James Dillon's Magnum Opus, Nine Rivers: Not for the Faint of Heart

September 22, 2011

James Dillon, *Nine Rivers (U.S. premiere)*: International Contemporary Ensemble, red fish blue fish, Steve Schick (conductor and percussion), The Crossing, Donald Nally (conductor), Miller Theatre at Columbia University, New York City, 14-17.9.2011 (BH)

James Dillon: *Nine Rivers* (1982-2000)

Wednesday, September 14

Part I: Leukosis

East 11th Street NY 10003 (1982)
L"ECRAN parfum (1988)
Viriditas (1993-1994)
Le femme invisible (1989)

Friday, September 15

Part II: Iosis

La coupure (1989-2000)

Saturday, September 16

Part III: Melanosis

L'oeuvre du noir (1990)
Éileadh squaibe (1990)
Introitus (1989-1990)
Oceanos (1985-1996)

Steven Schick, *conductor and percussion*
International Contemporary Ensemble
red fish blue fish
The Crossing
Donald Nally, *conductor*

James Dillon's Nine Rivers, Day Two: Steven Schick performs "La Coupure" (photo: Matthew Murphy)

"…a mythos of imagined waters, of fairies and snake-gods, a melancholy of flow, a requiem for poisoned rivers, an odyssey, a theatre of memory."

–James Dillon

How does one's mind grasp the full import of a barrage of complexity as daunting as James Dillon's *Nine Rivers*? A partial answer is, "it doesn't." Words like "puzzling," "intense," "baffling" and "insane" (the latter a compliment) were just some of the comments overheard during the three nights of Dillon's magnum opus, given its United States premiere at Columbia University's Miller Theatre. The performing crew was a composer's dream team: the International Contemporary Ensemble, the San Diego percussion group red fish blue fish, the Philadelphia-based choir The Crossing (led by founder/conductor Donald Nally), and coordinating (and performing) all the mammoth goings-on, percussionist Steven Schick.

Written over a period of 18 years, *Nine Rivers* was inspired by influences as diverse as Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Heraclitus (540-480 B.C.). The former's poem, *Le Bateau Ivre* "with its images of the freed boat crashing through rivers towards the ocean," and two of the latter's epigrams – "No man steps into the same rivers twice" and "[time is] like a child playing chequers" – form the spine of Dillon's creation.

Four discrete parts form "Leukosis": a prologue for percussion alone (*East 11th St. NY 10003*, the earliest-written, from 1982), two movements for instrumentalists (*L'ECRAN parfum* and *La*

femme invisible) and one for chorus (*Viriditas*) – all done in a single, 70-minute take with no intermission. In the opening, adroitly conducted by Mr. Schick, red fish blue fish (plus Ross Karre and Nathan Davis) turned in some viscerally jolting work on an enormous array of chimes, gongs, thunder sheets and other instruments. The International Contemporary Ensemble came buzzing in for *L'ECRAN parfum*, starting with some feverish string tremolos, with Schick all the while a beacon of calm in the midst of gradually increasing complexity. The third section, for choir *a cappella*, was dizzying, especially as presented by The Crossing, with Mr. Nally stepping up to the podium to direct. The texts – words and phonemes all but impossible to identify – often made the superb singers resemble a real-life Tower of Babel. Given that the sixteen performers were sometimes faced with individual vocal lines (often microtonal), it is not surprising that they were all issued tuning forks – in D, the section's central note. (Some enterprising singers retrieved the pitch via earpieces plugged into iPhones.) Schick and ICE returned for the final section, *La femme invisible*, which comes at the audience in waves – squalls of bubbling microtonal chatter, occasionally ebbing into near-stasis – that reminded me somewhat of the nonstop tumble of Wolfgang Rihm's *Jagden und Formen*.

An hour-long solo percussion extravaganza for Mr. Schick, *La coupure*, formed the second night's "Iosis," with video design by Mr. Karre and substantial electronic processing contributions from William Brent and Jaime Oliver – who as far as I'm concerned were the week's unsung heroes, helping transform the interior of Miller Theatre into Dillon's sonic forest. The 19 modules of *La coupure* are performed on vibraphone, snare drums, cymbals, chimes, an assortment of temple blocks and many other instruments scattered around the stage, with periodic detonations from an enormous bass drum, inserted smack in the middle of a large video screen (one of three) on the stage's back wall. Impressively, Schick had memorized the entire 60 minutes, since at any moment he could be asked to perform an excerpt from any of the modules – and on any of the instruments. Additionally, his live sounds were simultaneously electronically processed, often altered by custom-designed algorithms before scattering the results around the room, which was eventually seething with data. Despite some occasionally arresting images, I found the video component not as brilliant as Karre's work at the Park Avenue Armory Tune-In Festival earlier this year, when he collaborated with Schick on a mind-blowing interpretation of Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate*. Here, photographs of dry California riverbeds, fields and running water combined with schematic drawings of pipes – all flickering rapidly on the screens – didn't seem, at least on a single viewing, to add substantially to the more volatile music.

On the final night, the four sections under the umbrella "Melanosis" seemed the most complex, especially in the final *Oceanos*, when all 50 musicians onstage were completely engaged. Amid the onslaught of complexity, some impressions emerged, among many fighting for attention: ICE instrumentalists creating slithery stretches, groaning with vast whooshing sounds of rushing air and water. Huge brass glissandos combined with room-rumbling bass and percussion climaxes. A tuba drone had the air of a faraway foghorn, while other utterances washed around the theater as if spigots had been suddenly opened up all over the room. At one point the chorus threw out a fortissimo unison "ah" while somewhere behind me, broken glass erupted, and a burst of shrill chimes, glockenspiel and cymbals almost drowned out everything else. Watching Schick conduct, I wondered what he might bring to say, Mahler. In the final minutes, a series of pulses felt like sforzandos – but creeping by as if in slow motion. Then the tempo sped up dramatically

before pulverizing bass drum strokes brought the entire process to a halt, followed by silence, and a blackout.

James Dillon's Nine Rivers, Day Three: Steven Schick conducts the International Contemporary Ensemble, red fish blue fish and The Crossing in "Oceanos" (photo: Matthew Murphy)

It's truly difficult to know what to make of all this after a single hearing (and there is currently no recording of the complete cycle). During a lively onstage talk afterward with Dillon, Schick, Karre and ICE's Claire Chase (moderated by Miller Theatre's intrepid director, Melissa Smey), one literary-minded listener asked – rather plaintively – how to wrap her ears around the piece, and Schick encouraged her to follow her instincts and focus on the work's verbal elements. Later he used a phrase I liked: "psychoacoustic confusion." After three invigorating, slightly exhausting nights, that description seemed pretty apt.

Bruce Hodges