

# Interview: James Dillon

A Scottish composer's poetic, problematic magnum opus comes to Miller Theatre.

Time Out – New York  
By Amanda MacBlane



Steven Schick performs "La Coupure"  
Photograph: Bill Dean

A 1982 percussion piece titled *East 11th St, New York, NY 10003* immediately conjures visions of the East Village in the grasp of the downtown art scene. Yet composer James Dillon, who revels in esoteric source material, was actually inspired by John Cage, who came to mind when Dillon was commissioned to write a percussion piece on the theme of "the Americas." Cage lived in Manhattan (not on East 11th Street—Dillon thought that using his actual address would be "indiscreet"), a borough built on a grid; the structure of the composition adopts that framework, an apt metaphor for modernism. So goes the tangential thinking of a famously heady composer, whose epic *Nine Rivers* will receive its North American premiere at Miller Theatre this week.

Before he even finished *East 11th St*, the first of nine pieces that make up *Nine Rivers*, Dillon was already thinking about how to subvert the scheme. "I began to imagine a journey from this gridlike structure to something that's increasingly chaotic and multilayered, and this is when I began to map out the whole cycle," he recalls. "It becomes this kind of odyssey of things happening at different speeds."

The final puzzle piece, an hour-long multimedia duet for percussion and electronics called "*La Coupure*," was premiered in Paris by new-music rock star Steve Schick 18 years later. It took another decade (and five cancellations) for the entire cycle—which clocks in at three and a half

hours and requires two venues, more than 50 musicians and a battery of multimedia equipment—to receive its world premiere in the composer’s hometown of Glasgow last November.

Now the piece is crossing the Atlantic, thanks to the imperturbable ambition of Miller Theatre’s artistic director Melissa Smey, the Guggenheim’s Works & Process series, and the intimate involvement of Schick and the International Contemporary Ensemble. Two other groups will make their Miller debuts—the phenomenal Philly vocal ensemble the Crossing and Schick’s U.C. San Diego percussion group red fish blue fish.

Some tweaks to Dillon’s original vision were necessary in order to pull it off. Specifically, the piece will be performed in 60- to 90-minute segments over three nights, rather than all at once. Smey likens the undertaking to a contemporary-music *Ring* cycle, in that it requires a commitment of multiple nights to get the full impact.

The Wagner comparison resonates with Schick, who will perform the Herculean “*La Coupure*” on Friday night and will conduct the other nights. “There are these cataclysmic and culminating moments that will shake you to your roots in the way that the *Ring* does,” he says. “But it’s an even rarer sighting than the *Ring*. You can’t think, Oh well, I’ll catch *Nine Rivers* next time.”

Dillon admits that he hesitated before giving the green light. “Part of the experience is that it becomes almost a kind of deoxygenated space, where you have no time to catch your breath,” he explains. “I really wanted this visceral, cumulative quality not to be lost.”

Schick, who played a key role in convincing Dillon to give his blessing, argues that not only will the piece retain its punch, but the bite-size concerts will give audience members a chance to digest Dillon’s notoriously dense concept, which incorporates references from alchemy, molecular physics, etymology, Rimbaud and Heraclitus, among many others. Indeed, a look at the scores or a read through Dillon’s notes can boggle even the sharpest mind. But Schick is careful to avoid using the moniker “complex music,” which is often applied to Dillon.

“It’s musical poetry,” Schick insists. “Not cod-liver oil that’s supposed to be good for your brain, not music for specialists, but music for poets.”

Dillon, whose poetic descriptions balance well-crafted metaphors with succinct evocations of the sounds, likens the piece to an aural cathedral. “In a French Gothic cathedral, for example, there could be a staircase that’s astonishing in its audacity but most people don’t even notice it,” he says. “I really wanted to write something where you’re always finding things in it, cross-references or strangenesses or oddities, that puzzle.”

The idea of the river is the visual that Schick prefers. “You have this sharply etched beginning that becomes more and more diffuse but also grander—it’s almost as if the river opens out into a delta,” he says. “It sounds a little like Messiaen on steroids.” at the end.”