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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Wright, Roger. 1982. 'James Dillon'. *Contact*, 24. pp. 20-23. ISSN 0308-5066.

JAMES DILLON

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The music of James Dillon (b. 1950) has recently become a feature of contemporary music concerts, and the emergence of his compositional talent has been one of the most exciting elements of London's musical life over the past year. Whenever a new figure appears, every attempt is made to pigeon-hole him, and in Dillon's case the inevitable superficial comparisons have been drawn between his output and that of the so-called 'post-Ferneyhough school'.

Dillon is a 31-year-old Scot and his background is not that of a conservatory-trained composer. His early musical experience came from playing rock music and Scottish pipe music, and he went as a mature student to Keele University to study music as a degree subject. Interestingly, this was at a time when many musicians coming out of conservatories were making the opposite journey into rock music. Before university, in addition to taking linguistics at the Polytechnic of Central London, Dillon had embarked on his own personal composition course, incorporating such aspects as acoustics and north Indian drumming. He had no way, however, of judging any kind of development in his own music. Clearly he felt isolated in his work and in order to overcome his isolation decided to study at university—a move he now regards as a waste of valuable time. But it did allow him to explore the music of the dominant, prominent, and therefore influential figures of his time; and in this curiosity there lies a paradox, because Dillon was, and remains, determined not to be influenced by anyone, though he does align himself with a stream in Western music exemplified by such composers as Varèse and Xenakis.

Already at this period Dillon regarded himself as a composer—arrogantly perhaps, since lacking the pressure of deadlines and the luxury of studio facilities he had been unable to finish many compositional projects, and the very nature of his work up to then was difficult to judge because of a lack of performances. *Babble*, for 40 voices, is the first substantial work that he finished, and it managed to free him from the fear of never being able to complete a piece. The work took him two years to write (1974-6) and understandably he still has a certain fondness for it, despite what he calls 'its schism

between form and process'.¹ The title 'Babble' refers both to the first attempts at speech by infants² and the biblical story of Babel in which Man loses the language of the angels. The work stemmed from various sources and its composition was in part an act of exorcism, ridding Dillon of many ideas that had preoccupied him for some years: his interest in linguistics—word formation and sense development—and the technicalities of phonetics led him towards a piece for voices, as did the 'intoxication of' *Spem in alium* by Tallis, and his belief that most musical gestures are, in some way, derived from vocal music. The structure of the work is the result of a process that was heavily influenced by Jewish cabbalistic writings (which still fascinate Dillon), and is centred on the number 40. It takes the cabbala's Tree of Life as one of its starting-points: for example, the spatial conception of the work stems directly from the ten circles of the Tree of Life, as does the tempo proportion 2:5:3. *Babble* is a constructivist composition built upon generalised archaic structures in which everything is 'mapped out despite the material'—hence Dillon's concern with the form and process schism. Matrices are used to control the generation of pitch material, but Dillon now thinks that these pitches are rather dull. Apart from a totally unsuccessful attempt to present one part of one section of *Babble*, it remains unperformed.

Dillon's university career ended after only two years, having served, contrary to his intention, temporarily to heighten his sense of isolation. His distaste for the class connotations inherent in both school and university systems has led him to eschew the cosy existence of a campus composer, 'with his narrow, pampered view of culture in an environment of apathy and general uninterest'. In his own words again, 'I wanted to claw my way back to where music still has meaning, and not present some kind of second-hand experience.' This statement is the very essence of Dillon's purpose in composition. He attempts to infuse his music with so much energy, vigour, force—call it what you will—that it makes immediate and direct contact with his audience. The explosive nature of his work stems both from this desire and from his sheer obstinate refusal to accept the restraints imposed by our limited Western musical tradition.

The first major performances of works by Dillon were of *Dillug-Kefitsah*, given by Keith Swallow at the 1978 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, and . . . *Once upon a Time*, performed at the SPNM Composers' Weekend at York University in 1980 and later that year in the Purcell Room, London. *Dillug-Kefitsah* is a short study for piano and it represents the start of the composer's concern with a very particular and complex form of notation, which has been the chief factor in the linking of his name with Ferneyhough's. Whereas *Babble* included such elements as proportional tempi and pitch clusters that were depicted only approximately in the notation, *Dillug-Kefitsah* is fully notated in a very precise manner.

I began to think more about a direct relationship between notation and performance [Dillon states], stimulated more from the visual arts than anything in music. In particular my friendship with the painters Robert Lenkiewicz and Raymond Thomson (two ideologically opposed artists whom I greatly admire) helped to refine my thinking in this area. I also discovered an essay about this time by E. H. Gombrich which interested me. In it he discussed the idea of feedback between the eye and the brain; the centre of his argument lay with the question, how much does the artist paint what he sees and how much does he see what he paints?

At this time Ferneyhough's *Transit* (1972-5) made a deep impression on Dillon and he was amazed to discover in Ferneyhough a British composer who was already aware of the important links between the visual and aural aspects of music. Many fundamental questions are raised by the complexity of Dillon's music and its notation. He has a predilection for intricacy and density while wanting to achieve an uncluttered, straightforward aural result. He believes that in order to achieve emotional intensity in music the composer has to yield to a certain surplus of information. 'Anything that is highly expressive', he says, 'contains a high redundancy.'³ He is no doubt aware that his work has been criticised for being overwritten, but he knows that it does not sound as if it is presenting a surfeit of information. Indeed Dillon is firmly convinced that his is an 'economical music'. It contains myriad aural possibilities, reflecting the composer's love of art that contains a certain ambiguity—art which does not, despite or perhaps because of this ambiguity, insult either the head or

the heart and enters through the central nervous system like a painting by Bacon or a rabid bite!

Dillon's ideal is to reach an inevitable music, a 'music of bio-physiological inevitability', and this aspect of his work first emerges clearly in . . . *Once upon a Time*. It was written between December 1979 and March 1980 and submitted to the SPNM Composers' Weekend of that year. The instrumental group 'in residence' at York was that of Varèse's *Octandre* (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, and double bass), and the harsh gritty qualities of the sound-world of . . . *Once upon a Time* have much in common with that of Varèse. The piece is in one continuous movement and forms a double arch, the second part being formally homologous to the first. Dillon describes the work in terms of tension and struggle between structure and aggregate, or discourse and expression. 'Beyond the notion of opposites, however, musical time is explored in terms of coincidence through the beautiful and exciting metaphysics of unity.' This hints at a philosophical leitmotif throughout his work—namely the acceptance of an underlying unity in nature, here dramatised and formalised in a dialectic of opposed materials and process. Dillon's composition is not geared to the creation of beautiful aesthetic objects, but rather it is directed towards music that has a powerful communicating force, music 'that does not recoil from direct experience'. In this respect Dillon comfortably aligns himself with Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy, and he openly acknowledges his great admiration for both composers.

Dillon's individuality is exemplified particularly in his approach to form. Unlike Ferneyhough and Finnissy, he is interested in the teleology of structure and the possibilities of the process of 'becoming'. The doctrine of final causes, known as 'teleology', states that developments are due to the purpose or design that will be fulfilled by them. Dillon sees this aspect of structure as having been unjustifiably, but understandably, neglected in recent music; while he rejects it as a philosophical position, he also rejects the exclusion of it as a possibility. Beethoven's cumulative form and energy are a very clear influence on the manner in which Dillon's ideas slowly build up, the gestures becoming more complex yet at the same time aurally clearer. The breaking down of aural expectations by the slow accretion of material paradoxically results in the 'inevitable music' for which Dillon is striving. This strong inner narrative dominates . . . *Once upon a Time*, the architectural design of which dictates that the second half of the work shall be the same as the first except that it has a goal; the two parts consist of the same material redistributed to create two different outcomes. Dillon's concern with an all-pervading unity can be elucidated by a quotation from Ernest Nagel: 'despite the *prima facie* distinctive character of teleological (or functional) explanations . . . they can be reformulated, without loss of asserted content, to take the form of nonteleological ones, so that in an important sense, teleological and nonteleological are equivalent'.⁴ Nagel's description clearly parallels the structure of . . . *Once upon a Time*: within the whole there exist two parts, each created from the same material, one of which is goal-orientated (teleological) and the other of which is non-goal-orientated (non-teleological).

Since . . . *Once upon a Time* Dillon's works have aimed formally at a much more organic flow. *Spleen*, a solo piano work written at the request of Finnissy, is perhaps his finest

work to date. Again, one is struck by the fierce complexity of the score and the way in which the instrument's space is fully explored. In both *Spleen* and *Parjanya-Vata*, a solo cello work, there is a strong sense of visual and to some extent theatrical movement. This is interesting since it underlines Dillon's feeling that, in general, so-called 'music-theatre' is musically treacherous and that a theatrical element can be achieved 'safely' only as a direct by-product of the music. A concept of space, stemming perhaps from *Babble*, is developed in *Spleen* as the pianist's hands carry out a furious exploration of the keyboard; each area of the instrument is fully examined before another is introduced.

Parjanya-Vata, written as a showpiece for Alan Brett, takes as its point of departure a fascination with physical processes such as the 'turbulence' of a hail-storm; this is translated into musical action which is directly related to the physiology of the cello. Turbulence here is seen as something 'primordial', something apparently random, out of which emerges a higher patterning—'an architecture of great complexity'. The physical limits of the instrument play an important part in the structure of the work. Sections of the work are completed and compositional tasks fulfilled when particular 'outer reaches' have been arrived at—for example, when a certain speed has been achieved or the limitations of the pitch of the cello restrict further development. The sectional structure of *Parjanya-Vata* is not altogether successful since the listener finds the work lacking in coherence; in this respect it is akin to one of its precursors in the unaccompanied cello repertory, *Nomos alpha* by Xenakis.

Spleen is a far more satisfactory whole than *Parjanya-Vata*; it moves easily (not effortlessly!) from section to section, with a strong harmonic pattern underpinning its melodic blues inflections and syncopated rhythms. After a grand opening flourish, a boogie-ish, mechanical left-hand pattern begins, punctuated by *staccato* chords which are gradually transformed into a melodic line incorporating trills. This section ends with the arrival in the right hand of chord patterns strongly reminiscent of the type of chordal writing that appears in the last eight bars of Ives's *Three-Page Sonata* (1905). The deliberately awkward piano writing creates a very specific tension in performance (see Example 1). There are also echoes of Conlon Nancarrow's *Studies for Player Piano* (1950-) later in the work during a frenetic *ppp* section that incorporates intricate cross-rhythms. Dillon's desire 'to return a certain dignity to rhythm', to return it to a foreground level,⁵ is very evident here where the energy of the piece is maintained by the tight control of his rhythmic procedures. *Spleen* is a powerful and exciting work which certainly contains risks but which, partly because of the risks, forces the listener to take notice and be drawn into its argument.

The risks in much of Dillon's music are in some way connected with his concept of performance. The player must be highly disciplined and must ultimately lose himself in the performance of the music. This objectivity is very different from the attitude traditionally attributed to the virtuoso. Obviously the spectacle of a performer struggling with such technically demanding material incorporates a circus element for the audience. However, as Jonathan Harvey points out in his discussion of the performance of Ferneyhough's music, 'The subjective nature of the virtuoso personality cult draws attention to the ease with which the star gets round his instrument . . . Ferneyhough hopes that by presenting [the

Example 1 James Dillon, *Spleen*, extract beginning at bar 63

The image shows a musical score for piano. At the top left, it indicates a tempo of quarter note = 160. The score is written on two staves. The left hand has a complex rhythmic pattern with many triplets and sixteenth notes. The right hand has a more melodic line with some syncopation. A circled section in the right hand is labeled 'sotto voce' and 'pp'. There are several dynamic markings: 'sempre mp' in the left hand, and 'pp' in the circled section. There are also some performance instructions like 'Red.' and '* Red.' below the staves.

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JAMES DILLON

Announcing the publication of the following works in
Edition Peters:

Dillug-Kefitsah (1976)

for solo piano
P-7241

...Once Upon a Time (1980)
for ensemble (8 players)
P-7243. Performing material on hire

Who do you love (1981)
for voice and ensemble (5 players)
P-7245. Performing material on hire

Parjanya-Vata (1981)
for solo 'cello
P-7247

Ti · re-Ti · ke-Dha (1979)

for solo drummer
P-7242

Spleen (1980)
for solo piano
P-7244

Evening Rain (1981)
for solo voice
P-7246

Come live with me (1981)
for female voice and ensemble (4 players)
P-7248. Performing material on hire

'*Who do you love*' was performed in Milan on 17th March 1981 in the series 'Musica nel nostro tempo'.

performer] with almost insuperable difficulties he will suppress his subjectivity and any personal desire to interpret the music.⁶

Dillon's music is much more human than this rather clinical statement about performance difficulties, applied to him, might suggest. It is a music that not only has a place in the continuing Western tradition of musical development, for those who need their pigeon-holes, but, more importantly, one that draws on multifarious other musical and cultural sources. Dillon has fully assimilated these influences and succeeded in creating a music that speaks in an original language with power and cogency.

WORKS

Dillon's music is published by Peters Edition, London.

- Babble, 40 voices, 1974-6
- Dillug-Kefitsah, piano, 1976
- Cumha, 12 strings, 1976-8
- Incaain, 16 voices, 1977
- Ariadne's Thread, viola, 1978
- Crossing Over, clarinet, 1978
- Ti·re·Ti·ke·Dha, drummer, 1979
- . . . Once upon a Time, 8 players, 1979-80
- Spleen, piano, 1980
- Who do you love, voice, instruments, 1980
- Come live with me, female voice, instruments, 1981
- Evening Rain, voice, 1981
- Parjanya-Vata, cello, 1981
- A Roaring Flame, voice, double bass, 1981-2

NOTES:

- ¹ This and all other quotations not separately acknowledged come from conversations with the composer in winter 1981-2.
- ² 'it has often been observed that the infant, in one stage of his babbling, produces all of the sounds which are available to all of the world's languages and only in later childhood narrows his repertoire so that it includes only those sounds which are present in the language he hears about him'. Richard F. Cromer, 'The Development of Language and Cognition: the Cognition Hypotheses', *New Perspectives in Child Development*, ed. Brian Foss (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p.200.
- ³ 'It is this redundancy that makes language intelligible in the midst of noise, that is, any distortion vitiating a message during its transmission.' Jagjit Singh, *Great Ideas in Information Theory, Language and Cybernetics* (London: Constable, 1966), pp.18-19.
- ⁴ Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p.403.
- ⁵ This is the underlying motive in an earlier work *Ti·re·Ti·ke·Dha* for solo drummer. Here the restricted timbre of a jazz kit means an insistence on the primacy of rhythm and not colour.
- ⁶ Jonathan Harvey, 'Brian Ferneyhough', *Musical Times*, cxx (1979), p. 724.

[The following text is extremely faint and largely illegible. It appears to be a continuation of the article or a separate section of text, possibly containing further notes or a bibliography. The text is too light to transcribe accurately.]