

On the depth of listening and the non-depth of the complexity debate: a fax/telephone interview with James Dillon¹

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The following conversation with James Dillon began at the start of 1995, when the composer had really wanted to be in Tokyo since January. He was to be a 'visiting guest artist' at the Kunitachi Conservatorium's Studio for Electronic Music in order to work on the fifth part—*La Coupure* for percussion and electronics—of his extensive electro-acoustic project *Nine Rivers*. However, because of the earthquake disaster in Japan, Dillon had to postpone to the middle of March the start of this visit, which was to have lasted until June. Apart from the two orchestral works *helle Nacht* [bright Night] (1986–87) and *ignis noster* (1991–92) recently released on compact disc,² our conversation was concerned mainly with questions of a meaningful and appropriate approach to Dillon's music, as well as with details of the New Complexity story and with Dillon's views on Darmstadt.

James Dillon, born 1950 in Glasgow, belongs to that generation which was still at school when elder brothers and sisters had already half digested the non-appearance in Britain of the '68 Revolution. In the slipstream of the political as well as cultural breakthroughs of the era they stumbled through the terrain in search of identity and, even as thirty-year-olds, spent much time lamenting the course of events and hoping for better times. James Dillon also had to turn thirty before the new music scene began to interest him. His early musical experiences had been with Scottish bagpipe music and as a member of a rock band. However, at around the age of twenty he lost interest in rock music. At the time Webern's *Fünf Bagatellen für Streichquartett* fascinated him, as he now realises, with its musical language which seemed to come to him 'von einem anderen Planeten'. He acquainted himself with the Beethoven sonatas through Glenn Gould's recordings and discovered Indian and medieval music. Without ever having enjoyed a regular conservatorium education, he nevertheless studied acoustics and linguistics in London, but was decidedly self-taught as a composer. It was only at the beginning of the 1980s, when a series of prominent British soloists and ensembles took an interest in his music, that he became well known and thereafter received numerous commissions.

His first larger orchestral work *helle Nacht* has, since its Glasgow premiere, been played in Helsinki, Strasbourg and, in October 1995, at the Graz Musikprotokoll, performed by the Austrian Radio Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Arturo Tamayo. *helle Nacht* is the second work of a German 'trilogy', whose first part is *überschreiten* for chamber ensemble (1985–86) and whose third part is *Blitzschlag* for flute and orchestra. The title *helle Nacht* refers to the funeral scene in Sophocles' *Antigone*; Antigone's 'hellekeit Nacht' is the wording in Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles' tragedy. In his opulently coloured orchestral piece, with triple brass and wind, five percussionists and strings divided in up to sixty parts, Dillon has created a work which, as he says,

depicts a moment of searing darkness which in its intensity becomes unbearably bright. Formally this involves the construction of large morphological fields based on low fundamental tones—principally a frequency of 21.5 Hz and its partials, sets of 'spectral' information—somewhat protean in shape, the work is an everchanging state of evolution. These large morphological fields are constructed from the continuous enfolding of subdivided 'spectral' classes, whose proportions at a macro level down to the determination of phrase structure are derived from the spectral data.³

Five large sections create an arch of 'ebb and flow', consisting of the superimposition of a large number of layers of different duration (see Example 1).

The image shows a musical score for eight contrabass parts, labeled '8 Contrabassi' on the left. The score is divided into two systems, each containing four staves. The music is written in a complex, multi-layered style with various dynamics (pp, p, mf, mp, f, ff) and articulations (acc, stacc, marc, etc.). The notation includes many slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The score is for bars 1-2 of the piece 'helle Nacht'.

Example 1: Contrabassi divisi à 8, *helle Nacht*, bars 1–2.

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At the beginning two clusters create an harmonic spectrum over the bass note A, like the entry into the 'cathedral of black light'. Various consonant sounds later appear, woven into the incessant ebb and flow of the textures like a *déjà vu* of Romanticism; for example, the minor seventh chord in the horns shortly after Figure 19 (see Example 2).

Example 2: Winds, *helle Nacht*, Figure 19, bars 8–9.
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What analytical approach can be taken with a music such as this?⁴ James Dillon is, in his heart of hearts, extremely skeptical and

starts from the principle that analysis will, by its nature, work against the values implicit in any work, and even more so in a work whose rhetoric and associational methods are peculiarly resistant to discussion.

And he is not sure whether any sort of clarity would be possible here anyway. Analysis, however, in its academic system [*Wissenschaftlichkeitskomplex*], would tear the artistic object

from the environment of acoustics, concertising, performance class etc., there-

fore in some way rendering any analysis metaphysical. It worships the physical security of the object it has itself chosen.... The only thing which interests me is how I can work within a field of order, not working on some 'object'. Analysis as we know it would be unthinkable without musical notation and is therefore inextricably linked to the development of musical ideas, and destined to remain secondary and derivative with respect to that development. Notation 'suspends': it allows the analyst time to go about his business. The definition of time within a sign field does not imbue those signs with temporality; rather, time emerges as a field of relationships between segments.

'I don't like clubs'

Originally there were four English composers—James Dillon, Michael Finnissy, Chris Dench and Richard Barrett—who were assembled under the powerful catch-phrase 'New Complexity' by musicologist Richard Toop in 1988. Collectively their scores, with all their individual idiosyncrasies, are like the elaboration of classical compositional parameters—pitch, rhythm, articulation and timbre—into the greatest virtuosity and complexity. The attempt to sum up in the catch-phrase 'New Complexity' the difficult, complicated systems in the works of these English composers stands in contrast to the various expressions of what Toop calls 'New Capitulation': New Simplicity, New Tonality, New Age trends and postmodern popularity. 'New Complexity' has, since the 1990 Rotterdam conference 'Complexity?', turned itself into a European-American trend concept.

Dillon had already consciously disengaged himself even then:

My refusal to go to Rotterdam at that time arose from a certain discomfort: I don't like clubs. I declined the invitation to this conference since, by the late 1980s, the whole idea of so-called 'new complexity' was becoming objectified into part of the commodity market of new music. I found myself increasingly troubled by the self-indulgence of this conference; there was an odour of putrefaction about the whole thing.

Indeed, and what is his opinion of the Darmstadt Ferienkurse of recent years, with Brian Ferneyhough as leader of the composer forums?

'Like a sanctuary for long-lost souls'

For fans and the "in-crowd", Darmstadt is still the site of the 'most extensive international forum for new music'. With their work on complex sounds and time relationships, the two central tendencies in the creativity of the younger generations have clearly defined

themselves as centred on Tristan Murail and the Paris group *L'itinéraire* as much as on Brian Ferneyhough. At the same time Darmstadt is, as seen through the caustic liturgico-sociological spectacles of Gisela Gronemeyer, a type of church, with new complexity as the altar at which Ferneyhough functions as high priest

and is assisted therein by Belgian musicologist Harry Halbreich, who proclaims the new doctrine of salvation from the pulpit like an unholy spirit. At the same time the musicologists Gianmario Borio and Ulrich Mosch swing the academic thuribles while the Italian composer and conductor Aldo Brizzi directs the choir of interpreters like some sort of cantor. Finally the acolytes are predominantly former Ferneyhough students, along with other composers selected by the course leader.⁵

Dillon defines his position in relation to his compatriot Ferneyhough 'quite simply': 'We share the same publisher, I respect the integrity of his work, and personally I like and get on well with him.' Around 1979 he, along with Chris Dench, discovered the works of Ferneyhough, whose influence on Dillon's composition is, however, 'insignificant'; at that time Dillon was far too fascinated by Varèse and Xenakis.

Dillon's recollections of Darmstadt, to which he has been invited year after year since 1982, are mixed. On the one hand he remembers with enthusiasm a series of 'surprising events' which carved themselves deep in his memory:

a late night Radulescu concert directed by the composer; a wild piece of music theatre from Hans-Joachim Hespos, which took on a frightening intensity in the heat of a July evening; the premiere of Bernardo Kuczer's *Civilisation and Barbarism*.

On the other hand he realised at the end of the 1980s, as he willingly admits, that

unless the fundamental structure of Darmstadt changed radically I would feel little enthusiasm for taking part. It does seem to me that a rethink is necessary as to its function (if any) beyond the socio-economic jamboree which, in my opinion, it is these days; at times it resembles a horse-fair.... I personally found it necessary to reinforce the distance between myself and what was becoming an increasingly identifiable target.

And the musicologists and their 'academic thuribles' smoking with the incense of eloquence?

For the musicologists to learn to handle complexity correctly they must first of all empty it of all complexity. The schemata which evolve in order to classify, organise and summarise the [phenomena of complexity] turn

out to be nothing but arbitrary schemes which express not the nature of complexity but the nature of their own limitations. Everything is reduced to a kind of fiction.

'A cluster of changing elements'

At a time when we are assaulted everywhere by the video worlds of MTV and VIVA, when composers such as Glass, Górecki and others achieve pop status, Dillon is concerned with a kind of music which

resists the excesses, distortions and voracity of most popular music, but my own concern is to find a way of working which maintained some sense of authenticity.... To engage with a musical writing, in the sense of an *écriture*, already indicates the presence of an interaction between composer and society; musical idiom or question of style are secondary and, as such, subject to fashion.

James Dillon dreams of a compositional style which, in the words of Sir Thomas Browne, is a 'hieroglyphic and truly shadowed homily on the whole world'. Alongside this he would also count himself with the legion of artists for whom genuine art music embodies in its innermost 'an apotheosis of solitude'. With respect to simplicity and Neo-Romanticism he asks himself the question, 'just what do we sacrifice by opting for what seems to be the attractive return to "simplicity"?'.

When Brian Ferneyhough, in a recent conversation with Lutz Lesle, named as 'examples of a critical, confrontational embeddedness in the fabric of western music history' only West German composers—Lachenmann, N.A. Huber, Schnebel, Kagel and Spahlinger—did he not overlook (amongst others) his Scottish-British publishing-house colleague, who pronounces himself vehemently in favour of 'critical music'? For Dillon, this is a music which

has to indicate inner movement beyond stimuli and beyond a cold demonstration of theory, which is willing to break through the boundaries of art and function outside the forms of normative aesthetics and consumerism. The challenge for me is to find an element of resistance which derives from within the European traditions.... It is displacement, much more than the 'integrated', that offers resistance. A cluster of changing elements which deny reduction to a common denominator is for me the essential core or, if you like, generative first principle of such a 'critical music'.

The 'depth' of listening

In discussing the issue of listening to Dillon's music, let us take his most recent orchestral work *ignis*

noster, which was premiered in 1992 at the BBC Promenade Concerts in London. In a music such as this the multi-layered sound-world often takes on Romantic traits through the grouping of the orchestral sections, and in places also reminds one of Boulez in its outbursts from the marimba and vibraphone. The music seems to many listeners and critics all too abstract in its expression to be quite comprehensible; the superabundance of sound experiences is a continual strain on the cognitive capacity, treading a fine line between selfless subjugation and desperate serenity. Dillon himself is not at all concerned that his listeners pursue the comprehension of structural logic to the point of frustration:

The vulnerable, delicate process of creating a musical work demands a whole set of calculations, codes, references, embedded symbols, interlacings, rational and so-called irrational orderings. One can only expect a certain percentage of this complex ever to be experienced at any given time.

What matters to him is the paradox of non-listening, or simply a stunned hearing. Something like Lachenmann's 'release of perception' through 'penetration into the structure of closed listening' doesn't exactly matter to him; on the contrary, what matters is the evolution of an eavesdropping into the depth:

If I attempt to articulate the act of listening through language, it will only gravitate towards the wrong kind of apparent lucidity; the very act of listening will always involve an element of trust. The possibility of somehow reconstructing a set of intricate constructive procedures within the act of listening remains a 'potentiality', one amongst a number of potentialities at any given moment in a work. All I myself can hope for as a composer is that a listener might be willing to gamble with a few moments of their time.

One needs a certain 'attitude', and of course one attribute all art should embody is the potential to 'astonish'....

To restore and activate the listening process as an integral stratum of the musical weave will prevent monodimensional understanding. I can imagine instead a kind of multiple unity which extends from the molecular to a perspective where listener and work cannot be separated, the mutual arising of a kind of *unio mystica*. We must just assume that the competence of the listener is possible. The tendency of true listening is not necessarily expansive. From my viewpoint the only development that matters is spiritual; it lies in the withdrawal of listening into its own depths.

End Notes

¹ This interview first appeared as 'Über Tiefen des Hörens und Untiefen des Complexity-Diskurses', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 3 (May-June 1995), pp.44-48. This version, with some amendments from the German version, is translated by Patricia Shaw and Catherine Jeffreys, with direct quotations from Dillon. This interview is reproduced with permission of the publishers of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Schott Musik International, Mainz, Germany.

² *James Dillon I*, BBC Symphony Orchestra, cond. Arturo Tamayo (Montaigne/Audivis, Mo 78 20 38, 1995).

³ Dillon, Programme Notes to *helle Nacht* (ms, London, Peters).

⁴ I have drawn here on the informative study, unfortunately not yet published, by Michael J. Alexander, 'The changing states of James Dillon' (ms, 1988-90). See also James Dillon, 'Les instruments speculatifs', *Le timbre: metaphore pour la composition*, ed. J.B. Barrière (Paris: Christian Bourgois/IRCAM, 1991), pp.282-92.

⁵ Gisela Gronemeyer, "'Musik, die vom Hören-Müssen dispensiert": Die 37. Darmstädter Ferienkurse für Neue Musik im letzten Jahr der Ära Friedrich Hommel', *MusikTexte* 56 (1994), p.58.

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