JAMES DILLON / BIOGRAPHY

James Dillon was born in Glasgow on 29 October 1950 and his music has been published by Peters Edition since 1982, the year in which Parjanya-Vata for solo cello won the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis at the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik. This work’s Sanskrit title refers to the ancient Vedic hymns, in which parjanya and vata are the personifications of rain and wind. Dillon studied Indian music during the early 1970s with Punita Gupta, and some of the rhythmic techniques he encountered were used in another early work, Ti.re-Ti.ke-Dha for solo percussionist.

Since 1983, with the first performance of Dillon’s First String Quartet at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, the Arditti Quartet has been closely associated with Dillon’s work; they subsequently premiered the 2nd and 3rd quartets and various solos and duos. Huddersfield is one of the many European festivals to have regularly featured Dillon’s music; it mounted a large-scale retrospective in 1995.

In the mid-1980s Dillon began his ‘German Triptych’, a set of works based on the idea, the composer says, of “illumination as the emanation from darkness”, a recurring theme in Western art. Überschreiten from 1985 was commissioned by the London Sinfonietta, and helle Nacht, Dillon’s first work for large orchestra, followed in 1987. Richard Toop described this massive piece as “a music full of figures which, like the stars, are intense, yet seem almost infinitely far away”. In 1994 a collaboration between Grateful Dead’s Phil Lesh (Rex Foundation) and the BBC made possible a recording of helle Nacht, together with Dillon’s 1992 BBC Proms commission ignis noster, by conductor Arturo Tamayo and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. After an interval of some years the ‘German Triptych’ was completed with the 1996 flute concerto Blitzschlag. This work, a Radio France commission, was given its premiere at the Edinburgh Festival by soloist Pierre-Yves Artaud and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Martyn Brabbins.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s James Dillon worked on Nine Rivers, an ambitious group of pieces that the composer conceived not as a cycle, but as a collection of works with certain ‘internal symmetries’. The nine works are scored for various forces, ranging from the solo percussion and electronics of La coupure, through ensemble pieces such as La femme invisible, to the large-scale works, Viriditas for sixteen solo voices, and Oceans. This last piece, the ‘ocean of oceans’, is Nine Rivers’ delta, bringing together all the forces previously deployed throughout the series and including more than fifty musicians and live electronics. Oceans was commissioned for the BBC Proms 1996 and the first performance was given by conductor Richard Bernas, Polyphony and Music Projects/London. The commissioners of other pieces in the Nine Rivers series include IRCAM, Ensemble InterContemporain, the Oslo Sinfonietta and Glasgow 1990 European City of Culture. Dillon says that he embarked upon the Nine Rivers project in part to escape the frustratingly ‘atomistic’ nature of a composer’s activities. The intricate references of this massive and complex meditation on time range from environmental concerns to the nature of musical language connected through the metaphor of the river. Other grouped works include L’évolution du vol, an 8-movement song cycle for female voice and chamber ensemble; the violin series Traumwerk, of which the first book, for two violins, won the 1997 Royal Philharmonic Society award for chamber-scale composition; and The Book of Elements, a cycle in five volumes for solo piano, inspired by the pianist Roger Woodward, the final volume of which won Dillon a rare second Royal Philharmonic Society Award in 2003.

James Dillon’s Violin Concerto, his third BBC Proms commission, and was premiered to great acclaim by soloist Thomas Zehetmair during the 2000 season. Here, Dillon sets the piped drones and nimble fiddlework of the Scottish folk tradition against the overlapping webs of sound that have always characterized his virtuosic use of the orchestra. As in the earlier Blitzschlag both soloist and orchestra are engaged in a dance: like the moth and the flame, there is a strange attraction. Other recent orchestral works include the four-movement Via Sacra, commissioned by the Société Philharmonique de Bruxelles to celebrate the city’s Millennium project, and La navette, a single-movement work commissioned by SWR for performance at the Donaueschinger Musiktag 2001.

Dillon’s recent opera, Philomela, further explores the material of La navette. Premièred in Oporto in September 2004, with subsequent performances in Strasbourg and Paris, Philomela sets Dillon’s own libretto based on the myth of Philomela’s rape and torture by Tereus and her subsequent weaving of the story.

In January 2005 Dillon completed his Fourth String Quartet, which was premièred, the following March, at Musica Nova Helsinki by Quatour Diotima. Current projects include a piano concerto for Noriko Kawai and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and a new work for the Orchestre de Paris.

The majority of commercially available recordings are listed in the current brochure on James Dillon published by Peters Edition London. New releases include:

- The Book of Elements, Volumes 1–8 for solo piano / Noriko Kawai / NMCD091
- A Roaring Flame for voice and double bass / Sarah Leonard & Carrado Cononici / NMCD079

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