

MusicalAmerica.com

How Do You Say Gesamtkunstwerk in Scottish?

September 19, 2011

By Christian B. Carey

Excerpts – to read entire review you must join MusicalAmerica.com

NEW YORK - Scotsman James Dillon (b. 1950) is known as a member of the new complexity movement in composition. It isn't an easy gig; writing tremendously challenging music can make for a lot of canceled performances. Dillon claims that his epic cycle "Nine Rivers," is the most canceled premiere in music history. Conceived in 1982 but not completed until 1999, this three-and-a-half-hour-long work incorporates brass, winds, strings, percussion, voices, electronics, video and lighting design. After several quashed attempts, it finally received its first complete performance in 2010 by the BBC Scottish Symphony in Glasgow. Even that event was tinged with uncertainty at the last minute when conductor Rolf Gupta withdrew due to illness.

Enter Steven Schick, a renowned solo percussionist who is quickly gaining a reputation as a gifted new-music conductor. Schick not only rescued that performance, he conducted the Sept. 14 U.S. premiere as well -- the first of the work's three installments, performed on three consecutive nights at Columbia University's Miller Theater. Schick led the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), the University of Southern California at Davis' percussion ensemble red fish/blue fish, Philadelphia's Crossing Choir and several sound designers, who oversaw both taped and live electronics. The old saw is that composers who work in this style think more is more, that abstract ideas and extreme difficulty in pulling them off are to be celebrated. Dillon's music does in fact fit these descriptors; it is as challenging for the musicians to execute as it is for even the most ardent listeners to grasp. But where this first of three evenings of "Nine Rivers" was concerned, it was worth the effort.

...Schick then took a seat and allowed the Crossing's conductor Donald Nally to take a turn at the podium in "Viriditas" (1993-4), a work of jaw-dropping difficulty. All 16 choral singers were armed with tuning forks, which they used frequently in this densely chromatic, even microtonal work. Overlapping texts make it difficult to discern a narrative viewpoint, which may be beside the point anyway. The harmonies, often resembling the clouds of chord clusters in Ligeti's choral music, are punctuated by disjunctive, high-flying solo passages and brutish parlando interjections (the similarities to "L'ECRAN" are palpable). Occasionally, an unexpectedly lush, nearly triadic chord emerges as if flirting with the listener, only to slide back into the labyrinthine fray. Judging by the Crossing and Nally's performance here, they are one of the go-to groups for works of mind-blowing difficulty.

Presenting a cycle intended to be given in a single marathon-length evening over three nights is risky. Did people return to Miller for nights two and three after hearing the initial installment of "Nine Rivers"? Judging by the enthusiastic applause at the concert's end and the animated conversations in the lobby, they undoubtedly did.