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River Elegy That Covers a Wide Sonic Terrain
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The Miller Theater at Columbia University has long been a hotbed of contemporary music and adventurous programming. The work that Melissa Smey, the executive director, chose to open this season, James Dillon's "Nine Rivers," was so long, complex and unconventional in its demands that it was presented over three nights, on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. It was a co-production with the Guggenheim Museum's Works and Process series.

This was the American premiere of "Nine Rivers," an audacious cycle of nine pieces interlinked by what Mr. Dillon calls musical tropes, lasting about three and a half hours. It is skillfully scored for various groups of instruments, solo percussion with video, a percussion ensemble and an a cappella choir, enhanced with electronic sounds. The Scottish-born Mr. Dillon, 60, who has also studied linguistics, art, acoustics, computer sound technology and more, describes "Nine Rivers" as "a mythos of imagined waters, of fairies and snake-gods, a melancholy of flow, a requiem for poisoned rivers, an odyssey, a theater of memory."

To expect an instrumental work to convey all that programmatic and metaphorical content, even something as long as "Nine Rivers," is expecting a lot. The audaciousness of Mr. Dillon's composition, which spans a wide sonic terrain, pulls you in. But for me, "Nine Rivers" did not earn its length. Too often extended musical passages seemed stretched out and indulgent.

The percussionist Steven Schick conducted a dynamic performance, featuring the brilliant International Contemporary Ensemble, a.k.a. ICE; the Crossing, an impressive choral group from Philadelphia devoted to contemporary music; and Red Fish Blue Fish, a dynamic percussion ensemble from the University of California, San Diego. Mr. Dillon, who teaches at the University of Minnesota, began "Nine Rivers" in 1982 and worked on it through 1999. Plans to present the complete score were announced and abandoned five times (the "most canceled premiere ever," as Mr. Dillon told The Daily Telegraph of London last year). The premiere finally took place over two nights last year in Glasgow, presented by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and Glasgow's Concert Halls.

The hero of that premiere was Mr. Schick, who played the 60-minute middle movement for solo percussion, "La Coupure" (The Cut), and shared conducting duties. In the Miller Theater performance he again played "La Coupure," and he conducted the rest.

Mr. Dillon's description of the piece in his program as a "journey through timbral rivers" that explores "continuity and flow" through techniques likened to "the alchemical transformation of matter" makes

his vision seem impossibly all-embracing. The nine works are grouped into three large sections inspired by classical mythology: “Leukosis” (“Whitening”), “Iosis” (“Reddening,” the fifth piece for solo percussion and video), “Melanosis” (“Blackening”).

“Nine Rivers” opens with “East 11th St., N.Y. 10003,” scored for percussion ensemble, lasting some 25 minutes. There were mesmerizing episodes, with skittish rhythmic bursts that echoed from drum to mallet instruments, and a feisty section that sounded like a battle of drum rolls.

Listened to as the mood-setting introduction to an epic, the piece did its duty. But in comparison with some other similarly long pieces for percussion, this one lost my interest after a while.

The second piece featured six violinists from ICE playing almost continuous buzzing, trembling, often quietly frenzied music, prodded along by percussion. The third, for a cappella chorus, had mesmerizing moments, with quivering waves of sustained sounds and harmonies, overlapping phrases chanted at different tempos, aborted melodic bits and more, sung here with lush sound and complete confidence by choristers from the Crossing (who used individual tuning forks to focus their pitch).

Mr. Schick was cheered on Friday for his commanding performance of “La Coupure,” done from memory. The stage was set with three screens for video designs by Ross Karre, which showed a montage of diagrams and graphs, tunnels, grassy fields and a dried-up concrete waterway that looked like the Oak Pass reservoir seen in the movie “Chinatown.” The imagery gave you something to hang onto as you listened to this episodic hourlong work.

Part 3, which begins with the sixth piece, reminded me of the primordial music that opens Part 2 of Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring,” but instead of Stravinsky’s slowly heaving pulse, Mr. Dillon’s music moves in a slurpy flow. Again, it goes on too long. Only in the ninth and final piece do all the instrumentalists and choristers finally perform together, and the music builds to a cataclysmic conclusion.

Perhaps “Nine Rivers” is best entered into as a musical ritual, an immersion in a sonic space. But so many of Mr. Dillon’s ideas were so inventive, I wanted him to cut out the padding.

The Miller Theater and Works and Process deserve enormous credit for presenting it. I was grateful for the chance to hear this wildly ambitious piece, which will linger with me. And it was fun to see the same faces in the audience coming back for three nights, not wanting to miss a real event.