

Thursday 15 September 2011 01:26am EST.

'Nine Rivers' opens ambitious season at Miller

by [Emily Ostertag](#)

The days following Hurricane Irene are as fitting a time as any for a work called “Nine Rivers” to hold its U.S. premiere, which will begin Wednesday, Sept. 14, at Miller Theatre (2960 Broadway at 114th Street).

Several renowned contemporary musicians are to perform James Dillon’s epic three-part cycle. American percussionist and conductor Steven Schick will play with and lead the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). Performing along with them will be the choir The Crossing, conducted by Donald Nally.

The U.S. premiere of this work, which Dillon wrote throughout the ’80s and ’90s, is a significant moment for the contemporary music world. The Guardian called the world premiere of “Nine Rivers” last year in Scotland “an immense occasion, unquestionably the most significant new-music event of the year.”

This performance is an ambitious undertaking. The pieces are scored for a variety of instrumentalists and multimedia artists, and incorporate strings, live electronics, and video production. According to Miller Theatre director Melissa Smey, arranging the staging alone was one of the biggest obstacles in putting together the program. Smey, who took over as director of Miller Theatre in April 2009, has since been appointed executive director of Columbia’s Arts Initiative. Her main goal “is to make arts and culture part of everyone’s everyday life” at Columbia. “It is my personal mission to get every Columbian to come to Miller,” she added.

While Columbia students have a wealth of opportunities to experience the arts in New York City, especially with discounts like those found at the TIC, Smey feels that bringing the arts directly to Columbia is equally important. “Miller is a campus asset,” she said. “We are the only place like this on campus. We want to do things that you can’t see or hear anywhere else.”

In a place like Columbia, home to such a young and vibrant audience, Smey feels that programming at Miller should be both fresh and exciting. The “Nine Rivers” performances and the entire upcoming season exemplify this, especially because they emphasize the contrast between early and new music.

To complement one of its most popular series, “Composer Portraits,” which dedicates

concerts to a collection of living, working composers each year, Miller Theatre will also feature performances by groups like Le Poème Harmonique, which specializes in 17th century music, and jazz artists like Don Byron and Lionel Loueke.

“In both early music and contemporary music, you need an adventuresome spirit,” Smey said. “You have to make artistic decisions about what’s your approach, how are you going to shape the performance of the piece. And for audiences, I’m constantly trying to figure out what the next big thing is. I haven’t figured it out yet, but I will.”

The second and third parts of “Nine Rivers” will be performed on Friday, Sept. 16, and Saturday, Sept. 17, respectively. All three concerts begin at 8 p.m., and tickets are available at www.millertheatre.com