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# **Tradition and Invention: A personal response to *The Book of Elements* and contemporary culture**

## **Ian Pace**

**Revised version of Programme note for world premiere of work, The Warehouse, London, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003.**

Upon hearing a performance of the first volume of *The Book of Elements*, I was quite bewildered; the ambiguous, fragmented nature of each short piece, eschewing for the most part any type of rhetorical closure or sense of organic wholeness, combined with the distinctiveness of the harmonic and gestural language, developed ever since Dillon's earlier cycle *L'Évolution du Vol* (though with clear antecedents in many earlier works as well) into a state of great fluency, within which one could discern resonances and echoes of the music of Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin, Szymanowski, Enescu, Varèse, Messiaen, Xenakis and numerous others; the combination of these aspects made an unmistakeable impact but raised important questions: was Dillon making his impact merely by appeal to the bizarre, in an affected and mannered way that would by its very nature only remain as such for a finite amount of time and thus be prone to seemingly banal upon repeated listening, or did the music constitute a uniquely insightful form of dialectical mediation, with the potential to offer penetrating illumination and expand the categories of perception?

As a result of many musical works which are striking upon first impact, but whose mechanisms are revealed all-too-transparently upon multiple hearings, diminishing the potential conviction of the work as it is unmasked as an non-self-reflexive reification of musical 'truisms', I have become both alertful to this possibility from the outset, and also more inclined to suspend concrete judgement until after repeated listening and digestion. With this in mind, I nowadays have no hesitation in placing *The Book of Elements* firmly in the latter of the two categories described above.

To describe in positivistic terms the importance and personal impact of a work of art can be reductive to the point of futility, and a work from which such an espousal is too easily generated (as with many works and performances of today which appear to be created first and foremost with a view to the probable critical vocabulary they can germinate) is likely to be hollow. Eyeful as I am towards the limitations of the English language in delineating appropriate concepts, I would hesitantly suggest that a strategy which attempts to negate this can emphasize the extent of dialectical critique and thus contemporaneity of such a work, and consequently its resistance to assimilation as idle entertainment; the art work might avoid being swallowed up and eliminated within those gaping voids in a highly commercialised world.

It is clear that Dillon exploits a sophisticated network of reference, manifested within multiple compositional and perceptual strata: not only the types of harmonic and gestural resonances I mentioned above, also the incorporation of dance forms. the continual allusions to pianistic figurations and stylistic traits familiar to those versed in the history of the literature and its performers (including, for example, passages featuring slightly overlapping melodic notes or chords that almost parodistically

reproduce a type of Russian school of legato playing, or melodic parts repeated in double notes, reportedly a common feature of Liszt's playing of even single lines), and whether in the totality of the shorter works, or within the subsections of the longer ones, an ongoing process of fragmentation which itself has a long 'tradition' as made clear in Dillon's own note on the piece.

No music exists in isolation; it would be bold of any composer to claim otherwise about their work. The relationships of negation to be found in, say, the works of Stravinsky with regard to the Wagnerian aesthetic, or in the post-war works of Boulez, Stockhausen and Cage with respect to some aspects of Western traditions, or those types of conscious exploration of that which is conventionally 'excluded' in the work of Helmut Lachenmann, all serve to emphasize rather than marginalize the lineage; indifference might serve the latter purpose rather more readily, but that itself would open up another plethora of more arbitrary allusions which would be no less tangible to a listener by virtue of their arbitrariness. Even the music of such a supposedly 'blank sheet' composer as Iannis Xenakis would be unthinkable without that of Varèse and Stravinsky, Dillon himself has opined (I would personally add Bartok and Brahms to that canon).

However, the exploitation of quotation and reference has a rather chequered history in recent times. Such much of what goes under the banner of the 'post-modern' consists of an unmediated, undialectical musical 'reality', manifested in the form of a loose assemblage of empirically discovered gestures, harmonies, rhythms, etc., whose juxtaposition resembles little more than the layout of goods in a supermarket. Sometimes one encounters a little innocuous tweaking in the name of 'irony', as a feeble defence mechanism against the type of critique I am currently applying.

Those composers who work in this way are paradoxically the opponents of tradition rather than its begetters; by denying the complexities and radicalities of tradition as *process* they recreate it as a collection of unhistorical commodities, quaint exotica; their only aesthetic is that of the marketplace. The calculated, instrumentalised, rationality of the techniques used only perpetuate the terrifying irrationalism of the contemporary world they - perhaps unwittingly - reflect.

Dillon, as distinct from many postmodernists, appeals to the riches and depths of tradition as an alternative to the self-consciousness of much contemporary composition and performance that is constrained between the purportedly opposite forces of commercialisation and institutionalisation (which both in reality share some similar properties of reification). Dillon's tradition is in no sense a nostalgic appeal to some hopelessly idealized 'Golden Age', but an attempt to reinscribe the depth of history into culture existing in a late capitalist age, one in which history itself is rendered as simply yet another commodity.

But what is wrongly perceived as the converse of the 'post-modern' described above can be another equally questionable category: a self-consciously auratic obscurantism, flaunting its own impenetrability, in the face of which mere mortals should cower submissively, awe-struck by the sheer mystique that needs must imply their own sense of inferiority; very much the same type conceit as can be mercilessly exploited by any type of authority figure so as to elevate the arbitrary nature of their own social position into the realm of the aesthetic. One variety of nineteenth-century

individualistic ideology, by the terms of which art is incapable of doing other than presenting a window onto the curiosities of an artist's particular 'character' (presented as something innate and unchanging, unconstructed and unmediated by their dynamic interactions with the society they inhabit, the mainstay of many a reactionary ideology), requires therefore the notion that artists as such as superior beings, more 'interesting', than those unblessed with the opportunities (usually as a result of wealth, social standing, etc.) to work in an rarefied artistic field. As such, this type of art is emblematic of petit-bourgeois culture at its most militant, which in earlier times could indeed have a critical and subversive function, but today becomes merely another fetish.

This supposed converse in actuality repeats many of the same problems inherent within the post-modern position, most prominently the lack of engagement and reflection. The failure to sublimate this false aesthetic dichotomy is the major reason for a lot of inertia in modern composition, I believe, and it stands to Dillon's immense credit how he is able to move beyond these categories so as to create a visionary music which is autonomous while engaged, subjective while formalistic, ambivalent while affirmative, pensive while embracing that which lies outside its own boundaries.

So how in specific terms does Dillon achieve this? His strategies and techniques are pluralistic, though never reducible to a mere ostentatious agglomeration; throughout the force and irreducibility of the subjective will is irascible. Most of the musical material (much of it proclaimed in the first volume) is subject to a variegated range of perspective. New types of meanings are created as fragments from one part of the cycle are presented in different surroundings; elsewhere what might otherwise be straightforward is richly coloured by varying syntagmatic juxtapositions (as for example with the rhetorical flourish that opens the first piece in Volume 3, or the material that opens Volume 5 and recurs in very different forms). Different categories of material have different degrees of mobility, some returning in relatively fixed forms, others transformed through continual subtle alterations of pitch and rhythm. Passages of a crystalline clarity are set into relief when contrasted with those which are veiled, given a quality of half-presences through incorporation of foreign pitches or particular dynamic envelopes which create a state of fragility. Terse, aphoristic, incomplete, utterances create expectations and generate corresponding momentum within the larger structure: sometimes these expectations are fulfilled, at other times they are pointedly thwarted to create a sensation of almost infinite sadness and loss. While the cycle progresses in a linear manner in terms of the durations of the individual pieces, still the whole maintains something of a fragmentary and ambiguous nature, right up to the final gesture; this both enables the possibility of a very individualised reaction consciously arrived at by the listener, and also implies the potential for much more fruitful composition beyond.

Dillon is not an 'ironic' composer in the sense in which the term is fashionably used nowadays (an appeal to the 'ironic' gesture often serves as a 'Get out of jail free' card for that which would otherwise simply be considered bad music). If irony is seen instead as the defamiliarisation of the surface properties of a musical 'object', by a various techniques, such as have been practised in music for many centuries, then this is indeed an approach which Dillon employs in a sophisticated and multivalent manner. For this and other reasons, the music could rarely be said to be 'naïve';

perhaps some of its individual components exhibit such a quality when taken out of context, but the total experience is a different matter.

What results is an intricate, multi-layered, but ultimately coherent trajectory through a myriad range of under-stated emotions, reflections, assertions, memories; the qualities of tenderness, brooding, elation, passion, melancholy are rendered all the more vivid by virtue of the various distancing techniques employed.

So what are the implications of this for the performer? It has been clear to me for some time now that approaches to performance practice need to be as mobile, self-reflective and critical as the music being performed, whenever it was composed. But performance practice itself also entails or at least reflects an ideology imposed upon the work, nowhere less pronouncedly so than in unreflective, 'instinctive', 'musical' performances which simply repeat in an unmediated manner an empirically obtained dominant aesthetic ideology. I 'construct' myself as a performer through the deeply personal nature of my interaction with the works I play; at least that is the intention. Anyone playing this or any other work implicitly creates a set of *priorities*, based upon their own very individual perception of the work's most important attributes. This need not imply either a free-for-all or stifling *Werktreue*-like approach; all that is to be hoped for is that the performance ideology is not explicitly at cross purposes with that of the composer.

From numerous years of study and performance of the various chapters of this piece, often working closely with the composer, I have been acutely aware of the scale of the challenge involved for the performer, who must situate that pivotal expressive position that lies between the opposite poles of hyperbole (as a type of excessive rhetoric that fetishises clarity to the point of triteness) on one hand, and opacity on the other. When one locates that place, where presence is implied without being clearly manifest (perhaps 'under erasure' as Dillon might say, after Derrida), the result can be electrifying. The configuration by which Dillon place his musical material 'at a distance' paradoxically add to, rather than detract from, the intensity of the emotional experience.

A not inconsiderable amount of the cycle inhabits this sort of area, brought about in different ways, sometimes by the flow of the musical argument (and the continuous dialectic between states of continuity and discontinuity), sometimes by key details of voicing, pauses between aphoristic gestures, approaches to such key pianistic gestures such as tremolos, legato playing, repeated notes, pedalling, and all the associated history, both compositional and pianistic. Dillon is indeed an aficionado of the marvellous history of piano music and in particular of the pianists from the earlier half of the twentieth century; for one performing his music, these influences show clearly, but a response of idle pastiche is surely not the answer. Instead, one must consider how to make some of these traditional qualities meaningful in a music that has been touched by more recent histories as well?

Notation defines itself *negatively*, it delineates the space within which performers can operate by a process of exclusion (pitch has a more positivistic quality on the piano, but few other parameters can be defined so unequivocally). The score of *The Book of Elements* would be unlikely to strike one as being 'over-notated' in any sense; a greater amount of notional detail might seek to deny the particular type of *spontaneity*

which is so clearly present in the compositional process, and necessitates an equivalent response from the performer (very unlike the Stravinskian model which is much more common amongst many composers today). So much of the music is pregnant with implication, with multiple possibilities of meaning and feeling, it does indeed liberate the performer to find their own 'subtexts' from this omnidirectional music (I would argue that the highly detailed notation of Brian Ferneyhough can also 'liberate the performer' in a different way, but that is for another piece of writing!).

Dillon, like Ferneyhough and Finnissy, works aloof from the dominant musical and cultural traditions of his country, relatively autonomous from many of the institutions which propagate and reinforce those traditions, and as such has no particular need to effect either a reconciliation or an outright statement of opposition (many a would-be radical has ultimately discovered that straight negation only reinforces the paradigms they seek to oppose). This is indeed a situation that has a great potential for liberation that differs from that for composers working in countries and cultures (France, Germany and Italy in particular) with more radical traditions. This conclusion was reached by Richard Toop in his now infamous article 'Four Facets of the New Complexity'; that article gave wide currency to the notion of such a unified 'movement', which has rightly come under intense questioning (not least by the composers themselves) in subsequent times. Nowadays it is hard to imagine that many could listen to Ferneyhough's *On Stellar Magnitudes*, Finnissy's *Recent Britain*, and Dillon's *Traumwerk*, and fail to see how utterly distinguished from one another each of these works are (as would be shown by almost any other selection of pieces). A degree of notational detail, particularly with respect to rhythm, and a certain amount of surface density, remain the only possible similarities that are immediately apparent on a superficial level, and even these qualities vary in extent between the different composers. Now that this is more generally accepted and understood, it becomes more acceptable to consider what possible deeper unity might be present; the particularity of the relationship to the culture from which the composers hail is the most palpable manifestation of this, I believe, and is something that continues to give me hope in the continuing possibility of spontaneous, subjective and critically engaged musical invention in an ever-globalising world.