

Lawrence Dillon

by Kyle Gann

Allow me to achieve a minor milestone on *Chamber Music's* behalf: for the first time here, I'm writing a column about a composer I know only over the Internet. I've never met Lawrence Dillon, never been to a concert of his music, never heard anything of his live, never bought a CD of his. He doesn't frequent the same real-world circles I do, doesn't get performed much in the area where I live. He does get performed, and widely: he was a guest of the St. Petersburg Conservatory when his orchestra piece *Amadeus ex machina* was performed by the St. Petersburg Chamber Philharmonic, he's had pieces played recently in Paris and in Ukraine. Aside from inside my computer, he lives down South, and is composer-in-residence and dean of music at the North Carolina School of the Arts. It might have taken many years before I ran into him in real life, but he's one of the regulars at a feisty little composers' site called Sequenza 21 (after pieces by Luciano Berio), at <http://www.sequenza21.com>. On top of that, Dillon blogs. Welcome to the 21st-century composer's new career paradigm.

Do I still, for this magazine's readership, need to define *blog*? I didn't know

what one was myself when I was asked to start one two years ago. Critic Alex Ross defines it as "public procrastination." That's certainly true, but it's also a public journal on the Internet, a record of events, observations, and opinions for those interested. Lots of young composers keep them; and Dillon, in his forties, is one of the oldest composers I know of doing so. Gone is the composer as man-behind-the-curtain, the mysterious celebrity whom we don't even see onstage until he takes his bow at the end of the performance. Now, on the Internet, the composer becomes something of a tasteful shill for his own work, and we encounter his personality even before we do his music. I learned a lot about Dillon from his blog at www.sequenza21.com/dillon.html, from his website at www.lawrencedillon.com, and from sparring with him at Sequenza 21, before ever hearing a Dillonesque note.

For instance, I know that he has been partially deaf from birth, that he was the youngest of eight children, and that in 1985 he became, at 26, the youngest composer to ever get a doctorate from Juilliard. He studied with Babbitt, Carter, Diamond, and Sessions, yet his early influences came from John Cage and the headily conceptualist *Source* magazine. Fundamentally, as his blog makes clear, he is not a taker of sides, nor a polemicist. He is both moderate and a moderator, impatient with battles of musical aesthetics in which one side of the coin fights the other for dominance. He cites all four Jungian modes of experience—sensation, intuition, intellect, emotion—as necessary and valuable in music. He reserves his anger for the intolerant, and seeks balance.

This is just as true in his music. In general it is as finely poised between tonality and atonality as anyone's I could name. Of the Jungian qualities Dillon cites, I would have to accuse him of having feeling and intuition dominant.

Hidden structures never seem to underlie his music, nor does he seem to have any rigorous agenda. It's not what one would call intellectual music, but it is written with great care for detail and is often clever. His String Quartet no. 2 (2002), for instance, is subtitled "Flight," and it consists of six "fugues"; but he takes "fugue" in its original meaning of "flight"—while the instruments do somewhat imitate each other's lines in succession, their purpose is not so much polyphony as the building up of weightless textures that buzz through the air like insects, undulate like swings, or float like stars. The idiom is as gestural and as consonantly atonal as Berg's, but it doesn't take a new music expert to recognize the images. As is evident from a CDR of the work, his evocation of mosquitoes draws appreciative chuckles from the audience.

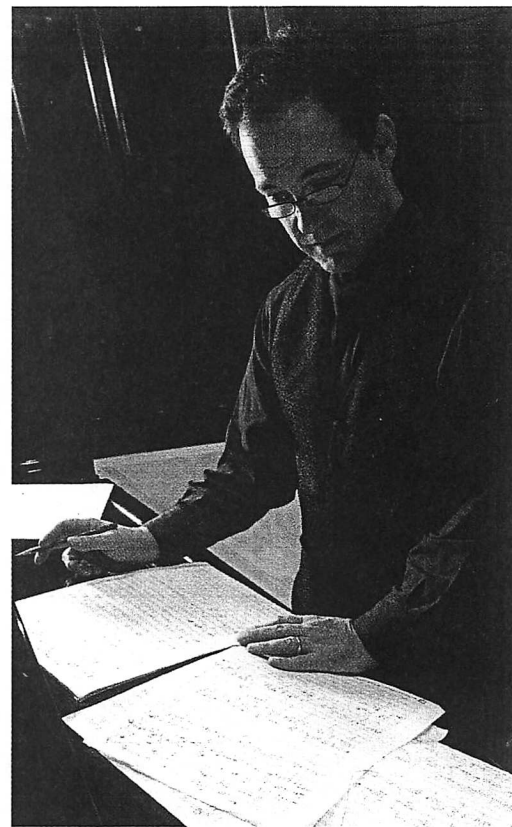
Chamber music dominates Dillon's output, though he's written a few concertos, one symphony, and that *Amadeus ex machina*, whose turbulent atonal patterns are devilishly revealed to stem from the angry opening theme of Mozart's G Minor Symphony. He's working on the fourth installment of a series of six string quartets based on ideas from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Curiously enough, though, despite his literary imagination and appreciation of the other arts, when Dillon writes vocal works, he always writes his own text. The one of these I've heard, *Appendage* (1993), is a strange, nightmarish stream-of-consciousness for soprano and mixed ensemble, from the point of view of someone whose limbs seem to be mangled or missing, and ending with a sweet lullaby. It would be reminiscent of Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, except that it's Dillon's most tonal work, with a steadily thumping beat often in the piano and lots of impressionist filigree.

In fact, if there's anything that sets Dillon apart from the general run of

semitonal expressionists, it's his rhythm, which is propulsive and not afraid to settle into a groove. The slow movement of his *Furies and Muses* (1997) for bassoon and string quartet, one of his loveliest works, is almost entirely based on a slow 9/8 rhythmic ostinato too off-beat to ever quite sound regular, but always there until the final measures. Despite a tension, chromaticism, and angularity that seem entirely 20th-century, the music takes great pains to draw the audience in.

And so does his blog, which often seems more geared to listeners than to fellow composers. He loves to chart the creative process, explaining where he gets his ideas and what he does with them. Do we suffer any from having the composer out in public like this, finding his audience without intermediary? Certainly, composers less articulate than Dillon will have trouble competing in the same arena. The website www.ludwigvanbeethoven.com might not have made a very ingratiating impression. But what aristocratic patronage, orchestras, publishers, and record companies no longer do for composers, they now have to do for themselves, and at present the Internet is a level playing field. Acting as their own factotums, composers will be graded on personality; and spelling and punctuation count, too. Whether this is a good thing or not, perhaps it's a needed corrective to the Composer-as-Great-Man of the past. Luckily, music is not the only medium through which Dillon knows how to capture an audience's attention.

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