

A letter to the editors

Richard Toop

Hartmut Möller's fax/telephone interview with James Dillon (*Context* 12: 33–36), though an important contribution to the Dillon bibliography, perpetuates some common errors and misunderstandings in relation to the "New Complexity" phenomenon. Though I didn't think these were worth responding to in the context of the article's original publication in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, I think their reproduction in a musicological journal such as *Context* calls for a few corrections and clarifications.

Like many before him, Möller seems to assume that the catch-phrase "New Complexity" was my invention. It wasn't, although I do admit to coining "New Capitulationism," as a purely polemical term; the phrase was already in use in London late in 1986, i.e. eighteen months before my article 'Four Facets of the "New Complexity"' was published (*Contact* 32 (Spring 1988): 4–50). I first heard it from Roger Wright, then director of the British Music Information Centre, and it featured prominently in a BBC radio feature that Wright authored and compiled in late 1986 or early 1987. Dillon himself, in a recent conversation with me, traced the term "New Complexity" back to a pre-concert talk given by Nigel Osborne in 1980 which introduced the premiere of his *Once Upon a Time* in the context of a concert series which also included Chris Dench's *Kinjiki*; he remembered that, even back then, he cringed at the term's capacity for "reification."

My own attitude to this catch-phrase was, from the start, equivocal. The first page of my article contained the following statements, which many subsequent commentators (conveniently?) overlooked:

- 'Leaving aside the appropriateness of the "New Complexity" label, it has the effect of lumping together composers who, from many points of view, might prefer to remain separate';
- '...there are differences which in the last two or three years have become so pronounced as to make this, perhaps, almost a last chance to regard them as a (disparate) unity'; [written in 1987]
- 'It is not surprising that the composers involved are less than enthusiastic about the "new Complexity" label'; this was followed by statements to that effect by Finnissy and Dench.

Since I was not in Europe or the UK between 1986 and the Rotterdam *Complexity?* symposium in 1990, I can't judge the degree to which, in Dillon's words, 'the whole idea of so-called "new complexity" was becoming objectified into part of the commodity market of new music'. However, I think it is worth pointing out that the symposium was "curated" by Joël Bons, a former Ferneyhough student whose compositions at that time (e.g. *Tour*) were actually much

closer to Andriessen than to Ferneyhough. Bons had close ties with the Nieuw Ensemble, and the initial stimulus for the symposium, as he made clear in his introductory essay in the symposium program booklet, was not glorification of a "complexist aesthetic," but utter frustration that his highly skilled ensemble had been unable to play a first version of Richard Barrett's *Illuminer le temps*. In the end, the symposium was disappointingly one-sided ("pro-complexist"), and I don't think Dillon would have enjoyed it; but that wasn't the original intention.

Finally, the 'unpublished' essay by Michael J. Alexander to which Möller refers in a footnote was published in *Contemporary Music Review* 13.1 (1995); I warmly recommended it to readers.

Sincerely

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Musicology Australia Volume XX (1997) is dedicated to the memory of the distinguished Australian musicologist Catherine Ellis (1935–1996).

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