



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *James Dillon: string quartets as a complex causal network*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/82872/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Spencer, M (2014) James Dillon: string quartets as a complex causal network.  
Contemporary Music Review, 33 (3). 244 - 265. ISSN 0749-4467

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2014.975551>

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## James Dillon: String Quartets as Complex Causal Network

### Michael Spencer

I would like to acknowledge the indispensable support and assistance of Keldene McNulty in the preparation of this article, particularly in relation to the formatting of music examples, tables and collation of raw analytical data.

Throughout his career, James Dillon has often used titles that are at best ambiguous, or otherwise unspecific or abstract. Until one reads the background to the *Nine Rivers Cycle*, the *German Triptych* or the *Leuven Triptych*<sup>1</sup>, it is difficult to imagine what these works are about, and even when the programme note is digested, the range of ideas that inform or initiate the compositions are not necessarily expressively lucid enough in text form<sup>2</sup>. It is also interesting to note that the title *New York Triptych*, particularly when one considers some recent American composers' title designations, even now has the shadow of the 9/11 tragedy evoked to some listeners and the visual art aspect of the term 'triptych' evoked to others<sup>3</sup>. But in other ways, the titles are open to interpretation; Dillon gives enough to whet the appetite of the audience and then leaves the rest up to us to a large extent. There are, of course, some titles that are more deliberately ambiguous, such as *L'Évolution du Vol*, where the title might refer to the English translation of the French 'Vol' as 'flight' or 'theft', this for a piece in which the text that is set refers to 'getting high' and medicinal and herbal spells and concoctions of witches and which brings together a myriad of musical stylistic references.

Andrew Clements points out that Dillon has a 'tendency to construct families of works [which] makes it easier to navigate a path through and obtain a sense of the shape of Dillon's now considerable output'<sup>4</sup> and it is certainly true that Dillon's catalogue consists of triptychs, cycles and works that share common extra-musical titles such as *Traumwerk*, but the string quartet as a genre and in their manifest form in his output, seems to be outside of this type of thinking for Dillon.

To use the prosaic title 'String Quartet' or 'Second String Quartet' implies the requirement of a particular listening strategy, one that is prepared to engage with the work and the medium itself in exclusively auditory terms; that is, while a listener may well have some pre-conceptions about the idea of a 'string quartet' in terms of instrumentation and structural properties, a work that has an extra-musical title or allusion connected with it is significantly more connotative than denotative<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> If one hasn't been to Leuven, what does one think prior to, or after a performance of the work, for example.

<sup>2</sup> This, of course is not a problem; rather, it is a tacit acknowledgement that music is an art-form that will always defy or transcend written explication.

<sup>3</sup> Dillon was on an academic residency in New York when 9/11 happened.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Clements, 'James Dillon and The Book of Elements' in *The Book of Elements* (CD Booklet, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> Of course in works with extra-musical references in the titles, these are hardly dealt with in any kind of programmatic way, as Dillon indicates in his programme note for *The Book of Elements*: '[...] it was never part of

There are no real solo parts in Dillon's quartets: occasionally Dillon's writing suggests independent roles (and certainly within four-part textures, individual quartet members often get to play virtuosic material), but he treats this medium, more than any other, as a self-contained unit though it might be argued that his orchestral works of the 2000s, especially *Via Sacra* (1999), *Physis* (2007) and even the Violin Concerto (2000) exhibit an approach to their respective mediums that is more homogenous and play with the normative expectations of those mediums than earlier essays in the orchestral domain by Dillon such as *helle Nacht* (1987) and even *Blitzschlag* (1996) which appear to attempt to blow the notion of writing for orchestra and within concerto form apart.

For me, the quartets act as the lungs of Dillon's creative practice – that is, when he is pre-occupied with large(r)-scale works, they allow him to re-think compositional processes in a very focussed manner, as an inhalation if you will, but the writing of string quartets also allows him to experiment and exhale the ideas explored and discovered in later solo/ensemble works<sup>6</sup>.

The quartets essentially form a complex causal network, one which has few if any detailed inter-connections across the six pieces, but one where the network is grounded in the historical medium of the string quartet itself, which allows for a self-interrogation in terms of process, conceptual approach and textural innovation. Perhaps most importantly, it allows for a re-thinking of how musical communication occurs, between the four performers themselves and the listener/audience; it facilitates reflection on the intimacy of music-making and music reception. Certainly for Dillon, these are vital aspects of the creative act.

In conjunction with this, Dillon is setting up, at a micro-level and macro-level, innovative patterning processes, in the sense that extended techniques and playing types (example in the String Quartet No. 3, movement 1, bar 51) often exist to disorientate the listener and certainly are not used to exemplify innovation for its own sake.

It is also worth noting that Dillon has referred to his approach to composing for string quartet as '[A] conscious play with tradition'<sup>7</sup> which suggests a certain lightness and gravity combined which is reflected even on the sonic level of the quartets: as Dillon puts it in reference to his String Quartet No. 6, the medium has 'the potential for a virtuosic and yet intimate space, both conversational and rhetorical'<sup>8</sup>.

### **String Quartet (August, 1983, London)**

---

my intention to either 'represent' or 'illustrate' these elements; rather they function as a kind of metaphor for different forms of energy'.

<sup>6</sup> I am more than aware that there are pieces such as *The Soadie Waste* (piano quintet), *Vapor* (string quartet and SATB voices) and other works that feature the violin or violoncello in Dillon's output, but these fall outside the remit of this text and also have extra-musical titles and themes that seem less relevant to the composer's more abstract approach to the string quartet medium.

<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence with the author by email; Dillon is referring to the string quartet as a medium here.

<sup>8</sup> James Dillon, 'Programme Note for String Quartet No. 6' in Donaueschinger Musiktage 2010 (CD Booklet)

Despite commentators' determination to suggest that Dillon was primarily interested in 'eschewing repetition at the bar-line' and being uninterested in repetitive forms in the early 80s, there is clear evidence in this work that repetition is an important element at the start of this work, and that paradigmatic repetitions are symptomatic across the quartet. In bar 51, the violoncello repeats the opening viola part from bar 1 with a modified rhythm. These gestures are interesting because the notion of double-stopped glissandi in different directions and in different durational cycles becomes a prevalent textural conceit of 'L'Oeuvre au noir' (1990) in which the cellos perform two-against-three glissandi gestures in opposing directions simultaneously, but where the extra-musical mood of 'blackness' is generated by this textural murkiness. What is interesting about this gesture in the String Quartet, is that it does not determine the over-riding textural paradigm as in the ensemble work; rather, it serves a different function in the quartet, capturing the mid-level expansion and contraction of overall phrases, also mirrored in the shaping of the dynamic indications, and focussing them at a micro-level (indeed, it's most likely that the micro-level details were generated first). This gesture is also the final one in the violoncello, marked 'poco lamentoso' which again pre-figures the similar writing in the later piece.

The more extrovert contour material and constantly shifting density of the textural writing in section 7 which sees the most varied approach to the ensemble writing to that point in the piece, with the quartet working together one moment (b.48) and very differently the next (b.51), in some ways pre-empts the style of patterning that appears in much larger works of a few years later such as *helle Nacht* and *Ignis Noster* (1992), both for orchestra. The paradigmatic recurrence of the sudden energetic gesture from bar 3 of the work in bar 170<sup>9</sup>, in which the roles of the violins are reversed (and augmented by the viola and violoncello) suggests a parity and equality in terms of the importance of each member of the quartet, an approach that is consistent across all of Dillon's quartets. Table 1 details the overall structure of the work and highlights important gestural and motivic material while also indicating examples of paradigmatic (or otherwise developed) material types. The shape of the quartet is such that it opens with a clustered moment before gradually opening out to encompass extremes of register and introducing significantly more microtonal inflexions and a variety of differentiated playing techniques as well as considerably more sophisticated rhythmic layering. At section 24, one of the tropes of string writing that permeates Dillon's work from this point on is fore-grounded, with the quartet performing transitions between *ordinario*, *sul ponticello* and *sul tasto* playing positions in an unsynchronised fashion. In later works, this technique is often combined with gradual transitions of other performance techniques in wind and percussion instruments. Overall, the work engages with the tradition of the quartet with its possibilities of soloist writing, duo or trio combinations as well as the homogenous tutti option while at the same time, appearing to be dysfunctional in terms of any normative narrative. Indeed, this seems to be what Dillon is

---

<sup>9</sup> it also appears in b.13 at the start of section 4, but with little unchanged other than an altered dynamic contour on the violin 1 gesture.

concerned with given he has said of the piece, ‘I wanted to create a kind of notion of directionality in terms of discontinuities’,<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1: String Quartet overview**

<i>Bar</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Pitch material</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	1 ♪=56	Prominent G	Gentle, staggered entries begin with viola. All pitches within a tone of G. This could be because G is an open string common to all strings. Interestingly pitched an octave above so G not played on open string. The gesture is constructed of a tone interval (G to A) and a semitone interval (G to F#) which is common to recaps of the gesture later in the work.
2	2 ♪=48	G still prominent but more pitches introduced in bar 3	G-F# tied over from the previous section. In quintuplet hemidemisemiquavers in bar 3. A wider range of pitches are now introduced. We see a return to pitch material centred within a tone of G in bar 4. Development of material from bar 1 in bar 5 with rhythmic alterations and entries staggered differently, for example violin I enters before violin II. At the end of the developed repeat of bar 1 there is another double bar marking the end of the section. Violoncello enters in bar 5 on G (two octaves below).
6	3 ♪=40	Microtonal inflexions	From end of 6-11, tremolando between neighbouring pitches. Close harmony. More microtonal movement. Material in violoncello from bars 5-6 is extended in bars 7-10.
13	4 ♪=63	G pedal	Development of quintuplet hemidemisemiquavers figure from bar 3 is heard again in bar 13 – with same pitches. Now accompanied by G pedal in violoncello and a pedal in viola.
18	5 ♪=63	D and E dominate with F introduced as a linking pedal to next section	Bar 19 sees a return of the instruction from bar 1 for all entries to be ‘very gentle’. The opening bar of this section is a duet between upper strings with sustained double stopped harmonics in violin I. The cello in 19 is in its upper register. There is an F pedal in the viola part from bar 19-21 and in violin II from bars 20-21.
21	6 ♪=48	G and modifications of G	Opening bar of section 6 begins with F pedals in violin I and viola, carried over from previous section and ascending tremolando. The first violin carries the melody from bar 21 and has a virtuosic solo between bars 22-24.
27	7 ♪=60	Primarily gestural material	Clearly the largest section. In bar 30 we have a bar of complete silence which provides a stark contrast to the complete texture heard in bars 25-29. In bar 31-38 there are sustained double stopped harmonics in the second violin part alongside double stopped harmonic glissandi in the first violin. The viola carries the melody in bar 31-36. There is a G pedal in bars 32-36 in the violoncello part. In bar 38, the double

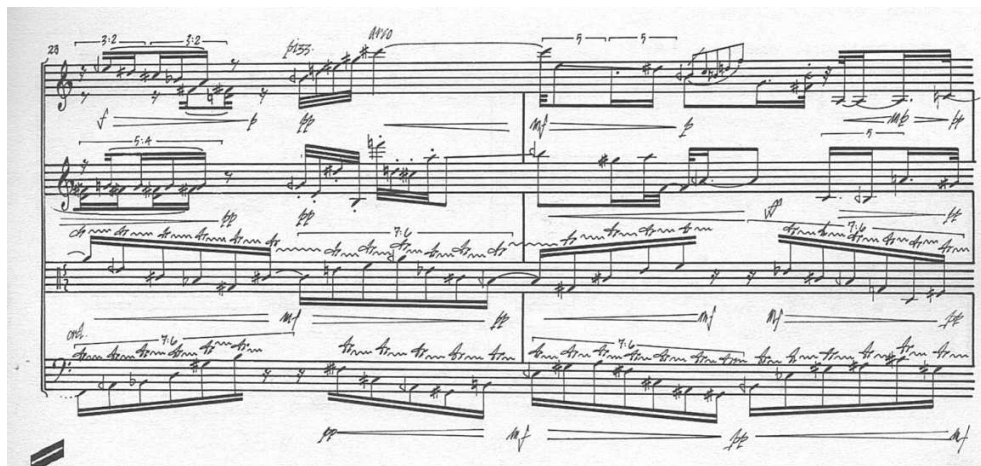
<sup>10</sup> From Keith Potter, ‘James Dillon: currents of development’, *Musical Times*, vol.131, no. 1767 (May 1990), p.253

			stopped harmonics from bar 31 reappear, initially on same pitch but with alternative rhythmic durations. In bar 51 there is a paradigmatic repetition of the double stopped glissandi idea from the opening bar but now starting a tone higher on A. In 72 there is another paradigmatic, developed repetition of the viola part from the opening bar in the violoncello, now with an additional triplet demisemiquaver figure at the end.
79	8 ♩=56	Intervallic relationships as per opening gesture	Descending material leads to a recap of the opening in bar 82 (reference to the instruction from the opening bar for all entries to be 'very gentle' recurs). This gesture, followed by chords arpeggiated 'as little as possible', marks the end of the section. The gesture is made up of a tone interval (F quarter-sharp to F three-quarters sharp) and a semi-tone interval (A to Bb) as per the opening gesture, but here the registral displacement significantly alters the aural effect.
84	9 ♩=72	Mainly around F initially then material becomes textural	There are staggered entries, beginning with the first violin shortly followed by violin II, then viola and finally violoncello in bar 85. The first violin begins with sustained E quarter flat from bar 84-85 with second violin enters on a E creating a microtonal inverted pedal. The viola, from bar 84-87 has an A pedal. The saltando gesture in bars 86-87 and the staccato repeated notes in bars 88-89 are modifications of the material in bars 26-27. In bars 92-94, the staggered tremolando entries are paradigmatically related to bar 7.
95	10 ♩=72 [fermata at close]	Pizzicato re-working of the opening with G as primary pitch	In bars 104-106 the harmonics in the violins are repetitions of the same material contained within different metric systems.
107	11 ♩=80	Gestural material	Begins with contrary motion glissandi between parts. In bars 108-112 there are 'strummed' arpeggiated chords in the viola and cello parts.
113	12 ♩=63	G and F# with gestural material	Section 12 begins with just upper strings. In bar 115, players are instructed that the 'fermata should be held just long enough to emphasise the effect of (agogic) syncopation'.
130	13 ♩=63	Gestural material	Begins with staggered entries, beginning first with violin I, violin II and finally, violoncello which becomes quasi-canonic in terms of the types of material with the instrument orders constantly shifting and paradigmatic repetitions of double stopped glissandi gestures from b.51.
151	14 ♩=92	Prominence of C	C pedal in first violin from bar 157-161 and C pedal in viola and cello in bars 158-161. Much more homogenous writing and sound world with rhythmic unisons (b.160) and repeated gestures.
162	15 ♩=72	F#	F# pedal in violoncello from bar 162-163. Microtonal tremolando in the second violin between pitches within a tone of D. There is a quasi-canonic idea in bar 167 between the first violin and the viola. The very prominent gesture from b.3 of the work recurs here, embedded within a new metric system and with the violin 1 and 2 parts reversed and additional augmentation of the gesture in the viola and violoncello.
175	16 ♩=30	Various pitches	At the beginning of section 16, the players are instructed to play 'Disembodied' evoking a ghostly sound world which fits with the harmonic glissandi across all of the strings from bar 175-191.

192	17 ♩=96	Various pitches	At the start of the section, the instruction from the opening bar returns 'all entries very gentle' but with the additional expectation of being 'resolute!' – the material seems to be a longer development of the opening gesture but without the focus on the intervallic pitch content as per other paradigmatic repetitions of that material.
196	18 ♩=72	Microtonal inflexions	Descending triplet idea moves from first violin into violoncello with different pitches. Double stopped glissandi in first violin in bar 198 and the whole section is transitional, moving away from the static previous sections and towards the more energised final sections.
203	19 ♩=84	Gestural material	In 203 there is further canonic textures as the 5:4 semiquaver idea in the first violin is soon repeated two octaves lower by the violoncello (also in b.212) and a generally more energised material with the tremolandi features recurring. Development of sound world through col legno and subtle glissandi deviations.
225	20 ♩=92	C and C# with E towards the end	Begins with just lower strings. The cello plays staccato 5:4 demisemiquavers in bar 225 while the viola sustains the D below middle C in bars 225-227 and the violins play sustained C# in bar 227 while the cello plays pizzicato double stopped. In bar 229 there is a shift in texture as all parts play quadruple stopped while 'arpeggiating the chords as little as possible'. Sustains the energised aspect of previous section.
235	21 ♩=104	Gestural with microtonal inflexions	The most rhythmically complex section in the quartet. Some rhythmic unison, (tutti in b.238, violin II, viola and violoncello in b.240, tutti in b.246) but also a significant amount of independent part writing.
251	22 ♩=92	Prominence of D	Double stopped glissandi develop the opening material from the viola in bar 1 leading to staggered trills.
266	23 ♩=80	F# primarily	Develops the idea of glissandi and double stopping as well as harmonics which is important feature of the end of the quartet.
271	24 ♩=96	Wide range of pitches	More development of the double stopped glissandi feature in the viola and (to a lesser extent) the violins. Bar 299, three bars before the final section, has single-line glissandi in violoncello and violin II. Violin I takes on the double stopped dyad and viola continues the changes of bow position from sul tasto to ponticello. Opening out of the micro level gesture which has permeated the previous 50 bars and which prepares the concluding section of the quartet which does, in its final gesture, see a return of the double stop glissandi texture in the violoncello, albeit in the upper range of the instrument. The string writing alternates between sul pont and sul tasto.
302	25 ♩=72 [with a rall. molto and a fermata at the close]	D/Bb with gestural material	D pedal in viola in bars 302-303. Double stopped E octaves in violin I in bars 310-312. Tremolando between pitches within a semitone of one another in bars 310-320 in the viola part. The first violin line in bar 324 is clearly related to the violin solo from bar 23. There are harmonic glissandi in the first violin part of bars 325-327 and violoncello takes up double stopping glissandi to the end of the piece – in general, overlaid gestural and textural types with differentiated part writing.

## Second String Quartet (August, 1991, London)

The Second Quartet was composed in 1991, an interesting and important point in Dillon's composition career, because he was finishing parts of the *Nine rivers* cycle and the *German Tryptych*, specifically *Blitzschlag* for solo flute and orchestra. This work was delayed due to commissioning issues and was not completed until 1995, but there are elements of the string writing from the opening of the piece that are alluded to in the Second String Quartet (bars 15-19 in the violin parts). This extremely energised work has rather smooth transitions between states and, as with most of Dillon's quartets, the end is pre-empted by a moment at the start, in this case, bars 23-26 whose contrary motion in the lower parts is a seed for the final section where the whole quartet works against one another in this way, threatening to spill into glissandi material but not quite managing to do so.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for a string quartet. It consists of four staves, likely representing the four instruments. The notation is dense and complex, featuring various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. Key markings include 'pizz.' (pizzicato), 'ff' (fortissimo), and 'tr' (trill). There are also performance instructions like 'trn' (trill) and 'trn trn trn trn trn'. The score is written in a clear, legible hand, with some corrections and annotations visible.

### Example 1: 'Seed' that pre-emptes the closing material in the Second String Quartet

There is little in the way of stasis in the piece and even when some respite is to be had such as at bar 47, the subtle fluctuations maintain the energy and impetus of the work despite being 'clothed' in *sordini*. At bar 131, the texture takes on a harmonics glissandi characteristic which acts as a bridge passage to a shadowy tremelando passage, both texture types similar to material that appears in 'Introitus' from *Nine rivers* and some of the string writing in Dillon's orchestral works. Between bars 82 and 89, two repeated metric systems introduce one of the longest sections of the piece in which, while there is no direct repetition, pitches are cycled around and modified by trilling ornaments and the 1/8 bars function as punctuation marks of either total silence or less dense textural points.



The image displays three systems of handwritten musical notation for a string quartet. Each system consists of four staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass). The notation is highly detailed, featuring numerous rhythmic markings such as 'drum', 'drum drum', and 'drum drum drum', along with dynamic markings like 'ff', 'f', 'p', and 's.p.'. Above the staves, there are large, bold numbers (5, 2, 1, 3, 5) and smaller numbers (5, 7, 6, 5, 2, 1, 3, 5) indicating specific measures or rhythmic patterns. The score is written in a clear, professional hand, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 5/8.

**Example 2: Repeated metric system with cycling of pitches and punctuated with rare moments of silence in the Second String Quartet**

The extreme outbursts of energy of the quartet finally come to some sort of climax at bar 270 where the violins initially play arpeggio features in the same direction which quickly dissipates to contrary motion materials with staggered dynamic contours, a section that concludes the work and is reminiscent of the concluding section ('L'ECRAN') to *L'ECRAN parfum* (1988), the second work in *Nine rivers* which had been composed three years prior to the quartet. The smooth transitions make the whole work feel significantly less sectional than the other quartets despite the fact that the micro-level material is so energetic and at times violent, and the Second

Quartet would seem to be the least traditional of the six eschewing as it does for the main part, more normative dialectical relationships one would expect of the medium.

### **String Quartet No. 3 (May, 1998, London)**

‘When a conceptual order encounters a medium, what are the interzonal crepuscular manifestations of that encounter?’<sup>11</sup> This is the starting point for the String Quartet No. 3. Arnold Whittall’s chapter ‘Dillon, Adès and the Pleasures of Allusion’ has already outlined the ways in which for him, Dillon potentially alludes to Bartók in this quartet and suggests there is a backdrop of a dialectic between modernism and classicism relating to Dillon’s ancestors in the form of Varèse and Beethoven. Whittall also observes that there is a relation between this quartet and the approach to the writing in *Nine rivers*, specifically the ‘[D]rones, blunt repetitions, glissandos, microtonal inflections, and a style of playing that shuns the vibrato-based sweetness of the quartet tradition: these are the predominant features of the Dillon style in this piece and they come across as particularly vital offshoots of that ‘weird, phantasmagoric’ atmosphere ‘with moments of downright ugliness not excluded’ so palpable in the Rimbaud-inspired materials of *Nine rivers*’s ‘L’oeuvre au noir’ (1990)<sup>12</sup>. Once again this would seem to suggest that there is a process of quartet feeding other larger pieces and vice versa (I have already suggested that elements from the String Quartet bear relations to the material in the violoncellos in ‘L’Oeuvre au noir’), a two-way process which would confirm Dillon’s recent assertion that the quartets are ‘spread, as it is (journal-like) through my work’<sup>13</sup>, journal entries that reflect the wider aspects of his output. There appears to be a distinction between metered silence and ‘silence as fermata’; however, in Dillon’s quartets and other works, both are almost certainly very carefully planned on a structural level, because often the fermata have specific indications of duration (i.e. 2’’-3’’). In the final movement at bar 56, the violin 2 and viola introduce an ululating tonal texture that is very similar to motif 1 of String Quartet No. 5 and which is then inverted such that the violin 1 and violoncello take up the texture and the inner parts take over their material, almost a microcosmic version of what happens in the later quartet. Soon after at bar 69, tritone and fifth double stops begin to permeate the music but only briefly, intervallic tropes that are particularly important in String Quartet No. 5 and are detailed in Example 1. Thus there are a few details that subtly connect the quartets and Dillon has stated that he often takes a moment from an earlier work as the starting point for new pieces so this is not especially surprising: it’s more interesting that there are so few examples of this across the quartets.

---

<sup>11</sup> James Dillon, ‘Programme Note to String Quartet No. 3’ in Donaueschinger Musiktage 1998 (CD Booklet)

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Whittall, ‘Dillon, Adès and the Pleasures of Allusion’, *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s* edited by Peter O’Hagan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp.3-27 (pp.10-11)

<sup>13</sup> James Dillon, ‘Programme Note to String Quartet No. 6’ in Donaueschinger Musiktage 2010 (CD Booklet)

Musical score for String Quartet No. 3, bars 56-59. The score is in 3/8 time and features four staves: Vln I, Vln II, Vla, and Vc. Bars 56-57 are marked with a 7:6 ratio, and bars 58-59 with a 6:5 ratio. The Vln I and Vln II parts are marked 'legato' and 'non legato' respectively. The Vc part is marked '(fff)'.

Musical score for String Quartet No. 3, bars 69-70. The score is in 3/8 time and features four staves: Vln I, Vln II, Vla, and Vc. Bar 69 is marked with a tempo of 64 and dynamics of pp, mf, and pp. Bar 70 is marked with a 14:12 ratio and dynamics of ff, pp, p, and pp. The Vln I and Vln II parts are marked 'sub.' and 'pp'. The Vla and Vc parts are marked 'sub.' and 'pp'.

**Example 3: bars 56-59 and 69-70 from String Quartet No. 3 that subtly relate to String Quartet No. 5**

**String Quartet No. 4 (January 2005, London)**

This quartet, which won a Performing Rights Society award, is in some ways the most elusive of Dillon’s quartets and yet it is also structurally the most traditional of them all, shaped as it is in

three movements which seems more intimate and chamber-like than the String Quartet No. 3's 'symphonic' four movements that hark back to Bartók (as Whittall puts it) though to my ears there is something reminiscent of Ligeti's quartets about this one. There is no microtonal material until the close in bar 246, five bars from the end of the piece. In his article on James Dillon that accompanies the CD *The Soadie Waste*, Richard Toop, talking about the *Traumwerk* series, posits, '[F]rom the start, one is aware of something very characteristic of Dillon's later work: interlocking *ostinati*, some regular and others by no means so.'<sup>14</sup> This fourth quartet consists of several interlocked ostinato patterns and also some striking hocketing material in the final movement. The work opens with odd ululating swells, ebbs and flows (not unlike the central section of String Quartet No. 6, see below), with repeated phrases and pitch centres of G (viola and violoncello) and D (violins), as well as a re-ordering of rhythmic groupings (7:6, 5:3, 5:4, 3:2) across the four players. Unlike the previous quartet, the transitions here are turbulent and sharply contrasted textures frequent the opening movement, with some material akin to Xenakis's string writing. A third texture returns the quiet ululating character of the start of the work, and the violins begin to dominate. From bar 230, the dialectical make-up of the ensemble is almost traditional, pizzicato bass textures effectively accompanying the violins near-melody.

The second movement violently explodes with repeated gestures and has more varied textures combined than the first movement though a more gradual transitional approach to texture overall. From b.64, the quartet takes on slow passing of material between each other, not dissimilarly to the opening string moments of *Blitzschlag* before becoming a distorted dance that breaks down as quickly as it began.

It is the third movement that is the most interesting structurally however, with a strange vibrato moment that without being overly microtonal is at least inflectional and prefigures the final moments of the quartet when microtones finally do appear signalling the faltering demise of the quartet. Key intervallic relationships from the opening movement reappear from bar 15 and another dance-like section dominates the central section, with the quartet hocketing material back and forth across the ensemble until, it deconstructs itself leaving the second violin to rather morosely reiterate the pitch D.

---

<sup>14</sup> Richard Toop, 'James Dillon' in *The Soadie Waste* (CD Booklet, 2008)

#### Example 4: Dance-like hocket from final movement of String Quartet No. 4

Throughout this quartet then, the materials within sections are unified, but the transitions and structural aspects are significantly more turbulent than perhaps in the three preceding quartets.

#### String Quartet No. 5 (Autumn 2003, London – Fall 2008 Minneapolis)

In String Quartet No. 5, the sections are determined by textural movement. This quartet is remarkable on several levels. Here, perhaps more than any other quartet to this point, repetition is clearly fore-grounded, especially given that the main gesture is a repeated tone interval oscillation. It might be possible that the prevalence of hemidemisiquaver (and equivalent) motives with tone and semitone alterations is a written out exploration and interrogation of the notion of trills and, more pertinently vibrato in string music, especially in the medium of the string quartet. Unlike some of the other quartets, this one has no indications of ‘vibrato levels’, and indeed, there is only one vibrato reference in the score: ‘trill-like wide double vibrato’ (violin 1, b.97) at a point when all the other instruments are moving towards the ‘hemidemisiquaver intervallic tone alteration’ (h.i.t.a.) material which permeates the next few bars.

## Dillon: String Quartet No. 5 (motif chart)

### Motif 1

Violin II  
(bar 34)



### Motif 1'

Violin II  
(bar 38)



♩=108

### Motif 1''

Violin I  
(bar 43)



### Motif 1'''

Violin I  
(bar 44)



### Motif 1''''

Violin I  
(bar 45)



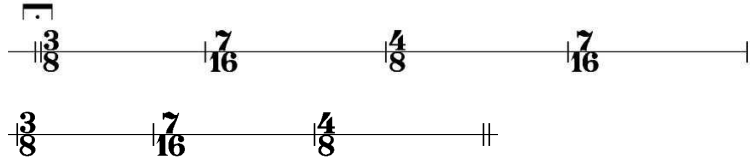

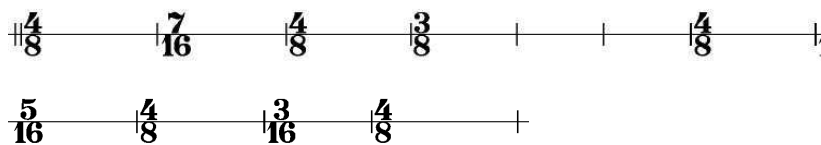
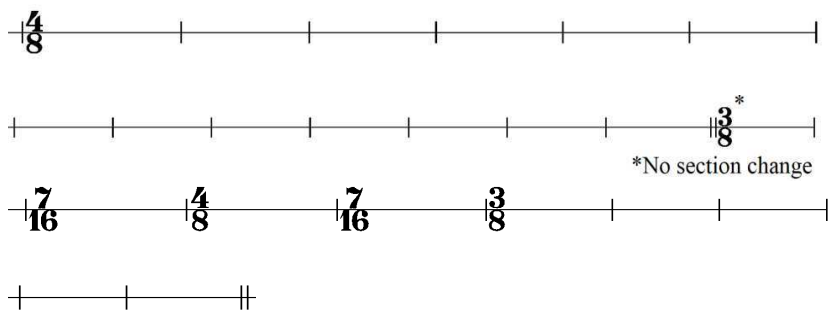

In his article on String Quartet No. 3, Arnold Whittall points out that it seems that 'Dillon seems especially excited by the possibility of animating the flow of textures by degrees of smoothness and turbulence'<sup>15</sup> and I would suggest that in the fifth quartet, he is focussing more on the former of these transitional approaches, there is a smoothness of movement from one state to the next which is quite the opposite of the turbulent Second String Quartet. There are particular characteristics of the metric system such that palindromic patterns underpin that structure (b.148-154 and b.180-187<sup>16</sup>). Indeed there are less rigorous mirror patterns with the bar by bar tempo changing section 3 which seems to come from nowhere reflected towards the end of the quartet in section 27 which also consists of self-contained units, demarcated by fermata which gradually lead to a canonic section that utilises the intervallic patterns of the earlier section.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold Whittall, 'Dillon, Adès and the Pleasures of Allusion', *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s* edited by Peter O'Hagan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp.3-27 (p.11)

<sup>16</sup> The latter example is arguably incomplete since there are bars of 4/8 either side of the mirror: however, the material in the 'mirror' bars is unlike the 4/8 sections which utilise the slower and more prosaic repeated material.

**Table 2: Selected metric overview of String Quartet No. 5**

Bar	Metric system
Introduction	
1	
Section 1	
4	
Section 2	
7	
Section 3	
14	<p>*The author appreciates that the score he was provided with from Edition Peters reflects 'the state of editorial work and correction as of 6th January 2009'. The lack of a double barline at this point is not in keeping with the rest of this section, and the author feels that between 21 and 22 there should be a double barline, which is in keeping with the tempo change notation in section 3.</p> <p>This section gradually introduces intervallic shapes (e.g. viola b.17) that are modified throughout the piece and come to serve as the basis for the canonic move to the static conclusion to the quartet</p>
Section 4	

32	<p><math>\text{♩} = 120</math></p>  <p>The 4/8 bar is the centre point of the first palindromic metric pattern in the work and is also the moment where motif 1(h.i.t.a) appears for the first time, albeit as a demisemiquaver gesture rather than a hemidemisemiquaver one</p>
Section 6	
43	<p><math>\text{♩} = 108</math></p>  <p>Here, the repeated note motif is developed (see motif chart) and an inter-connected pitch aspect is taken up by the inner parts: the treatment of this material is the only time this texture appears in the quartet (though there are several other important moments where a trilling texture appears, not least the important section 27 which leads to the work's conclusion</p>
Section 9	
79	<p><math>\text{♩} = 96</math></p>  <p>The repeated motifs become the focus in a very exposed section which also foreshadows the paradigmatic development of this material at bb.188-ff. and bb.229-ff.</p>
Section 11	
108	<p><math>\text{♩} = 96</math></p>  <p>*No section change</p> <p>The lead in to the palindromic metric pattern reveals motif 1(violin 2, b.119) in the form that closes the work and an immediate modification of it, quite typical in Dillon's works, as the metric pattern begins (violoncello, b.121). The 4/8 bar mid-point of the pattern is characterised by all four players playing together and another typical trait of Dillon's work follows with some intervallic consistencies in terms of his approach to gesture formation, with repetition to the foreground at this point</p>
Section 12	
132	<p><math>\text{♩} = 96</math></p>  <p>The tonal 'written out trill' iteration returns but only briefly before there is a new texture (possibly an extension of the texture at around b.50 of the String Quartet No. 4 which is preceded in bb.46-48 with a gesture that is very</p>



similar to the fifth quartet's h.i.t.a. material, suggesting that Dillon has focussed in on this area in the later work: compare, for example, bb.134-138 in String Quartet No. 5 and bb. 46-66 in String Quartet No. 4. The sequence of textural types is striking and almost certainly related across the works

Section 14

143  $\text{♩} = 96$

In this section, the pizzicato repetitive motif recurs and is combined with the triple stopped material, based on the earlier occurrence and also, arguably, the previous quartet. Dillon modifies the sound world by reducing the finger pressure of the violoncello part at bar 157 and then staggers this texture across the ensemble through the section.

Section 22

254  $\text{♩} = 120$

Further palindromic metric patterning that reveals that Dillon is possibly using the metric structure arbitrarily

Section 26

302  $\text{♩} = 84$

Introduces the move towards the conclusion of the work and mirrors, to some extent section 3 with the fermata bar-bound self-containment which relates to the tempo-isolation of the bars in section 3.

Section 27

304  $\text{♩} = 96$

As above with arpeggio material (first introduction of this type of music in the piece) interacting with the h.i.t.a.

	material which eventually concludes the piece in the next short concluding section
Section 28	
328	
	Unified textural material with interjected silences and homogenous playing techniques

There are several small and focused motifs that permeate the work in a variety of ways, the first a demisemiquaver movement which appears in bar 33 of the violin 2 part which is modified several bars later to become a repeated pattern on a single pitch (this becomes highly significant between bars 86 and 91).

\*This example shows the pitch material in the internal parts and the connections, on an intervallic level, between them.

### Example 5: Pitch relations with articulation variations in String Quartet No. 5

The h.i.t.a. material really begins to impose itself from section 22 and by section 25 the outer parts continue with repeated h.i.t.a. and the triple stopped material from bars 147 to 154 return in the violin 2 and viola parts. In a typical textural shift, this is then inverted from bar 288 with the violin 1 and violoncello taking up the triple stopped material (with a slight modification in the cello part of the previous viola gesture) and the inner parts play the h.i.t.a. material in a rising and falling contour.

It is possible that there is a deliberate perversity about concluding a piece that celebrates the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arditti Quartet with 'white note' material for the final eight bars though there is a unifying aspect in that the quartet plays tutti *sul ponticello* and tutti *sul tasto* as the work draws to a close.

### **String Quartet No. 6 (August, 2010, Minneapolis/London)**

Dillon refers to his approach to the string quartet as a ‘medium that has held fast beyond its make-up’, and to the structural aspects of the work in the programme note (CD liner notes for the Donaueschinger Musiktage performances of this quartet<sup>17</sup>). Dillon specifically outlines that the central (and longest) section of the quartet is built on a ‘narrow ambitus of a whole tone’<sup>18</sup>, the interval that permeates String Quartet No. 5, but here, the treatment of the interval is quite different: the central moment literally does not stray from the whole tone bandwidth and sees the quartet performing a series of polyphonic continuous microtonal movements, often with glissandi and with a regulated transition from *sul ponticello* to *sul tasto* and vice versa every two bars, and a centre within the section which focuses on pizzicato gestures before returning to the subtle arco fluctuations. Here, unlike the previous quartet with its motivic approach to the tone and semitone which take the gestures into all registers across the ensemble, the function of the whole tone is to restrict the material in such a way that the expectations of the listener are usurped by the odd structural appearance of this tightly wrought material at the centre of the work. It is not unusual for Dillon’s work to be seemingly obvious on a structural level (String Quartet No.6 is essentially palindromic after all, following the pattern A, B, C, B[i], A[i]), but typically, as here, the choice of material that is fore-grounded at important structural moments is often unexpected.

---

<sup>17</sup> This quartet was part of an innovative programming development at the Donaueschinger Musiktage 2010 which enabled the simultaneous performances of the piece by the Arditti Quartet, the JACK Quartet and Quartet Diotima, embedded within varied programmes.

<sup>18</sup> James Dillon, ‘Programme Note for String Quartet No. 6’ in Donaueschinger Musiktage 2010 (CD Booklet)

Musical score for String Quartet No. 6, measures 187-195. The score shows four staves: Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. Each staff has dynamic markings (ff, ppp) and articulation markings (s.p., s.t.) indicating transitions between sections.

Musical score for String Quartet No. 6, measures 196-204. The score shows four staves: Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., and Vc. The Vln. I and Vln. II staves have 'pizz.' markings, indicating a move to pizzicato.

**Example 6: central section of String Quartet No. 6 showing detailed transitions within the space of a whole tone and the move to the pizzicato centre of this section**

This quartet demonstrates a significantly more balanced approach to the turbulent/smooth transitional aspects of the textural writing, as outlined by Whittall in his chapter. It remains to be seen how Dillon will continue to interrogate the string quartet medium and where along the axis of turbulence and smoothness the String Quartet No. 7 which is in progress will sit, and indeed, whether there will be other ‘journal entries’ to be enjoyed further down the line.

**Conclusion**

While there is no doubt that the string quartet is a medium and space in which to focus on and indeed experiment with form, structure, gesture and textural aspects, primarily it is for Dillon, a testing ground for focussed conceptual ideas and at the same time a sketch book for possible pieces of the future, not necessarily string quartets. In some cases such as the gradual transition moments of the early quartets, these aspects have been adopted in other works and across Dillon’s considerable oeuvre, but there is no over-riding connection between the quartets: each stands as a monument within the string quartet tradition in its own right. The complex causal network is the way the quartets speak to and absorb aspects of the works Dillon is writing around them (not necessarily chronologically, but often so) or is planning to write. The fact that one of the most ‘traditional’ genres, Dillon’s first major commission and via that, his interaction and

collegial friendship with the Arditti Quartet, then the foremost interpreters of the string quartet repertoire<sup>19</sup> have resulted in the quartet remaining a 'journal' of his creative practice says much about both his engagement with history and the ability of the genre to constantly re-invent itself, or at least to remain open to the possibility of such re-invention.

---

<sup>19</sup> And, indeed, commissioners of many quartets, encouraging collaboration between performers and composers.