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| Dench, Christopher (1953-) |
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| Christopher Dench is one of a group of British composers who emerged in the early 1980s associated with the notion of New Complexity (other composers included Richard Barrett and James Dillon); the term was also applied to slightly older composers, such as Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy. Typical of their works were extremely intricate rhythms, often exquisite and highly personal calligraphy, use of microtones, and a generally radical approach to instrumental writing that often placed huge demands on performers. |
| File: Dench.jpg  Christopher Dench is one of a group of British composers who emerged in the early 1980s associated with the notion of New Complexity (other composers included Richard Barrett and James Dillon); the term was also applied to slightly older composers, such as Brian Ferneyhough and Michael Finnissy. Typical of their works were extremely intricate rhythms, often exquisite and highly personal calligraphy, use of microtones, and a generally radical approach to instrumental writing that often placed huge demands on performers.  Born in London, Dench is self-taught but, like many of his contemporaries, gained much from his contact with Michael Finnissy, the composer and pianist. In June of 1987, Dench emigrated first to Tuscany and, later, to Berlin on New Year’s Day, 1989, to take up a DAAD residency. Dench ultimately relocated to Australia on Christmas Day of the same year and became an Australian citizen in 1992.  Whereas many other New Complexity composers drew on archetypally Romantic domains, such as literature and the visual arts, the younger Dench mostly looked elsewhere. Big Bang theories were (and remain) a natural source of inspiration, but so were influences as diverse as pinball machines, Japanese shunga erotica, Michael Foucault, Gregory Bateson, New Wave exponent Thomas Dolby, and the early hip-hop guru Afrika Bambaataa.  Solo works apart, Dench’s music typically involves a dense, sometimes claustrophobic, polyphony of rhythmically independent individual lines, for which he cites Charles Ives as an initial and enduring influence. Many characteristic features of his work are evident in the excerpt below from *the blinding access of the grace of flesh* (2003), which, like the earlier ik(s)land[s], uses texts by the Australian poet berni m janssen. The work was written for the ELISION Ensemble, with whom Dench has collaborated regularly since the 1990s, and is prefaced by two very different quotations: a passage from Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* that gives the work its title, and a second passage from *Consilience*, a book by Harvard professor of Entomology, Edward O Wilson, whose discussion of various aspects of memory inspired the work’s broad formal structure.  File: BAGF score.jpg  Technically, Dench is a resolute formalist: for every work he prepares intricately crafted charts, matrices, and form-plans. For many years, these pre-compositional designs had consciously cabalistic elements, such as the use of the letters of personal names to generate not only the structure and details of works but also, in Dench’s view, to significantly affect the whole aura of a work (especially with solo compositions). Typical details can be found in Toop 1991 and 1995, referenced below.  For Dench, works composed in 1997 mark a turning-point in his output; the changes include a reduction of the cabbalistic impulse, an inclination to define forms in terms of “boundary phenomena” rather than classically organicist core systems, a partial retreat from the use of instrumental extended techniques (particularly associated with some of the flute pieces), and a rapprochement with literature, as well as more speculative investigations of time and physical matter, such as those of Julian Barbour’s “the End of Time.”  **Selected Works:**  énoncé, chamber orchestra (1984)  Tilt, piano (1985)  symphony 3/ afterimages, chamber orchestra (1987)  funk, bass clarinet and percussion (1989)  sulle scale della fenice, flute (1989)  driftglass, solo percussionist and chamber orchestra (1991)  heterotic strings, 5 players (1993)  beyond status geometry, 4 percussionists (1995)  Phase Portraits, piano (1978-97)  symphony 4 / propriocepts, 4 amplified voices and large orchestra (1997)  ik(s)land[s], chamber ensemble (1997)  the heart’s algorithms, piano (1999)  eigenmomenta, chamber ensemble (2001)  light-strung sigils, chamber ensemble (2001)  the blinding access of the grace of flesh, chamber ensemble (2003)  blood music, clarinet, quarter-tone vibraphone and guitar (2005)  sum over histories, bass and contrabass clarinets (2006)  Agnî, chamber ensemble (2006)  fundamental processes, guitar (2008)  Permutation City, keyed percussion duo (2005/09)  in Platonia, solo guitar and chamber ensemble (2012) |
| Further reading:  (Toop)  (Dench)  (Dench, The Pattern Which Connects)  (Toop, Sulle scale della Fenice)  (Toop, Beyond the 'Crisis of Material': Chris Dench's "Funk")  (C. a. Dench)  (Rosman) |