

**Bob Gilmor**  
*Faint Traces*

The music of Frank Denyer is the work of a truly original mind, one that sees and hears the world just a little differently. The six pieces on this CD are so unlike the music of any other composer working today that even now, with a large and colourful catalogue of over sixty works already behind him, the place of Denyer's work in the broad spectrum of contemporary music still seems elusive. His compositional search has been for a personal voice in changing times, in what he calls "an age of migration". The works recorded here prove that that voice, and what it has to tell us, has never been stronger or more compelling.

Born in London in 1943, Denyer's earliest musical training was as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral; later he studied piano at the Guildhall School in London. In the late sixties he founded and directed the experimental ensemble Mouth of Hermes, giving British premieres of works by Cage, Feldman, Scelsi, Takahashi and Ichiyanagi; thanks to this group his own compositions started to be heard in public in Britain and Europe. In the mid-70s Denyer became a Doctoral student in ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, specialising in Japanese music. Finding life outside Europe to be of benefit in pursuing his compositional ideas, he became Research Fellow in African Music at the University of Nairobi from 1978-81, working intensively with the music of the Pokot. These years were crucial for him, and permanently shaped the direction his subsequent music has followed. Upon his return to England in 1981 he taught at Dartington College of Arts, where today he is Professor of Composition; he also performs and records extensively as pianist with the Amsterdam-based new music ensemble The Barton Workshop, of which he was a founder member in 1990.

Denyer's compositions celebrate the richness of acoustic sound in all its inexhaustible variety. His music uses conventional and/or modified instrumental and vocal resources, not infrequently augmenting these with new instruments of his own invention. A composition will often begin from the reshaping of an instrumental ensemble into something quite personal, something he can live and work with. An example is the first piece on this disc, **Out of the Shattered Shadows 1**, written on commission from the Saitama Arts Foundation for the Japanese ensemble WAYS, and completed in October 1996. The WAYS ensemble would be unconventional enough for most composers, consisting as it did of flute, guitar, piano and percussion, but even in this case Denyer had to make some changes to the instrumentation before he could begin work on the music. The keyboard player plays not piano but harmonium and microtonally retuned spinet; the flautist doubles on bass flute; the guitarist plays tenor banjo; and the percussionist has to assemble an elaborate collection of instruments including a friction drum, thirteen tuned cowbells, three tuned gongs, sandpaper blocks, rattles, a metal scraper, a pair of glass marbles (attached to resonators), a pair of bones and a thundersheet. The four musicians also

sing, and at several points in the score play small, high-pitched bamboo whistles. This is music of great subtlety not only timbrally but also melodically. Denyer makes use of microtonal intervals that are both highly expressive and somewhat otherworldly - no fewer than twenty-seven notes have to be retuned on the spinet, involving not merely quartertones but third-, sixth-, and even tenth-tones. The music demands great control of intonation from the flautist and the banjo player, who “bend” notes to achieve particular shadings of pitch more or less throughout. Using only four musicians Denyer is able to convey an enormous range of sound and emotion. The work begins quietly - listeners to this CD are urged not to turn up the volume, however - but this mood does not last long. Several times, as the work progresses, music of great delicacy is blasted out of existence by enormous blows on a large specially made plywood box, a one-metre cube, which is struck with heavy wooden beaters. The extreme brutality and violence of these moments make a devastating impact sonically and seem replete with symbolic significance. (A similar impact is made by the loud blasts on four bamboo whistles, the shrill, piercing sounds of which reconfigure the aural and emotional thresholds of the work.)

While it is surely misguided to look for unambiguous meaning in the two **Out of the Shattered Shadows** pieces, there is a definite sense that this music has come in the wake of something extremely violent. The delicate and subtle sounds resonate in the aftermath of a cataclysm that has not yet fully passed. What exactly that violent “something” is, or represents, is never stated explicitly, but its audible manifestation is the violent hammering on the box and the piercing sounds of the whistles. Constantly in these passages there is the sense of something fragile enduring inhuman brutality and seeming about to break, to give way under force. Significantly, Denyer symbolises that force not by conventional musical instruments, whose traditional meanings perhaps do not so readily permit such extremes, but by the invented instruments (the box and the whistles).

**Out of the Shattered Shadows 2** was completed three years after its namesake. In fact the linking of the two **Shattered Shadows** pieces only emerged during the composition of the second, which seems to begin where the first leaves off (even though Denyer had composed another large-scale work in the interim). In the concert hall, **Out of the Shattered Shadows 2** appears to be a work for eight musicians, four male vocalists and four instrumentalists (viola, two flutes, and percussion); then, just over halfway into the piece (at 7' 43" on this recording), the work suddenly takes an unexpected turn with the distant sounds of three offstage musicians: first a cornett, then a violin, and then a low female voice. The effect is disorienting - it is as though the doors of the concert hall have suddenly been opened and we become aware that another music has been there all the time. Right from the outset, in any case, the sound world is complex. Denyer bypasses the apparent division between the four vocalists and the four instrumentalists in the delicate interplay of timbres. The whistling of the male singers merges with the whistle- and aeolian-tones produced by

the flutes; several of the singers and players (not merely the percussionist) play a range of rattles of different timbres (mostly traditional Indian and South African instruments, their sounds produced by a range of organic items including moths' cocoons, mango seeds, cockle and snail shells); one of the singers plays a retuned autoharp, and two singers and the first flute also produce tones from individually mounted concertina reeds of various pitches (resonances, perhaps, of the harmonium sounds in **Out of the Shattered Shadows 1**). This gives rise to a soundscape of exquisitely imagined textures, occasionally shattered by loud slams on the box. In due course a soloistic voice emerges, a muted viola, playing languorous phrases of great beauty. Symbolically as well as literally, the three offstage musicians, when they enter, do not form a unified group, a huddled mass; they are separated spatially and are distinct timbrally. (What is curious, though, is how at a distance their individual timbres - brass, bowed string, vocal - are less distinct than they would be close up: perhaps distance eradicates distinctiveness.) As the offstage music proceeds it never becomes fully integrated into the now recontextualised music onstage: the two coexist in a fragile alliance. The ending of the work suggests a tentative calm, capable of being broken at any time.

The most recent work on this disc, **Faint Traces**, was written in 2001 for the Barton Workshop, and was first performed at Paradiso in Amsterdam in November the following year. It is music of extraordinary quietness, seeming to come to the listener from an ephemeral world. This involvement with sounds that are barely audible first came into close focus in Denyer's music in **Unnamed** for solo shakuhachi, written in 1997, and remained in **Out of the Shattered Shadows 2** and in **Prison Song** (1999-2000) for five musicians. The latter work in particular has links to **Faint Traces**, marking the advent in Denyer's work of a new tone of voice that gave him the means to articulate the psychological landscape within which his most recent music exists. (**Prison Song**, **Faint Traces**, and the recently completed **Tentative Thoughts**, **Silenced Voices** form a collective work entitled **Prison Trilogy**, still unperformed in its entirety, which marks the furthest point he has so far reached in this new landscape.) In **Faint Traces** the immensely delicate sounds appear always about to be eradicated, like marks in sand or snow. Again there is an offstage musician, only one this time, a trombonist (first heard at 3' 30"), whose very quiet tones occasionally infiltrate the music; here the onstage ensemble seems to recognise and react to his sounds, whereas in **Out of the Shattered Shadows 2** the music of the offstage musicians had silenced the onstage performers for a time. As is true also in **Prison Song**, **Faint Traces** has a ghostly dance-like section (beginning 10' 00") towards the end: this music comes at a critical point in the work where further elaboration of the previous material seems impossible. "What of us?" the musicians ask, several times over; "nothing!" comes the reply, "just the dance". But the dance that follows is very bizarre. Denyer has suggested parallels with the use of dance in some forms of Asian drama, where the dance "bridges impossible divisions where words won't do"; the dance section of **Faint Traces** has an analogous function. It seems fragmentary, remembered as much as real. So too the use of spoken and

sung words, like fragments of an overheard conversation, which suggest another dimension beyond the musical surface.

**Music for Two Performers** has its origins in a request from the composer-trombonist James Fulkerson for a new piece for the trombone and piano duo that he and Denyer had formed at Dartington in the early 1980s. The idea didn't immediately appeal to Denyer, largely because of his temperamental aversion to writing for the piano (for which he has composed nothing since his student days); and yet it seemed absurd not to respond to so genuine a request. He was able to extricate himself from this impasse when it occurred to him that a musician is no less a musician without an instrument; and that a work for two performers might be possible as long as the performers could temporarily dispense with their instruments. In the end, the work he composed calls for neither a trombone nor a piano. The two musicians produce vocal sounds - not singing, exactly, but a mixture of sung tones, grunts, growls, breath sounds, percussive consonants, and non-vocal sounds such as handclaps. The resulting piece has moments of comedy, but its humour is contextualised by its strictly formal setting: the musicians are not improvising or clowning around, but reading from a fully notated part. This formality extends also to the stage set-up: to either side of the two performers are two identical, tall, banner-like sheets of tin foil, the shimmering of which punctuates the piece at various times.

**Play** dates from March 1973, and is part of a collection of seven compositions entitled **A Book of Emblems and Songs**. This energetic piece was conceived for two woodwinds who play raucous and lively interlocking rhythms throughout, with occasional support from a violin. The piece was written in a single morning for Murray Khouri, the clarinettist of Denyer's ensemble Mouth of Hermes. **Play** uses a restricted pitch range of less than an octave (from the second Db above middle C to the B an augmented sixth higher), and quartertone divisions of the tempered scale. The woodwind lines use an unusual mode consisting mostly of intervals three-quarters of a tone apart. This odd tuning was difficult enough to master in the 1970s and is not significantly easier today. But the even tougher challenge of this music is rhythmic. The woodwind players start with a shared pulse - although playing offbeats against each other - but their phrases soon become of such irregular lengths that their downbeats rarely coincide. The violinist seems content most of the time to listen to their interplay, occasionally offering a discreet word of encouragement.

**Passages** was written in 1984 for the Dartington Ensemble and was first performed in the Great Hall at Dartington four years later. The commission was for a quartet of flute, clarinet, violin and cello, but Denyer has the players double on extra instruments (as was true in more extreme form of the quartet for **Out of the Shattered Shadows 1**). In **Passages** the flautist also plays piccolo and alto flute, the clarinettist alternates Bb and Eb instruments, and the violinist occasionally swaps her instrument for a viola.

The work's title has multiple meanings. Most straightforwardly, the piece consists of seven passages of music with no transitions between them. But the title also refers to the fact that this music was written shortly after Denyer returned to England from three years in Africa, researching and teaching; the music is a sort of rite of passage, not merely between two countries but between two cultures with quite different emotional ties for him. Some of the musical material in **Passages** recalls some of the music-making he had heard in Africa (the final dance-like section, for example; how very different in tone and feeling from the dance in *Faint Traces*), and yet the piece is wholly Western in instrumentation and manner. It is a passage between two places, the music, perhaps, of a transitional phase in Denyer's life and his fascinating output.

Bob Gilmore, November 2004