Butterfly effect: the music of Frank Denyer

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Music history needs a special category for those composers who, with their three-score years knocking ominously at the door and a substantial body of compositions already behind them, find their life's work unengraced by an entry in the New Grove. Such is the case with Frank Denyer, born in London in 1943, whose name is conspicuous by its absence between "Denver" (Colorado) and "Denza, Luigi." Nor, for that matter, will you catch many of his works in a trawl of concert programmes from the city of his birth over the past few decades. Yet however dismal the implications of such institutional neglect (insignificance! marginality! obscurity!), all may not yet be lost: there are signs today of a counter-trend, the growing recognition by a number of contemporary musicians that the body of work Denyer has created over the past forty years is – just maybe – one of the better-kept secrets of English music.

Thankfully, no-one really believes anymore that art is best understood in its own time. Ours is an age of revisionist history-writing: if we are confident of anything today it is that whatever view subsequent generations take of our own time it will certainly be different than ours. And, as Denyer himself has pointed out, we need not a single history of music but many. It matters not only when and where music is created but also when and to whom it becomes known. We breathe life into music by the act of appreciation, when it enters the bloodstream, exerts its presence, changes our perceptions.

In our new century Frank Denyer's music is just beginning to receive the attention largely denied it by the last. It must be said that he has not exactly made life easy for those wanting to programme his works. Assembling the personnel for *After the Rain* (1983: violin, shakuhachi, three ocarina players and percussionist) seems just about manageable – the London Sinfonietta did it in 1997. Less easy to get together, though far from impossible, is *Towards the Darkness* (1989) for three double basses (with or without buzz attached), three flautists who play plunger flutes and tin whistles, and two percussionists who play friction drums, a plank of wood, a bass drum, tin foil, a small ratchet, a ruler vibrating against a surface, a bag of marbles, a tam tam, and two concrete paving stones. But where, I wonder, is the festival director fearless enough to tackle *The Fish That Became The Sun* (1991-4) for four female vocalists, four male vocalists (who also play eunuch flutes), seven percussionists with non-standard instruments, solo violin, sitar, mandolin, cimbalom, three double basses,

contra-bassoon, harmonium, six woodwind players (on specially adapted organ pipes/crumhorns, various whistles and a shell trumpet), two child vocalists (aged 5-7), and eight off-stage cornets? This forty-seven-minute tapestry of "songs of the dispossessed" still awaits its first performance.

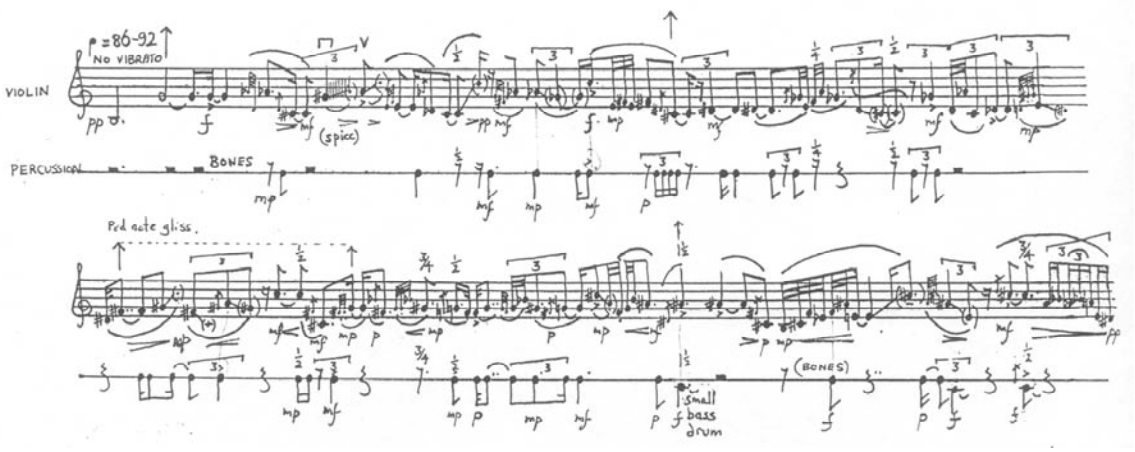
While it is true that Denyer's use of such unconventional ensembles and newly invented or modified instruments has limited the number of performances of his music, I believe there are deeper reasons why his work is only now becoming better known. We are always a bit nervous in the presence of composers who so resolutely refuse to play the game, who distance themselves from the norms of music-making of their day and cultivate such remote territory with so few recognisable signposts. It bothers us: we are exasperated by them: we wonder why they can't, just this once, make a step in the direction of common practice and write, say, a string quartet, rather than a *Quartet* for flute, double bass, cymbalom and steel pans (1988-90: one of his most engaging and colourful works). We bemoan the fact they will gladly spend a year writing a 45mn work for solo shakuhachi (*Unnamed*, 1997, composed for and premiered by Yoshikazu Iwamoto, and so far untouched by anyone else), and yet turn down a commission for chamber orchestra.

But to entertain such thoughts about Denyer is as pointless as it would be in the case of Ives, or Partch, or Scelsi, or any of the composers who have so generously enriched our musical experience in previously unimagined areas. Denyer himself has a disarmingly simple explanation: the new sound-worlds of his pieces come about not from a quest for originality for its own sake but from the fact that most conventional Western instruments and groupings of instruments are so clogged up with fixed identities of their own that he feels the need to find more diverse starting points. "It's not a question of disapproving of conventional forms," he remarks, "it's just that I have no ideas for them. Even as a student I came to feel there were more and more sounds I couldn't use... Every instrument I could think of, before I could even think of a note, was sort of done for, because I'd heard so many pieces for it. There didn't seem to be any music left to write. So, I just had to find a little corner somewhere... always I want to find one instrument I can connect with, that I can make a gesture with, that I can possibly live with. It's a kind of desperation."

His career had, on paper at least, a relatively conventional beginning. Following early musical experiences as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral and studies at the Guildhall School in London, he founded the contemporary ensemble Mouth of Hermes and served as director and sometime keyboard player during the seven years of its existence, 1967-74 (as he did also for its shorter-lived sibling, the Anglo-Dutch Amalgam). While never as well known as the contemporaneous Scratch Orchestra or the Fires of London, Mouth of Hermes gave a number of important concerts including British premieres of works by Cage, Scelsi, Kondo and Feldman (with whom they toured in the early seventies). Denyer's own early compositions featured in their programmes, most notably in the whole evening devoted to his music at the Festival d'Orléans in March 1973. The concert, although successful enough in itself, proved a turning

point in his development: shortly thereafter he withdrew no fewer than seven of the nine works in the programme, discarded some entirely and rewrote others (which, risen from the ashes, became *A Book of Emblems and Songs*). It was a way of purging himself of the unwanted residues of earlier influences – perhaps even of the entire sixties, the decade with the longest musical hangover in recent history. He then set out on the path that he has followed ever since.

The primary musical subject of the works that immediately followed is melody. He had reached a compositional impasse where he needed to rethink such basic concepts as note, step, ornament, portamento: this led him gradually towards a melodic language of great suppleness and richness. It can be heard in works such as *Frog* (1974) or *A Fragile Thread* (1979), both for solo string instrument (muted violin or viola, but there are also less conventional performance possibilities): and in the cycle *Melodies* (1974-77, still unperformed in its entirety), "a work in twenty-five movements that can be adapted to instruments of various cultural origins, some that have to be specially made, and voices," each movement of which is "a melodic study in intonation." A further example, this time not purely monodic, is *The Hanged Fiddler* for violin, sustaining instrument and percussion (1973, Example 1), inspired by the legend of a fiddler who is accused of horse stealing and sentenced to hanging but who, before the noose is tightened, is allowed to play one last tune from the gallows. Here a virtuosic violin line of unrelenting energy and subtle twists and turns is set against the pounding of a bass drum and ticking of a pair of bones. The violin is shadowed by a sustaining instrument which captures and holds isolated notes from its line, creating an eerie and



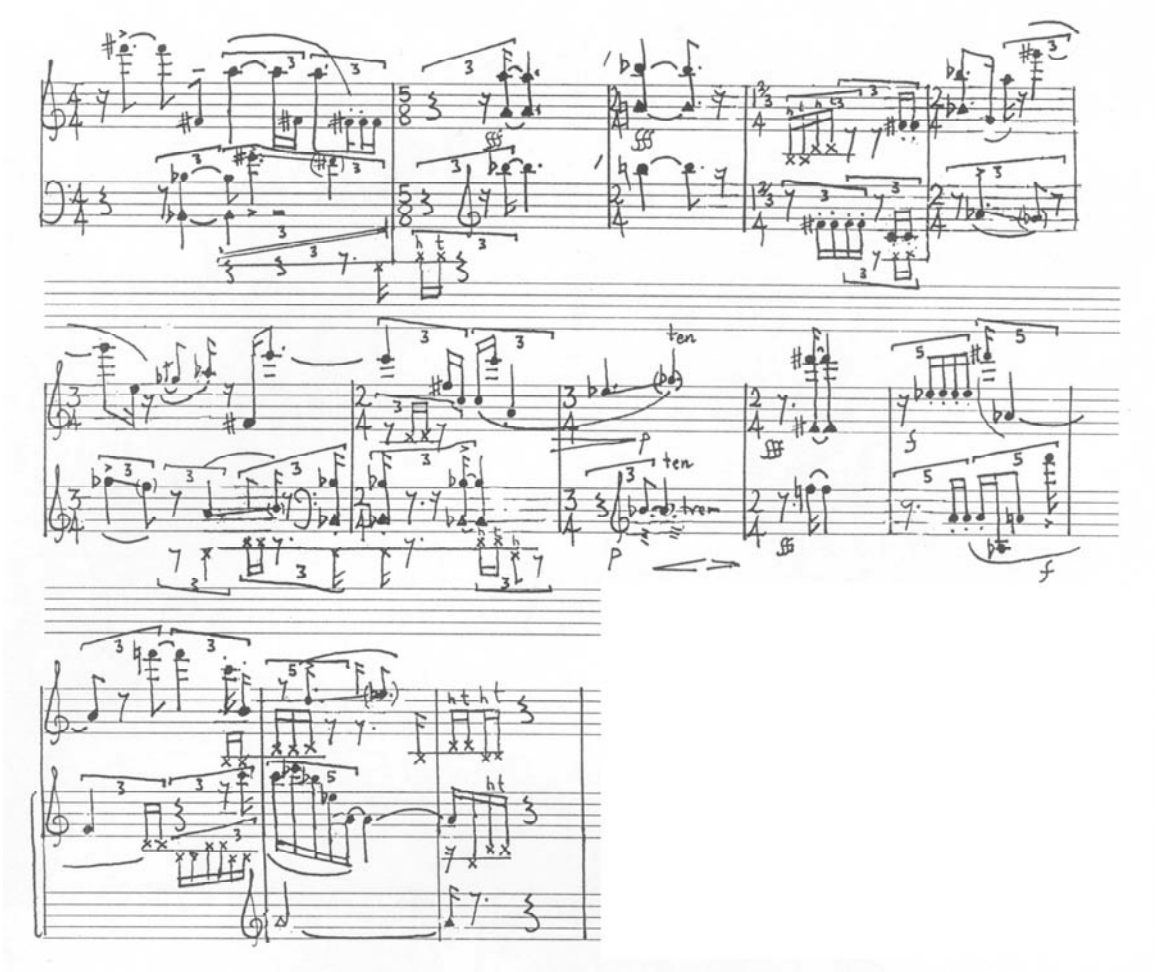
unpredictably changing drone.

Example 1: *The Hanged Fiddler* (opening)

Crucial to Denyer's new musical direction was a prolonged involvement with non-western musical traditions, principally Indian, Japanese and African. The benefit of travel outside Europe to his exploration of new concepts of melody (and, increasingly, of all the other

parameters of music as well) was considerable. His first spell of ethnomusicological fieldwork was in 1973, in the Kulu valley in North India: the following year he began a PhD at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, specialising in Japanese music. From 1978-81 he was Research Fellow in African Music at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, studying the music of nomadic pastoralists such as the Pokot tribe, among whom he lived for brief spells. Some years later, in 1987, he undertook further fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone.

The impact of such study on his compositions is a rich and complex subject. Certainly it runs very deep, so much so that more often than not the innocent listener would never detect or imagine any such bloodline in a given Denyer work. While feeling no affinity with the aesthetics or practices of the "world music" industry (which to him is generally only a disguised form of corporate multiculturalism), he has readily written for specific individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds, whether that individual plays a clarinet, a shakuhachi, or is prepared to learn or to build a new instrument. His music manifests a truly global perspective on the world's musical traditions without ever descending into the superficiality of cultural tourism or ethnic kitsch. I would even describe some of Denyer's works as "transcultural," if by that we understand a wish to create, from diverse elements, imaginative sound worlds marked by the absence of a single dominant cultural tradition. An example from his later work – though an unsettling one – is *The Tender Sadness of Tyrants as They Dance* (1991) for shakuhachi and bass flute. (The title alludes to a photograph Denyer once saw – or, he says, perhaps only imagined – of a dictator dancing at a diplomatic function: the strange mixture of brutality and human fragility thrown up by the image infuses the music.) Rather than emphasize the distinctiveness, sonically and culturally, of the Japanese shakuhachi and the western bass flute, Denyer creates a new hybrid sonority by having the two instruments play together the whole time. The resulting sound is sometimes delicate, sometimes relentless, even ruthless. It is shaped by a diverse range of playing techniques, some contemporary and others very old: these include singing into the instruments, ghost tones (produced by fingering pitches and breathing into an instrument, thereby creating an unvoiced sound), several kinds of vibrato, microtonal inflections of pitch, and purely vocal sounds (Example 2). In addition, the two musicians are required to wear tap-dancing shoes and to use them to produce painfully loud percussive knocks on the floor: this introduces, when the piece is seen in performance, a feeling of desperation, of enormous physical exertion, of two musicians stretched to the limits of the humanly possible. In this work, as in much of his output, Denyer's aim is to find instruments versatile enough (and performers courageous enough) to set aside, at least for a moment, their accumulated cultural heritage and engage in the free play of art.



Example 2: *The Tender Sadness of Tyrants as They Dance* (extract)

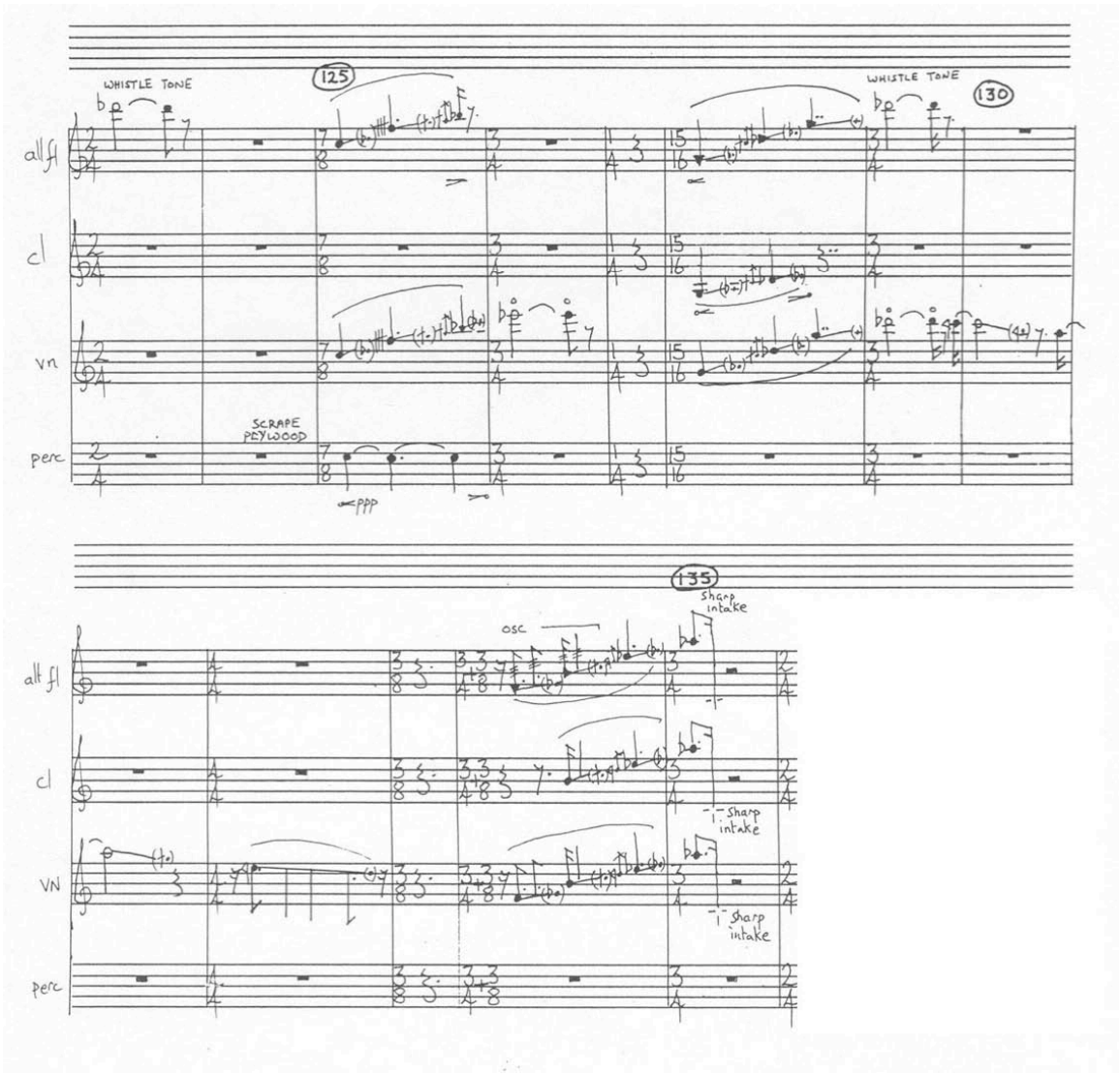
Denyer's musical pursuits in the seven years or so beginning in 1974 had the effect of absenting him for much of his thirties from Britain – a crucial time in career terms for a composer struggling to establish a reputation. Having had at least part of one foot in the door of the British musical establishment as a young man, on his return to England in 1981 he never again felt particularly compelled to shove it back. He accepted a job at Dartington College of Arts where he has more or less remained ever since, becoming Professor of Composition in 1999. Denyer has produced (at last count) twenty-four major works in his two decades there, as well as resuming his career as pianist, primarily with the Amsterdam-based ensemble The Barton Workshop; his recordings of the solo piano music and ensemble works of Cage, Feldman, and Wolff have met with wide acclaim, and his CD of the complete piano sonatas of Galina Ustvolskaya on Conifer Classics in 1995 won the unqualified enthusiasm of the reclusive Russian.

The music of the past twenty years has moved a long way, in complexity and emotional range, from the music of the seventies. The commitment to melody has remained, indeed intensified, although now set increasingly in the context of ensemble rather than solo

pieces. All of his music is distinguished by a keen sensitivity to sound, and the new instruments of his own invention that he occasionally uses – eunuch flutes, shells, slates, pebbles, the resonance of wood and of metal – create some extraordinary textures. In several works Denyer creates his own unusual kind of Klangfarbenmelodie: in others he builds passages by the fusion of timbres. *Towards the Darkness*, for example, ends with the loud rubbing together of concrete paving stones synchronized with shrill blasts on three tin whistles – a sound to quicken the pulse of any sample-hungry young musician.

One of the recurrent images in the recent music is the sense of new life struggling for existence under the debris of the old. His whole concern with musical instruments, new, modified, or nearly extinct, can perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the larger question of what can be salvaged, artistically, from the chaos of civilization as we begin a new century. This image is at its sharpest focus in *A Monkey's Paw* (1987-88), which enjoyed a kind of grudging success at Darmstadt in 1990 (surely the best kind of accolade). This work takes as its starting point the image of a hideously decayed monkey's paw kept hidden inside a small drum used in healing ceremonies in east Africa. "That this grotesque object... should hold the secret of regeneration and renewed human health seemed to have a profound meaning for me," Denyer has written. *Finding Refuge in the Remains* (1992) also confronts this central issue, the sense of new life emerging from a morass of dead or decaying matter - an issue which, one feels, has for him a sense both of compositional and cultural urgency.

A new approach to this question is manifest in *Unnamed* for solo shakuhachi, premiered at Dartington in 1999, and restated in sharp resolution in *Out of the Shattered Shadows 2* (1999), *Prison Song* (2000) and *Faint Traces* (2001). (Or do these works in fact pose a different set of questions? Time will tell...) This has taken the form of an intense concentration on extremely quiet sounds, sounds so soft and delicate that they seem in danger of disappearing altogether, of being brutally nudged out of existence. Until its very last moments, *Unnamed* hardly rises above a mezzo-piano, and most of it is much quieter. In *Out of the Shattered Shadows 2* the Denyerian textures proceed for about half of the work's sixteen minutes before being interrupted by the faint music of an offstage cornett, violin and female voice. It is as though the doors of the concert hall have suddenly been opened and we become aware that another music has been there the whole time. His is a radically new kind of quiet music, distinct from that of Feldman or Sciarrino. To risk a generalisation, I'd suggest that if Feldman's very quiet music tends to draw us in, both towards the music and towards him – even at times claustrophobically so – Denyer's makes us aware of the world outside: it reminds us that life is going on elsewhere while we pay attention to the conceits of art. To me the masterpiece in this genre is *Prison Song* (Example 3), a tremendous exercise of compositional restraint operating on evanescent wisps of musical material, quite unlike the music of any other composer writing today.



Example 3: *Prison Song* (extract)

Mention of Sciarrino is perhaps odd in this context: but he and Denyer, roughly contemporaries, have important things in common. Not the least is their love of musical materials taken to extremes; and their empathy with fellow creative artists who maintain radical or uncomfortable attitudes. In a programme note for a recent work, *Il Clima dopo Harry Partch*, Sciarrino wondered about the relevance of "marginal" figures and speculated that something like a butterfly effect may be operative in the artistic world; just as a lone butterfly flaps its wings in Ahmedabad and a tidal wave engulfs the whole of southern California, so too do apparently obscure figures make a far greater impact on musical culture as a whole than we perhaps imagine. Certainly, history seems to resist being always reduced to a simple narrative of cause and effect: very complex processes scatter the ideas and acts of human beings to far-flung and unlikely destinations. In this case Sciarrino was referring to Partch: I'll resist spelling out the obvious parallel with Denyer. But one confident prediction for

our uncertain times: in the next New Grove the gap between "Denver" (Colorado) and "Denza, Luigi" will be filled.

Discography

Faint Traces (Mode Records, Mode 151, 2005): *Out of the Shattered Shadows I, Out of the Shattered Shadows II, Faint Traces, Music for Two Performers, Play, Passages*. The Barton Workshop and others, directed by Frank Denyer.

Fired City (Tzadik TZ 7082, 2002): *Towards the Darkness, Beneath the Fired City, Quick, Quick, the Tamberan is Coming, The Hanged Fiddler, Resonances of Ancient Sins, Prison Song*. The Barton Workshop; Duo Konink & Andriessen; Christopher Taylor; Kontra-Trio.

Finding Refuge in the Remains (Etcetera KTC 1221, 1999): *Finding Refuge in the Remains, Quartet, Frog, Archaeology, Contained in a Strange Garden, The Tender Sadness of Tyrants as They Dance*. The Barton Workshop; Alex Robertson; Robin Canter and James Wood; Yoshikazu Iwamoto and Jos Zwaanenburg.

A Monkey's Paw (Continuum CCD 1026, 1991): *Stalks, After the Rain, A Fragile Thread, A Monkey's Paw, Winged Play*. Various musicians.

For more information on Frank Denyer and his music:
http://www.frankdenyer.com