

Silenced Voices

Mode 198

liner notes by Bob Gilmore

One of the legacies of late twentieth-century music is a re-problematizing of many of the aesthetic dichotomies of modern art-making: calculation versus intuition, representation versus abstraction, freedom versus control. These dichotomies continue to pose challenges no matter how a composer regards the nature and purpose of music – whether as a medium in which to communicate and interrogate ideas, as a means of filling and defining acoustic space, as a way of forming differing relationships with the passage of time. Frank Denyer's music doesn't adhere to any easily-defined aesthetic prescripts, and the four recent works on this disc resist categorisation, and ready comparison to the work of other composers, just as determinedly as does his earlier work.

There is, however, one generalisation we can make: this music seems very far removed from abstraction. The titles of the four works suggest as much, being rich in imagery and association and yet resistant to simple narrative interpretation. They are, chronologically: **Tentative Thoughts, Silenced Voices** (2002-3); **Woman, Viola and Crow** (2004); **Ghosts Again** (2004-5); and **Two Beacons** (2005). As we listen it is hard to resist the intrusion of visual imagery flitting across our minds – fragmentary glimpses of movements, colours, even interpersonal relationships and tensions.

Sonically, the most immediate thing the four works have in common is a shared sense of intimacy. They inhabit an extremely quiet sound world, a territory that Denyer first entered in the solo shakuhachi piece **Unnamed** in 1997 and from which, a decade later, he has still not fully emerged. (The listener to this CD is however urged not to raise the volume level: "if it doesn't seem vivid enough", Denyer says, "try turning it down".) There is much of importance on the level of nuance – in the strange quality of a particular microtonal interval, or a delicate shading of timbre, or a novel combination of instrumental and vocal sound – quite as much as there is on the medium scale of the long melodic lines, or the large-scale formal structures.

Denyer's sound world is multi-layered and complex. In these pieces there are resonances (both sonic and associational) of sounds from the real world, or perhaps from dreams: breathing sounds (sometimes calm, sometimes sharp and disturbing intakes of breath); footsteps; knocking sounds; a crow call. These sounds exist on a kind of threshold, not immediately registering as music, and they subtly dislodge our listening from its familiar habits. The conventional instruments used here – violin, viola, flute, clarinet and the rest – hardly ever sound as they normally do, largely because the sounds they make are so soft, so disembodied, that they seem like voices of a late, post-holocaust civilization. Occasional fragments of melody drift past, seeming at times like imperfectly remembered snatches of something familiar. All four works present combinations of instruments that have rarely if ever been heard together before, offering totally fresh sonic images.

Woman, Viola and Crow was written for the Dutch viola player Elisabeth Smalt, whose exceptional playing Denyer had admired during the years they were colleagues in The Barton Workshop. The piece responds not only to the poise and control of her playing but to her vocal abilities and to her tendency to remain undaunted by the most extreme challenges. Besides playing the viola and singing, the player has to wear an elaborate set of rattles on her back, which she sounds at several places in the score; she also wears special shoes to make distinctive footsteps. Finally, she has to produce a vocal imitation of a crow call, a haunting sound that lends the piece its distinctive aura. The piece in performance is not music theatre: it is more like an obscure ritual. The sounds of the work invite symbolic association – the crow is often an augur, sometimes a portent of death; the footsteps signify both approach and escape; and the rattles seem almost shamanic in their power to ward off, or to attract, we know not what. Musically the piece calls for extreme control over different sizes of microtonal interval and of qualities of sound production. The performer has to widen her consciousness, as though embracing other people, spirits and birds, within her own identity.

As a listening experience, **Two Beacons** is more complex still. As with all the ensemble works on this disc, the three-dimensional performance space configured by the composer must be imaginatively recreated by the listener to this CD. In **Two Beacons** the sound sources exist in

three locations: onstage, at the back of the auditorium, and offstage (represented here by placing the respective sounds in different acoustics). Onstage there is a female vocalist, three flutes, three strings – heavily muted violin, heavily muted double bass and (unmuted) sarangi, which sit together at the front – and two percussionists, playing a range of mostly non-standard instruments (rattle drums, cloth pads, bricks, wooden planks, broken bamboo canes and sandpaper blocks, as well as rubbed cowbells, crotales, and a bass drum). At the back of the audience is a French horn, which has two extended solo moments (beginning at 5' 14" and 7' 38" respectively); off-stage is a mixed chorus of some thirty voices. The positioning of the musicians is crucial in creating the "setting" in which the action takes place; and, rather as a filmmaker plays with depth of field in a movie, Denyer in this way creates the illusion of multiple perspectives rather than a fixed scene of action. The sound world is one of incredible richness (note the delicate sliding tones of the sarangi, as first heard at 1' 26", and the subtle range of flute sounds, replete with whistle tones and ghost tones). How, though, do we understand the presence of the large offstage chorus, which seems so essential and yet so enigmatic a component in the piece? As with many interests that become obsessive, Denyer claims to be "quite in the dark" about the underlying reason for this interest in offstage performers, found in several of his recent works. Quite apart from the purely acoustic interest of sounds that reach us over a long distance, with their own special quality of softness, there seems to be a strong symbolic significance, invoking images perhaps of the outsider, the neglected or outcast, the "silenced voices" that nonetheless manage to make themselves heard. In **Two Beacons** we have been taking in the music for some time before the offstage chorus is first heard breathing quietly (at 2' 16"); it is as though something has momentarily come in from outside that opens the whole piece up. There is just the glimmer of a possibility that the "real" music is that of these offstage voices, and that somehow we have been listening to the wrong thing. The chorus is a distant world but not an alien one. The onstage musicians respond to them, as though listening to what's going on; there is a sense of communication with these hidden and largely inarticulate "others" who do little else but make breathing noises and occasionally sing single tones. Whatever else is happening in this work, there is an onstage-offstage dialogue that pulls us out of the confines of music listening and into a social space that demands our attention.

A further off-stage presence, this time a trumpet, is with us in **Tentative Thoughts, Silenced Voices**. This work again uses an entirely novel combination of voices and instruments. There is a string group in the centre of the stage, consisting of viola, violin (both using heavy practice mutes) and an Indian santur, retuned and with some of its notes muted. Behind them are three male vocalists, who also use a whistling tube, six individually mounted concertina reeds, and a eunuch flute; at the sides stand two percussionists with a strange array of instruments, including a large tree branch with leaves. **Tentative Thoughts, Silenced Voices** forms the final part of a trilogy, **Prison Trilogy** (1999-2003), with Denyer's two immediately preceding works, **Prison Song** and **Faint Traces**. As he was completing **Faint Traces** (which can be heard on his previous Mode CD, **Faint Traces**, Mode 151) Denyer had the idea that the piece somehow wasn't entirely self-contained, that it was broadening out into a more complex concept. Collectively the trilogy seems to return, and nowhere more clearly than in **Tentative Thoughts, Silenced Voices**, to the notion of the dispossessed, of life struggling to exist beneath a weight of oppression, a theme that goes all the way back to **A Monkey's Paw** (1988). The offstage trumpet is all the more eloquent for appearing so seldom (first at 1' 04", when it is almost buried under voice and viola notes, and thereafter only four more times). In the ensemble the viola has a prominent role, with the player also singing. So too does the sound of breathing: while it had appeared in earlier works, in **Tentative Thoughts, Silenced Voices** breath becomes an important "voice" in the ensemble. Denyer has likened the role of breath in this music to the importance of human skin to a painter, the voice being as close as music usually comes to the role of the nude for the visual artist. The fragility of these breath sounds – sometimes comforting, sometimes unbearably frail – seems at the heart of this music, as though a literal depiction of human life clinging on in the face of death. In this perspective, perhaps the strangest moment in the whole piece is the brief whistled snatch of melody, lasting barely five seconds, at the very end. How should we understand this bizarre gesture? It seems so cocky, so dismissive, so utterly incongruous, that it has an unsettling effect. As with a nervous laugh that helps us confront difficulties through its very inappropriateness, so too does this little tune enable us to get out of the piece as though we were walking away from an unbearable situation.

In **Ghosts Again** this willingness to deal, musically, with the extremely fragile finds yet another incarnation. The piece calls for five instrumentalists and seven singers: the instruments are muted violin (whose player also sings), flute, clarinet, and an array of non-standard percussion played by two players. There are six male singers, each carrying a percussion stave (a round wooden stick about six feet in height with large tambourine discs and heavy metal rings attached, played by

striking it sharply on the floor). Another distinctive presence in the piece is a female vocalist with a sound which Denyer had imagined as being that of a very old woman (the part could actually be performed by a very old woman or by a younger woman playing a role, as in this recording). The intention of this part was a particular quality of vocal sound, extremely frail and as though in a world of its own, far removed from the other performers - and one might say, entirely removed from the whole world of contemporary music. In contrast to her singing, and to the delicacy of many of the instrumental sounds of the piece, are the six male singers with their staves. They stand in a row along the back of the stage, evenly spaced. They are, Denyer says, rather like "guardian deities" with a statuesque presence - utterly unlike the other musicians, who are finding their way precariously through this very subtle music. Indeed, almost all the other sounds in this piece seem to come from another world or from the recesses of the human imagination; these six totemic deities, as in so much of Denyer's music, are yet again a symbol of the opening up of our attention to another world - not a distant possibility but a human reality, closer to our own world than we may want to admit.

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