

## Bob Gilmore

extract from the liner notes to *Finding Refuge in the Remains*, 1998

...**Finding Refuge in the Remains** is for seven musicians, including a female vocalist. At first she is treated as an equal member of the ensemble, occasionally contributing single tones, breath sounds, percussive sounds; then, seven minutes into the piece, she sings a slow, ascending, irregular scale, as though emerging from underneath the instrumental 'rubble' of the rest of the ensemble. Thereafter she remains for most of the time with her head above water, first in a gorgeous birdsong-like passage in which she is joined by rapid oscillations on bass flute and trombone and delicate spiccato harmonics on double bass; then, after a noisy episode in which she once again becomes less prominent, she quietly intones a text which offers, retrospectively, a reinterpretation of the particular emotional ambience of the piece: 'a child died / but love bloomed.' The work ends with the quiet rasping sound of a metal scraper, as though thoughts and feelings were being dissolved in the oblivion of the inanimate world.

**Quartet**, for bass flute doubling alto flute, double bass, cymbalom and steel pans, is one of Denyer's rare abstract works, apparently unrelated to extramusical image or concept. I hear it as one of his most joyous inventions, music of considerable complexity and daring that seems to exult in the sheer fact of its own existence and to infuse the listener with its colourful presence. The piece is a tour de force in sonority and in nuance of instrumental colour. The four musicians create an astonishing sound world in which, at times, it can be difficult to tell which instruments are playing - which is all the more incredible given their completely different manner of tone production. Many different forms of quartet writing can be found here; at times the instruments play in emphatic unison; at others they perform a very fast hocketing, creating a musical back-and-forth in the timbre of the melodic line; at still others they pair off and have dialogues (the cymbalom and steel pans have an energetic passage not long after the beginning, and the bass flute and double bass end the piece with a quiet, enigmatic, unison melody). This is a piece that richly rewards careful, detailed listening; it does not yield up its secrets easily.

**Frog** is a small piece for an unspecified bowed string instrument. It was written in Ahmedabad in July 1974, fully fifteen years before anything else on this disc. It is in two short movements. Its inclusion in the present context allows us to hear an instance of Denyer's (admirably unfashionable) obsession in the 1970s with melody, an interest that was stimulated by his travels in India and Africa. 'I had been musically preoccupied for some years,' he wrote, 'with melodic problems which I knew required the cultivation of more flexible attitudes towards 'pitch' and 'note,' more flexible than the conception of 'note' merely as a fixed point on a discreet scale of frequencies.' On the page, the monodic line of **Frog** (the piece contains not so much as a single double-stop) is replete with appoggiaturas, portamenti, microtonal inflections, reiterated notes, dynamic shadings, and details of articulation. To the ear, it is a charming, incantatory piece, music of intimacy and perhaps of loneliness. It was first

played on a new bowed string instrument that Denyer had made of laminated wood, but is heard on this recording on a muted viola.

**Archaeology** takes its inspiration from an incident that occurred while the composer was doing research in Nairobi in the late 1970s. There he had an archaeologist colleague who, 'one unforgettable day,' took delivery of a huge quantity of undifferentiated matter excavated from the site on which he was working. The material - enormous amounts of rubble containing, to the layman's eye, nothing remotely worth preserving - was delivered to the university and completely filled several large rooms. After an initial long period of sorting through it all, "separation and cleaning slowly revealed human material, pottery, fossilized wood, metal and, very very occasionally, a larger piece which even I could recognize as part of an intelligible artifact. Nothing, of course, was either polished or left unblemished by the vicissitudes of time. The processes of informed and acute speculation, the comparative work with relevant historical, linguistic and other evidence in order to construct the framework of possible contexts (historical, social, demographical), began to reveal a hesitant significance for this sparse residue of human life. The comparison with ourselves and societies today, but then again the hesitancy over the legitimacy of this course, recurring doubts about the wider value of all this work but ultimate faith that it is important, even when it could not be said exactly why." This incident clearly had enormous (one might almost say mythic) significance for Denyer. In symbolic terms it speaks of the impermanence of human societies, of the disregard that the passage of time shows for the most worthless and the most precious of human excretions alike; in cultural terms it raises the question of the wisdom and perhaps the ethics of foraging through the detritus of vanished cultures; and in compositional terms it raised the possibility of burying and concealing sounds, of throwing others into stark relief, and demonstrated the provisional nature of our ideas on aesthetics, the beautiful and the ugly, the functional and the useless. **Archaeology** itself, written a decade later, has for me the sense of a composer working with musical material just beyond what he can really yet control; elements of the piece (perhaps the insistent nature of the knocking sounds, or the sudden loud sung tones, pulled out of nowhere) seem to have insinuated themselves into the overall fabric, rather than having been placed there as the result of an explicable compositional choice. The piece inhabits a new and, to my ears, disconcerting world - the unusual sound quality of the 'prepared' bass trombone and adapted alto flute enhance this feeling - a world in which the composer is audibly present, but in which he makes himself vulnerable to all manner of 'troubling' elements, the existence of which he can no longer ignore. In this sense one can perhaps understand Denyer's claim that **Archaeology** marked one of the turning points in his work as a composer.

**Contained in a Strange Garden** has its origin in the composer's fascination with the mey (sometimes mei), a little-known and almost extinct reed instrument from the Erzurum area of eastern Turkey. Its timbre is unusual in that, unlike most of the shawm family of instruments in west Asia, the mey was traditionally used for intimate music-making in indoor surroundings. It

has a pitch range of just over an octave, with a characteristic intonation pattern, and has little capacity for variation of dynamics. 'These limitations I find attractive from a compositional point of view,' writes Denyer: 'the instrument's particular ethnicity is not at all germane to my concerns but its sound quality is central.' (The former point is borne out by the fact that the piece can alternatively be played on a crumhorn.) Around the sonority of the mey he began to put together 'a family of complimentary timbres': five berimbau (musical bows of the type associated with Brazilian capoeira), instruments consisting of a single string stretched over a bow attached to a gourd resonator and played with a stick (although Denyer has added a buzz to the usual sound of the instrument and rack-mounted all five, leading to a quite unconventional playing manner); thirteen earthenware bowls, tuned with water and struck with hard beaters; five glazed porcelain bowls struck with light wooden sticks; ten tuned cowbells; a small, high-pitched bell; two deep gongs; and a pair of wooden blocks with sandpaper attached. All these percussive sources are under the control of one player. The berimbau and the bowls match the non-tempered intonation of the mey but expand upon its scale by the addition of various unequally-spaced microtonal intervals; the cowbells, gongs and the small bell use the regular tempered tuning, at times creating shimmering non-unisons with the pitches of the mey. The result is a ravishing collection of unfamiliar materials, a sound world at once strange and enticing.

**The Tender Sadness of Tyrants As They Dance**, for shakuhachi and bass flute, was written for and is dedicated to the composer's friends Yoshikazu Iwamoto and Jos Zwaanenburg. Rather than emphasize the two instruments' distinctiveness, sonically and culturally, Denyer has written a piece that creates a new hybrid sonority by having the instruments play together the whole time. The resulting sound - sometimes fragile, often relentless, even ruthless - is coloured by a diverse range of playing techniques, such as singing into the instruments, 'ghost tones' (produced by fingering pitches and breathing into an instrument, thereby creating an 'unvoiced' sound), various kinds of vibrato, microtonal inflections of pitch, and purely vocal sounds. In addition, the two musicians are required to wear tap-dancing shoes, producing at times painfully loud percussive attacks, and introducing (when the piece is seen in performance) a feeling of desperation, of enormous physical exertion, of the two musicians being stretched to the very limits of the humanly possible. This is in keeping with the image that suggested the work: "I once saw [writes Denyer], or perhaps I only imagined, a photograph of a dictator dancing at a diplomatic function. The aura of the condemned hung over him, giving the special sadness of those that have left behind the merely human and are secretly lost, irredeemably alone, having closed the door to the balm of human frailty - their own and others.' The sadness of unyielding brutality has its own unique flavour that is, unfortunately, a particular part of our own time." The work is savage and tender by turns; the brutality that the composer unleashes seems to create an unbearable feeling of fragility and helplessness in its wake. Like Denyer's work as a whole, **The Tender Sadness of Tyrants As They Dance** looks without flinching at the human condition and offers, through music, a recreation and celebration of our shared humanity.