

**Bob Gilmore**  
*Fired City*

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Frank Denyer is a free-thinking visionary and a composer whose inventive and engaging compositions have remained resolutely independent of musical fashion. His output over the past forty years is the record of a musical journey: a journey into one small part of what he has called "humanity's adventure with sound," and at the same time an inner journey, a search for a voice "in an age of migration." At times tender and delicate, at others insistent and tenacious, his music is distinguished by a keen sensitivity to sound, by a fresh approach to the techniques and the poetics of composition. It presents images of contemporary life in all its complexity--destroyed cities, the brutality of oppression, the residues in the modern world of past times and archaic beliefs. Underlying it is a broad compassion and humanitarianism, a spirit of hope.

Denyer's artistic path has been quite different than that followed by many composers of his generation. The English experimentalism of the late sixties was denunciatory and iconoclastic in manner; but while some composers were content merely to knock the heads off a few statues, Denyer quietly set about building a cathedral. His compositions combine conventional or modified instrumental and vocal resources with new instruments of his own invention: shells, slates, pebbles, the resonance of wood and of metal, new wind and string sonorities. The vividly imagined sound worlds that result come about not from a quest for originality for its own sake but from the fact that most conventional Western instruments are so clogged up with fixed identities of their own that he feels the need to find a more diverse range of 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."

A new composition will often take root in the discovery of a fresh sound, or gesture, or instrumental combination. Such is the case with **Towards the Darkness**, with its 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. The music begins with the

sonority of the basses playing in rhythmic unison, their collective timbre sometimes fused with other sounds (such as those of friction drums). This heavy, intense sound world persists relentlessly, then suddenly gives way, nine minutes into the piece, to the brighter sounds of flutes against the tapping of a plate struck with a hard beater. But this is not simply a resolution of darkness into light: the flute music seems to hover in an suspended state without momentum or climax, its meaning ambiguous. We may, of course, choose not to listen for these sorts of meanings but to hear this music purely abstractly, as a non-symmetrical form that branches off in an unexpected direction in its closing minutes (before ending with another distinct timbral invention, the loud rubbing together of concrete paving stones synchronized with shrill blasts on three tin whistles).

**Beneath the Fired City** is for two percussionists who play a complex range of sound sources including beaten strings, blown reeds, tuned wind wands (waved in the air), and a collection of percussive resources that make tearing, knocking, rasping, banging or tapping sounds. This music is a further exploration of an image of archetypal significance for Denyer: that of civilization razed to the ground and the possibility that, nonetheless, strands of desiccated life still remain underneath the devastation. Initially the two musicians keep up a nearly unbroken continuum of sound, sometimes playing two or three instruments simultaneously. The result is a highly complex polyphony, a kind of subterranean music. The piece, Denyer writes, "uses unamplified instruments that are mostly made by the performers from easily available materials, the residue of our consumer life-style or cannibalized parts of other discarded instruments. This inevitably makes the resulting sound-world rather soft in comparison with the usual diet of vibrantly resonant or even electronically enhanced musics. Today, our senses seem to need this enhancement in order to respond adequately, while less sonorous sounds, such as the ones I use, may appear not quite real enough; and so, imperceptibly we lose that basic sense of ourselves as frail, short-living creatures, each with a small voice and strange dreams, tentatively making our way through the world. We thereby deny our awareness of being a small but integral part of the great wilderness, and ultimately, I fear, our humanity. Why my work is haunted by images of urban destruction and the aftermath of disaster, I cannot say. These visions of a fragile and perhaps temporary, even traumatized survival persist, and so I continue to respond to them through my music."

Tracks three and four on this disc are works from a cycle of seven compositions entitled **A Book of Emblems and Songs**, composed in 1972-73. Heard in this context, they foreshadow the renewed concern with melodic forms that characterizes Denyer's most recent music. Both **Quick, Quick, the Tamberan is Coming** and **The Hanged Fiddler** are single-line, non-repeating melodies from beginning to end, essentially heterophonic but overlaid with, or punctuated by, other elements. Denyer has returned repeatedly over the years to melodic problems that necessitate a complex rethinking of conventional notions of line and phrase. The score of **Quick, Quick, the Tamberan is Coming** is prefaced by a description (from Margaret Mead's book **Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies**) of an

Arapesh ritual in New Guinea involving the tamberan, a mythical sea-creature who is summoned on rare occasions such as a feast to sing to the villagers, and whose appearance is heralded by the sound of flutes. The tamberan is described as a colorful, masked figure with a beautiful voice; but the flute music that announces his arrival may have further resonances, the flute in various traditions worldwide being a herald of death. "Each of the four bass flutes simultaneously plays a variant of a single basic melody," Denyer writes of the piece, "and these variants are made, by processes of contraction and expansion, to cross and recross each other."

**The Hanged Fiddler** likewise begins from an image, this time of a traveling musician, as seen on old woodcuts. Behind the piece lies a story (common to Scottish and American traditions among others) of a fiddler who is accused of horse stealing and is sentenced to a public hanging. Before the noose is tightened he is allowed to play, from the gallows, one last tune. Reaching the end of his performance he abruptly snaps the fiddle in two and throws it into the coffin that will soon be his. **The Hanged Fiddler** is a virtuoso piece for a violinist who is set against the pounding of a bass drum and ticking of a pair of bones. Throughout, the violin has a shadow, a sustaining instrument--a viola, in this recording--which captures and sustains isolated notes from its line; this musical equivalent to freeze-frame technique, simple but vividly effective, seems to prolong the last fleeting moments. At the end the violinist's danse macabre seems not to stop but to wind down as though in exhaustion, achieving a kind of resolution.

**Resonances of Ancient Sins** was written on commission from the KONTRA-Trio, a Lucerne-based ensemble of contrabass instruments, to which Denyer added a fourth musician, a percussionist playing a very large, specially-made plywood box. Typically, he was concerned to explore not merely the contrabass register of the instruments but to bring out a great many nuances across their whole range, especially the particular quality of high sounds when played on low-pitched instruments. (In its highest register the contrabass saxophone sounds not unlike the female voice.) In addition to the instrumental sounds the wind players are asked to produce whistle tones and ghost (aeolian) tones; the plywood box is by turns scraped, lightly tapped, and hammered furiously. All the musicians at times also sing, or hum. This is music of rapidly changing textures and emotional states, a complex world enclosed in a small frame.

Written for the Barton Workshop between December 1999 and January 2000, **Prison Song** is a tremendous exercise of compositional restraint operating on evanescent wisps of musical material. The sound world is reduced to extreme quietude, partly hushed and partly ecstatic, almost as though it were the ghost of another music that has vanished. The score calls for alto flute (which produces no sounded tones, only pitched air sounds and whistle tones), clarinet (sustained tones and oscillations that never rise in dynamic above pppp), violin with a heavy practice mute, muted trombone doubling melodica, and a collection of quiet percussive sounds (a cloth swish, a pencil tapping a cigar box, a cowbell rubbed with a stick, a wooden scraper, plywood rubbed with metal, a wet tile, a rattle drum, the scraping

of a piece of unglazed pottery, two bricks rubbed together, a bowed woodblock, and a light metal tapping: this latter sound accompanies the swaying, dance-like music that begins just over ten minutes into the piece, a sort of clandestine "tango"). Through this extreme reduction of means, Denyer is able to concentrate on melody in a new way. "The sounds have become very, very ephemeral," he has commented, "and, nevertheless, in this very tentative and fragile setting the music seems to have developed a melodic line which is much more extensive... it's always been there at odd moments in my earlier music, especially at the ends of pieces, a kind of proto-melodic line. But in **Prison Song** it has become rather more elaborate - so much so that when I tried it out with the Barton Workshop, everybody said "Ah, we see you've come out of the closet at last!"... I'm aware that suddenly I can make much longer lines of music than I've been able to do in the past. And suddenly that's come quite easily for me and I don't quite know why. I'm sort of happy about that."

Bob Gilmore, 2002