

Bob Gilmore
Frank Denyer - Music for shakuhachi

The four works on this CD are fruits of a musical collaboration that spans a quarter of a century. Frank Denyer and Yoshikazu Iwamoto met at Wesleyan University in Connecticut in 1974, where the former was a Doctoral student in ethnomusicology and the latter artist-in-residence in the World Music programme. Whereas initially it was Denyer's interest in traditional Japanese music that brought them together, the enduring legacy of their friendship is a folio of new compositions for shakuhachi that run like a vein through Denyer's output and collectively form a body of work unique in contemporary music.

Denyer first attracted attention through his work with the ensemble Mouth of Hermes, which he founded in London in 1968. During the six years of its existence it served as a vehicle for performances of his own music and experimental works by others, championing the music of composers such as Cage, Feldman, Scelsi, and Takahashi. When the group disbanded in 1973 Denyer crossed the Atlantic to pursue Doctoral studies at Wesleyan University. In fact it was shakuhachi music that was partly responsible for attracting Denyer to Wesleyan - more specifically, the Nonesuch LP *A Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky*, recorded there in the late 1960s and featuring the playing of Goro Yamaguchi, the first such recording to be on general release in the west. This disc was very much in tune with the temper of the times - a vibrant testament to the musical and spiritual richness of "other" cultures. For Denyer its appeal was of a quite specific kind. In the honkyoku repertoire (the traditional Japanese solo music) he found a rich tradition of single-line melodic music that nourished his own primary compositional obsession in the early 1970s: melody. "I had been musically preoccupied for some years 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... Having reached this impasse I was very fortunate to meet Yoshikazu Iwamoto, for he possessed a whole technical/aesthetic approach to music that required a refined control of pitch inflection (rather than pin points) and subtle nuance". The two men played Japanese music together at Wesleyan (where Denyer, among other things, studied the koto); and in his last weeks as artist-in-residence Iwamoto asked Denyer to write some music for him.

The idea of a western composer writing for shakuhachi was not an entirely new idea in the 1970s, but precedents were few and far between. Henry Cowell was probably the first, with a piece called *The Universal Flute* written in 1940. After World War II a few Japanese composers wrote music for shakuhachi, most notably Makato Moroi and later Toru Takemitsu, and the idea of the integration of the shakuhachi into the western instrumentarium began to take hold (with even an occasional rock band

using the instrument). Denyer, however, was not interested in this sort of east-west synthesis. The first works he produced for the instrument (**On, on - it must be so** and **Wheat**) were essentially solo works with accompanying parts for percussion. They are very different from the traditional Japanese repertoire and manner of playing, and yet far also from the concerns of most contemporary composers of the time. Rather than being exercises in cultural fusion they are musical spaces not yet identified on any map.

The strange title of **On, on - it must be so** (1977-78), the composer tells us, “refers to a particular quality inherent in the melodic line”. Indeed, despite the rattling of castanets and throbbing of the bass drum, this is purely melodic music, driven by the intensity of the shakuhachi part. Nearly four minutes into the piece we are granted a temporary respite from this intensity by a single, quiet stroke on metallic percussion - the sump case from an old car. This gesture silences the other percussion for a time and leads the shakuhachi toward slower, more contemplative phrases. Finally the energy picks up again and the piece closes with more virtuosic material.

The piece seemed an inauspicious beginning to the collaboration of composer and performer. Looking at Denyer’s score in Japan, Iwamoto was at first floored by the technical difficulty of the piece, which is replete with microtonal intervals and irregular phrases. He then began the protracted task of tackling the difficulties one at a time, reconsidering the whole performing tradition of the shakuhachi in the process. The technical problems of this first piece are compounded in **Quite White**, which pushes the player’s virtuosity to an extreme. The first note of **Quite White** is at the very top of the shakuhachi’s range and had never before been played pianissimo; after a long period of practice, Iwamoto found it could be played extremely quietly and in the almost colourless way that Denyer imagined. This note is a recurrent point of reference in the piece: “other phrases”, writes Denyer, “emanate and fall from, or gravitate towards and merge into, this point, as if it inhales and exhales form”. For Iwamoto, the special feeling of the piece resonated with lines from T.S. Eliot’s *Preludes* that he read in Japan, the sentiment capturing exactly his sense of the music: “some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing”.

Although begun before **Quite White**, **Wheat** was not completed until 1981 when Denyer was living in Nairobi. The title attached itself to the music because the opening consonant and vowel, in his mind, evoked the sound of the shakuhachi. Written for shakuhachi and two percussionists, **Wheat** consists of six short pieces. “In the opening piece”, Denyer writes, “the organic natural bamboo sounds of the shakuhachi are complimented by the natural but inorganic sounds of stones. The second piece adds to the shakuhachi another form of bamboo sound - that of bamboo slit drums (designed for this piece). There are also gong-like sounds from various modified steel plates as well as sandpaper blocks. The third piece is unaccompanied. The fourth has two different stone sounds (each stone

flexibly mounted on an individual resonator and struck with another stone); the fifth piece is again unaccompanied, while the sixth requires bamboo slit drums, steel plates, a gigantic gourd rattle strung with beads, slap sticks and a single artillery shell chime”.

The original LP recording of these three pieces was released in 1984, by which time composer and player once again found themselves together at an academic institution, Dartington College of Arts in southwest England. A new solo shakuhachi piece and several small ensemble works containing the instrument were written during this period, culminating with *The Tender Sadness of Tyrants as They Dance* (1991) for shakuhachi and bass flute - at the time, Denyer felt this technically and emotionally demanding score would be the culmination of his involvement with the shakuhachi. But five years later he was beginning to have ideas for his longest composition yet for the instrument, a piece that is both “a kind of summary” of his work with it and music that, he says, leads the instrument “about as far as I can take it” into new territory.

In the mid-1990s Denyer’s music entered a new phase, which took 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. This new sound world only emerges fully in **Unnamed** for solo shakuhachi, completed in October 1997. At 45 minutes it is both Denyer’s longest composition to date and one of his richest and most enigmatic.

The unfamiliarity of the world inhabited by **Unnamed** begins with its title, which seems both to conceal meaning and at the same time to direct us toward something solid and yet without name. (Denyer is adamant that the sense of the title is quite different to a usage such as *Untitled Composition*, so beloved of visual artists.) Musically the work is an expansive tapestry of sound that derives much of its language from subtleties of pitch and articulation. One of its starting points was a scale of seven equal divisions of the octave; the initial appeal of this highly unconventional sequence of intervals was to deflect the music away from the more familiar vocabulary of semitones. Denyer found this equiheptatonic sequence was not especially interesting in itself but became far more so by the addition of “satellite” notes, subtle microtonal shadings around the scale notes. In addition to subtleties of intonation, the player has continually to traverse a spectrum of four kinds of sound, from a pure tone to a breath sound (produced by breathing into the instrument without sounding the note: these are called “aeolian” tones) and the gradations in between. In addition to this, there are purely vocal sounds ranging from inarticulate groans to singing. At various points in the piece clear sung fragments of melody with text emerge. At one point the player sings the phrase “lest we know and come to harm” (its sole appearance having been prefigured by earlier fragmentary occurrences); at another we hear the single word “forgive”. These phrases

seem to articulate possible meanings while hardly dispelling all the mysteries.

Unnamed is a music of sustained quietness: until its last moments the piece hardly rises above a mezzo-piano, and most of it is much quieter. In his earlier shakuhachi works Denyer had generally wanted to avoid slow and quiet music because the traditional repertoire, excelling in those things, “would have drowned me”; but in this work he felt ready to face the challenge. The music successfully draws the listener into a very still, shaded world, which reaches an extreme in the long silence towards the end of the piece - a silence prepared by earlier, shorter silences, in which the music seems to have disintegrated into nothingness. Perhaps we have, metaphorically, reached the “unnamed”, before which we become temporarily mute.

Unnamed is extraordinary to listen to, and its score is striking to look at. In attempting to notate the microtonal complexities of the piece Denyer used a colour notation to differentiate the several conflicting tuning systems found in it. When Iwamoto travelled to Dartington to begin work on the piece he was puzzled by the colour notation and disturbed by one thing in particular - the use of the colour red for the notes of the equiheptatonic scale. (“I cannot play a red note”, he told Denyer firmly.) The red notes were rewritten as green notes, and joined by blue notes (the satellite pitches), black notes (the conventional twelve-note equal tempered scale augmented by quartertones), and gold notes (the strongest notes on the shakuhachi, D and A in several octaves, which come into their own at the brief loud passage moments before the end). Iwamoto’s performance of this remarkable score, recorded live at Dartington in 1999, is a fitting testament to a musical collaboration that, while reaching across cultures and continents, is finally the meeting of minds of two remarkable individuals.

May 2007