

James Fulkerson

The Music of Frank Denyer

(extract from liner notes to **A Monkey's Paw**, 1991)

I am happy to have the chance to preface a recording of Frank Denyer's music because both the composer and his music are extraordinary. I will sketch a background of Denyer first, because his music is clearly the result of his most striking personality and life. I met Frank in 1981 when he and his wife, Saroj, moved to Devon after he had been appointed senior lecturer in composition at Dartington College of Arts.

A brilliant pianist, Frank comes from a conventional British background initially as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral and then at the Birmingham School of Music during his secondary education. Finally after graduating from the Guildhall School of Music in London, he founded, in the late sixties, the performing ensemble "*Mouth of Hermes*", which presented new music from both east and west throughout the UK, Europe and Scandinavia. During this time he also lectured in composition and ethnomusicology at Middlesex Polytechnic. Between 1974-77 he somehow found time to do a PhD in Ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University, Connecticut.

He has done fieldwork in East Africa, West Asia and north and west India. He has lectured at Queen's University (Belfast), Kenyatta College (Nairobi, Kenya), has been a Research Fellow in African Music at the University of Nairobi, and finally returned to England to teach at Dartington. Frank has been performing Scelsi since the late sixties, performed regularly and corresponded with Morton Feldman, known the music and writings of Sorabji since his teens, and always been an avid reader. He is striking for his robust laughter and is a real joy to spend time with, because of the richness of his intellect and independent perception in those areas that interest him.

One wonders with a field like ethnomusicology how much the discipline subsequently shapes one's perception. Frank has had a long and fruitful collaboration with the shakuhachi player Yoshikazu Iwamoto, whom he met initially in Connecticut. Yoshikazu subsequently followed Frank to Dartington.

The relatively few performances of Frank's music to date, I believe, is because of his use of unusual instruments, some "found", some constructed, and some from countries where he has done research. These are not easily envisaged by musicians with conventional European training and makes it difficult for them to construct or to attempt a substitute for them. His scores, therefore, are often somewhat opaque for potential performers/conductors. I appreciate that these "instrumental variations" are genuinely a result of Frank's unusual musical vision, though I have tried at some length to encourage him to write for more conventional instruments in order that more performances might be forthcoming. Most recently, I thought I had arranged the funding for a commission for him to compose a new work for the harpsichordist Jane Chapman. Alas the funding ultimately fell through and I was lamenting this to Jane, citing that it would have been

a work which, being for a conventional instrument, would have meant that his music might become more accessible for performance. She said that while this was true, it was obvious I was not in touch with him regarding his final intentions. He had been planning a microtonal work with further additional "preparations" to the strings. Programming it would have meant that one not only needed to be willing to make the microtunings requested, but two instruments would need to be available in order to include it in one's programme. The best laid plans...

Even though the collaborations with Iwamoto have resulted in many performances and recordings of his work, how many shakuhachi players are there who are interested to play twentieth century repertoire? This is the nature of the problems confronting musical performances for Denyer. It is encouraging that James Wood who is undaunted by these practical problems has taken Denyer's music to perform in the 1990 Darmstadt Summer Course. The recording of **A Monkey's Paw** is a result of this effort.

The art we make is a result of the life we live, the questions we pose, the intensity of our gaze. Frank is culturally and spiritually a very rich man. He is here working, thinking, talking, performing. Regarding scale, he is not attempting the epic but making 'pearls'. This has nothing to do with the profundity of what he makes or envisages but the nature of the listening experience which results from the music he has created. The music on this CD is either ensemble or solo music. The solo works are really some of the most concentrated melodic writing I know; they demand constant attention from the listener, and it is in their distillation that the listener becomes aware of the unusual twists and turns of these quicksilver melodies. In turn, the richness of the listener's experience makes them aware of their own existence. This is a fundamental experience of art, the creation of consciousness, a 'peak experience' in the words of Abraham Maslow.

The ensemble works, by comparison with the focused nature of the solo works, become sensual and at times exuberant. **After the Rain** is an experience that everyone deserves. I cannot help contrasting the differences between listening to the music of Henryk Gorecki and Frank Denyer. Gorecki is "epic", Denyer is "atomic"; both are transcendent.