

***Whispers*: liner notes by Bob Gilmore**

The experience of listening to Frank Denyer's music is extraordinary, quite distinct from other aspects of our contemporary musical lives. His music manifests an exquisite sensitivity to sound, often unusual or fragile sounds; his compositions are more concerned with what can be heard than with an interest in systems, or drama, or "ideas". And while these sounds sometimes seem to embody a covert narrative of sorts, as though a story is hiding, waiting to be told, any such narratives are never made explicit. This leaves the listener free to concentrate on the highly original melodic lines, the harmonies and the unique tone colours of Denyer's work, while speculating, if desired, about possible scenarios that may lie behind. This disc, the eighth devoted entirely to his music, collects three solo and two ensemble pieces, and forms a portrait of his recent work, from the years 2007-10.

Whispers, for solo voice with ancillary instruments and offstage muted violin, marks a radical (and, so far, a one-off) change in Denyer's working methods. Whereas his pieces generally emerge from a long gestation period, this one arrived suddenly; he began by writing down a few phrases one morning, not thinking in terms of longer spans. About five of its movements were composed in this way, on the day he began work. It is the first piece of his to be a mosaic of short movements, some very short indeed. Denyer found that the gaps between the individual movements needed to be very exact, some of them quite long, so by trial and error he determined a series of lengths which are specified in the final score. Like the earlier *Riverine Delusions*, but in a very different way, this piece led him to think of time very differently than in his earlier music. The piece was not specifically intended for his own voice, but Denyer's performance here offers a marvellous sense of immediacy, as though the pieces are coming into existence as we listen. The very quiet, fragmentary music of an offstage muted violin is heard unexpectedly in piece fourteen, as though briefly opening up the performance space to a world outside.

Woman with Jinashi Shakuhachi is the second in a set of pieces intended for solo female performer. In 2004 Denyer composed a solo work for the Dutch viola player Elisabeth Smalt entitled *Woman, Viola and Crow*, in which the performer also has to sing, shake a set of rattles worn on her back, make footsteps of a quite specific timbre, and imitate (vocally) the call of a crow. Five years later, responding to a request from shakuhachi player Kiku Day, he wrote the second of what would become a set of four works with a woman performer in mind. Part of the stimulus was that Day played the jinashi shakuhachi, the original shakuhachi associated with mendicant Buddhist priests, made without any lacquer on the inside, and which women were traditionally forbidden from playing. He especially loved the very soft notes on

the instrument, similar in quality to the human voice, and so the player also sings and, in addition, makes percussive taps with a thimble on the body of the instrument. In the context of Denyer's output, this marks the drawing of a line after the many compositions he wrote for the shakuhachi master Yoshikazu Iwamoto in the decades up to 1999 (four of them collected on *Another Timbre at03*): *Woman with Jinashi Shakuhachi* takes a new approach to an instrument that has featured extensively in Denyer's work.

Riverine Delusions is the earliest of the pieces recorded here, and was the last piece Denyer composed for the Amsterdam-based ensemble The Barton Workshop (with which he had performed, as pianist, for more than fifteen years) before the ensemble's demise. But the work is less an act of closure than of new beginnings. A more flexible attitude to time is one aspect of this; atypically for Denyer, the score includes a few passages of unsynchronised material. So too is the striving for a more linear continuity, for ever-longer spans of music. The piece began life as a trio for flute, clarinet and trombone, but Denyer found it unsatisfactory in that form, so he rewrote it, adding violin and cello (both muted) and percussion. The work, the composer says, contains "some of the subtlest things I've done": one example is the quiet, unison microtonal melody on bass flute and bass clarinet, so accurately played here that it seems like only one instrument. Like a river, perhaps, the piece has no clear beginning and end, as though a passing fragment of a more continuous music.

The ensemble piece *Two Voices with Axe* calls for three different types of sound source: two voices (female and male), an ensemble of five instrumentalists, and an eighth performer who slices into wood with a large axe. While these three elements are sonically distinct, the piece finds all manner of connections and dialogues between them. Quite unlike the music that surrounds it, the axe is a loud and even a violent presence. No two sounds produced by the interaction of axe blade and wood will ever be the same, hence yielding a range of timbral unpredictability. The other percussion, in contrast, while occasionally echoing the axe with gentle knocking sounds, is wholly different in function and sonority. The vocal writing, by extending the female voice downwards and the male voice upwards, makes them at times indistinguishable, so that it is not always clear which singer is producing any given sound. But just as significant as its extraordinary timbral world is the melodic nature of *Two Voices with Axe*; the concern to make long melodic lines has been a recurrent feature of Denyer's work for over four decades.

The closing work, *A Woman Singing*, is the fourth in Denyer's series of works for female performer. Here the singer must strive for what he calls a "painfully

intimate tone of voice”, almost as though she were singing to herself. Heard in this way, the work is a stream of consciousness in which the very gentle sounds - as though the performer were engaged in another task while softly singing - are occasionally interrupted by words, like fragments of an inner monologue. In concert, the piece would at times hover on the threshold of audibility. The special intimacy afforded by CD, where we as listeners can feel very close to the sounds, gives us privileged access to the very special tones of voice that characterise Denyer’s remarkable output.

Bob Gilmore, August 2014