

## THROUGH ONE OF BOB'S WINDOWS

Paul Griffiths

A short paper hardly stands in need of an epigraph, but I'm going to give mine one all the same. Here, then, are four lines, a quatrain, using every letter in the alphabet except for the loss of B, O, G, I, L, M, R and E.

What vast wants can fantasy attack?  
What junk quanta has fantasy attun'd?  
What zany dad had an ax at hand?  
As Kant says, what a fuck-up . . .

I'd like to begin now by quoting from an exchange of emails I had with Bob – less than three months, as it turned out, before his death.

**Bob to me, October 7, 2014:**

As you are doubtless aware, it will be Pierre Boulez's 90th in March. I'd like to publish a tribute to him in the April 2015 issue of TEMPO, together with one acknowledging the 80th birthday of François-Bernard Mâche a few days later (the latter I'll write myself).

I was wondering if you'd be interested in taking on the piece on Boulez. I am thinking of roughly 1500–2000 words, but it could be any length, really. A lousy fee unfortunately, normally £50.

**me to Bob, same day:**

Of course, this is a lovely and appealing idea – except for the money. Could you give me a day or two to think how I could make it work? Meanwhile, I hope the editorship of Tempo isn't proving too arduous and keeping you from other work. In the words of an opera, What Next?

**Bob to me, still the same day:**

I feel very ashamed about the money situation. To hell with it, why don't we say £100 (only slightly less insulting).

I'm enjoying TEMPO a lot, most of the time, though it certainly is work, as it is for poor Juliet who handles the reviews . . . and the illiteracy of some of our would-be contributors is staggering.

I don't know What Next? after Vivier. I'd love to do another biography but haven't yet hit on the right subject. I believe I'll know it when I do . . . :-)

**me to Bob, October 12, 2014:**

Please don't tie yourself in knots to up the fee. I'll just have to trick someone else into vastly overpaying me.

As to your next book (talking of projects that vastly overpay), why not Frank D?

**Bob to me, same day:**

Frank D, goodness, you've almost read my mind. He's a real contender. Dunno who'd publish it or who'd buy it, but hey, that never stopped me before! Anyway, thanks for reinforcing this idea, am certainly giving it some thought.

Here then is Bob, almost at the end, looking ahead. 'He's a real contender'. Who could have been others? Mâche, obviously. Rădulescu, obviously. Volans, as we've just heard.

But it would be contrary to Bob's spirit, and I think contrary to his view of history, to lament his loss as having cut off possibilities, much as we might want to have those putative books in our hands, or have them to look forward to. He was, if anything, a great opener, and the windows he opened have not been closed by his death. I want therefore to spend a little time looking through one of those windows, the one offering a view of – to give him his surname at last, as if anyone here could be in any doubt – Frank Denyer.

Bob wrote about Denyer's music on seven occasions: he provided notes for all six of the CDs devoted to the composer that have been released since 1998, including last year's *Whispers*, and in 2003 there was a sixtieth-birthday piece for the *Musical Times*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Denyer was the subject of one of the ten audio documentaries Bob made in the last year of his life, characteristically engaging and straightforward features that can be downloaded from the Bob Gilmore site free of charge.

Besides being, for almost 20 years, Denyer's chief commentator and promoter in print, Bob was also, quite remarkably, a Denyer performer, his being the whacking blows that sound through *Two Voices with Axe* in the 2013 recording included on the *Whispers* album. One might feel there's a certain irony in having this part, which keeps violently interrupting the fine thread produced by the other musicians, performed by – well what was Bob exactly? Some combination of scholar and enthusiast, and, yes, a performing musician himself, but not regularly a participant in Denyer performances. It is only here that we hear him, as an outsider, wielding the axe while the others are creating a gentle music of voices and muted strings – except that part of the challenge of this piece, part of the opportunity, is to understand the axe blows not as hacks into the fabric of the music but as part of that fabric. This is, inevitably, something Bob himself recognised, identifying a particularly Denyerian aspect to the part that he was – though, of course, he does not mention this in his note – undertaking himself: 'No two sounds produced by the interaction of axe blade and wood will ever be the same, hence yielding a range of timbral unpredictability'.

Unpredictability was only one of several themes that go through Bob's writings on Denyer, and they're all laid out in his 2003 *Musical Times* piece – which, I can't help pointing out, shows the care Bob brought to his writing in its perfect choice, for its very opening sentence, of an unusual word, where he refers to musicians who, with decades of solid work behind them, remain 'unengraced by an entry in the New Grove'. This – neglect – was another of Bob's Denyer themes, and yet not voiced as a reproach. Bob was realistic enough to acknowledge that a composer who, though a pianist himself, never writes a piano piece and has nothing in his catalogue for a regular kind of chamber group is bound to encounter problems in the world of performance. But Bob was also historian enough – and, one may say, optimist enough – to note that similarly wayward figures, writing for home-made instruments tuned in relatively simple frequency ratios, or exclusively for player piano, had been absorbed a little into the mainstream.

<sup>1</sup> 'Frank Denyer at 60: Butterfly Effect', *Musical Times*, 144 (2003), 27–31.

Something else Bob observed was how Denyer's 'primary musical subject', as he put it, became melody after 1973, and how this development was strongly affected by the field research the composer began that year into musical cultures way outside the western classical domain: Indian, Japanese and African. There are more characteristics yet that emerge from Bob's writings on Denyer: the use of friction percussion, 'the sense', to use Bob's words again, 'of new life struggling for existence under the debris of the old' in the later music, and, in what was in 2003 the most recent of all, 'an intense concentration on extremely quiet sounds'. We experienced that earlier this afternoon, especially in pieces written some years after Bob's *MT* survey, *Whispers* and *Woman with Jinashi Shakuhachi*, both of which are on the *Whispers* CD, where Bob had the opportunity to bring the story up to date. Denyer's 'music', he wrote, '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 there's another finger – there must be more than ten of them by now – placed on the essence: the concern with 'what can be heard', the absence of 'drama, or "ideas"' – of what we might call rhetoric.

In going on from Bob, in looking through this window of his, we might want to see if some of his cogent remarks are related to one another, as Bob has already suggested that the close interests in melody and in non-western musics might be related. Is there, for example, some connection between the melodic impulse – the single line, fluid and flexible, to use the composer's own terms, and yet at the same time decisive, set on its course – and the line Denyer has followed as a composer, solitary, apart, constantly on the move and yet motivated, so it seems, by certainty? Much more clearly, and indeed implicit in Bob's writings, is the existence of something linking the 'new life struggling for existence', the softness, increasing softness, of Denyer's music, and the nature of his creative project, which is to bring new life into being, with great care and gentleness, the gentleness necessary to the nurturing, and the nurturing necessary under conditions when so much old life is yelling at us from every quarter. Hence, too, the need for the still, small voice.

As time goes on, as it will, we might want to turn the emphasis a little also from what separates Denyer from his contemporaries to what unites. Bob himself was already doing that 13 years ago, making a comparison with Salvatore Sciarrino. We might think also of Luigi Nono's late music of quietness and often of solo lines, or of some of Karlheinz Stockhausen's compositions, such as his flute piece *Xi*, exploring fine nuances of intonation. I could mention, too, another European composer of that generation who listened attentively to musicians in distant parts of the world, and who put together an ensemble having absolutely nothing to do with western convention, an ensemble created for this one work and this one work alone: that would be Pierre Boulez and *Le Marteau sans maître*.

However, I want to turn now from these general considerations to examine, if only rather sketchily, one of the works we heard a little while ago, *Woman with Jinashi Shakuhachi*, starting with the title. To begin with the easy bit, the jinashi shakuhachi is the older form of the instrument, with no layers of paste (ji) on the inner surface. To a traditional Japanese, placing 'woman' in this context might seem provocative, since the shakuhachi was reserved to men, and for several centuries, while it was still always jinashi, without ji, it was the preserve of a class of zen monks, the fuke, who wandered the country,

begging for food and shelter, and meditating by playing their elected instrument. I'm getting all this, of course, from Wikipedia, which also offers the fascinating tidbit that being itinerant, at a time when most Japanese were forbidden to travel, the fuke monks could be employed as spies. Or you could send out your spies dressed as fuke monks – though you then risked that if they fell into enemy hands, musical enemy hands, their lack of expertise on the shakuhachi might be detected, in which case . . . .

But back to the piece, or at least back to the title, which has a curious air to it. It's a bit like those Morton Feldman titles that simply state the forces – *Cello and Orchestra; Voice, Violin and Piano* – except that here not only the instrumentation is stipulated but also the player, by sex. We heard another such work in the concert, *Viola, Woman and Crow*, and there are two more, similarly with 'woman' in the title. Could a man play these works? Would this be just like, say, playing Bach's cello suites on the viola? One is tempted to answer 'no', because, as I've already suggested, 'Woman with Jinashi Shakuhachi', just that title, makes, in the face of Japanese traditional culture's fierce differentiation of the sexes, a quiet demurral. This alone is altogether a Denyerian response. And it would be negated, or at any rate set in question, were a man to play the piece. But does the title affect the music? – or does the music affect the title? Is the specifying of a woman performer no more than a relic of how these pieces came to be written: for Elisabeth Smalt, for Kiku Day, and so on – hardly more than a generalised dedication? Or is there more to it? If we leave out the possibility that the composer is invoking some manner of performance that only a woman could impart, the simple presence of a woman playing this instrument, if we know the background, might help us to understand a quiet demurral being made by means of a quiet demurral, of a music that gently says otherwise.

So let's move on from the words at the top to the music of *Woman with Jinashi Shakuhachi*, notated with Denyer's customary precision and elegance. It all starts, you will remember, with a note – or, rather, it all starts *from* a note, because although this opening note is quite prolonged, lasting about seven seconds, its very prolongation implies a position from which there will be movement, probably slow movement. Also, it's not stationary within itself. Rising from silence, but only as far as *ppp*, it then falls back to *pppp* before trailing away. In one of his infrequent essays, Denyer has raised the topic of when changes in intonation are heard as variations of colour within the same note, and there are examples of that in this piece, where deviations of a sixth-tone are concerned. But here at the start is an example of an extreme case, where sameness persists across an interval of a tritone, for though there's a descent from C through A to F-sharp, I don't think we hear an arpeggiated diminished chord here; the dynamics are too soft and the speed, by this point, too quick. I'm not sure we hear the event truly as one note, flagging, but I would argue that we hear it as one sound, flagging. Then the line recovers, to land brightly on what we do hear as a different sound and a different note: the E above the initial middle C, a note itself in movement, as notes and sounds so often are in this piece, sliding up through a semitone to F. We thus have one sound fading, but only to give rise to another sound, more present, and lifting. It seems to me that the whole gesture of the piece, even the whole meaning of the piece, is present in these opening ten seconds: something falters, but only so that, out of it, a surprising act of revival and discovery can be made.

As to what is failing and what being discovered in the piece as a whole, there are no straightforward answers. It is with the music as it is with the title: a statement is being made, strange in itself, and with implications that run in different directions. For example, you will have noticed how the main flow of the piece – which, with constantly changing time signatures and strong beats unasserted, has a quite unpredictable rhythm – is diverted occasionally into passages with a very clear triple metre. By no means coincidentally, these passages also have a very clear modality. They give the impression of a folk song. Are they memories from former times – or, rather, are they instances of a single memory from former times, recurring, changing on each occasion, until at the last, very close to the end, the memory has almost been lost? Do they represent what Bob called ‘the debris of the old’, from under which ‘new life’ is ‘struggling for existence’? We might want to think so, but then we should listen again to what we in that case would have to regard as the new life, unpulsed.

I remarked just now on how the initial C declines and then skips up a major third to E. After this the C is repeated three times by itself, with subtle changes of colour. Listening to the recording, one might find it very hard to distinguish, at these very low volume levels, between sounds played on the shakuhachi and vocal sounds, which the piece also uses. That first sound is vocal; the fluctuations of colour then come from alternating between voice and instrument. Then comes the rise to the third, now on the shakuhachi and now to the minor third, wavering up to the fourth. I don’t want to recapitulate the whole composition in words, which would take 20 times as long and still not come near conveying the experience, but I have to point out that soon after this comes another rise from the opening middle C, through the major third, a sixth-tone flat, to a destination on the fifth. Bass note, third, fifth: in this very new harmonic world we find the elements of an old friend, the diatonic triad.

What I earlier called the main flow of the piece is, then, no less than the folk-song-like incursions, intimately acquainted with a former language. Denyer’s music, like the fuke monks of old Japan, is always on the move, travelling on, in migration, to employ a term he has used himself. We have that sense, as Bob said, of ‘new life struggling for existence under the debris of the old’. But it may be this old debris that, in the process of decay, is springing to life all over again, in a very different way, as we listen. At the very end of the piece, when the folk song memory has almost been erased, that starting-point C is still there.