

13 FRIENDLY NUMBERS - John Butcher

Music for single and multiple saxophones - 1991

Sleeve notes for 1992 and 2004 issues.

Despite their special and distinctive qualities, improvisation and composition are not neatly separated activities. For the 'improviser' this becomes clearest with solo-playing, where personal concerns are unmodulated by other musicians' input. Of course improvisation fortunately means that pre-performance decisions, if made, may well be modified or dropped in the heat of the moment.



Rather than attempting to describe the music, the following comments deal mainly with approaches taken.

In **Buccinator's outing** I wanted to start by using the tensions of simultaneous static and moving parts and possibly develop the multiphonic patterns that, as it turned out, end the piece. **Notelet** and **Humours and Vapours** were 'free', with the proviso of largely sticking to conventional saxophony and its attendant lyricism. **A leap in the light** was completely open and reflects my interest in attempting a music that integrates, rather than juxtaposes or singles-out from, the saxophone's almost disparate facets. **There are today...**, **Uncommon Currency** and **A sense of occasion** all basically followed their noses from the opening sounds, whilst **The Brittle Chance** and **wisp & whisk** can be heard, to some extent after the event, as approaches to space, rhythm and colour.

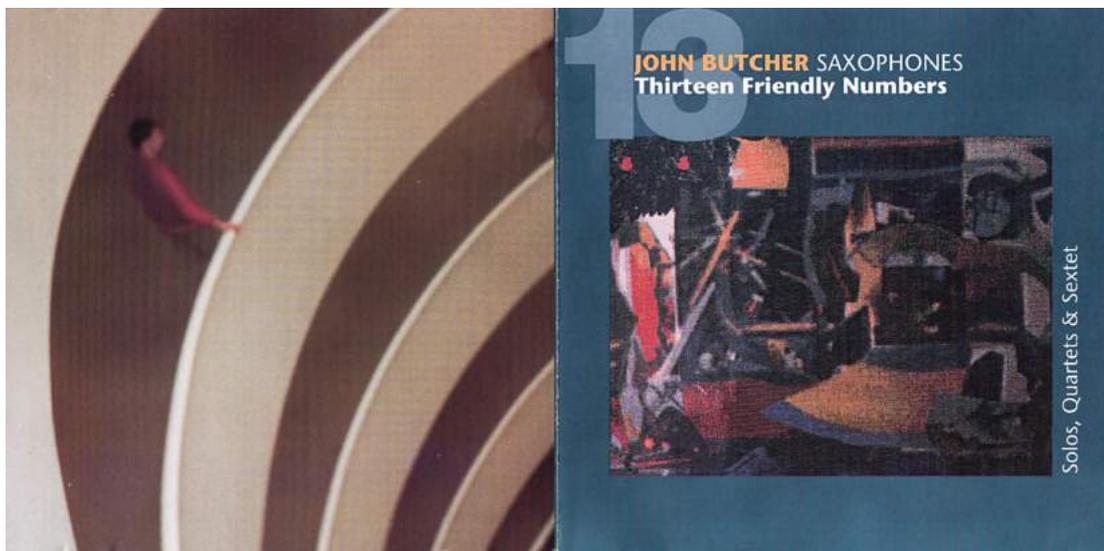
The multitracked pieces stem from work done with the aid of a 1990 Arts Council bursary to look at overdubbing possibilities and are not attempts to mimic the interactions of group improvisation. Stacking certain types of material can produce almost electronic sonorities as well as enabling an unusual focus on some internal components of sounds. These characteristics mainly appear in the first half of **Bells and Clappers** and **Tolv...sax**. **Mackle Music** is a brief return to the simple amplification I last used on the 1985 record **Fonetiks**. Finally, **Two up-Two down** tries to make sense of knowing what each previously improvised part is when the next one comes to be played.

John Butcher, April 1992

Cover computer painting

Glasford J. Hunter is a Jamaican born artist living in England since 1964. He says: this artwork is more about using a medium that is quick and fast to create a work that expresses something about the process of art creation, rather than about the subject matter itself.

THIRTEEN FRIENDLY NUMBERS



John Butcher appeared on six records, beginning with the 1984 LP "Fonetiks," before he first released "Thirteen Friendly Numbers" on his own Acta label in 1992. But the disc is still something of a debut; it is the first document of his peculiar language for solo saxophone, which he had fashioned by purging his vocabulary of the instrument's familiar sounds and jazz-associated gestures, and filling the space with carefully selected sounds located at the periphery of instrumental control.

Butcher's inspirations were as singular as his sounds. In *Musique Concrete*, he explains, "the actual source of the sound could change quite drastically within the course of a phrase of the music, and was intrigued with trying to find ways of doing that on the saxophone." In "The Brittle Chance," for example, Butcher replicates the dynamic and textural shifts of 50s and 60s electronic music by nimbly switching between multiphonics and fluttering, high-frequency tones. "Notelet" unveils his determination to wring something new from that ancient device, melody, by trying to avoid idiomatic references.

And the four multi-tracked pieces bypass the dubious legacy of saxophone quartets; while Butcher preserves spontaneity by executing the parts in real time, each track of "Bells And Clappers" hews to the same notes, creating densely massed sonorities, effectively treating the horns as one giant instrument instead of a reduced ensemble. And by amplifying the interior action of his horns to the point of feedback, he turns microphones and clattering keypads into an electro-acoustic ensemble on "Mackle Music."

In the years since "Thirteen Friendly Numbers" initial release Butcher has advanced as a player, making apposite contributions in settings as disparate as his intimate duo with harpist Rhodri Davies and the massively amplified Ex Orkest. His burgeoning discography now includes three more solo albums, yet this one still holds its own in any company; the ideas are compelling, the playing committed, the music thrilling. In an age when so many records of improvised music seem like little more than calling cards, that's no mean feat.

Bill Meyer, Berwyn IL, January 2004.

