

## Ezz-thetics

a column by  
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John Butcher, Lyness Oil Tank, Isle of Hoy, Orkneys

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Our spaces are increasingly noisy, crowded and uniform, our sounds digital representations of a lost reality or mere fabrication. We desire novelty at the same time that we seek the original. The musics discussed here all seek unique spaces—a temple, a tomb, a cave, a dam, a reservoir, a gas tank—from which some special sonic experience might be taken away, some echo that will speak with renewed authenticity, some sound so potent that it can transcend the digital makeover. In a sense each of these performances will try to break through the quotidian to achieve a heightened sonic presence. Each explores matter, whether in the primordial sense of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water), or the state of matter (solid, liquid or gas); each is about improvisation that seeks the specific space as active collaborator.

There's a kind of compound tradition to recording reed instruments in unusual places: one is public and avowedly spiritual, call it, perhaps, exoteric; the other is arcane and may be materialist or spiritual or a region of matter in which the two converge—call it esoteric. The first tradition seems the oldest. It may begin with Paul Horn in India in 1968, when he surreptitiously took a flute into the Taj Mahal to record the echoing meditations that would eventually be released as *Inside*. It's been decades since I've heard the music (It's interesting how New Age improvised music and the other kinds seem to occupy unrelated universes [as if Coltrane and Albert Ayler were the wrong kind of spiritual] and that mentioning them in the same place is just embarrassing to everybody, including the mentioner), but since then Horn has become the avatar of both the spiritual tourist and the echo-tourist. He's revisited the Taj Mahal with a battery of flutes and saxophones; he's recorded *Inside* the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the Great Pyramid at Giza, and the Kazamieras Cathedral in Vilnius, Lithuania.

With the success of the original Taj Mahal recording, Horn is even inside when he's outside, as in *Inside the Canyon de Chelly* and *Inside Monument Valley*, both with R. Carlos Nakai, the virtuoso of the Native American flute. Only Horn's record of Christmas carols, *The Peace Album*, is spared the designation. With the spiritual and cinematic tie-ins, one believes Horn could record some edifying music in the eighteen-inch Stonehenge that appears in *This Is Spinal Tap*.

The second stream of the tradition usually foregoes the heightened expectation built into the monument, though there seems to be a certain meditative, occasionally spiritual, dimension to it, and it frequently goes for the literally profound. It seems to start with the late Swiss saxophonist Werner Lüdi who in 1993 spent two days in the vast Lucendro dam with his alto and baritone for an extended exploration of resonance and psychic resource in an underworld journey of concrete nooks, dripping water and careening baritone blasts (*Lucendro*, Unit UTR 4064).

In 2000 the group September Winds—three Swiss reed players, Peter A. Schmid, Reto Senn, and Jürg Solothurnmann, trombonist Hans Anliker and Evan Parker formed with the intent of performing a series of concerts in an empty cistern above Zurich, built in 1922 and abandoned in the 1970s. When fire regulations prevented an audience, they recorded a disc of Parker/Schmid duets (Creative Works 1036) and a two-CD set, with a disc of duos by the quintet members and a disc-length piece by the full group (Creative Works CW 1038/39), exploring a community of sounds and resonances where Lüdi had created psychodrama.

Vast functional architecture for the control of water provides the site for another of these projects, the very beautiful *Falling Water* (Drimala DR 04-347-06) recorded in 2003 by saxophonist Joe Giardullo and violinist Carlos Zingaro. The Aqueduto das Águas Livres is an 18-kilometer aqueduct in Portugal, carrying drinking water across deep valleys to Lisbon. Beneath the aqueduct is the Mãe de Água, or “temple of water,” an unused reservoir which has been fitted with lights that reflect on a man-made waterfall. The original intention was to exploit the nine second reverberation of the space, but when the concert actually took place, the waterfall had been turned on. The musicians ended up improvising with the continual sound of water as well as one another and the delay. It’s part of what makes these projects so valuable, providing new material to the improviser, their sounds and lines reimagined by the space itself and returned to them for further development.

Perhaps no musician has found as many of these special spaces to test as John Butcher. His first adventure in this area was *Cavern with Nightlife* (Weight of Wax WOW 01). The solo portions of the disc were recorded in 2002 in the Oya Stone Museum, Utsunomiya, Japan. The museum is another reclaimed industrial site, this time a mine for Oya stone, a volcanic rock that cuts easily, thus creating the extraordinarily straight lines of a quarry that is 200 feet deep and the size of a football stadium. Through the years the quarry has been employed as a World War II airplane factory and later as a mushroom farm. Butcher’s 2004 return to the space (a rare event in the genre of architectural improv) provides the first two tracks on *The Geometry of Sentiment* (Emanem 4142), where Butcher uses both long tones and then rapid runs to interact with the special acoustics. The same CD includes a portion of Butcher’s 2006 performance at the Gazometer in Oberhausen, Germany, a 350-foot high container for gas that has an eight-time echo, each of Butcher’s sonic gestures repeating like an image in a fun-house mirror.

This fascination with special sonic environments is the focus of *Resonant Spaces* (Confront 17), recorded during a very special tour of Scotland in June 2006, predating the Gasometer performance by three months. Organized by Barry Esson and Bryony McIntyre of Arika, a Scottish arts organization that specializes in provocative events in unusual spaces, the tour sent Butcher and sound artist Akio Suzuki to various locales in mainland Scotland and the Orkney Islands in the far north, playing in natural, industrial and monumental sites. Esson and McIntyre’s choice of sites shows thought and wit and a remarkable knowledge of Scotland’s stranger crannies. Only parts of Butcher’s performances are here, but the range of environments is remarkable and each draws something musically distinct from the saxophonist’s interaction.

Throughout his career Butcher has expanded his sonic palette by focusing control on the mechanics of the saxophone, its capacity for multiphonic layering and the myriad acoustic shifts possible with changing embouchure, resonance and false fingerings. In recent years he’s also employed overdubbing, amplification and feedback, the latter using microphones to articulate the saxophone’s messages rather than his own breath. A dedicated improviser, he’s found new ways to interact with the horn, just as he has explored large and small ensembles through the years. On the *Resonant Spaces* tour, he’s employing every technique and combination thereof except overdubbing.

The CD is bracketed by subtle feedback pieces. The first, “Sympathetic Magic (stone),” has Butcher playing feedback tenor in the Hamilton mausoleum, a squat cylindrical building with a domed roof built in the nineteenth-century, an aristocrat’s monument to himself and a kind of unwitting industrial travesty of the Taj Mahal. The high notes produced by the interior alcoves are striking, an effect so unusual that Butcher, quoted in Biba Kopf’s notes, has since become reluctant to use feedback in more conventional spaces. Remarkably frosty, sweeping sounds are achieved using soprano feedback in the Tugnet ice house, originally a kind of mausoleum for fish.

The minimalism of tenor feedback gives way to the soaring, trilling, echoing acoustic soprano of “Calls from a Rusty Cage,” recorded in the watery underground of Wormit Reservoir in Fife, while Butcher is at his most evanescent in “Wind Piece,” recorded at the Standing Stones of Stenness, the remains of a neolithic stone circle with slabs reaching 16 feet high located in the extreme north of Scotland on the Orkney mainland. So strong is the wind that Butcher could manipulate fluting sounds as the wind blew over his amplified soprano’s sound holes, combining them with feedback.

Smoo Cave, a vast natural echo chamber with its own waterfall, receives two contrasting performances. The piercing multiphonics in the tenor's upper register sound like alien birds on "Styptic," while "Close by, a Waterfall" develops the most complex texture of the entire CD, a burbling mélange of acoustic, amplified, and feedback soprano that moves through many phases, some suggestive of birds, some softening in the damp air, some sounding like sonar, all touched by the distant sounds of water and actual birds.

One of the strangest environments is an oil tank in Lyness, a tiny village on the island of Hoy in the Orkneys. It's on the Skapa Flow, a vast natural harbor rich in military history--a German admiral scuttled his captive fleet in 1919--and the fuel storage tank dates from the Second World War when the Skapa Flow provided the main harbor for the British Fleet. Butcher takes diametrically opposite approaches to the environment. "New Scapa Flow," played acoustically on tenor, begins with a low-register tone that's sustained by circular breathing and the 15-second plus echo. While Butcher's blasts rise in pitch and shift in duration, it gets harder to distinguish what is original and what is echo, until a quiet passage follows that seems to be all echo. Building out of this with short multiphonic blasts, he begins to build up a piece in which the interactions of the space come to take on a life of their own, creating new harmonies, magnifying every shift in pitch and volume.

The other piece from the Lyness oil tank, the concluding "Sympathetic Magic (metal)," uses feedback soprano with plosive fingering noises to create an eerily submerged, electronic world in which feedback and echo combine to create the illusion that the music (mostly flute-like sounds) is playing backwards, the echo seemingly creating the ultimately louder sounds of the saxophone's initial feedback. Butcher subtly manipulates feedback and echo to create the kinds of multiphonic dissonance that he usually makes blowing through the instrument.

*Resonant Spaces* is a remarkable commemoration, rather than imitation or facsimile, of a journey and its locales and the sonic textures and possibilities of those spaces. Its nine, well-realized pieces in just under 49 minutes reflect both the spaces and Butcher's interaction, collaborations between improviser and architecture that suggest, even enforce, a fresh attentiveness to the nuance of sound and to those special places in which new possibilities and meanings might abide.

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