

Akio Suzuki & John Butcher

Immediate Landscapes

Ftarr! CD

John Butcher/Damon Smith/Weasel Walter

The Catastrophe Of Minimalism

Balance Point Acoustics CD/DL

John Butcher/John Edwards/Mark Sanders

Last Dream Of The Morning

Relative Pitch CD/DL

Keiji Haino & John Butcher

Light Never Bright Enough

Otoroku CD/DL/LP

Wherever you place your attention across 34 years of recording that includes dalliances with improvisors from AMM to The Ex, you can't help but notice the breadth of John Butcher's resources. His

quite extensive – soprano and tenor saxophone, amplified or not – but the sounds he obtains from them encompass pure, conventional tones, acoustic sonorities that sound like they're directed from avian throats to canine ears, and voltage-enhanced ones that bridge the gap between Stockhausen's alien electronics and Howlin' Wolf's microphone-frying harmonica. But don't call them extended techniques, since the term suggests a division between core techniques and outliers that he rejects. Butcher prefers to make choices based on what will make sense out of the action taking place around him, but also to push it somewhere fresh. He believes in progress.

Last Dream Of The Morning finds him in familiar company. Butcher has performed

quite extensively with bassist John Edwards and fairly frequently with drummer Mark Sanders, who in turn have played together so often that the question is how it took them until November 2016 to play as a trio. Their collective familiarity eliminates the need to figure out what works; instead, each musician seems to be simultaneously provoking and enhancing the efforts of his fellows. On "Signal" tiny sounds build to an extraordinary three-part counterpoint of blat drums, pungent trills and a constellation of contrasting drum skin and cymbal textures; then the piece resolves so suddenly that you almost resent its elegant, ruthless logic.

The instrumentation on *The Catastrophe Of Minimalism* is similar, but the interaction swaps lusty assertiveness in the face of uncertainty for the final puzzle piece perfection of Butcher/Edwards/Sanders. Butcher hadn't played with bassist Damon Smith for years before this 2008 concert. He and percussionist Weasel Walter were strangers, but Walter was a frequent partner of the bassist during the years they both lived in Oakland, California. They're kindred spirits, punk-ornery but deeply acquainted with a history of free music that stretches back to before either was born. Butcher's peppery soprano interjections and fast-flowing tenor streams enter unreservedly into the Americans' energy flow. Every abraded timbre, jointly articulated long tone, or brute yank on the strings arrives with the force of a passionate argument. But it's a thoughtfully delivered one; Walter eschews the heavy bass drum action he often uses in his own ensembles, instead delivering streams of dry, discrete drum strikes that propose forward motion while atomising any sense of pulse. If minimalism is indeed a catastrophe, this trio work hard to be part of the solution.

Immediate Landscapes pairs five recordings that Butcher and sound artist Akio Suzuki made during their 2006 Resonant Spaces tour of acoustically distinct locations in Scotland and Orkney with a 2015 club set. Their respective

engagements with the spaces matter as much as their responses to each other. On "Reservoir", which was recorded at Wormit Reservoir in Fife, the rattle and clatter of Suzuki's diverse objects – pebbles, glass plate, sponge, bamboo stick, metal plate, wood screws, cardboard box, pocket bottle and a self-developed portable echo generator called an analapos – feels much closer to the listener than the high, fraying pitches of Butcher's soprano. The apparent distance between them draws attention to the varying reverberations caused by the site's odd shape and concrete construction. Likewise, Suzuki uses wordless hoots and the action of his analapos to situate an echo within an echo on "Ice House", while Butcher's burred tenor tones give an independent measure of the space's sonics.

While the location recordings position the listener as witness to an exploratory journey, "Night Club", which was recorded at SuperDeluxe in Tokyo, puts everyone on more familiar ground. Close-miked and clearly recorded, Suzuki sounds more like a friction-oriented percussionist than an investigator, and Butcher is much more dynamic in this setting, shifting instruments and attacks at speed.

Butcher's flexibility meets the ultimate test on *Light Never Bright Enough*, in a face-off with Keiji Haino. Haino's guitar playing veers between broken harmonics, powerchords, oceanic loops and a few sardonic jazz licks, referencing genre just long enough to pervert it. He also storms Butcher's timbral territory with a suona (a Chinese double reed instrument), dims the lights with power-sucking electronics and forlorn crooning, and brings down a rain of metallic chimes.

Butcher faces enveloping soundscapes with rapier parries, amplifies the space age effects with some radioactive feedback of his own, and illuminates the rain with a gorgeous, fully formed melody. At every turn Butcher has a contribution that simultaneously enhances Haino's gestures and suggests ways past them.

Bill Meyer



Keep it light: John Butcher (left) and Keiji Haino