



The Primer: John Butcher

The saxophone has undergone one of its most radical transformations in vocabulary since free jazz through the innovations of the UK reeds player. From collaborations to solo recordings to site-specific happenings, this user's guide maps his forensic yet intimate adventures in freedom and sound

By Seymour Wright

Illustration by Savage Pencil

Over 40 years of sustained performance and publishing, English saxophonist, improviser and composer John Butcher has shaped much of what soprano and tenor saxophone can do, and what their roles and vocabulary in improvised music might be. There's a situated purposefulness to Butcher's music. It is always concerned with its context, flexibility, space and company: how group playing works and flows; how aspects of improvisation fit into a living musical world; how and what the saxophone can be for. Always generous, he finds appropriate and new ways of playing in diverse, collaborative contexts.

I've always heard Butcher's playing as a kind of nose to tail saxophony, where the whole instrument from reed-tip to brim of bell is available, accessible and articulate. Few other saxophonists slice as sharply back into the physical history, material (and physics) of the instrument, across its near 200 year history through jazz, particularly Lester Young's infinite permutations, to its speculative, hybrid origins. When Hector Berlioz wrote of his friend Adolphe Sax's then fresh invention, "the varied beauty of its accent, sometimes serious, sometimes calm, sometimes impassioned, dreamy or melancholic, or vague", he could have been imagining Butcher's distinctively clean but complex, enquiring soundworld. Butcher's lines (when he plays them) hop, skip and swing between intervals, across the octaves of the saxophone register. They often involve a kind of repetition that dwells on a tone or texture as it spirals out, pirouetting or billowing with fanning multiphonic sounds, where several different pitches are eased, rung, squeezed or wrung simultaneously out of different points in the saxophone's tube.

Paradoxically perhaps, Butcher often refers in interviews to a deliberate forgetting that he is playing a saxophone, focusing instead (he told David Keenan in *The Wire* 249) on asking "what musical input do I want to make – what sound, structure, density?" To find a way of doing this requires deep, intimate knowledge of the instrument. This intimacy is at the core of his work whether alone, or with others.

His discography, like his influence and pool of collaborators, is huge and global. "Everything I got enthusiastic about," Butcher told Clive Bell in *Invisible Jukebox*, *The Wire* 344, "came from hearing people playing live. It's odd now, because the way history gets written is in terms of the records put out. It's such a small part of the real music making."

With this limit in mind, I aim to highlight some key albums, collaborators and themes: groups first, and then some solo recordings.

Chris Burn & John Butcher *Fonetiks*

Bead LP 1985

Butcher's musical association with pianist Chris Burn began in the mid-1970s when the two were students at Surrey University, where Butcher studied physics. It feels a defining context in Butcher's musical development. From 1977 onwards, they became more focused on free improvisation, with Burn working inside the piano – a soundworld of open and muted strings unique in its attacks, chimes, marks, resonances and ringing tones. Into the 80s, this duo context, and later, the larger Chris Burn Ensemble, saw them develop a respective and collaborative language, Butcher finding ways to bring the saxophone into this space. The first sounds we hear on "Subtitles" on the A side of *Fonetiks* are Burn's spacious, inside-piano pluck-struck-percussed and rung-chimes, and Butcher's (already) unique saxophone voice: a reedy rrrrrrrrr (an apical-alveolar trill), leading to a squeezed splay of spicy multiphonics, then the slow pulse of a right-hand fanning of F-E-D keys,

and after a pause for Burn's woody knocks to ring, a ghostly tonal shadow emerging out of Burns's tone. And all this in the first one minute and 20 seconds. "Acute" on the flip side uses amplification and feedback alongside Burn's trumpet, something Butcher has since continued to do with soprano and tenor. From the start much of Butcher's voice and language – sounds, pacing, choices, approach to form (in improvisation) – is clear, and all here.

John Russell/Phil Durrant/John Butcher *Conceits*

ACTA LP 1987/Emanem CD 2014

Concert Moves

Random Acoustics CD 1995

The Scenic Route

Emanem CD 1999

News From The Shed

News From The Shed

ACTA LP 1989/Emanem CD 2005

"From brittle flecks of acoustic sound to swirling majestic pageantries" is how this trio is described (by David Illic in *City Limits*) in a press sheet that comes with the 1987 *Conceits*

LP. These extremes – breaking-up-minutiae and grand-tableaux-display – capture well the scale of the trio music Phil Durrant (violin and trombone), John Russell (acoustic guitar) and Butcher developed between 1984–99. Playing weekly, initially at Russell's North London flat, they grew a mode of open, taught, three hands on the tiller chamber improvisation. Recorded in late spring 1987, "FTT" for example, is a study in almost vicious, viscous concision, and on "Liberal Dose (Audi Alteram Partem)" Durrant bows and shaves delirious sonic shadows around and through his colleagues' splinters and snaps of sound.

"Heavy Merge" from *The Scenic Route* 12 years later is a longer form, equally trim exercise in placid, pickled, potent play. This trio were hugely influential on a generation of global musicians in terms of scale and proportion, collective interaction of the subtlest gestures, and instrumental virtuosity. Bows, blows, bellows; plucks, puckers, plump pecks and pulls; scratches, strums, and snaps grow, simultaneous, inchoate shoots.

The trio would augment itself on occasion,



Butcher at Company, 1990

as part of John Russell's QuaQua ensembles: the News From The Shed quintet added trombonist Radu Malfatti and Paul Lovens on selected drums, cymbals (and saw) for a 1986 UK tour. It's music that sounds like the microbial party on a busy gardener's earthy fingers: pollen, ferment, insects, earth, oils, rust, sap. There is perhaps no finer example of a push and pull, edge-y, midsize group improvised music than this. An essential record, briefly fixing a protean flow of ideas and approaches that were already moving in different directions.

Spontaneous Music Ensemble

A New Distance

ACTA CD 1995/Emanem CD 2005

Derek Bailey/John Butcher/Oren Marshall

Trio Playing

Incus CD 1997

Derek Bailey/John Butcher/Gino Robair

Scrutables

Weight Of Wax CD 2000

Derek Bailey / John Butcher / Rhodri Davies

Vortices And Angels

Emanem CD 2000

By the late 1980s and 90s what Butcher evolved with colleagues away from direct collaboration with first generation British improvisors led (perhaps inevitably) to invitations to collaborate from that earlier generation. Butcher was invited into John Stevens's SME in 1992 (see Julian Cowley's "Spontaneous Combustion" in *The Wire* 224). He walked into a specific, formal music. "[Because] of the influence John [Stevens] made on the early improvising scene, I was intuitively familiar with his ideas, even though

I didn't know they were his. Somehow I slotted in without realising the group had developed such a particular way of playing," Butcher explained to Philip Clark (*The Wire* 289). For example, the long trio "Stig" recorded at London's Conway Hall in 1994 is a fast, pulseless music powered by the extraordinary subtle energy of Stevens's particular, multi-hued, particulate and tender drums. It's a wonderful late incarnation of Stevens's ensemble, where the instruments inhabit an inclusive space and energy, permeating and not atop each other.

If there is a direct line of influence between Butcher and an earlier first generation of British improvisors, it is Derek Bailey, who he recalls seeing live many, many times and whose music and attitude impacted Butcher's approach greatly. The invitation to begin working together came in the 80s through Bailey's interest in Chris Burn's Ensemble. By the early 90s Butcher was a regular member of Bailey's Company events. There are few recordings of them together. *Trio Playing*, recorded at Bailey's home studio in summer 1995, is the first. Tuba, saxophones and acoustic guitar bubble and distil ideas together. The final track "Spane" is a simmering stew where flamenco sketches submerge, in turn, winds as rhythm section.

Scrutables is a fiercer, firmer affair, with percussionist Robair playing energised surfaces. "Frangible", for example, is just that, a desiccate frottage of ideas breaking up. The duet with Bailey is some of Butcher's finest playing. The interactions on "Low Vortex" are a collaborative study of decays, bites, elisions, collisions, concisions and extensions, a joyful grapple with the vorticity, volume, and viscosity of sound.

Vanessa Mackness & John Butcher

Respiritus

Incus CD 1995

Accommodating and fuelling much of the above was a 1980s to 90s culture of informal performance spaces, a once vibrant, now more or less vanished, world of living music in the back and upstairs rooms of pubs. After the spaces of the first generation of British improvisors and that second generation connected with the early London Musicians

Collective came a third different thing (or scene) involving Butcher, Russell, Durrant, Burn and many other improvisors in a perhaps more slippery, unresolved aesthetic brew.

Recorded in 1994, four years after they began working together, vocalist Vanessa Mackness and Butcher's Incus disc feels part of this. Their duo (which performed often until Mackness's return to painting in 1998) is about breath, voice and meanings made. Butcher rarely growls or sings through the saxophone, but his soundworld is to do with the mouth feel and throat space of his instrument, tongue and tooth articulations and even when feedbacking, how these things affect and change the saxophone tube's resonance.

Mackness slides into, and out of, words in another version of resonant change. "Every Telling Has A Taling", for example, runs a wild gamut of odd, emotive (inter)actions. Slipping in and out of real world referent and abstract stuff with a kind of Bacchal ludic-to-lucid abandon, trilling sighs and panting (a word appropriately derived from phantasia, with its origins in causing to imagine). There's a fashion of emotion-theatre present here not present on Butcher's other recordings.

Rhodri Davies & John Butcher

Carliol

Ftarrri CD 2010

Drunk On Dreams

Cejero LP 2019

A key aspect of Butcher's career is how he found new contexts and collaborators in which he could develop, grow and refresh his work. The duo collaboration with Welsh harpist Rhodri Davies is now in its third decade. It exemplifies Butcher's catalysing and combinatorial influence on a subsequent generation of UK improvisors working with different approaches to improvisation, technology and structure. Something about Davies's harp, and its extensions, evokes the electric and acoustic guitars of Derek Bailey, John Russell and Roger Smith plus the inside-piano of Burn. These recordings document an ongoing dialogue of careful, sensuous placement. Stackings, balance, silences, serifs and sustained drones: bowed, blown, beats of motors, and burr and bubble of feedback. The two encourage each other on, in an unshowy,



News From The Shed, 1986

Amalia Pistilli Conrad (Butcher); James Lang

developmental solidarity. Both do, and try out, things on these records that they don't elsewhere, ensouling a particular version of adventure. Davies seems to coax Butcher towards drones, experimental approaches and techniques increasingly involved with amplification and its magnifying powers. Each recorded encounter is different: from the graceful church-y still acoustic music of *Angels*; through the feedback and motors on the electroacoustic-noir of *Carliol*; to the slowly micro-macro-undulation-al-duration-al terrain of *Drunk On Dreams*.

Phil Durrant & John Butcher
Requests And Antisongs

Erstwhile CD 2000

Toshimaru Nakamura & John Butcher
Cavern With Nightlife

Weight Of Wax CD 2004

By the late 20th century, another, more global, wave of electroacoustic improvisation was maturing. Alongside other loosely contemporary meetings with Sachiko M, Christof Kurzmann and Otomo Yoshihide, these two recordings exemplify how Butcher was integral to this electroacoustic encounter. Durrant was now working with live electronic manipulation and modular feedback. Recorded over two days in early 2000, *Requests And Antisongs* is an oddly disorienting working out, where the mystery of one of Durrant's pitch-dependent gates, say, determines the parameters of exchange, play and musical purchase, almost psychedelic: "Eye Splice" flutters, lacrimose blinks of saturate grit; or, "Kreuzklem" bites, snaking (us and itself) into fanged prosthetic chambers of sound. It's also remarkable how the dialogue between them resonates, still, with aspects of their acoustic trio work from two decades previous.

Two years later Butcher was in Tokyo playing with Toshimaru Nakamura's no-input mixing board – a very different kind of encounter. Their almost-20 minute duet "Practical Luxury" was recorded in 2002 at SuperDeluxe. Around seven minutes in, Nakamura introduces a hollow metallic ringing (though it's never clear when Nakamura's sounds start) that persists for much of the next ten minutes. Listening to Butcher's tenor negotiate this – mistily undergirding it at first, then kettling it into a shared whistle pitch and menacing it with ringing whips – is remarkable. "The appeal, for me, was that there's no real model for combining such bodily and non-bodily instruments," Butcher told David Keenan in *The Wire* 249. This is the sound of a possible model, taking shape.

Polwechsel

Polwechsel 2

hat[now]ART CD 1999

Polwechsel & Fennesz

Wrapped Islands

Erstwhile CD 2002

The Contest Of Pleasures

The Contest Of Pleasures

Potlatch CD 2001

Tempestuous

Another Timbre CD 2007

For a decade, from 1998–2009, Butcher was part of the Austrian group Polwechsel,



The Contest of Pleasures, 2009

playing a more deliberately composed music straddling improvisation. Since the 1980s he has long involved himself in large-group structured contexts for improvisors: Chris Burn's Ensemble, Radu Malfatti's Ohrkiste, or King Übü Örshestrü, in his own words, "working with something that didn't have a name then, but it was sort of low-key chamber improvising". Polwechsel's is a music with its own cool dimensions and logics. Balanced, never seeming to work up a sweat. Blending electronic and acoustic sound, often slow, often low (volume and frequency) and steady. It's a styled music that feels concerned with outcomes in a particular way, and deliberate direction. The working out has been done somewhere else. The collaboration with Fennesz takes this a stage further, towards a juicy, ripened, synthetic-fleshed music derived but far distant from seeds in improvised sound.

A trio with virtuosic fellow extenders of their instruments, German trumpeter Axel Dörner and French clarinetist Xavier Charles, trans-European group The Contest Of Pleasures seem to share an interest in a carefully crafted, deliberate direction but a wholly acoustic version. They make a consummate, breath-based acoustic music informed by the way electronic music's sounds arrive, depart, turn on and off, stretch and manifest, an absence of effort and spectacle. It's a consciously beautiful world of slow fades, overlaps, buzzes, rasps, granular bits, hums, dial-up-handshake hollows, blown Shepard-Risset tones– 19th century technologies doing late 20th and early 21st century things.

Akio Suzuki & John Butcher

Immediate Landscape

Ftarri CD 2018

Maybe more than any other of Butcher's recordings, this collaboration with Japanese sound artist and player of self-made instruments Akio Suzuki exemplifies Butcher's ability to adapt to, and accommodate social and environmental inputs, really play together and still articulate and assert his musical self. It was recorded in 2006 at a range of locations across Scotland, and in 2015 in Japan. Biba

Kopf's "World Of Echoes" feature (*The Wire* 270) describes several of these concerts at length, in particular the way the context of the changing – extreme – environments, from gail-force winds through standing stones to booming oil tanks and dripping caves, drew curious-minded publics and shaped the music. And, Butcher explains in an interview with the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, that "the challenge for wind players is often to play more of the actual instrument while keeping it very transparent and quiet enough for the company. If Akio is rubbing stones together, I've got to find material which will not cover his work." The whole thing, encounters from both decades, is a wonderfully ambiguous, organic musical balance of nature and culture.

John Butcher & Eddie Prévest

Interworks

Matchless CD 2005

Visionary Fantasies

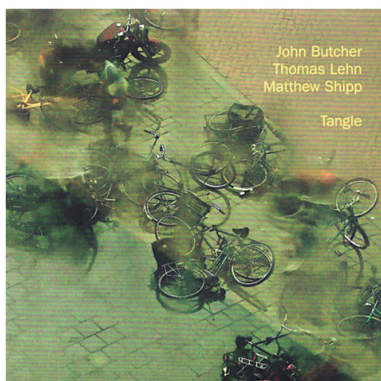
Matchless CD 2018

Unearthed

Matchless CD 2023

Early in his career Butcher had avoided working with drummers as part of an attempt to escape jazz (and what that brings to the saxophone, and the saxophone into). Eddie Prévest, drummer and pioneer of British improvised music, had made a similar jazz escape by reinventing himself and the drums in the context of AMM in 1965. 40 years on, the two began working together as a duo (and in AMM, with John Tilbury and others; see AMM Primers in *The Wire* 271 and 461). Their duo collaboration spans two decades and three superb recordings.

Though consistently searching in approach, each disc sounds very different. *Interworks* is a studio recording made not long after their first duo concert (a 2005 Oligarch Shit Transfusion event at the Foundry, East London); very much a laminar thing, solid surfaces, porous layers of tiered grainy, glacial abrasion and adjacence. Track three "Work Flow", for example, swings in and out of sonic and process phase – Butcher using his knee to open and close the tenor's bell, Prévest



John Butcher/Thomas Lehn/Matthew Shipp, *Tangle* (2014)



Sophie Agnel & John Butcher, *la pierre tachée* (2022)

bowing a gong and squeezing its cord.

Visionary Fantasies is a lush, rolling landscape of fecund play emerging out of a solo series. Most recent, *Unearthed* ensounds a peculiar, visceral return to an AMM-ancient disorientation and sort-of-jazz imaginary: midway through its almost 80 minutes of big, slow, earthy collaborative excavation, the second piece "Digging" begins with a series of Prévost-whacks – until Prévost joins in, revealing the whacks, instead, to be Butcher's reed thwacks.

John Butcher & Matthew Shipp *At Oto*

Fataka CD 2010

John Butcher/Thomas Lehn/Matthew Shipp *Tangle*

Fataka CD 2014

Matthew Shipp had heard Butcher's work on record and asked to play with him as part of a 2010 residency at London's Cafe Oto. The encounter was the 29 minute duet "Generative Grammar", again following a series of respective solos. It was a remarkable, tender negotiation and establishing of a common language. Around 24 minutes in, a very special shared ground is found – Shipp reaches inside the piano to pluck a two-tone step; after a short, resounding pause, Butcher follows him with a slow first step, matching the first tone perfectly. You can hear a musical smile on the recording as he takes the next step assured, onto that very same second tone: a remarkable, as if in slow motion moment.

Butcher has been collaborating with

German analogue synthesist Thomas Lehn since a London Red Rose duo in the mid-1990s, and in trios (with John Tilbury, Gino Robair and Andy Moore in the group Thermal). Their trio with Shipp is a deliciously teetering, weird soundtrack-to-an-android's wildest dream of electric sheep affair – breath and touch seamlessly oozing into synthetic glitches and polished gnarl (and back).

Last Dream Of The Morning *Crucial Anatomy*

Trost CD 2020

Sophie Agnel & John Butcher *la pierre tachée*

Ni-Vu-Ni-Connu DL/LP 2022

John Butcher +13 *Fluid Fixations*

Weight Of Wax CD 2024

In 2024, Butcher's discography continues to grow in evolving directions. These three more recent recordings document and exemplify just some of the strands of his current collaborative work: at once looking backwards and forwards at practices and structures in and of improvisation.

Last Dream Of The Morning is the trio of double bassist John Edwards and drummer Mark Sanders and Butcher. It's great to hear them negotiate more and less vigorous potentials in ways that feel infused and concerned with various traditions and rhetorical propositions. There's an obvious sonic link back into past traditions of British improvisation, and inevitably, jazz forms. But they also steer this instrumentation into more pulled back, filigree and static modes. Butcher's particularly grainy tenor here works in spacious and spare combination with bass and drums, visiting (at least to my ears) a hot/cold territory fascinatingly close to some of the more open, clairvoyant jazz of the mid-1960s, in particular Jimmy Giuffrè's 1965 tenor in trio with Richard Davis's bass and Joe Chambers's drums – but approached from a completely opposite direction.

In recent years the Ni-Vu-Ni-Connu label has been releasing an ongoing series of Butcher's small group music. The duet with French pianist Agnel makes deep, exquisite sense – a consummate, ever virtuosic, total music. Since first playing together in 2001, their collaboration has gained a new momentum in recent years. Recorded at Berlin's Ausland, just before the 2020 pandemic fermata, *la pierre tachée* is an elegant, slow, mutually wondering celebration of respective and compound sounds made up of both musicians' voices together: scrapes, smears, snaps, stop-start-silences, slow, stern escalations. Four decades after *Fonetiks*, it's also fascinating to hear Butcher again in the company of a pianist working (largely) inside the piano.

Fluid Fixations is the most recent document of Butcher's large group compositions, or what he has more recently called "psychological orchestration" for larger ensembles – intriguing examples of structured music that involve and include improvising and improvisors with their own character, history and voices. Butcher explains it as organising music for people that he knows. It's

part of an ongoing strand of his composed work including *somethingtobesaid* (Weight Of Wax, 2009) and *Tarab Cuts* (Out Of The Machine, 2014), that connects intriguingly back to his earliest compositions such as "Southern Samba A Go-Go" on Chris Burn Ensemble's *The Place 1991* (Emanem, 2001). "Despite their special and distinctive properties, improvisation and composition are not neatly separated activities," wrote Butcher in the 1992 sleeve notes to his first solo disc *13 Friendly Numbers* (of which more below). One of the most striking passages of *Fluid Fixations*, recorded in 2023 at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, is turntablist Dieb13 working with vinyl pressed from Butcher's more gossamer sounds. On "Ice Needles", for example, Isabelle Duthoit's voice, Dieb13's vinyl-Butcher, the real-life Butcher, and then Liz Albee's trumpet combine powerfully, as if to re-articulate, re-sound and re-affirm (fresh for 2023) this idea of a non-neat separation.

From (at least) saxophonist Gene Sedric's brief, velvety 1937 "Saxophone Doodle" solo, saxophone recital has been part of the musical world. For Butcher, "performing solo has been part of [his] musical life since [he] first rather nervously tried it at the Workers' Music Association in Notting Hill in the early 1980s". His solo music is as dialogic, and as collaborative as his group work. "If solo improvising is to make any sense, it has to respond to the particular acoustic of wherever you're playing. It's your partner, and it tests the flexibility, the usability, of your own language."

These quotes come from a 1998 article he wrote on playing solo in the important zine *Rubberneck*. Technical, at times astonishingly so, but never about technical display, contextual, but never about special effects or acoustic demonstration, his solo recordings – like his group music – have a generous, social responsibility to their play.

13 Friendly Numbers

ACTA CD 1992/Unsounds CD 2004

London And Cologne Solos

Random Acoustics CD 1996

Like his earliest recording in the company of Burn, Butcher's solo language is all in place on his first, 1992 studio solo *13 Friendly Numbers*. Track one, "Buccinator's Outing", for example, is a stunning statement in what the saxophone is designed to do, what it is able to do (and can be made to). Across the disc, tiny sounds are made large, and larger sounds packed down. Lines turn at 90 or 180 degrees with multiphonic webs and fanning splays. Simple melodies appear and are drenched, dripping in overtones. Long beating tones, rhythmic with tongue rolls, multiphonic burrs, trilling, pincer keys. And multitracking to stack up levels of sound into rich blocks and patterns. *London And Cologne Solos* develops this live and studio work further, "Shrinkdown", for example, layering pre-recorded and real-time soprano lines.

**Fixations (14) – Solo Saxophone
Improvisations 1997–2000**

Emanem CD 2000

Geometry Of Sentiment

Emanem CD 2006

Various

Horn, Bill: Reed Solos

Matchless CD 2005

Three records that document Butcher testing the usability and flexibility of his saxophone language in extraordinary, exciting and effective ways in varied, global locations – from London's Red Rose, to Chicago's Empty Bottle, and Utsunomiya City's Oya Stone Museum. The Emanem pair unfold like long, varied solo concerts. On *Fixations (14)*, the closing moments of "Last Bottle", recorded in Chicago, are a fine example of how Butcher's work synthesises 'normal' music with much weirder mangling stuff. And on "Nearly Art", recorded in San Francisco, a series of flinty chippings-away spark, until one takes light and bursts into a series of pitched but richly glowing flames, white-hot-to-embers. Recorded on a 2004 return to Japan's Oya Stone Museum (two years after the solos on *Cavern With Nightlife*, a project Butcher wrote about in Epiphanies for *The Wire* 475), "First Zizoku" opens *Geometry Of Sentiment*: it hews, meaty, thickly confident, hearty steaks of dripping, sanguine tenor sound. The 15 minute "Action Theory Blues" for soprano recorded at London's Red Rose slowly concertinas out and domino-cascades patterns with elegant, logical formality. The 18 minutes and 44 seconds of "291/5", Butcher's 2005 solo at London's 291 Gallery, on the Matchless disc is, simply, one of the most remarkable instances of solo saxophone there is.

Invisible Ear

Fringes CD 2003/Weight Of Wax CD 2010

Resonant Spaces

Confront CD 2008

This pair of noughties solo releases bifurcate towards different extremes. *Invisible Ear* amplifies, close-mics, etches, magnifies and multitracks the saxophone in ways that render and make salient rich and revelatory micro-worlds, hockets, exponentials and potentials of surprise. *Resonant Spaces*, recorded on the same Scottish tour as the 2006 duets with Suzuki above, definitively captures the intrigue and almost magical freshness of Butcher's encounters with acoustics, context and the elements. For example, "Sympathetic Magic (Stone)", recorded in Hamilton Mausoleum, is bizarre, almost super-natural. As he tells Biba Kopf in the sleevenotes to *Resonant Spaces*, "[the] feedback produced all these interesting high-pitched twitters, which I've never had before... the whole thing was responding to some ultra-high frequencies... I have never heard that kind of feedback from any instrument. It's completely to do with the place, my technique was the same as I've used in other places, but with a very different effect."

Bell Trove Spools

Northern Spy CD 2012

Nigemizu

Uchimizu CD 201

The Very Fabric

Ftarri CD 2023

Butcher's more recent solos releases consolidate his intense, attuned responses

to dialogue with space(s), public(s) and still evolving technique. *Bell Trove Spools* was recorded in Texas and at New York's Issue Project Room, *Nigemizu* in Japan, *The Very Fabric* in a water tower in Copenhagen. Together, in their similarity and difference, they explore everything from charged, beaming fizzes of sound, through revving clouds and aural fumes, to patterns danced and cast across space. The slow-wading emanations of the most recent *The Very Fabric* work with echo in astonishing ways. The gargantuan, lyric close of "Summer Incantation" brings back to (my) mind the rest of Hector Berlioz's description of the saxophone: "like the weakened echo of an echo, like the indistinct plaintiff moans of the breeze in the woods and, even better, like the mysterious vibrations of a bell, long after it has been struck."

"The transience of performance based creation often leads to devalued cultural estimates of it," Butcher wrote in a 2011 essay "Freedom and Sound – This Time it's Personal" (available on his website). "The improviser's art," he continues there, "occurs in real time but the musician's oeuvre often only falls into place over many years. Eventually we recognise that their contribution adds up to something as personal and formed as that of a conventional composer, albeit one who has chosen to go out night after night to recreate, hone, challenge and expand their own music." This feels a fitting way to reflect on Butcher's oeuvre so far, and look forward to further honing, challenge and expansion. ●

Resonant Spaces, Smoo Cave, 2006



Garrard Martin