

## TANGLE

John Butcher: *tenor and soprano saxophones*

Thomas Lehn: *electronics*

Mathew Shipp: *piano*

### Liner Notes - by Nate Wooley

“It seems very simple”, I said to my van-mates, “there’s a spectrum between accretion of raw ideas and refining a very specific language.” The thought coalesced as we careened through red lights in a rented van in downtown Detroit. During a short period of my life this was not necessarily an unusual situation for discussion—it became my preferred social energy for thinking, in fact. In a nutshell, I was saying that, as musicians, we swing between the addition of new ideas and the act of whittling down those ideas into some sort of elegant language. We vacillate between the two according to need: sometimes feeling dissatisfied with the building blocks we have been using to construct musical statements and wanting to add something—anything—as long as it’s different; then feeling dissatisfied with the raw state of our new ideas and wanting to perfect them technically and understand their place in our musical aesthetic.

I went on to say that some people work closer to one end of the spectrum or the other, even though they still go through the same process of acquiring and editing. “Give me an example”, said the driver/percussionist, taking us to the organ trio bar for off-night drinks. “Well, for example, John Butcher. He is very refined. He has a specific language and it is all about the elegance and rigor of how he uses it.” “Okay, and the other side?” he said as he pulled into a parking spot. “Matthew Shipp. Not that he’s raw, but you get the feeling that the newness of the thing is the most important, over the need for editing those ideas down to their essence.” The van-mates, cellist and percussionist, nod and we promise to take up the conversation again once we are out of the club and back in the van.

And, we do. And, I do with others. This idea comes up over and over again and the examples change to suit the listener. Sometimes I defend, other times I’m met with yawns of agreement. Over the years, I have had different relationships with this idea, as I have taught it to students, fleshed it out in arguments, or thought it through again to occupy my mind during subway delays. Recently, however, I’ve felt that if this is all there is, then I’ve reached a depressing kind of stasis—a place where improvised music is simply a Marcusian A/B seeking the ever elusive C—the truly new—outside the system. I have become trapped within my own thought cycle.

But now I am faced with this recording. It is the C. It is the something surprising that, if not rewriting my van ride theory, renews my energy for it.

John Butcher continues to refine. He continues to be elegant, rigorous, and profound in the way that he uses his instrument to converse using his individual syntax. His playing on this recording, however, is wild in turns. While still being rooted in a precise attention to timbre, it quite simply shreds with a certain abandon that feels slightly unhinged at points, and in a way that makes you so happy you are there to experience it.

Matthew Shipp is still a fount of ideas. He continues to be an unfettered conduit of gestures, shards of melodies, and full-blown sonic assault. But he is putting his lightning in pristine bottles and stacking them into designs we’ve never attributed to him before. There is an obvious sense of architecture in Shipp’s playing here that is shocking in its ability to structure the way we perceive the trio improvisations.

And, yes, it is a trio. Shipp and Butcher are the A and B in my theoretical dyad. They represent two opposed ways of thinking that, luckily for the listener, meld beautifully, especially when they play against character. This leaves a very important space open for Mr. Lehn, the C. It is a rare pleasure to hear someone so in tune with a group's dynamics that she or he can forgo the parts for the whole and create from a distant place: not transcendent or confrontational, just . . . indescribable. Lehn is this element, and his synth colorings of the saxophone and piano and the subtlety of even his most aggressive electronic statements create certain aural-historical connections to psychedelia and 60s electronic experimentation via Stockhausen and the Columbia-Princeton Center.

These connections are made without being eye-wink referential, however, and that is the power of these improvisations from all three players. Shipp's manic repetitions, Butcher's scalar blankets, and Lehn's warm reverb remind the listener of certain eras of experimental improvisation and composition, but it isn't the remembrance that contains the power, but the feeling that this is something fresh and new. It is a music that brings up new ideas and paradigms, thought through and shared as I did, after my first listening, by immediately calling my old van-mates.