

WIRE # 270 - Resonant Spaces by Biba Kopf



Akio Suzuki at the Standing Stones of Stenness, June, 2006

In June, Resonant Spaces dropped saxophonist John Butcher and Japanese sound artist Akio Suzuki into remote areas of Scotland and challenged them to sonically find their way home. Biba Kopf reports back from the Orkney and Durness legs of the tour. Photography: Garrard Martin

The Orkney Islands are a 90-minute ferry ride from the northernmost tip of Scotland. With the summer solstice approaching, the sun doesn't set up here until near 11pm and then only stays down for some four hours. The longest day might be just 48 hours away, but the sun is showing no sign of making an appearance the afternoon the Resonant Spaces party arrives at the Ring of Brodgar to sound out possibilities for the first performance of its six-date tour of Scottish sites. Various positioning himself at the centre of the circle and close up to some of the stones, the London saxophone improviser John Butcher subjects the ring to staccato soprano fire and more full-bodied tenor blows without making much headway against the dirty, driving wind and rain. Patrolling the monument's perimeter clacking together a pair of stones found on a Brittany beach and interspersing an occasional holler, Japanese sound artist Akio Suzuki elicits a more immediate response from their larger, more weathered Orkney relatives. Entranced, he picks up the pace to a canter as if trying to keep up with the echoes. Then, amid

the bleak splendour of this Neolithic monument, 27 stones of which are still standing some 4500 years after they were erected on a low plateau between two lochs, Suzuki's eye is caught by something in an insignificant-looking mound of rubble. Quick as a cat, his hand darts in to retrieve a tiny, seagull-cracked cockleshell. "A gift," he beams, as he proceeds to blow an impromptu version of the Japanese national anthem on it. "Like a small stone that grows much bigger, the Japanese people will be forever – or so they are conditioned to believe," remarks Suzuki later, somewhat gnominically summarising the anthem's lyric. "But it's not true. A small stone never grows. It gets smaller and smaller." The tour has not yet properly begun and already its spaces are producing some fascinating resonances.

Arranged by the Arika organisation's Barry Esson and Bryony McIntyre, the people behind Glasgow's Instal and Dundee's Kill Your Timid Notion festivals, Resonant Spaces is bussing Suzuki and Butcher through some of the remotest regions of Scotland for a series of site-specific performances in natural,

prehistoric, manmade and industrial locations, starting with two events in the Orkneys and then heading back south to the mainland for performances at Smoo Cave in Durness, Tugnet Ice House in Spey Bay, Wormit Reservoir and Hamilton Mausoleum. Also onboard are sound and lighting designer Ruari Cormack, the LMC's Ben Drew and audiovisual artist Emma Hart – both here to document the tour for Resonance 104.4 FM radio, as well as creating some site-specific works of their own. As much as possible the tour has scheduled school visits and other stops. "In each location we were trying to find somewhere where it didn't feel like we're parachuting in," explains Esson, "coming over like some fey southern fops patronising a community and thinking they should really love experimental music because we have bothered to take it here. Instead we looked for locations where the community wants it to happen, which have interesting acoustic properties, and then again different acoustic properties from each other, so the artists are challenged each time."

The first challenge, however, proves insurmountable. A storm forecast promising 45mph winds and 60mph gusts causes the cancellation of the opening Ring of Brodgar night. To cut their losses, Resonant Spaces organise an impromptu public recording session for Suzuki and Butcher at the nearby Standing Stones of Stenness for the morning before the storm is due to kick up. There might be only four surviving monuments in this smaller and older circle, erected 5000 years ago, but being much larger than the Brodgar stones, they offer the two artists more surface from which they can bounce sounds. Even so, they're still up against a vicious wind, which prompts Suzuki to consent to amplification directing the sound of his analapos – the extraordinary self-made acoustic echo instrument consisting of two steel cylinders connected by a long metal coil cable – towards one of the stones. Yodelling into one cylinder, finger-drumming it, or brushing his nails along the cable, he transmits signals to the other cylinder and then conducts a dialogue with its

trapped echoes, occasionally involving the delicate overtones that hover above the reverberating coil. But beyond the immediate vicinity of the instrument, the wind negates any serious sonic interactivity with the stones. The wind is less hindrance and more help when Akio switches to his 'Suzuki-style' glass harmonica – a set of fragile glass tubes arranged like a marimba and either played gamelan-like with mallets and metal tipped sticks, or rubbed with wet fingers to produce haunting singing tones, enhanced by the whistling effects caused by the odd gust.

The larger stones prove to be more yielding under Butcher's sax assault. "The echo effects were definitely there," he asserts. "I tried short, piercing, rapid attacks on the tenor, and that was interesting for sounding out the stones. But I couldn't see a way of working musically with that." However the high-pitched, multiple tones of his amplified soprano produce the morning's first breakthrough. "The surprising thing was that the previously reasonably silent sheep, who were gathered in the far corner of

the Stones area, recognised qualities in those sounds and they started up bleating," smiles Butcher. "Then it was possible to get a call and response thing going with them, and that inter-species communication took off and became a more dominant thing." When he steps up to yet louder and higher frequencies, the sheep drop out only to be replaced by cawing seabirds overhead. "None of this had anything to do with the acoustics of the space, perhaps, but when the Stones were originally made, presumably they were used for rituals that used basic percussion sounds and human voices, which were maybe connected with the imitation of the sounds of nature that were in the space," he speculates. "OK, the sheep wouldn't have been there, but it is possible that there was an awareness of communication with wildlife."

Butcher's performance takes an even more impressive turn when he notices the wind starting to play his amplified soprano without him blowing into it. He proceeds to reverse-sculpt a disembodied,

Suzuki and John Butcher inside Lyness oil tank



eerily beautiful solo by using his horn to catch the wind across its tone holes to produce fluting sounds, while working the air trapped in the tube by moving the instrument and pressing the tabs. An absolutely stunning response to atrocious conditions.

"The wind thing was interesting because when you are playing saxophone, the player hears a lot of wind sounds, whispers and things happening in the instrument, which never get to the audience," remarks Butcher, "and this was the bit I like, making that much more apparent. I like exposing these kind of hidden workings of the instrument. Today the wind showed you exactly what a saxophone is: a tube with resonances. Everything else is imposed cultural history on it."

For any number of reasons, Resonant Spaces is a fantastic undertaking. Partly funded by the Scottish Arts Council, with Esson and McIntyre making up the shortfall out of their own pockets, the Resonant Spaces events are all free, due to the absurdly prohibitive costs of obtaining a licence for paid events. If door-takings are not the point, then what is? That Esson, McIntyre and sound man Cormack are doing all the driving, hotel and ferry bookings and humping between them scotches any cynical suspicion about such a tour being primarily a curatorial caprice. Though it was on an entirely larger scale and budget, last year's *Storr: Unfolding Landscape*, the NVA organised sound art spectacle, running for eight weeks on a mountain in Skye, upon which Cormack worked, had a massively positive impact, both culturally and economically, on the local community. By percolating the life force of interesting or different ideas through remote locations ignored by more commercially driven events, the Resonant Spaces tour is helping to prevent their cultural arteries atrophying. Further, the exchanges on the Orkneys are decidedly two-way, with the local Scottish heritage rangers and education authorities working hard to make things happen. The first of two school visits on the Orkneys confirms the manifold significance of the Resonant Spaces undertaking. Though Stenness Community School is struggling to maintain its independent status despite the area's falling children's population, it has an enviously well-stocked music department. Performing on a mixture of self-made rainsticks, percussion items and regular instruments, the work the juniors put on for the tour party is staged like a John Zorn gamepiece, with the teacher conducting the children's improvisations with a series of signals and instructions. Afterwards they evince a critical interest in Suzuki and Butcher's respective demonstrations. "He sounds like a boat!" pipes up one boy about the saxophonist. "A lot of people say that about my playing," sighs Butcher.

To the smaller Orkney island of Hoy for Resonant Spaces' next stop, the oil storage tank in Lyness, facing the Scapa Flow harbour, where the British Navy scuttled the defeated German fleet in 1919. During the Second World War, Hoy housed 18 such oil tanks, some buried underground, to keep the allied forces fuelled. This last one standing has been converted into a museum, with military hardware, guns, lights and landing craft on display amid the giant heating elements that kept the oil heated and flowing. Though the tank finally offers the musicians shelter from the elements, they're not entirely free

of its impact, as the occasional heavy downpour rat-a-tatting like hail on the tank's metal roof and walls must be taken into account. Further, leaks have corroded parts of its metal base, causing the rust to crackle underfoot. "I was surprised to see it filled with the technology of war," remarks Suzuki, mildly. "But it also had less warlike objects – like a sailing boat called *Daisy*, which I felt more comfortable with, so I made the area next to it my performance space."

After having to struggle so hard against the wind and rain to achieve any notable acoustic response from the Neolithic stones outdoors, the circular metal walls of the tank reflect back an embarrassment of rich resonances. The length of its sound decay is timed at 17 seconds, while any tone made in the middle of the space bounces back from the ceiling almost immediately, but with interest. From some points, the sounds Butcher and Suzuki generate produce an acoustic mirroring effect, and elsewhere the tank's curved surface acts like the whispering gallery at London's St Paul's Cathedral.

Suzuki, who customarily refers to his analapos as his baby, worries how a custom-made echo-instrument will cope with the tank's cavernous echoes.

"Whatever I do with the analapos, its voice will be lost like a raven in the black night," he despairs.

Butcher, who opens the concert before an audience of 70 (out of an island population of 400 inhabitants), isn't so nervous about exploiting the tank's sonic wealth, yet he's far too fastidious an improviser to lazily kick back and leave the space to do the work. "The first impression is that obviously almost anything you do in there immediately has some interest because of this wash of sound that surrounds it. But after a few minutes you realise, OK, this is interesting but it is not substantial enough to make music, where you have to make choices. However, when the audience come in, they will not have heard a performance in that space before, so I thought I'd work with some note based material just to give the audience something they are a little more familiar with, which awakens their ears to the potential of the room."

But Butcher's performance truly takes off during a lengthy tenor improvisation on the acoustic feedback created in his instrument by moving its bell towards a mic. Amplified pad sounds help control its circulation, while all the time Butcher avoids blowing through the mouthpiece. Like his wind-driven improvisation at the Stones of Stenness, the method, which he says he has been working on since the early 1980s, permits him to explore a wholly other kind of physicality to his chosen instrument's full-on, free-blowing post-Coltrane legacy, creating weirdly ectoplasmic clusters of fluttering beats and tones. Things only start to fall apart when he attempts to take advantage of the tank's long decay times with a seamless instrument switch to amplified soprano. "But when I swopped over I just couldn't get it to work," laughs Butcher. "That was my own idiocy because I actually had the pedal on off!"

After an awkward pause, he compensates with a rousing, circular breathing acoustic soprano piece that more obviously exploits the tank's acoustics. "I must say," he confesses, "I thought, fuck this!, and went for a big gesture. I was working with glissandi. With the echo in the tank you have always got a different pitch coming back at you than the one you send out, because you have moved to somewhere else in the glissando by the time it comes back."

The thrilling results are too much for a few older listeners with no prior knowledge of Improv. Drawing non-partisan audiences to events where the unusual space is as much part of the attraction as the musicians can produce the odd casualty.

"I thought I would start with something simple and then move away from it as the music sort of took over," says Butcher. "The best way to have respect for other people is to do things as well as you can according to your own intentions and let them take or leave it. I don't want to cause offence, but in a sense these are my intentions and if they offend you or mean nothing to you, that is part of our interaction and our discourse."

In the event, casualties are few, and Esson manages to convince the most disgruntled of them to return for Suzuki's set. In an ideal world, Suzuki says, he would travel with nothing and make use of implements to hand. Since his first public sound performance – emptying a garbage pail down the steps of Nagoya station in 1963 – he has racked up a history of dada and Fluxus-like 'actions' and site-specific performances that have left few traces beyond the odd recording, photo or curious relic suggesting something once happened here, if it's no longer altogether clear what. Yet closer scrutiny of the surviving documents reveals the depth of his interest in the act of listening and how sound behaves in different acoustic spaces. Indeed, his major invention, the analapos, is the result of ten years researching echoes in the mountains near his home in Tango, a remote coastal area of Western Japan. Despite his insistence that its sound properties don't always travel well, his desire not to disappoint those who invite him abroad means he often ends up packing it. Regardless of Suzuki's own version of events, his analapos performance in the tank sounds to these ears as more than merely going through the motions. Butcher agrees. "Akio has a wonderful ear and sensibility to music," he says. "One of the things that makes him special is, when a lot of people work with self-invented instruments, those instruments only ever really do one thing and they go out and demonstrate them. But Akio really responds to his situations and they are instruments that he can really play, which is quite rare in the world of self-invented instruments."

However, once Suzuki has satisfied the audience's desires with his enchanting performances on analapos and glass harmonica, he is at his most exploratory of the tank's acoustic character during the evening's closing duo piece with Butcher, where he performs on a whisky bottle in a sock, a little nip taken to create the air bubble resonator, which when struck and shifted, produces a fabulously warped marimba-like percussion sound. He drums on the bottle simultaneously or alternately with a sheet of plate glass, which he plays with stiff sponges to produce sounds that are uncannily similar to Butcher's soprano.

Back to the Scottish mainland to the bleak, isolated northern coastal town of Durness for a performance in Smoo Cave. The cave notwithstanding, the town's other claim to fame is a John Lennon memorial garden, commemorating the former Beatle's childhood holidays here. Otherwise the main diversion appears to be provided by British and allied air and sea forces blasting away at the coastal test



Butcher in Smoo Cave, Durness

ranges at the aptly named Cape Wrath nearby. Even though not much seems to happen round here, the arrival of the Resonant Spaces tour isn't greeted anywhere near so warmly as in the Orkneys. Much of the promised help from the local fire service and coast guard fails to materialise, but fortunately Esson persuades four American marines, in Durness "on business", they cryptically tell Ben Drew, to help carry the sound equipment down a steep path into the cave, which is dominated by a roaring waterfall in its second chamber. Suzuki, who spends much of his time rehearsing in a small cave near his home in Tango, is delighted by the location. The sound of the ceramic stone flute – which he made to replace the natural stone flute passed down through generations of his family until it was stolen in Europe last year – emanating from the waterfall chamber opens the concert. It appears to be the ideal Suzuki event, where the sounds he produces become one with the surroundings. The lost echoes of his analapos finally find their way home here.

Alternating between acoustic and amplified instruments, Butcher's performances at once advance on the techniques evolved at the two earlier locations, and adapt to Smoo's cavernous acoustics.

"The acoustic wasn't like the oil tank, but the music tonight was fully a product of the space," says Butcher. "I wouldn't have played the way I did if I hadn't been in this space."

It's the last Resonant Spaces date I attend, yet even though the tour has just reached its midway stage, any doubts about it being a curatorial contrivance have been dispelled by both the musical results and the reception given to them in such far-flung places.

Butcher is an immensely thoughtful musician and improviser with a pathological need to keep pushing at the boundaries of his playing, if only to prevent crowd-pleasing habits from forming. Yet he is acutely aware that any technical breakthrough he might make can very easily come across as a saleable commodity in the novelty-hungry zone of contemporary Improv. He says that the discoveries made during a tour like this help him continue. "Obviously when you begin on instruments you come up against brick walls and you try to push beyond them," he says, "because you don't know how to play the instrument, which is quite exciting. And then you get to the stage where in many ways you can play it, and then you think, what next? And it is the 'what

next?' bit that interests me, because in the end it always sounds like a saxophone, even when you have got this feedback phenomenon occurring, because it's got all the natural resonances from the saxophone. In recent times, there was very little more that I thought I could deal with, so the thing then is to attempt to go deeper into what you already know about.

"There have only really been two concerts so far," Butcher concludes, "but I have made discoveries each night. For me this has been very stimulating, and I'll come back and start working on them and try and put them into other situations. Some of the very simple things, like working in a very resonant space and working with feedback, the orientation of the instrument could have quite an effect on the tones coming out, much like when a guitarist starts waving a guitar in front of an amplifier. I found I could control the feedback by the orientation and position of the instrument; the different fingering combinations; and the different shapes inside my mouth, bags under my mouth, changing the resonances of the tube. So all these phenomena add up to produce some quite surprising sonic experiences. This is what I am going to be experimenting with next, I think." □