



John Butcher
Resonant Spaces

Interview with Frantz Loriot
April/May 2021

*This record was originally released on the british label Confront in 2008.
It was reissued in vinyl version on Blume, in 2017.*

Listen on bandcamp:

<https://johnbutcher1.bandcamp.com/album/resonant-spaces>

LP on Blume:

<https://www.editionsblume.com/john-butcher-resonant-spaces.html>

Frantz Loriot: Could you tell us a bit about how this project took place, originally? Was there the idea of making a recording from the beginning?

John Butcher: Barry Esson and Bryony McIntyre run the remarkable Scottish, political arts organisation Arika. They invited me and Akio Suzuki to visit six sites in the Orkneys and Scotland, to play solo and together. I was asked because they'd heard a record where I played inside the hollow Oya Stone Mountain in Utsunomiya, Japan in 2002. They researched all the locations and did a lot of preparatory work, like installing a metal ladder to get down into the Wormit reservoir and booking a St. John's ambulance for that day (a council regulations). On the tour we visited each place the day before the public event, to set up and learn about the acoustics.

Ruari Cormack drove the tour bus, set up all the microphones, lights and electricity generator (when needed) and did the recording. There were no specific plans to release anything. Mics were set up at different positions around each space. Back home, when I heard the recording, I thought of it mostly as documentation because it couldn't capture the sonic experience of listening in the space. But I played it to a friend who was really enthusiastic about it, so I decided to release a CD.

FL: what is the difference between collaborating/dealing with spaces and other fellow musicians? What was challenging about it?

JB: In a group I can shape aspects of the others' playing through what I'm playing, and vice-versa, but working solo within a space is a one-way relationship. The space's sound influences my choices, but I'm limited in what I can change about it. Moving to different parts and pointing in different directions alters the acoustic response, but it's still me making all the decisions.

Playing solo is the situation that shows most clearly that improvisation is actually another way of composing. But in unusual environments you have to be comfortable with making music in partnership with the space and not just importing a piece of music into the space. This has some parallels with group improvising, which falls flat if individual players stick to too rigid an agenda.

The site-specific challenge is to make a piece that digs into something deeper than just being a demonstration of the acoustics you find yourself in.

FL: how is it different to record in those conditions than in a studio? According to you, what does it bring or take off?

JB: Playing solo in studios is my least favourite musical activity. It's hard to find a sense of purpose and necessity. Improvising in unusual acoustics is wonderful for that feeling of making a unique creation, but recording it is problematic. I haven't had the chance to really experiment with this, and would love to spend some time in a very resonant space with an expert engineer. One problem is that I'm responding to what's arriving at my own ears, and microphones out in the space capture a diffuse picture with so many reflections. The sonics are very different in different positions. I've had people in the audience describe things I didn't hear myself and certainly I've heard things that no-one else has.



FL: how does having microphones recording in front of you affect your playing and/or your music? Is it something you consider or not at all?

JB: Microphones can inhibit risk taking, which is essential in improvised work if you want to find those places you don't already know about. But it's so common for someone to be recording the concert these days that I've got used to it and can mostly not worry about the mics.

That said, there's some things I do pay attention to - especially in live recording. (I'm thinking of more regular situations here, rather than something like Resonant Spaces). I like the instruments in a group to have a similar degree of presence, so too much room sound on the sax mic doesn't sit well with close miked instruments and electronics. But, especially the way I play it, the sound from the sax emerges throughout its body and you need some microphone distance to capture it. Then, if it's a loud setting (like with Keiji Haino playing full-on guitar) I have to get really on top of the mic because of the spill. So there's always a compromise with choosing mic positions.

In general I tend to vary the sax/mic distance depending on what I'm playing, both with PAs and with recording, and so don't like clip-ons.

But I must say there's something pleasing about playing with no recording going on - not just the extra freedom one might feel but the idea of it never being heard again. It really exists just for that one moment.



FL: you are used to playing with microphones as an extension of your sound practice. You imply them in your sound production to get sounds that would maybe be not possible to produce with an acoustic saxophone and thus, you use amplification. How was it to bring these materials and include them in the natural environments and confront them to natural elements (I'm thinking of the wind piece)? How different is it from using them in a closed regular room, for you?

JB: 20 years ago I made a CD (in a small, home room) using some of these ideas and called it "Invisible Ear". The title implied that the microphone was revealing both hidden sounds in the instrument - air, condensation etc. which were acoustic but amplified by the recording mic - and actual amplification generated sounds like feedback. It's completely different working with these elements in a studio to live situations - but what I learned in the more controlled environment helps the latter. The wind piece on Resonant Spaces would never have happened if I hadn't had the memory of this studio work.

Moving into natural environments means real-time experimenting becomes a big part of the music. "Wind Piece" came about from trying to amplify the sax over the very noisy winds at the Standing Stones of Stenness on Orkney. I noticed these gentle Aeolian tones as the wind blew over the instrument's tone holes. In "Close by, a Waterfall" at Smoo Cave the sound was actually quite dead and the natural sax sounded rather dismal.

So I was led to working with amplification and choose quite harsh material rather than coaxing out the hidden sounds of "Invisible Ear".

Saxophone controlled feedback is the most space dependent material to work with. Literally in terms of the enclosure, but also the positions and orientations in space of the mic, sax and amp. Generally the more live the space the better it works, but it's very unpredictable. I made a piece at HCMF in 2019 for sax-led feedback and multi-speaker diffusion. It worked beautifully in rehearsal, but at the concert (in a conventional hall) 3/4 of the possibilities disappeared. It was November and everyone in the packed hall was wearing thick winter coats that sucked up the sound.

FL: You said, you've visited the different places beforehand to set up and see the place. Did you have clear ideas of what you would be doing before playing in these specific places? Did you have specific intentions in mind before playing?

JB: No, it was the opposite. I wanted each place to inspire its own musical response from me. I wanted the ideas to come from, and be tied to, the specific location, its atmosphere and acoustic.

FL: What were your relations with the sound engineer Ruari Cormack? How did you collaborate on the process of this recording and what was his place?

JB: Technically the recording was quite basic, with Ruari placing mono mics around the space and in front of me. There was so much for him to do, long drives and setting everything up, that there was little time to plan or experiment with the recording method. At Smoo Cave, for instance, the sound, light and electricity generating equipment all needed to be carried down a long, narrow cliff-side track to the sea cave. In the end we had to ask soldiers from a local army base for help.

When I mixed the recording I chose a small selection of the mics to try to capture, as well as I remembered it, the sound of each space. Having the mics spread out was useful for any pieces where I moved around, like in Smoo Cave.



FL: The tracks “Wind piece” & “Frost piece” are dryer in their acoustics. We do not have these long reverbs and echoes. They are also both shorter (and both have the word piece in the title). Did the quality of resonance and propagation have a direct impact on the duration of these specific pieces?

I personally once had a pretty hard experience regarding dry acoustic. I was playing in duo with saxophonist Lionel Garcin with whom we were used to playing in a very reverberant

place (Chapel next to Barre Phillips' place). We were playing and practicing for a few days, recorded and somehow, we probably got used to playing in that kind of acoustic, and how the duo would sound. Later, after a long pause, we met and ended up playing in a pretty dry room in Zurich. We struggled, playing a lot, trying to feel up space and gaps, having the feeling any of our gestures could not breathe and the sound not propagating. In a way, it was a very good experience, and I now deal differently with these acoustics, and for sure the music is different and affected. How is it for you, more generally, to deal with dry acoustics?

JB: The Standing Stones of Stenness recording was mostly unsuccessful due to the incredible wind there. The recording comes from a trial run in the afternoon. The evening concert was cancelled because of a big storm. “Wind Piece” is short because it was the only part that worked, when I hit upon this “Aeolian” idea. It was a test for the evening event, which never happened.

The concert in Tugnet was in a rather claustrophobic, dry space. The audience were very close and spread across a number of small rooms, which I moved between. This recording also had problems, trying to mic multiple rooms. My movement was exaggerated by the sometimes close, sometimes distant mics and there was quite a lot of digital distortion.

But, “Frost Piece” (part of a longer improvisation) sounded good, so I used it. I imagine I was working with those chilly amplified breath sounds because I knew the buildings were built to store ice.

Improvisation is a compositional method that fails if you bring too fixed an agenda. This applies as much to how you respond to the acoustic you’re in as it does to your relationship with fellow players.

It was when I was playing, in the mid 80s, quite a lot of concerts with John Russell and Phil Durrant (acoustic guitar and violin) that I really became conscious of performing in different acoustics. The venues were rooms above pubs, galleries, small theatres, the occasional concert hall. Nothing unusual, but different enough to notice that something that worked well the night before wasn’t likely to succeed the next night because the instrumental sounds were speaking and mixing quite differently.

On top of this, saxophone and strings usually like different room acoustics. And nobody likes that feeling of the sound just falling at your feet.

But dryness in a small room can create a particular intimacy for the audience. It doesn’t feel so good to play in, but the clarity and instrumental separateness can be exciting, as it leaves no where to hide. But it’s a problem if you want to make music that depends on the intermeshing of the instruments’ frequencies.

FL: How did you deal with external sounds - I’m thinking specifically of “Close by, a Waterfall” where we hear a waterfall but also people moving and talking around and also the “Wind piece” where the external element (the wind) is totally included in the process and as sonic material? It seems to me the inclusion of externality is very different between these two specific pieces.

More generally, what is your relation to externality in your practice?

How do you usually include and interact with externality in your regular practice? What makes you decide to include or to decline them in your playing and process?



JB: As you mention, wind is the sonic driver in “Wind Piece”. It came about from struggling to make something happen in that difficult situation at the Standing Stones. The wind and I were both playing the instrument.

The interaction in Smoo Cave was very different. The external world was a parallel but influential presence. I like the children’s voices in “Close by, a Waterfall”. When you allow elements like that in, it changes the rhythm of your playing since you allow space for it. With a more constant sound, like the actual waterfall, your playing can allow a different kind of space because of the “continuo”.

A few years back I joined an ornithologist in France who was leading a guided walk through the countryside to discover different birds and their songs. I was invited to play along with them at each stop. It was possible to get some kind of dialog going, in that the birds would increase or decrease their singing, mostly depending on the frequencies I was using (on soprano). Playing in non-concert spaces forces an engagement with externality and that includes the sounds in the environment. It's a positive thing, unlike in more conventional situations where external sounds can be a real pain - especially human ones, but also fridges, air conditioning, heating etc. I played solo at the Knitting Factory in Los Angeles once and wanted to play acoustically. But the air-con was ridiculously loud. They said they couldn't turn it off and expected everyone to use the PA - and this was a purpose built music venue!



FL: Bassist Sean Ali talks about “recordedness” in the sense he was attempting to make a record that exploited its "recordedness" in the same way that a concert exploits its "liveness." My understanding is that he uses the potentiality of the act of recording as something to produce something which is not reachable/doable in live conditions.

When I listened to Resonant Spaces and reflected on it, what I found special about this recording is that it definitely has liveness – I feel a live situation, but it isn't just a “regular” live recording of improvised music. The context makes it very special. I think, even without having been to these specific performances, the record itself transcribes something more than just a live recording.

The content of this recording says/gives more than just the act of solo improvisation. The music is special, let's say, compared to “regular” improvised music recording productions. It has a special design.

What would be the content of discourse underneath this recording, if there would be any?

JB: Well, using the studio as an instrument traces back at least to the 1940s with Pierre Schaeffer, but anytime you bring a microphone in close to an instrument and/or mix the balance you're doing something like this. With Resonant Spaces I had to choose from maybe 10 microphones which to include in the mix. I made “design” decisions but with the aim of creating something close to the feel of the event. The actual music being played was, perhaps, special, as you say, because it was inseparable from the unusual environments it was made in. Both in conception and realisation.

FL: In the liner notes on the LP, you said, I quote: “I suppose I could have played quite minimally and let the performance be more about the sounds of the environment, (...) I really wanted to make something happen. If I have a philosophy about this kind of situation, it’s that it needs some friction. I mean, between forcing your usual musical concerns onto the place, and allowing the setting to direct the actual result. I don’t want to just demonstrate each space’s sound. It should be an encounter between a musician and a place that gives a fighting chance to drawing something new from them both”. Could you develop the term of “friction” in your practice? What does this term exactly evoke to you? Is it something you would also translate in societal and social relations/activities?

JB: Too much agreement between the players can drain an improvisation of life. It turns into a fake composition - the product of one brain. There’s a similar problem in solo improvising, where you’re just agreeing with yourself all the time. An unusual space provides something to work both with and against.

Of course, the important question is “what’s too much?” and friction is probably too strong, or loaded, a term. I’m certainly not suggesting deliberate antagonism, just an awareness of the need to sometimes question aesthetic consensus in a group and likewise in your own playing. It’s often enough to manifest the questions in the actual playing. Not being in comfortable agreement all the time creates the chance of discovering something new - and I guess this has some social parallels.



FL: This question could relate to what you have said above in the first questions regarding the differences dealing between spaces and fellow musicians. Roland Barthes, in “[the death of the author](#)” states that we do not know who is really behind a text. Is it the author? is it the character or the hero? a universal wisdom? Etc.

Barthes also states here, that “a text is a space of many dimensions in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing and no one is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.” According to him, “the reader is the one who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.”

Would there be something similar with improvised music?

JB: Somewhere else I’ve written that when you’re improvising with other musicians, even as a duo, the stage actually becomes a very crowded place. When I played with John Stevens in the SME we’d meet Anton Webern, Kenny Clarke and myriad others.

Regarding Barthes - most texts get onto the page via one brain (with its particular tangled history of cultural learning). But group improvisation has a complexity of interaction for which there is intrinsically no author. No one is "behind it".

Solo work might have more similarities to such author/text ideas, but I'm inclined to think listeners mostly engage according to their own expectations and outlooks, rather than "holding together ... the traces" of the sonic elements presented by the performer.

FL: According to you, why do we record improvised music? What would be some of the purposes?

I am asking this in the sense that improvised music or music more generally is, I would say, something ephemeral in a way. But more specifically with improvised music, it is a music of the now, so to say. It happens and is built on a specific instant and situation, never repeating itself. Any kind of recording cannot reproduce its "liveness". Someone like conductor Sergiu Celibidache refused to record stating that a recording would not be able to catch and reproduce all the harmonics a symphony would deploy nor the "transcendental experience" and "free" moment of the performance's time. He also stated that sound can only be lived or experienced within its original space.

Is the idea to leave a trace, an archive or would it be an act of sharing a specific music in a different way? or something else?

JB: It's the "now" that brings improvisation into existence, but fueled by the player's memories and plans built around years of thought and experience. I mean that the past is always there in the present, and, with recording, so is the future.

When it comes to the experience of the actual event - whose experience?

I've been terribly disappointed listening to symphonies from the cheap, distant seats of the Albert Hall in a concert that may well have been "transcendental" for the conductor. Now I prefer the choir seats behind the orchestra, where the balance can be quite wrong, but there's a physical feeling to the sound. A recording will always be a different experience to a live event, but it can actually be better.

In general, if an improvisation is any good, some of that will communicate on a record and, as a bonus, also be worth returning to. Our personal worlds now are very unlocalised. A recording of a sweaty club performance at 11pm can deliver something significant in a cool living room at 11am, 40 years and 4000 miles apart.

For something like Resonant Spaces, a sizeable chunk of the actuality clearly isn't captured. But, you know how some people prefer radio drama to film or theatre, because they have to use their imagination more? I think an engaged listener does that with recordings, and creates a fresh experience for themselves. One's listening is never "true" anyway. With a record it changes the 2nd, 3rd, xth time through. Even live, one person's take on what's happening won't be the same as anyone else's in the room - partly literally, but certainly cognitively.

On a different tack, using a microphone as part of the improvisational process (such as on "Invisible Ear") blurs the idea of an improvisation and its recording being separate things.

FL: Is the format/media the music will be released on an important question to you? Would it influence your way of making music?

JB: Sonically I prefer CDs. If I know it's for an LP the duration will be on my mind a little. Cassettes are just a weird choice, and we should do something to stop these endless YouTube clips people film and post.

FL: How do you perceive this record today?

What kind of comments or critics would you do about it, if there would be any?

Would there be anything specific you would like to add regarding this recording or your practice before we conclude?

JB: I'm pleased with how the music seems wedded to the spaces. The pieces sound non-transferable. They show the value of spontaneity if you can just keep yourself open to the unique qualities of each situation.



Resonant Spaces photos by Garrard Martin, Keiko Yoshida and Bryony McIntyre
Oya Stone Mountain photo by Osamu Enomoto
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