

MaerzMusik 2010 in Berlin

The John Butcher Group; Quartetto Prometeo; Klangforum Vienna/ Beat Furrer, et al

By Liam Cagney

(...)

Commissioned in 2008 by the Huddersfield Festival, *somethingtobesaid* brings together an ensemble of saxophone (Butcher), piano (**Chris Burn**), harp (**Clare Cooper**), double bass (**John Edwards**), percussion (**Gino Robair**), turntables (**dieb 12**) and vintage analogue synthesizer (**Thomas Lehn**), for a mind-bending musical vector along a welter of weird sounds and timbral spaces. One would say it's more than the sum of its parts were it not for the fact that that's exactly what it isn't – in collecting the influences of the musicians exactly in their own particular qualities, the piece tears this way and that for an hour or so through a number of distinct sections, where everything may be necessary but nothing is subsumed.

There was nothing particularly auspicious about the work's opening, a simple oscillating drone on the synth, the drone being the seed whose flower can open into any number of genres. Soon the saxophone and double bass entered in gangly unison, signalling the start of the first section. At times the music's character, though coming from the free improvisation background of its composer (Butcher) and players, was suggestive of Xenakis: motions and trajectories of sound where the exact identity of each pitched or unpitched sound is less important than the overall dynamic gesture. And in the work's overall form of distinct chained sections, there was too a suggestion of Ligeti's *Atmosphères*. But this is to ignore the originality of *somethingtobesaid* and the group, which made for a truly exciting concert. What sounded loudest of all in my ears after it had finished was the collective ethos here brought out to shine, contrasting with the egotism commonly found in our idea of the composer.

(...)

By Stuart Broomer

Somethingtobesaid is an hour-long composition for octet commissioned by the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival where this performance was recorded in November, 2008. For Butcher it's an opportunity to merge his usual improvisational practice with composed elements in such a way that composition might lead improvisation into new areas without inhibiting it. Notated pitches and playing intentions were developed from voices on a ten-year-old answering machine tape, a source that surfaces occasionally, and other pre-recorded elements include the sound of multi-tracked wine glasses as well as some sounds from the ensemble's musicians. *Somethingtobesaid* is intimately tied to processes of memory, including repetition, transformation and expectation. It's performed/created by an ensemble of both players long associated with Butcher (pianist Chris Burn, bassist John Edwards, percussionist Gino Robair and synthesist Thomas Lehn) and more recent associates (dieb13 on turntables, Adam Linson on bass and electronics and Clare Cooper on harp and guzheng). There's a mingling of acoustic, electronic and pre-recorded elements that blurs both time and source. These interests in time and the relationship with language parallel Butcher's 1997 composition "No Stops, Only Commas" for the Chris Burn Ensemble, from *Navigations* (Acta 12), but *Somethingtobesaid* represents a significant step in both scale and methodology.

The piece unfolds like a topographical map of an area both new and oddly familiar. Its very first sound is a drone that defies identification, yet the occasionally surfacing, slightly muffled, voices will resonate with shared experiences of telephone messages and dreams. Different combinations of improvisers create shifting textures and layers of association and density, from the vague and skein-like airiness of "Part One" with Burn, Cooper, Lehn and Linson, to the sudden hurly-burly and grit of Butcher's multiphonic tenor and Edwards' bass as they emerge from "Part 2," reminding one why this was recorded and broadcast by the BBC's *Jazz on 3* (this suggestion of jazz reappears on "Part 8," with Butcher's phrasing and tone seemingly more rooted in customary modern jazz practice than one might expect, this in itself apparently an element of memory). These emerging sub-groups highlight the sense of continuous evolution, while underlying compositional elements seem to create a sense of foreboding, made explicit in the cryptic and fragmented words. There's even a sense of time coming apart, as in the conclusion of "Part 5" where there's a sudden collocation of voices, low register-bass and the chirping upper-register of Butcher's soprano saxophone. That disintegrative process is still more explicit in "Part

6,” where there’s a “duet” between Burn’s live piano and a recording evidently manipulated by dieb13, sound seemingly becoming substance in a distorting mirror.

Clearly the improvisation takes on different dimensions and assumes new directions based on the composed elements, and the ultimate shape of the piece has coherence and depth compounded of the two methodologies and their abilities to reshape one another. *Somethingtobesaid* is important and powerful work, mixing mystery and certainty in subtle and sometimes disturbing ways.

www.cyclicdefrost.com
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John Butcher Group – somethingtobesaid LP (Weight of Wax)

By Oliver Laing

This was the question that British Saxophonist John Butcher posed in the programme accompanying his octet’s specially commissioned performance at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in November 2008. On the strength of the live album documenting this performance, the answer is resounding in its affirmation.

Butcher’s long association with British Improv; from the London Musician’s Collective and the deceased head of all things mawkish and striving, Derek Bailey, to his international collaborations with the likes of Toshimaru Nakamura and Austrian group Polwechsel certainly highlight Butcher’s polymath tendencies. For this outing, Sydney’s Clare Cooper on harp and guzheng and Californian percussionist Gino Robair are part of an international ensemble that certainly know their chops.

This hour-long performance veers between the disquieting spectres of a thousand insects descending upon the set of *Blade Runner*, with the odd nod towards the shadow of Albert Ayler; hard-bop sax runs emerging from seemingly electronic scree. I say ‘seemingly’ as with many of Butcher’s enterprises it is virtually impossible to tease out the acoustic from the electronic. Spectral voices of old answering machines invoke the atmosphere of a Cape Canaveral countdown, before the symbiotic interplay of Cooper’s Guzheng and John Edward’s athletic double bass slur into increasingly psychopathic vocal treatments reminiscent of a regular collaborator of Butcher, Phil Minton.

The concept of ‘responsibilities’, especially in the context of a contemporary musical performance may strike the listener as po-faced Marxism, but the John Butcher Group delivers handsomely on their leader’s question. There is definitely ‘somethingtobesaid’ here.

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By Julian Cowley

Somethingtobesaid was created by saxophonist John Butcher for the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in 2008, an hour-long composition realised by musicians who mostly follow his instructions and at times are invited to improvise. Shortly before he joined the multinational octet for this performance, Californian percussionist Gino Robair told me how he felt strong affinity with Butcher’s taste for generating electronic timbres and textures with purely acoustic means. Much of the musical action here takes place around that interface.

The group features Thomas Lehn’s analogue synth wizardry, Robair’s ‘energised sufaces’ and turntable input from dieb13, along with Butcher’s saxophones, Chris Burn’s piano and the sinewy springy double bass combination of John Edwards and Adam Linson. Some of the composer’s directions took their bearings from sound now audible in the performance - ghostly vocal snippets retrieved from a disused answering machine; the frictional hum of multitracked wine glasses. Occasionally chains of acoustic events tumble together, swirl and disperse in ways that suggest the dynamics of studio-produced electronic music - there’s a very good example about five minutes in from the start. But Butcher is guiding the instrumental cross-currents too, regulating combinations within the group, keeping the music shapely, cohesive and uncluttered without sacrificing vitality.

Wired and unplugged sound sources find common ground, but it’s not a matter of mimicry or camouflage. Rather it’s a means of focussing and concentrating the flow of energy from technique, and the outcome is singular and often strangely beautiful music. Substantial too - like the loaf of bread in Philip Butcher’s splendid painting on the cover. Something said; something really worth saying.