



Otomo Yoshihide / Axel Dörner / Sachiko M / Martin Brandlmayr -  
*Allurements of the Ellipsoid* (Neos Jazz 2010)

This review is something of an attempt to put together some thoughts I've been having recently about Otomo Yoshihide's place in the Japanese improv canon and his recent recording activity with respect to EAI and jazz. The sidelining of the other musicians appearing on *Allurements of the Ellipsoid* occurs only in this respect.

---

If we're to think of a line running from the genesis of Japanese free improvisation to the modern improvisation of Otomo Yoshihide, perhaps the cleanest lineage is provided by Julian Cope's *Japrocksampler*. In the book, the release of Wolfgang Dauner's *Free Action* LP in the summer of 1967 forms a total turning point - the record may be best described as a melting pot of Stockhausen, Turkish pop and the freer music of John Coltrane. Dauner's tour of Japan is written to have led to an odd miscegenation of German jazz to the likes of Masahiko Satoh, Akira Ishikawa and Takehisa Suzuki. Most significantly (to paraphrase Cope), *Free Action* precipitated bossa nova/modal jazz guitarist Masayuki Takayanagi's decision to 'go free' in 1969. To contrast Takayanagi's early work to his explosive collaborations with Kaoru Abe is to observe one of the greatest sea changes in any 20th century musician.

From this point, it's easy to trace the line from Takayanagi to Otomo Yoshihide. Otomo has written of his following of the Abe/Takayanagi collaborations; the guitarist "honing his improvisational language upon a groundwork of noise, born from his cool observations of society" and the *Kaitaiteki Kohkan* concert as "much too noisy and extreme to be

called free improvisation". With the deaths of Abe and jazz figurehead Aida Aquilax in the late seventies, Otomo moved to Tokyo and sought to follow Takayanagi. Certainly, Otomo's work for solo guitar is indebted musically to Takayanagi, but, in some respects, so is the sheer leap into the abyss made by both musicians; the latter into free jazz and the former into electroacoustic improvisation. And nowhere else is Otomo's credence to the leap stronger than in the analogy of 'leaving\_the\_jazz\_cafe'.

A few months ago, we were given nice platform for an analysis of Otomo's current musicianship with the close release of *Allurements of the Ellipsoid* and the New Jazz Trio +'s *Lonely Woman*. The former - the subject of this review - is a recording of a fresh quartet at the Donaueschingen Festival of 2005. The festival has provided earspace for an enormous number of vanguard contemporary works since 1921, spanning from those of the Second Viennese School to Elliott Sharp and Helmut Lachenmann. On the other hand, *Lonely Woman* is a recital of tonal covers of the Ornette Coleman jazz standard, and effectively marks the 12th year of New Jazz collective.

It's puzzling that, when capable of straddling a vanguard, Otomo has preoccupied himself with tonal jazz and covers. I've seen it suggested, that that Otomo's jazz fixation adheres to Confucian ideal (presumably in regard to reverence of 'kings past' in *The Great Learning*). In any case, I can't help but feel that if Takayanagi and Abe should be revered for anything, it's an unflinching forward-thinking rather than anything within the jazz idiom. Inescapably, each new revival of the New Jazz Collective proves itself a regression and New Jazz Trio + is no exception. It's made all the more frustrating that Otomo invests more and more of his time in releasing insipid jazz recordings like *Lonely Woman* and less on forward-thinking collaborations like *Allurements of the Ellipsoid*.

On the note of the latter recording - to my ears, the release sits in a similar realm to Sachiko and Yoshihide's Filament project. The charm is, however, in the mixture of Japanese Onkyo and European free improv colourings (a la *Selektiv Hogst*). With Martin Brandlmayr's

presence, *Allurements* is lent a rhythmic drive rare to Sachiko/Yoshihide collaborations. As always, he gives an adventurous (but modest) performance; here, it's rather Lê Quan Ninh-esque, particularly on 'Allurement 2'. While so often sidelined in ensembles, Sachiko M is provided with the breathing space to harbor an unusually acrobatic style. By way of contrast, Sachiko provided a gentle force of subversion in the New Jazz/Ground Zero context - innovative, but a fixed role nonetheless. On *Allurements*, she proves her salt as one of the purest adherers of the Onkyo aesthetic. It's also lovely to hear Axel Dorner play in an EAI ensemble and the addition of his modified microtonal trumpet as acoustic counterpoint solidifies each of the four pieces.

As a sum of its parts, *Allurements of the Ellipsoid* is a functional amalgam of musicians from two EAI scenes pushing towards common goals. Curiously, it's also managed to slip under the radar. Which is totally unwarranted. Though I feel I might by now be cheapening *Allurements* with discussion of the Yoshihide canon, I'll spare one last word: if we're to view it as a milestone on that line beginning with Wolfgang Dauner, it's a release that sets a foot well and truly outside the jazz cafe and into freer celestial planes. It's only unfortunate that such milestones have been stymied by New Jazz works.