

# Soundcheck This month's selected CDs and vinyl

Noise may not be very articulate, but in the right hands it can shape the architecture of society, argues Ken Hollings

The great autator: Lasse Marhaug



## Lasse Marhaug The Great Silence

PACREC CD

## Jazzkammer & Howard Stelzer Tomorrow No One Will Be Safe

PACREC CD

## Marhaug/Åsheim Grand Mutation

TOUCH CD

It has been noted in the past that one of the principal reasons why animals don't wear sunglasses is that they're smart enough to stay in the shade at noon. They don't have much use for ear protectors either; and pretty much the same line of argument applies here too. Human beings are among the very few creatures willing to stray outside their sensory comfort zone and to do so with a deliberate sense of pleasure. As a consequence, the range of what can be seen and heard is appreciably extended, simply because we choose to interfere directly with our organs of perception. Noise is essentially a hallucination given physical form, especially for those whose amplifiers have dials that go all the way up to 11 and beyond.

Always doomed to be 'one louder', noise is sound that doesn't quite fit its surroundings. Given enough volume, however, it can become its own environment, one directly imposed upon any given space. In short, noise is completely unnatural and loudly proclaims itself so. Which is what makes the cover image for Lasse Marhaug's *The Great Silence*—a simple snapshot of the performer enjoying a solitary picnic by some tranquil lakeshore—so arresting. There's something both wayward and thoughtful about the scene, establishing a mood that is continued in the title of the opening cut, "Back To Nature". There is, however, nothing remotely natural about the fearfully relentless scouring that ensues. Recorded in a day at Jørgen Træn's studio and produced by Træn and John Hegre, the three tracks that make up *The Great Silence* are, according

to their creator, "as primitive as it gets". Like the photograph taken by the lake, however, this statement is also misleading. The engineering behind Marhaug's sound, including guitar, amplifiers, effects pedals, microphones and electronics, may have hair growing out the backs of its hands, but the fractured dynamics of both "Back To Nature" and the title track itself show considerable thought and skill in their handling. "The New Sound", meanwhile, is subtly brutal in ways that Nature could never hope to copy in its methods of operation.

Documenting their tour of the US in 2004 with composer Howard Stelzer, *Tomorrow No One Will Be Safe* reveals a far more sociable set of encounters. The silences it contains are pensive ones, and not just empty gatherings of breath before the next onslaught. "Requiem For Officer Bobby Barker" finds Marhaug and Hegre working their way stealthily across the fretboards of two detuned guitars, the first squeals of feedback only occurring five minutes into their set, before the volume levels start rising and the piece erupts into scorching shades of vibrating white noise. On his solo track "On Last Night At Blid", Stelzer manipulates tape players and analogue electronics into deft contortions and strangled tones before joining Jazzkammer for the blistering title track: a performance remarkable for demonstrating the extent to which all three players are clearly listening to each other.

Outside of its antagonistic relationship to 'signal' in the basic mathematics of human communication, noise does not so much oppose notions of order and meaning as revel in them. Mutually exclusive concepts like purity and pollution, impulse and inhibition, action and stasis quickly disappear into one another. Put it another way: it's noise—what more do you want?

How much more do you think you can stand? Constantly touring, performing and recording with others, Lasse Marhaug is generous in his approach to the sounds around him. He not only listens, but

listens well. *Grand Mutation*, his collaboration with composer Nils Henrik Åsheim recorded in Oslo Cathedral during a single night in June 2006, shows a remarkable grasp not only of how acoustic sounds mesh with electronic ones but also how the live production of both is transformed by the recording process.

Just before the building was closed to the public for extensive renovations, the two musicians were allowed access to the cathedral's organ, Åsheim's main instrument of choice. No church organ is ever a mere collection of keys, stops and pipes; it is a permanent and integral part of the edifice itself. Granite and timber, glass and tile, not to mention the space that contains them, all resonate along with it. Åsheim's playing demonstrates this understanding with every note in each of the five of the pieces emerging from the session, and Marhaug's electronic accompaniment displays equal sensitivity.

Working late at night to keep outside noise to an absolute minimum, Marhaug and Åsheim created compositions of remarkable luminescence. From the slowly developing periods and seething intervals of "Bordunal" to the throbbing bass pedals and densely packed coils of industrial noise on "Philomela Coming so soon after Sunn O)))'s performance at Bergen Cathedral in March of this year, at which Marhaug assisted on synthesizer, the release of *Grand Mutation* presents a lighter, more integrated approach to how ecclesiastic space responds to the imposition of other sonic possibilities. It's in the chiming choral effects of "Claveolina" that the distance between cathedral organ and electronics starts to disappear entirely.

Capable of expressing only itself, and thereby becoming the cause of seemingly endless debate, not least in the pages of this very magazine, noise really has little to say for itself. Through the skilful intervention of Lasse Marhaug and his many associates, however, it is developing an architecture and a social presence entirely its own. □