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The quartet formed from the eclectic cultural milieu around London's Cafe Oto take folk, sound art and call and response to create a liberated vision of modern song

By Ilia Rogatchevski  
Photography by Wendy Huynh

# The Art

© YAMA: O in London, May 2023: (from left) Marie Roux, Keiko Yamamoto, Billy Steiger, Rie Nakajima



# of Falling Apart

Sitting outside East London's Cafe Oto, O YAMA O vocalist and Oto co-founder Keiko Yamamoto reflects on her entry into the capital's experimental music scene. "I was working at the Bonnington Cafe in Vauxhall," she says of the South London community space. "Upstairs, every Monday, an improvisation group gathered. That's when I met Adam Bohman, Steve Beresford and David Ryan. Steve Beresford came down to buy some food from me, then went upstairs. That was my first encounter."

Cafe Oto, which was marking its 15th birthday on the night of our interview, has become synonymous in the UK and beyond with music that challenges boundaries. Initially, Yamamoto's intention was to expand her artistic network, after making a permanent move to the UK from Japan. "Me, Hamish [Dunbar, her partner and Oto co-founder] and another friend started hosting a show, twice or three times a month, in pub function rooms. That was out of wanting to connect, because we were doing various jobs, random things. In those days we didn't have any social networks."

The itinerant project, which was then called Divers or Loons (after the migratory loon bird), settled into its present cafe incarnation in Dalston in 2008, but continued to serve as a platform for collaboration. O YAMA O came together after Yamamoto saw sculptor Rie Nakajima, an acquaintance from the Chelsea College of Arts, perform at the venue. "Rie and I knew each other through a mutual friend," Yamamoto recalls. "I knew she made sculptures.

**"Freedom for me comes after understanding my limit: what I cannot do. First, I need to understand the physicalities of the situation. If I know that then I can think about it or just free up some space."**

Rie Nakajima

Japan had a horrible tsunami disaster [after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake]. We organised a commemoration and I invited her to perform. That was the first time I saw her activate her objects."

Nakajima utilises everyday items and found paraphernalia – ceramic bowls, tin boxes, plastic whistles, foil sheets – triggering their sound potential with small motors or by aeolian means, often in site specific contexts.

At the time of the tsunami concert, running Cafe Oto was demanding and left little time for Yamamoto to be creative. "I wasn't really making anything, apart from singing to my children. It was immediate and something I could do every day without committing any time. I wanted to make it into some sort of shape and share it with somebody outside of the house. Then I saw Rie's sculpture: a sound made with a rice bowl. It resonated with me."

O YAMA O's improvised performances combined Yamamoto's singing – touching on subjects derived from Japanese folklore and domestic life – with Nakajima's kinetic objects. Their first concerts took place in intimate settings, such London's No Show Space in 2014. In a video of the performance, the audience encircle O YAMA O's modest set-up in the small gallery space. The duo starts quietly, with Nakajima spinning a corrugaphone over her head. The whirling tube emits a faint and eerie drone, which acts as a counterpoint to Yamamoto's voice. Before long, Nakajima summons delicate textures out of her objects, slowly muting the music into what appears to be a choreographed crescendo, but is actually a largely improvised ritual.

O YAMA O's current line-up is completed by violinist Billy Steiger and drummer Marie Roux, who also have deep connections to Oto: Steiger is one of its sound engineers, while Roux photographed gigs for the venue's archive. Roux and Steiger have contributed to the group from the beginning, but conflicting schedules meant they couldn't always perform as an ensemble. The visual arts practice of the members informs or crosses over with O YAMA O: Steiger has made abstract paintings during their

gigs, while Roux's photograph of an oblique Tunisian street scene adorns the front cover of the group's new album *Galó*.

I meet all four members at a Central London community garden to hear more about their collaboration. Nakajima has recently returned from Milly-la-Forêt in France, where she performed alongside Pierre Berthet on the site of Jean Tinguely's sculpture *Le Cyclop*. "I don't care much for what is art or music," she declares. "It's just a situation. If I'm in a musical context – a concert or festival – I gather information from my past and try to make something more interesting than before, but that's the only thing I think about." Nakajima sees her work in terms of accumulated knowledge that is collected over time, like raindrops in a bowl, with improvisation being an opportunity for this knowledge to express itself.

One notable addition to the group is former Flying Lizard, David Cunningham. Although he has occasionally performed with O YAMA O in a live setting, it's his signature production work that helps to shape the band's recorded material. "The fifth Beatle", as Steiger calls him, is both inside and outside the project, sympathetic to the band's intentions, but not afraid to critique their aesthetic decisions. Nakajima elaborates: "[*Galó*] is definitely his personality. His identity is there in the album. When we play live, it's our collective. It's all mixed up."

The band see Cunningham's role as solving a jigsaw puzzle of disparate pieces, combining old concert recordings with time-delayed Zoom sessions and outdoor sounds into a cohesive whole. "It's good to have him," Yamamoto agrees. "He cares a lot. Otherwise we are a bit too wobbly, edgeless blobs."

*Galó*, a follow-up to O YAMA O's self-titled 2018 debut album, was recorded over the course of several years, with sessions beginning in 2019 and continuing remotely throughout the pandemic. In the first half of 2020, Cafe Oto was required to close, and pieces like the instrumental "Harvest Dance" were recorded at an empty venue with Nakajima and Steiger taking turns at the house piano. "I See You" and "Jigoku" were also recorded live, and alongside "Harvest Dance" give the impression of a composed triptych of songs. But the band maintain that the opposite is true: all aspects were improvised. "There's nothing set," declares Yamamoto. "It's really more exciting to make it up on the spot. Everybody has their own tools and goes into the zone, really giving each other space. For me it's like dancing."

Choreography happens to be an important constant in O YAMA O's work. In late 2021, Nakajima and Yamamoto presented a performance-talk at London's Somerset House, as part of *The Wire's* Music By Any Means series. In an online article promoting the event, the band listed influences that included dancer Min Tanaka, the performance poetry of Gōzō Yoshimasu, and the traditional menburu dance, which is native to the Saga Prefecture and staged annually to welcome in the harvest.

The Somerset House event, which also featured frequent collaborator David Toop, was titled *Accidental Rituals*. With accidents being unplanned or left to chance, and rituals implying tradition, premeditation and repetition, does the notion of an accidental ritual not seem like a contradiction? The key, Nakajima insists, is "just not to think". Yamamoto elaborates: "The live [performance] is unplanned. It's improvisation, but each individual has a method within: things that nobody can change. For me, it's important. [Ritual] doesn't have to be special. Something special is always happening in everyday life. Everyone does beautiful things without knowing. I want to depict that."

Themes of everyday beauty run throughout *Galó*. The album's opening track "Kuroneko" bursts forth with whistles, melodica and a crashing drum that serve to illustrate Yamamoto's lyrics about a black cat running on the grass at night, bathed in moonlight. Elsewhere there is "Hakushon" – the title is the Japanese onomatopoeic equivalent to the standard sneeze response "achoo!" – and "Suna No Shiro", which takes the fragility of sand castles as its central theme. "I See You" and "Jigoku" both explore paranoia through characters who are looking back at someone who is observing them. While the latter track once again references sand castles, implying that trust is just as easily broken as those impermanent structures,



the former song goes back to a postcard that Yamamoto saw in childhood. Her mother, also an artist, wrote the words “I See You Seeing Me” on the back of an exhibition invitation, the sentence spiralling round to make a complete circle. Intentionally or otherwise, this concrete poem is reminiscent of Fluxus event scores by the likes of George Brecht and Yoko Ono, where the thought experiment evoked by the words was in itself an activation of the artwork. Ono’s *Sun Piece* (1962), for example, instructs the reader to “watch the sun until it becomes square”, mirroring the circularity and magical thinking of “I See You”.

Another thread running through O YAMA O songs is folklore. Yōkai, the supernatural apparitions deeply embedded in Japanese mythology, appear in the track titles of the band’s debut album. “Oni” references the iconic red-skinned demons who punish the damned in hell, while “Kitsune” is a nod to shape-shifting fox spirits. The word yama translates into mountain from Japanese, and the ensemble’s name is a stylistic visualisation of a mountain flanked by two circles, perhaps suggesting the figures of Nakajima and Yamamoto standing on either side of their sound-making objects.

The band hint at a soft spot for folk, listing songs by Pentangle and Fairport Convention as influential. “Jacky My Son”, an a cappella arrangement by Staverton Bridge of a traditional song, informs O YAMA O’s use of the voice to deliver an emotional impact, such as can be heard in the sorrowful “Suna No Shiro”. By contrast, songs like “Kuroneko” or “Oni” embody elements of childlike joy via their use of recorders, harmonicas, whistles and other small instruments. Such kinship with innocence brings to mind the playful music to which the tanuki in *Pom Poko*, Isao Takahata’s 1994 Studio Ghibli feature, revel and party to.

The foundations of the ensemble’s music, however, are found objects. Improvisors like Steve Beresford and Adam Bohman are well known for awakening the textures inherent within everyday objects. However, unlike Beresford’s kitsch toys or Bohman’s bricolage, which often incorporates industrial objects like springs and metal sheets, O YAMA O usually opt for small domestic items that you may find accumulating in the kitchen cupboard and can never bring yourself to throw away. “Adam Bohman was my gateway into improvised music,” says Steiger. “That was the first point when [I understood] you can do whatever you want! His influence on music is completely under recognised. So much stems from him.” Yamamoto agrees: “It’s beyond music. It’s just him and a medium”.

I mention Dan Barrow’s review of Nakajima’s 2018 solo show at Birmingham’s Ikon Gallery in *The Wire* 414 where he assesses her work in relation to the “split in histories of free improvisation between ‘small instrument’ music, based on short and quick-decaying instrumental gestures, and drones”. Bearing in mind their use of sustain, as with Steiger’s violin for example, to what extent do these tensions between decay, dynamics and acoustic dominance manifest in O YAMA O? “It seems quite an arbitrary split to me,” Steiger replies. “The violin doesn’t sit on either side. We make short sounds and long sounds.” Yamamoto responds with a question of her own: “Does it translate into an emotional sound if it’s prolonged or repetitive? We don’t really think that way.”

Live, the ensemble sometimes ignore their own setlists and traverse paths unknown. *Bruxelles* documents their 2019 concert at Les Ateliers Claus in Belgium. The first half of the album is a demonstration of spontaneous composition, small sounds of clinking bottles and woodblocks engaging in dialogue with Steiger’s pizzicato violin, while a distant melodic draws out melodies from the air. Roux’s drums start gently, echoing the clatter of spinning plates, before evolving into a tribal march that guides Yamamoto’s voice into the key refrain on “Namekuji”.

With this blank canvas approach to performance, do they see their work as denoting a kind of freedom? “Sometimes improvisors, they just play,” says Roux. “We do lots of call and response. I can feel a lot of exchange – it builds up into something. I always felt we have this connection or structure that gives me space and I can experiment within that space.” Steiger follows the thought: “Freedom is there in the way we play. I can be free to make whatever noise I want, but there’s a

responsibility to actually make it right. What’s the right sound to put in this situation?”

Steiger retells a story where he made use of a turntable the DJ forgot to turn off during O YAMA O’s concert in Belgium. “At some point I went over and I was moving the record super slowly. There was this giant sub-bass. It was loud. In that sense, this idea of total improvisation – where you’re allowed to do whatever – doesn’t change no matter who I’m playing with or what the context is. It’s actually something that I think about a lot.”

For Nakajima, freedom exists in relation to restriction. “Freedom, for me, [comes] after understanding my limit: what I cannot do. First, I [need to] understand the physicalities of the situation. If I know that then I can think about it or just free up some space.” Have their performances ever fallen apart or dissolved into disaster? “There’s nothing to fall apart,” Steiger assures me. “Or it falls apart all the time,” Roux jokes. “I think we try to make it easy when we play live because we trust each other. It allows us to feel quite comfortable – loose.”

Each member of the ensemble has their own extensive individual practice outside of O YAMA O. Nakajima exhibits her installations across the world and performs solo, or in group formulations with other artists. From 2013–16 she curated the Sculpture performance series along with David Toop, which sought to undermine the notion of performance as entertainment and argued that durational events could be classed as a form of sculpture. Dead Plants & Living Objects, her duo with the Belgian sound artist Pierre Berthet, extends her vocabulary of motorised objects to incorporate automated plants, suspended cans and industrial materials. For this summer’s Monheim Triennale, held in the German town of Monheim am Rhein, Nakajima will present collaborative installations with the Düsseldorf based artist Miki Yui, composer Hans W Koch and Berthet, taking inspiration from locations where the Rhine meets the river bank.

Yamamoto is currently based in Devon, where she ran the artist-run project space Aller Alley with Josie Cockram and Hamish Dunbar on the Dartington Trust estate until the Covid pandemic and logistical issues mothballed the project. In June 2022, Yamamoto performed as a solo musician for the first time, opening a Conrad Schnitzler exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf. The piece consisted of taped field recordings played back on two cassette machines: crying cows, squelched puddles, a crazy storm. “It was very simple, really analogue,” Yamamoto says of the event. “I had to [press play], reverse, do it [gestures pressing play again], and I was shouting sometimes. I had a drum and little things as well. I wanted to make noise.”

Steiger’s second solo album *Loud Object*, released on Cafe Oto’s Otoroku imprint in 2022, also embraces noise. Each side of the LP is dedicated to a 20 minute violin improvisation where the bow grinds steadily across the strings until electronic processing inverts the organic sounds and releases the tension. The album takes its name from a rejected title for Clarice Lispector’s *Água Viva*, a novel devoid of characters or plot. The reference suggests an automatic approach to composition where Steiger makes creative choices based on experience, but without an end goal.

Roux’s approach to photography is comparable. “I also can’t plan, because if I do it’s a catastrophe,” she says when discussing her visual work. “I’ll have an idea to go somewhere and just take pictures, trying to show some order that’s not mine. It’s analogue, so I don’t know how it’s going to come out. It’s sort of the same when drumming.” Despite being taught by a heavy metal drummer, Roux’s minimal style seeks out different textures, responding to the other sounds in the room. Roux also edited the video for “Galo” (which is viewable on *The Wire* website). Composed from private photographs and mobile phone footage taken in transit, the visuals reflect the speed and pressure embodied in the album’s closing track. And while Yamamoto’s words are intended to be “as meaningless as possible”, the song’s title sounds like gallop when pronounced with Roux’s French accent, proposing that O YAMA O are on a rapid forward trajectory into the unknown. ○

O YAMA O’s *Galo* is released by Bison

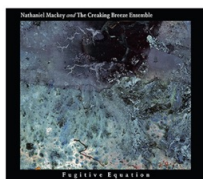
## Stewart Smith surveys some of the most dynamic performances captured on disc at East London's Cafe Oto



### XT *Deorlaf*

Otoroku DL/LP 2021

Saxophonist Seymour Wright and percussionist Paul Abbott celebrate their Oto connection with this dizzying collage of live recordings made at the venue over 12 years. The sound of traffic and birdsong sets the scene, morphing into saxophone multiphonics and dubwise percussion. Rampaging free jazz is juxtaposed with disjointed beats and ring-modulated sax. The duo's love of house and footwork comes through in Wright's nagging motifs and Abbott's kit-triggered 808 samples. XT's determination to push improvised music out of its comfort zone is exhilarating.



### Nathaniel Mackey & The Creaking Breeze Ensemble *Fugitive Equations*

No label 2xCD/DL 2021

In 2019, poet Nathaniel Mackey collaborated with a circle of musicians closely associated with Oto. He reads extracts from his epistolary novels *From A Broken Bottle Traces Of Perfume Still Emanate*, depicting an imaginary jazz band and their fictional music, prompting improvised responses from poet Evie Ward. Their overlapping voices are cushioned by the grainy harmonics of Billy Steiger's violin and Ute Kanngiesser's cello. Mackey's needle drops of Miles Davis, Coleman Hawkins and Salif Keita offer a series of propositions for Seymour Wright and Paul Abbott to improvise around.



### [Ahmed] *Nights On Saturn*

Astral Spirits DL/LP 2021

Oto has supported some of Pat Thomas's most radical projects. In Seymour Wright, the Oxford based pianist has found a creative partner fluent in jazz and improvised music traditions, with a commitment to the unknown. Completed by the French rhythm section of bassist Joel Grip and drummer Antonin Gerbal, [Ahmed] are one of the most advanced groups on the planet, fashioning elements of Abdul Ahmed-Malik's Arabic jazz into intense motivic excursions that are simultaneously free and in the pocket. Their Astral Spirits debut, recorded at Oto in December 2019, mesmerizes.



### Black Top presents: Hamid Drake/ Elaine Mitchener/William Parker/ Orphy Robinson/Pat Thomas *Some Good News*

Otoroku 2xCD/DL 2021

Exploring free improvisation from an African-Caribbean diasporic perspective, the Black Top duo of Pat Thomas and Orphy Robinson had already played with William Parker and Hamid Drake at Oto in 2016. For this 2019 show they were joined by the brilliant vocalist Elaine Mitchener, who scats, mewls and floats over constantly shifting instrumental textures: ritualistic hand drums and nasal single reeds, swirling electronics, ecstatic piano clusters, deeply funky marimba and guimbrí workouts.



### Oren Ambarchi *Live Hubris*

Black Truffle DL/LP 2021

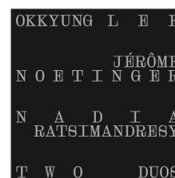
Oren Ambarchi celebrated his 50th birthday, and the tenth anniversary of his label Black Truffle, with a four day residency at Oto in May 2019. The programme culminated in an epic performance of his 2016 album *Hubris*, realised by a 15 strong band of Black Truffle affiliates, including seven guitarists, three drummers and Mats Gustafsson on baritone sax. "Part 3" is the motherlode, with Ambarchi's fluttering harmonics, Eiko Ishibashi's flute and Julia Reidy's dissonant guitar building over the motorik pulse. A dramatic chord change unleashes Gustafsson and the drummers, leading to a volcanic 20 minute climax that has to be heard to be believed.



### Decoy with Joe McPhee *AC/DC*

Otoroku CD/DL 2020

Joe McPhee's brilliantly curated 2019 Oto residency paired the veteran multi-instrumentalist with Black Top, Paal Nilssen-Love, Bryan Eubanks, Ute Kanngiesser, Áine O'Dwyer and Decoy. McPhee and Decoy – Alexander Hawkins on Hammond B3, John Edwards on bass, Steve Noble on percussion – are always special: Hawkins's Leslie rotary speaker opens a portal to other dimensions, over Noble's deep gong vibrations and Edwards's abstracted funk, while McPhee's tenor spits spiritual fire, hot R&B licks and the occasional beautiful melody.



### Okkyung Lee/Jérôme Noetinger/ Nadia Ratsimandresy *Two Duos*

Otoroku DL/LP 2022

Drawn from Okkyung Lee's 2019 Oto residency, these duos provide delicate and otherworldly settings for her visceral cello improvisations. Noetinger's Revox tape machine beds white noise under Lee's tremulous whinnies, live processing her glisses into electronic swoops. Later, his varispeed classical piano solo sets up a woozy conversation with Lee's cello. The duo with Nadia Ratsimandresy on ondes Martenot is gorgeous, beginning with static scratches and analogue pips, ending with fluid arco lines against a viscous, writhing drone.



### Nicole Mitchell & Mark Sanders *14.5.16*

Otoroku DL

From Merzbow to John Tilbury, Limpe Fuchs to Smega, Otoroku has made dozens of live recordings available to download. The series is particularly good at highlighting Oto's inspired programming of collaborations between visiting artists and core UK musicians: XT and RP Boo, Sachiko M and Eddie Prevost, Keiji Haino and Steve Noble. In 2016, Nicole Mitchell was due to make her Oto debut with regular collaborator Joëlle Léandre. The bassist had to pull out at the last minute, so percussionist Mark Sanders stepped in, with magical results. The music from this first meeting is beautifully sparse and airy, with Mitchell's flute and voice weaving around Sanders's sensitive brush work and bells. ○