

Take Five Edition VIII by Marcus O'Dair

Inside a barn, on a dairy farm somewhere in Kent, eight more or less jazz musicians are rehearsing. John Surman, the multi-instrumentalist and composer best known for his sublime and prolific output on the ECM label, is conducting. He does so rather casually, sitting back in his chair and only occasionally raising a finger to mark the passing bars of collective improv.

There are two trumpeters in the group. Yazz Ahmed has worked with everyone from Sir John Dankworth to Radiohead and been tipped as a rising star by *Jazzwise* and *Time Out*, while Rory Simmons of the LOOP Collective tours worldwide with Jamie Cullum but also leads Fringe Magnetic and Eyes Of A Blue Dog. The double basses are doubled too: Gateshead's Andy Champion, member of 'free prog' group ACV and improv act Spelk, is joined by Dominic Lash, a Bristol-based free improviser and composer who has recently returned from a productive stint in New York.

On guitar is Chris Montague, best known as leader of Troyka but who has also worked with the James Taylor Quartet and Gwilym Simcock. Saxophonist Paul Towndrow, meanwhile, is part of the multi-award winning horn quartet Brass Jaw and a member of the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra. Completing the ensemble are two singers: Gwyneth Herbert, once signed to Universal and Blue Note but now successfully self-releasing, and the singer, harper and composer Cevanne Horrocks-Hopayian.

It's Cevanne's composition that the group is rehearsing in the barn. With that harp'n'voice combo, she will grow used to comparisons with Joanna Newsom and Serafina Steer, as well as Alice Coltrane and Iro Haarla. Yet Cevanne has explored Armenian maqam and Indian raga as well as western music from the Renaissance to punk, and her piece is utterly singular – existing at the point at which those three metagenres, jazz, classical and world, intersect.

We're here for Take Five, a scheme developed in 2004 for UK-based musicians and composers a decade or so into their careers – well beyond the 'ones to watch' stage but not yet marquee names either. The residential week find them swapping stage and studio for Bore Place: only 35 miles from London but feeling much more remote, not least because there is no 3G or even mobile reception without a walk down the lane. It's a funny location for jazz, urban music before Urban music was a twinkle in a marketing department's eye, but that's part of the total immersion approach.

The business side of Take Five is necessary because of the post-Napster wobble that continues to affect all musicians. Jazz players, well down in the long tail, have a particularly tough time – and since jazz labels tend to be small, and few of these artists have managers, both industry knowledge and an entrepreneurial mindset are vital. There's also the fact that, broadly speaking, jazz education tends to focus on performance rather than business (not that these musicians are not necessarily jazz, or even music, graduates; Gwyneth, for instance, studied English literature).

John Surman, firmly ensconced as Take Five's musician in residence, could not be more suited to the role. Contemporary music pedagogy tells us that teacher and student are part of the same community of practice, and the saxophonist manages to combine his own wealth of experience with a genuine sense of comradeship. At one point he suggests being "a bit less British" when presenting work, then ruins it by concluding: "Take it from me... if that means anything." Surman is also more down-to-earth than one might guess from his serene musical persona, playfully joining in with Zip Zap Boing in the morning warm-up, then singing Mungo Jerry and George Formby in the evenings. "It's just like Christmas," he grins at one point, before sitting by the fire on a particularly chilly night.

As well as superb organic food and wine, the daily programme at Take Five has two main components. Mornings are spent in supervised rehearsals: each musician, including Surman, arrives with material written specifically for the group. Afternoons and evenings, meanwhile, are given over to panels and discussion with industry guests. There is practical information: how best to approach a venue when looking for a gig, or how to write press releases and biographies. Other subjects include the asymmetric relationship between average age of today's jazz audiences and average age of the musicians on stage, and the equally worrying notion that the supply of talented musicians could be outstripping demand. There is also a dazzling lecture on the paradigm shift that took place in the music industry around the turn of the millennium (the grinning, green-eyed face of Napster looms over us again). Changing with the times, it seems, involves geo-targeted Facebook ads and increasing average revenue per user. Louis Armstrong might have been able to play the trumpet, but he didn't know shit about ARPU.

In addition to scheduled panels and lectures, Take Five participants work, in pairs, on an entrepreneurial proposal, presented in a Dragons' Den scenario on the final night. There's also a hefty component of networking. That means participants pressing CDs into the hands of guest speakers, but also getting to know one another: before arriving at Bore Place, many of the musicians knew one another by reputation only. One week later, several ongoing collaborations are under way – particularly striking given the disparity of the eight musicians selected.

Presented immediately after Cevanne's tightly composed piece is a 'texture for group improvisation' from Dominic Lash. Each musician has three options, the bassist explains: a sustained note, a rhythm or a solo. Taken together, the sustained notes create a shimmering, seasick drone, the musicians following one another through the microtones like a murmuration of starlings in slow motion. On top, we get the full palette of improv: double basses thumped or tapped, tabla-style; harp strings dampened with sheets of paper; brass squawks and squalls and squeals.

Musically, says John Surman, who insists he doesn't say the same thing each year, this is perhaps the best Take Five groups to date: never before has each piece had so much character. Though increasingly punch-drunk as the relentless schedule moves towards the final day, the musicians too seem genuinely enthusiastic about the experience. There is nothing else out there that begins to resemble Take Five, and competition to take part is stiff, some musicians waiting years to make it through the selection process.

As to whether it's worth it, the alumni list speaks for itself. Members of Trio VD, Beats & Pieces Big Band, Phronesis, Kairos 4tet, Outhouse, Empirical, Curios, The Invisible, Heritage Orchestra, Acoustic Ladyland and Polar Bear are among the previous participants, together with a strong selection of solo artists: Kit Downes, Soweto Kinch, Mara Carlyle, Gwilym Simcock. It's a safe bet that several musicians in the barn this year will join them.