

Asian Music: Wise Dreams and Fables of the Sky - a multisensory Odyssey.



Johnathon Bakan
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On June 13, 2014, music history was made when Ultra World X-tet presented their groundbreaking concert "**Wise Dreams and Fables of the Sky**" in the beautiful O1C sanctuary as part of their

ongoing chamber music series.

Ultra World X-tet is one of the Bay Area's premiere Asian music ensembles, combining sounds from Asia with fine jazz for a classy sophisticated sound.

At the helm of Ultra World X-tet is composer and Creative Director, **Gary Schwantes** on saxophones and bamboo flutes. He is joined by guzheng (Chinese zither) master Winnie Wong, Yangqin Zhao on yangqin (Chinese hammer dulcimer), drummer Surya Prakasha, and veteran jazz bassist Doug Ebert.

The concert began with several X-tet favorites including "Highlands of Tibet", "Southern Comfort", Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman" and concluded with a traditional tune "Dance of the Golden Snake".

After intermission the ensemble plunged surely and inexorably into uncharted territory: The Ancient Greek epic, "The Odyssey" by Homer. They were joined by experimental film maker Craig Baldwin on film projections.

The focus was books IX-XII where Odysseus, as a guest of the Phaeacians, recounts the ten year period of adventures experienced on his zigzag voyage home following the Trojan war circa 1200 B.C.

As the lights went down and the music began the listener was immediately drawn into the world of the Odyssey with the first blow of the conch. The music was sectionally based, unpredictable, angular, percussive and filled with unusual twists and turns that kept the audience spellbound throughout. The melodies were well crafted, the rhythms powerful and filled with drive, complimented by shimmering tone

colors for an exotic delight.

Behind the musicians on dual screens, scenes from Greek epics, morphed into ancient ruins and faded into the Mediterranean Sea, where images of ancient gods emerged anew. It was all there: passion, tragedy, adventure, and loss.

As the visuals came into focus the music morphed into something larger than life: a sound emerged that was beyond any ethnicity or idiom and seemed to emerge from a place that was very ancient.

As *Wise Dreams* progressed from the opening tetrachords, the various musicians took on specific roles in the drama. The guzheng played the bitter sweet melodies of the Earthly Realm. When Odysseus and his crew are swept off course to the Land of the Lotus Eaters, the bass portrays the man eating giant cyclops Polyphemus. As the crew reaches Hades to seek wisdom from the souls of the dead, the saxophone delivers the prophesy of the blind prophet Tiresias.

The question arises, what does the Bay Area's premiere Asian jazz ensemble have to do with ancient greek legends? Composer Gary Schwantes explains:

There is a reason for working with Greek Mythology. Building on our previous production *The Monkey King* where we explored myths of the east, and now adding the *Odyssey*, we have explored two of the most classic fundamental Myths of both East *and* West.

It brings a lot of depth to our music in that there is a cultural understanding that grounds our performances. It's important for me and for all of the musicians in the band not to just play the notes of another culture, but to work at understanding the history and tradition behind those notes.

I am very interested in working with mythology in general. Myths contain symbols and archetypes embedded deeply in our collective unconscious. It's surprising how many common elements there are in the myths of different cultures, and it is very interesting to note the differences also.

There is a parallel in the way we approach our music and the reason we use the instrumentation we use. By combining the Chinese and Western Instruments into a hybrid form, the musicians and the audience are really able to appreciate the similarities (for instance the bluesy, soulful quality of Chinese phrasing and note bending) as well as the differences (there are many, including the wonderful timbral colors). The result is something new, with its own logic, that works perfectly.

Wise Dreams swelled to its riveting conclusion and the audience responded with enthusiastic applause. *Wise Dreams* had so much going for it: finely crafted, interesting compositions, exceptional musicians, stunning visuals, a captivating stage presence, and an innovative concept.

Hopefully Ultra World X-tet will continue to perform and tour *Wise Dreams* offering more exceptional performances well into the extended future.

As of this writing *Wise Dreams* is not yet available for commercial sale, however the latest Ultra World X-Tet CD "Moon and Legend" is available from **CD Baby**.

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