

Press Reviews

Pan Project, Neuma Records (2021)
by Pan Project Ensemble

Songlines

<https://www.songlines.co.uk/reviews/review?slug=pan-project&fbclid=IwAR2NhKYINIZtepOCL0exeG42yJfwQe0SzTy9gJgxpU3UzeuvYhbmZse0Br>

March/2022

Rating: ★★★★★

Author: Charlie Cawood

Taking their name from the Korean music-storytelling tradition *pansori* – meaning ‘to gather’ or ‘come together’ – PAN Project is a collective that draws on the intercultural art forms of Korea, China, and Japan, and fuses them with contemporary Western composition and group improvisation. The ensemble’s ease of synthesis between the ancient and modern is apparent from the opening track ‘Kangwon’. A semi-improvised arrangement of the popular Korean folk song ‘Arirang’, the piece is driven by Woonjung Sim on *jangu* (barrel drum), playing an asymmetrical five-beat rhythm rooted in shaman ritual music. ‘Yi Gu Ren’, a duet between Jeff Roberts on *guzhen* (zither) and Ned Rothenburg on *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute) is a tranquil meditation on a theme dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

The centerpiece of the album is *Sugungga (Song of the Sea Palace)*, a five-part suite conveying the humorous tale of a dragon king greedy for immortality, and the farcical adventures of a rabbit and a turtle. At once playful and exploratory, *Sugungga* is the perfect encapsulation of PAN Project’s dynamic combination of ancient storytelling and modern improvisation, with pansori performer Sae-Yeon Jeong’s entertaining delivery taking centre stage. ‘Si Xiang Gi’ – a repurposing of a Taiwanese folk tune – continues the album in a delightfully introspective manner, with ensemble co-founder Gamin Kang’s glistening *saenghwang* (mouth organ) serving as the ideal bed for Ying-Chieh Wang’s soaring *erhu*. Rothenburg’s microtonal composition ‘The Bell Rings Deep Blue’ serves as a spectral close to **a joyfully unique recording, which marries the traditional and avant-garde with sensitivity and panache.**

Roots Music Review

[https://www.rootsmusicreport.com/reviews/view/1445/album-review-of-pan-project-by-pan-project?](https://www.rootsmusicreport.com/reviews/view/1445/album-review-of-pan-project-by-pan-project?fbclid=IwAR3q48sXVXKA4B8UQiAk3BwOk2mvjZXTpQNgWkcc-3yYHYVhuFMa9E-6cFs)

[fbclid=IwAR3q48sXVXKA4B8UQiAk3BwOk2mvjZXTpQNgWkcc-3yYHYVhuFMa9E-6cFs](https://www.rootsmusicreport.com/reviews/view/1445/album-review-of-pan-project-by-pan-project?fbclid=IwAR3q48sXVXKA4B8UQiAk3BwOk2mvjZXTpQNgWkcc-3yYHYVhuFMa9E-6cFs)

February 13, 2022

Rating: ★★★★★

Author: Joe Ross

Conceived in Seoul in 2015 as an improvisation experiment, PAN Project is now a sextet of collaborators who hail from the USA, Canada and East Asia. “PAN” is a Korean word that means “to gather” or “come together,” and the group’s moniker is also derived from **p’ansouri**, a Korean vocal style of musical narration and percussion that’s highly regarded in that country. Playing a variety of stringed and percussion instruments from Korea, China and Japan, PAN Project’s debut album was recorded on both sides of the Pacific.

Some of their haunting, plaintive music is based on traditional folk music (such as “Kangwon”), but PAN Project also takes improvisatory sounds into the territory of neo-traditional adaptations for modern life and beliefs. “Kangwon” is an excellent tune to introduce the eerie Korean double-reed bamboo wind instrument played by gamin known as a **piri**, five-holed Japanese **shakuhachi** flute blown with considerable technique by Ned Rothenberg, and Jeff Roberts’ Chinese plucked **guqin**. The opening track also features **erhu** (Chinese two-stringed bowed fiddle) of Ying-Chieh Wang, and **jangu** (Korean double-headed barrel drum) played with a thin stick or hand by Woonjung Sim.

The sound of human breath through bamboo **shakuhachi** conveys expressive sounds of life itself. Rothenberg has studied the instrument to a point of mastering its proper tone and vibrato. Subtly fragmented melodies in a duo arrangement of “Yi Gu Ren” (“Thinking of an Old Friend”) are suggestive of other-worldly mystery as the flute’s tones blend with the gentle melancholy of the **guqin**. Microtonal shadings color this piece in a very organic way, as does a trio arrangement of “Si Xiang Gi” (“Thinking of....”) to reflect nostalgically on one’s longing for home as the **shakuhachi** and **erhu** converse with the **saenghwang**, a Korean free-reed polyphonic mouth organ capable of playing 2-4 notes simultaneously. A captivating story that spans five tracks, “Sugungga (Song of the Sea Palace)” presents the tale of a dragon king’s selfish desire for immortality and adventures of a rabbit and turtle. The five movements create moods of tension, wit, wisdom and joy. It’s enlightening to read the story synopsis for each 1-3 minute track to appreciate how musical narrations of vocalist Sae-Yeon Jeong interpret one of the few surviving stories of **p’ansouri**. English translations are provided in the liner notes. Her vocal form, while perhaps hard for westerners to decipher, is only a taste of the operatic dramatic solos that can be sung for hours to the accompaniment of a drum, and with only a fan and handkerchief as props. For further exploration of Korean **p’ansouri**, you might also want to check out performer Kim So-Hee who has been recognized as a “living national treasure.”

Later in PAN Project’s set, “Gutgeori” features the five stellar instrumentalists in a piece based on a 12-beat Korean rhythmic cycle with origins from shamanistic ritual music and culture of the rural dispossessed. To close the journey, “The Bell Rings Deep Blue” introduces very pleasant sounds from the quintet. Some are so subtle that **PAN Project creates aural impressions of a musical garden with different sounds, textures, colorings, ornamentations and melodic phrases.** While this isn’t music for karaoke parties and sing-alongs, its timeless quality and place stem from its poignant messages, folk tales, fables and dominant images for quiet introspection and relaxing meditation. (Joe Ross, Roots Music Report)

Jazz Weekly

https://www.jazzweekly.com/2022/01/pan-project-ensemble-pan-project/?fbclid=IwAR23IEBFiMIC_T2NH2FmX1T9gX_JjVoJ4e9b8oY5oX-855aiQTc7bPW9KYg

January 6, 2022

Author: George W. Harris

Traditional East Asian instrumentation and atmospheres mix with Western tones on this album by the band PAN Project Ensemble, which includes gamin/piri, Jeff Roberts/guqui, Ned Rothenberg/shakuhachi-bcl, Ying-Chieh Wang/erhu, Woonjung Sim/perc and Sae-Yeon Jeong/voc. Each of the ten songs includes stories of their inspiration, ranging from traditional flutes and percussion on the village atmosphere of “Kangwon” to the wind chimed and high pitched bowed strings of “The Bell Rings Deep Blue”. Some rich reeds are resonant on “Gugeori” and the dynamics vary greatly for “Forever Young!” with Jeong’s vocals adding richness and texture here and during the vocal percussion of “ Captured By Eagle, Escape With A Trick”. **The team does a successful presentation of authentic sounds from lands far away, but with accessibility for those who think Chop Suey is a traditional meal.**

Take Effect

December 15, 2021

Rating: 9/10

A very cultured ensemble consisting of gamin (piri, saenghwang, taepyeongso), Jeff Roberts (guqin), Ned Rothenberg (shakuhachi, bass clarinet), Ying-Chieh Wang (erhu), Woonjung Sim (Korean percussion) and Sae-Yeon Jeong (vocals), as Pan Project they bring several East Asian traditions to their inimitable formula, where their native instruments illuminate their deep ties to Chinese, Korean and Japanese heritage.

“Kangwon” starts the listen with strategic percussive sounds as winds enter with much beauty, and, further into the track, well timed, plucked strings add much to the organic formula. “Yi Gu Ren” then follows and brings a bare delivery of strings and winds interacting with a very poetic approach.

Deeper into the listen, “Sugungga (Song Of The Sea Palace)” unfolds across 5 installments that welcome Jeong’s expressive storytelling to the often unpredictable and squealing moments, while “Si Xiang Gi” drones a bit with much ambience as a blurry, mysterious landscape unfolds.

The final track, “The Bell Runs Deep Blue”, textures twinkling percussion, soothing winds and subtle strings amid much cautious atmosphere, as the respective strengths of the players is quite appreciated.

‘Pan’ actually means ‘coming together’ in Korean, and that certainly applies to the vision here, as **this cross cultural experience also unites improvisation with experimental ideas, effectively putting an entirely new spin on world music.**

Sonograma

<https://sonograma.org/suplement-de-discos/pan-project/?fbclid=IwAR2ITljgAslvnXAs0cE0AgoK38EEykSYgWFIEAmJB4rFRItvgxrKs0zCJc>

Date: October 29, 2021

Author: Carne Miró

English Translation:

Conceived by Jeff Roberts and Gamin first as an improv project in Seoul in 2015, the Pan Project Ensemble became an instrumental and vocal quintet in 2016 in a residence at Avaloch Farm, with five founding members representing Chinese, Korean and Japanese traditions. The word *Pan* in the group's name comes from *pansori*, a Korean genre of musical storytelling performed by voices and percussion, and means "gathering".

These musicians tell a story through music, song and performance, with creations that are based on the intercultural language of East Asia, in which they play with instrumental and ritual performance and theater. His style is also steeped in Western influences, resulting in the use of improvisational drawing, Western composition, and modern technology. This project arouses the greatest praise, given its undeniable originality.

The multi-instrumentalist and composer Ned Rothenberg, who is part of the musical current of the new improvisers, as they call themselves, explains in the disc notes the origin of each of the recorded pieces. *Kangwon* is an improvisation based on a version of the Korean folk song *Arirang*, from Kangwon, a coastal province in northeastern Korea. The basis of this piece, *Yi Gu Ren* ('Thinking of an Old Friend'), is the Chinese guqin. Relying on the naturalness and spontaneity of one's own intuitions, the real self would emerge and give a unique personal style to play this instrument.

Follow the work *Sugungga* ('Song of the sea palace'), one of the five survivors of the pansori tradition. It consists of four movements centered on the Dragon King, a deity from Chinese mythology. This kind of mixture of cultural myth and legend is filled with facets that arise from narrations, chants, melodic improvisations, repetitive sounds and complex instrumental effects. **It is, in short, a poetic improvisation in which beautiful conversations and refined instrumental relationships unfold with a strong presence of percussion.**

Original Spanish:

Concebut per Jeff Roberts i Gamin per primera vegada com a projecte d'improvisació a Seül el 2015, el conjunt Pan Project es va convertir en un quintet instrumental i vocal el 2016 en una residència a l'Avaloch Farm, amb cinc membres fundadors que representaven les tradicions xineses, coreanes i japoneses. La paraula *Pan* del nom del grup prové de *pansori*, un gènere coreà de narració musical interpretat per veus i percussió, i vol dir «reunir-se».

Aquests músics expliquen una història per mitjà de la música, el cant i la performance, amb creacions que es basen en el llenguatge intercultural de l'Àsia Oriental, en què es juga amb la representació instrumental i ritual i el teatre. El seu estil també està impregnat d'influències occidentals, que resulten en l'ús del dibuix sobre improvisació, la composició occidental i la tecnologia moderna. Aquest projecte suscita els més grans elogis, atesa la seva innegable originalitat.

El multiinstrumentista y compositor Ned Rothenberg, que forma part del corrent musical dels nous improvisadors, tal com s'anomenen ells mateixos, explica a les notes del disc l'origen de

cadascuna de les peces enregistrades. *Kangwon* és una improvisació basada en una versió de la cançó popular coreana *Arirang*, de Kangwon, província costanera del nord-est de Corea. La base d'aquesta peça, *Yi Gu Ren* ('Pensant en un vell amic'), és el guqin xinès. Confiant en la naturalitat i l'espontaneïtat de les pròpies intuïcions, el jo real emergiria i donaria un estil personal únic per interpretar aquest instrument.

Segueix l'obra *Sugungga* ('Cançó del palau del mar'), una de les cinc supervivents de la tradició del pansori. Està format per quatre moviments centrats en el Rei Drac, una deïtat de la mitologia xinesa. Aquesta mena de barreja de mite cultural i llegendari està farcida de facècies que sorgeixen de narracions, cants, improvisacions melòdiques, sons repetitius i complexos efectes instrumentals. Es tracta, en definitiva, d'una improvisació poètica en què es despleguen bellíssimes converses i refinades relacions instrumentals amb una forta presència de la percussió.