


We think you're near 

Ultra World X-Tet: Chinese Music and Jazz converge in San Francisco.



Johnathon Bakan, SF Asian Music Examiner

October 22, 2011 - Like this? [Subscribe to get instant updates.](#)

Add a comment 

Like  68

Send



Share

Email

Print



Ultra World X-Tet plays at the Old First Church (O1C) on Sacramento St.

Credits: Johnathon Bakan

On Friday October 21, The Old First Church (O1C) on Sacramento St. presented [Ultra World X-Tet](#) as part of its ongoing [concert series](#).

To put it plainly Ultra World X-Tet is an extraordinary world class ensemble. Ultra World X-Tet combines jazz, world, classical and experimental styles in a pioneering mix of music and culture.

This is no ordinary jazz band however. Central to their unique sound is the "[guzheng](#)" (pronounced 'goo-jung') a 21 string Chinese plucked zither. The guzheng has movable bridges giving it the capability of accommodating a wide variety of tunings. Pitch bends are also widely used in its performance giving it a unique Asian shimmer.

Ultra World X-Tet consists of Gary Schwantes, on saxophones



Slideshow: [Ultra World X-Tet at O1C](#)

Related Topics

[Music](#)

[jazz](#)

[chinese music](#)

[world music](#)

[fusion](#)

Advertisement

One of the many strengths of this ensemble is their ability to evoke imagery in the mind of the listener. The program began with "Alongside the Butterfly Spring" based on Bai minority folk songs. As Gary Schwantes played the melody on the saxophone, Winnie Wong and the guzheng ensemble played delicate tremolos. One could easily see the serene Chinese landscape: mist covered mountains, overgrown hanging vines, drippy caves and placid lakes.

Also in the imagery department "Highlands of Tibet" a traditional Qinghai melody followed. On this song Gary Schwantes switched to the "Dizi" (Pronounced: "Deet-zuh") a Chinese transverse bamboo flute. Its sound is unique: somewhere in-between a flute and a reed instrument due to a hole on the top of the flute that is covered with a membrane which buzzes when played.

The dizi along with the rolling tones of the guzhengs punctuated by the acoustic bass and rounded out by sophisticated playing on the drums evoked the snow capped mountains of Tibet, grazing Yaks and the expansive Himalayan landscape very effectively.

The concert was also filled with many pleasant surprises. The ensemble unveiled its new experimental piece "Irresistible Influence" composed by Gary Schwantes. The piece had its own notation system, a custom tuning and featured many extended techniques including cluster chord playing on the guzheng and use of multi-phonics on the saxophone.

The sound was angular and pointillistic and the rhythm section really stretched out into uncharted territory. Amazingly, the ensemble seamlessly morphed "Irresistible Influence" into a rendition of Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman".

Another surprise was the X-Tet version of Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit". It was a wild version given the instrumentation involved. Gary Schwantes played psychedelic lines on the dizi over the plucks and bends of the guzheng underpinned by slow throbs on the bass and drums. It really worked with this unique instrumentation and if Grace Slick and the Door Mouse would have heard it they would have been very proud.

Also notable on the program was "Spirit of My Homeland" a traditional Shaan Xi folk melody. A majestic tune that featured Winnie Wong as guzheng soloist.

Overall, the Ultra World X-Tet provides the maximum value for the entertainment dollar. The ensemble has a lot going for it including excellent musicianship, good technique, masterful improvisations, a captivating stage presence, full-spectrum tone colors, and a diverse repertoire.

Hopefully they will gain more notoriety and we will see more of their exceptional performances in the future.

The Ultra World X-Tet CD Moon and Legend is available from [CD Baby](#).

If you would like to continue receiving Asian Music related articles including the latest news, upcoming events, and reviews, please click the subscribe icon. It is free and anonymous. Thank you for reading and thank you for sharing this story with others.

To share ideas or upcoming events send email to asianmusicexaminer@gmail.com.

Like

Send

68 likes. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.



By **Johnathon Bakan**
SF Asian Music Examiner

Johnathon is a trained composer and multi-instrumentalist. He has a long standing enthusiasm for the music of the Asian diaspora. His interest in...

[Read full bio](#)

[Get my newsletter](#)

[Get my RSS feed](#)

[Become an Examiner](#)