

The best Asian Music concerts of 2012. (Photos)

BEST CONCERTS OF 2012 | JANUARY 31, 2013 | BY: JOHNATHON BAKAN |

7 photos

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Looking back on the year 2012, it was truly a year filled with exceptional concerts and memorable performances in the diaspora of [Asian music](http://www.examiner.com/topic/asian-music/articles). It was also a year filled with innovation and exploring new ground.

Jazz fusion innovators [Ultra World X-tet](http://www.ultraworldxtet.com/) premiered Magical Adventures of the monkey king an innovative

multi-sectional work that combined the best aspects of traditional Chinese music and fine modern Jazz. Monkey King was based on a ancient 16th century Chinese legend called Journey to the West. Monkey King chronicled the journey of monk Hsuan Tsang and a misfit band of protectors to bring sacred sutras to the East.

The X-tet lineup included Gary Schwantes, Composer Artistic Director and woodwinds, Winnie Wong, guzheng, Yangqin Zhao, Yangqin, Doug Ebert, Bass and Surya Prakasha, drums and harmonium. The Monkey King sound was very cinematic. One could easily imagine the Monkey King frolicking through fantastic landscapes filled with adventure. The music was very evocative and would lend itself well towards movement or film. It is hoped that the X-tet will continue to develop and perform Monkey King in the new year.



(http://cdn2-b.examiner.com/sites/default/files/styles/large_lightbox/hash/d5/ab/1359692339_9920_682.JPG)

Conductor Jindong Cai congratulates Sensei Kazue Sawai on her performance at the Stanford Pan-Asian Music Festival, one of the best concerts of 2012.

Photo credit: Johnathon Bakan

musicianship and depth of feeling.

The Concerts of Compassion series featured the best of Indian music in the Bay and was held at the M.A. Center in Castro Valley. A fundraiser for the humanitarian efforts of embracingtheworld.org (<http://embracingtheworld.org>), the second concert in the series was especially notable as it was an all day concert that featured both North and South Indian musical traditions. The concert's Highlights included a "Taala Vaadya" rhythm composition as a homage to late Mridangam master [Sri Vellore Ramabhadran](http://www.kutcheris.com/artist.php?id=210) (<http://www.kutcheris.com/artist.php?id=210>) that featured three young children on the Mridangam playing complex rhythms beautifully. It was very clear that the Master's legacy will live on through the children.

Also notable was a performance by Prassana Rajan on the carnatic flute. A disciple of flute maestro [Sashank Subramaniam](http://www.shashank.org/) (<http://www.shashank.org/>), Prassana Rajan definitely honored his guru during the performance as his playing was technically excellent and soulfully rendered. He was flanked by Vignesh Venkataraman on Mridangam and Divya Mohan on violin.

Innovation was also evident in Vietnamese music. Dan Tranh zither champion Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ who teamed up with the legendary Kronos Quartet for a concert called "Womens Voices". The centerpiece was "[All Clear](http://www.examiner.com/article/women-s-voices-kronos-quartet-historic-concert-at-ybca)" (<http://www.examiner.com/article/women-s-voices-kronos-quartet-historic-concert-at-ybca>), a composition that explored the theme of War and in particular the suffering of women and children who bore the harsh effects of the American war in Vietnam.

The phrase "Awe inspiring" does not even begin to describe this magnificent composition. "All Clear" featured Vietnamese zither master Vân-Ánh Võ on her signature instruments the đàn Tranh zither, đàn Bầu, monochord, and beautiful voice.

The composition featured the Kronos Quartet alternating between traditional strings and exotic Vietnamese instruments. Many gongs were also present on stage, including clangorous artillery gongs made from expired ordinance. "All Clear" was emotionally gripping and delivered with exceptional

The finale featured the exceptional, harmonically rich voice of Nachiketa Sharma who sang North Indian classical songs and was accompanied by Vivek Datar on harmonium and Ravi Gutala on tabla. One of the notable things about his performance was the meditative quality that was maintained throughout the concert regardless of whether the song was at fast or slow tempo, dense or sparse in content. His voice was rich, mature, a true pleasure to listen to.

•Japantown Jazz Festival

The Japantown Jazz Festival was another highlight of the year. Three top shelf bands were featured in Japantown's Peace Plaza in San Francisco. It featured a stunning list of talent including Michael Sasaki and the Bluesetta Band, Anthony Brown's Asian American Jazz Orchestra and the Bob Kenmotsu quartet. Highlights included a performance by the AAJO including the multi-sectional masterpiece "EO9046" that wove traditional Japanese instruments with jazz sonorities and paid tribute to the Japanese-Americans who had survived internment during WWII. Also notable was a performance of a Duke Ellington classic by veteran Jazz cat George Yoshida at a spry 90 years.

Other Notable Festivals

The Stanford Pan-Asian Music Festival did an [Asian Zither Summit \(http://www.examiner.com/article/asian-zithers-highlighted-at-pan-asian-music-festival-stanford\)](http://www.examiner.com/article/asian-zithers-highlighted-at-pan-asian-music-festival-stanford) that featured zither players from Japan, China, and Korea. Noted was a stunning performance by 70 year old koto master Kazue Sawai who played both standard koto and bass koto in a concerto that was backed by the full resources of the Stanford Symphony Orchestra.

The [San Francisco World Music Festival \(http://www.doordog.org/festival/\)](http://www.doordog.org/festival/) shared opera traditions from around the world, including selections from countries as varied Azerbaijani opera, Korean, Chinese, Hindi, and Tibetan cultures. The beauty of this festival is it is not content to only present varied musical traditions side by side, but has consistently innovated unique cross-cultural collaborations that make the SFWMF fresh and vital year after year.

Upcoming in 2013

Vân-Ánh Vanessa Võ will present [several Bay Area concerts \(http://vananhvo.com/event.html\)](http://vananhvo.com/event.html) of Vietnamese music.

Ultra World X-tet will showcase their mastery of traditional and contemporary forms at [Yoshis in February \(http://www.yoshis.com/sanfrancisco/livemusic/artist/show/3238\)](http://www.yoshis.com/sanfrancisco/livemusic/artist/show/3238).

Natori Koto master Shoko Hikage will be performing with the [Wooden Fish Ensemble \(http://www.sfcv.org/event/wooden-fish-ensemble/wooden-fish-ensemble-old-and-new-music-from-the-pacific-rim\)](http://www.sfcv.org/event/wooden-fish-ensemble/wooden-fish-ensemble-old-and-new-music-from-the-pacific-rim) showcasing old and new music from the Pacific Rim.

Guitarist Michael Sasaki of Cold Blood and Hiroshima fame will perform with the [Murasaki Ensemble \(https://www.facebook.com/MurasakiEnsemble?notif_t=fbpage_fan_invite\)](https://www.facebook.com/MurasakiEnsemble?notif_t=fbpage_fan_invite). The concert will feature special guest performers on the Shamisen.

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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 Asian music began in



1981 when he discovered koto music while thumbing through records a the public library. This led to further explorations in Asian...