

CD REVIEW

Local theremin virtuoso
blazes new ground

Shuehli-Ong's new Xenovibes album shows that Singapore has more to export than just mainstream pop artists, says **CHRISTOPHER LIM**

XV III - Xing Paths
Xenovibes
Electric Muse/Fingerfoot Music
Productions
Rating: A

This Is The One
Utada
Island
Rating: B

Gentle Love
Norihiko Hibino
GEM Impact
Rating: B-

Cheek To Cheek: Jazz Standards From Rio
Lisa Ono
Avex Trax
Rating: C

It's gratifying to see Singaporean artists like JJ Lin and Stefanie Sun blaze tried-and-tested paths in mainstream music genres because it means they've succeeded in a crowded competitive field.

However, there's a special pleasure in hearing local artists distinguish themselves in musical paths less well trodden. There are countless pop singers out there, but only a handful of professional theremin players.

A what? Theremins are rare electronic instruments that are hard enough to find, and even harder to play well. If you want to hear what one sounds like, there's no better place to look than the latest album by Singapore's own theremin virtuoso, Shuehli-Ong.

She's just released *Xing Paths*, the third album from her Xenovibes project, which is a partnership between her and John Martinez. It's Ong's best stuff yet.

It's a lush blend of quirky electronica driven by strong melodies and lots of imagination. There are plenty of surprises in store too. For example, on your first listen to



Sweet Talker, you might think you're listening to a slide-guitar solo, but it's actually Ong in cheeky imitation mode.

"On this CD, I concentrated on building new sound, putting my voice and theremin through 'awkward' moments and fine-tuning my style of synth performance; which I think has grown to be more sophisticated," says Ong.

If there's one thing that *Xing Paths* demonstrates as a whole, it's that Ong isn't a one-trick pony, and her vocals are appealingly polished. While the Kate-Bush-esque vocal acrobatics from the last album are largely absent, there's plenty of understated emotion.

While adventurousness is the whole point of crafting one's own musical genre, it isn't necessarily the most effective way to break into a new market.

By shrewdly picking the kind of material most easily accepted by the American pop market, Japanese pop star Utada Hikaru has finally broken into the United States with her second all-English album, *This Is The One*.

The record hit the No 2 spot on the digital US iTunes music charts, which is the highest spot ever reached by a Japanese artist.

It's much better than her first all-English album, *Exodus*. But the biggest strength of *This Is The One* - its crossover accessibility - is also its biggest liability.

The album is too formulaic. Every song is in the same slick R&B style. There's none of the brilliance of Utada's early single *First Love*, or even her last Japanese album, *Heart Station*.

But the vanilla predictability of

the songs doesn't detract from Utada's gorgeous voice. It also helps that she doesn't sing with a Japanese accent. There's simply no reason for English pop audiences to reject the songs.

And at least there's one instant classic - a vocal adaptation of Ryuichi Sakamoto's beautiful *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*.

There's a fine line between calculated accessibility and cheesy monotony, and that division separates Utada from Norihiko Hibino.

Hibino will be performing here at the Video Games Live concert of game soundtracks in June, but on his new album *Gentle Love*, he's swapping his composer's hat for that of a solo artist.

The album comprises forgettably tepid smooth-jazz instrumentals of pop songs like Don McLean's *And I Love You So* and Bob Crewe's *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*.

To Hibino's credit, his saxophone tone isn't quite as sentimental as Kenny G's, and there are a few nice song choices, such as Wang Lee Hom's *Forever Love*.

You also have to give Hibino kudos for painstaking attention to sonic detail. *Gentle Love* was recorded at DVD-quality 24-bit/96Khz and mastered at a fanatical 24-bit/192Khz, which results in a pristine clarity that will please most audiophiles.

In contrast, there isn't much to redeem Lisa Ono's jazz album *Cheek To Cheek: Jazz Standards From Rio*.

The Brazilian-Japanese singer's unobtrusively breathy voice is inoffensive enough for background music, but if you like your vocal jazz fiery, you will find this boring enough to douse any attempt at maintaining interest.

Just when you think there's some redemption in the tasty guitar solo on *Satin Doll*, you realise it isn't Ono playing, but rather Lula Galvao. Quintessentially soporific fare.



Cold front: 'Operation Anchorage' throws you into a pivotal battle between the United States and China that takes place in Alaska

Fallout 3 add-ons
extend game's life

By **CHRISTOPHER LIM**

FALLOUT 3 tied with *Fable II* for our pick of last year's best action role-playing game (RPG), but the former title has remained very much current with a pair of downloadable expansion modules for the Xbox 360 version of the game, which broaden the game's world of post-apocalyptic America.



Cutting edge: The Pitt is the post-apocalyptic name for what used to be Pittsburgh, but is now a stronghold for slavery

But here's one essential piece of advice: Before you enter the simulation, make sure you have heavy weaponry capable of taking on power-armoured foes.

If you are into amassing arsenals, you will probably find *Operation Anchorage* worth your time. Those looking for a good storyline, however, will be disappointed.

The opposite applies to *The Pitt*. It's intriguing because it's the first time you get to leave the Capital Wasteland and travel to another state altogether.

The Pitt is the post-apocalyptic name for what used to be Pittsburgh, but is now a stronghold for slavery.

Unlike the Capital Wasteland, The Pitt was spared direct nuclear bombardment, which means some of its industrial equipment is still in working order, but there's more to the situation than meets the eye. Let's just say the plot thickens.

Unfortunately, there isn't a great deal of loot to be had. Yes, there are a few new weapons like an ad hoc motorised saw, but it's nothing to scream about. Forget about finding shiny new power armour there.

Operation Anchorage and *The Pitt* are just two of a trio of previously-announced *Fallout 3* expansions. The third, *Broken Steel*, is scheduled for release via Microsoft's Xbox Live on Tuesday.

This last add-on promises to be the most important *Fallout 3* expansion yet because it's the only one that extends the main story arc.

Advanced gamers who have already hit the 20-level ceiling on character advancement are also eager to begin their journey towards the new Level-30 limit.

Stay tuned to find out if the wait has been worth it. While *Operation Anchorage* and *The Pitt* have already been released for the Xbox 360, PC gamers will have to wait for a simultaneous release of the three add-ons sometime in the near future.

Rating for Operation Anchorage: **B-**
Rating for The Pitt: **B**

Fallout 3: Operation Anchorage and *Fallout 3: The Pitt* are available now as direct downloads from Microsoft's Xbox Live service, for 800 Microsoft Points (US\$10) each

Shiver-worthy
moments

Ophelie Gaillard
CIC Chamber Orchestra,
conducted by Michael Costeau
Esplanade Concert Hall
April 29, 8pm
By **CHEW XIANG**

THE cello, because of its range and timbre, is said to be the closest to the human voice.

From that insight has been born an industry of transcriptions for the cello - of pieces originally written for singing, or other instruments.

Craig Leon's new arrangement of a number of classic romantic tunes for the remarkable young French cellist Ophelie Gaillard is another generally distinguished addition to the list.

Dreams as the arrangement of 10 pieces is called, was performed on Wednesday at the Esplanade with Gaillard and her 1737 Gofriller cello, and accompanied by a young troupe of French musicians picked for the occasion: the CIC bank's 25th anniversary in Singapore.

Gaillard from the start played well and honourably but one felt the arrangements could have given her and her instrument greater prominence. She has magnificent technique and the tone, especially in the lower range, of her cello was magical, yet frequently some over-enthusiastic playing in the strings would cover her, or the arrangement simply didn't let her breathe.

One was left snatching at, then savouring, the morsels that made it out.

But there were some shiver-worthy moments. *Una furtiva lagrima*, from Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love*, is for orchestra and tenor (and features a particularly exquisite bassoon solo, for which the bassoonist



Gaillard: Has magnificent technique and the tone of her cello was magical

was rewarded by Gaillard with her post-concert bouquet).

In the first stanza she took the tenor line, then went an octave down for the second. It was a remarkable effect - if making a mockery of the libretto; as if the aria had slipped into duet and in those precious few seconds - "un solo istante" the lyrics go at that point - we like Nemorino are almost confounding the two voices, exactly as we're supposed to.

David Popper's *Hungarian Rhapsody* ended the list for the evening (except for a couple of unfortunately bland encores) and it finally gave her room to indulge in some fearsome arpeggios that Yngwie Malmsteen would have been proud of.

The programme has already been recorded, in London, for release under the Naïve label, so you can soon hear it for yourself, should you require something soothing and seldom short of interest.

But the regret must be that Gaillard wasn't given a chance here to perform one or even all of the Bach suites for solo cello, or something from the extensive early music repertoire that is actually her forte.

AROUNDTOWN



A traditional Romeo and Juliet

TNT Theatre Britain has developed an international reputation for presenting dynamic and traditional productions of Shakespeare's major works. Live music and a simple performance style allow a modern audience to experience Shakespeare's great love story *Romeo and Juliet* (above) as an Elizabethan audience might have done at a London theatre some 400 years ago.

TNT's rendering of the oft-produced play promises to free it from the clichés of *West Side Story* as a story not of urban street kids but of "two houses both alike in dignity". This is a tragedy of clan war, of a town in violent chaos, driven by family feuds, where the deaths of two young lovers bring the warring factions to their senses.

A traditional production of the tale of star-crossed lovers is becoming increasingly rare. TNT has taken upon itself the lofty task of presenting *Romeo and Juliet* as Shakespeare may have intended it, with limited scenery, live music, small casts, energetic physical performances and a sensitivity to poetry. All of these elements are present in this

production, which will tour 30 countries on three continents in 2009.

'Romeo and Juliet' will be performed from April 30-May 2 at 8pm in the Jubilee Hall of the Raffles Hotel. Tickets are \$69 and can be purchased at www.sistic.com.sg

Seeing animals in a different light

THE Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ) will be exhibiting *If a tree falls in the forest*, an art installation that aims to question common views of and relationships with animals, and challenge these pre-conceived ideas by making subversive changes to the way we observe them.

If a tree falls in the forest is made up of three parts: a live performance titled *Before the flood*; *Kings*, an exhibition of rare animals never before seen in Singapore, and *Soon Bo's Cold Room and Shelves*, a collection of photographs.

"ICZ aims to promote discourse on the principles and practices of animal spectatorship, animal advocacy, animal killing and animal-related policies across the fields of entertainment, social science, commerce, culture and ecology and we hope that viewers will look upon animals in a different light after seeing this exhibition," says Tomo Kawasaki, director of the ICZ.

Exemplifying Mr Kawasaki's statement is *Kings*, a collection of rare white Tottori cockroaches, never before displayed in Singapore. They are from the Tottori sand dunes of Japan and are an attempt to illustrate how animals are assigned a certain "status" based on their aesthetic appeal. "Simply put, the cuter the animal, the more protection and support it will receive. We assert that the panda, which is marketed as a cute and cuddly animal, will never become extinct as long as the WWF

(World Wide Fund for Nature) features the panda on its logo," explains Mr Kawasaki. Animal souvenirs and memorabilia from around the globe in the museum's collection also accompany *Kings* and pose the question: "What purpose do they serve and what memories do they contain?"

'If a tree falls in the forest' will be exhibited from May 2-20, from 11am to 8pm, in The Substation Gallery. For more information, visit www.substation.org and www.criticalzoologists.org. Admission is free

Rhythms of gypsy music

AS part of its year-long 60th Anniversary celebrations, the Alliance Française de Singapour will be hosting two concerts in May featuring illustrious musicians making their first visit to the island.

For their first show, The Alliance Française Theatre will be introducing to Singapore diabolical rhythms of gypsy music - the *pompe manouche*, the waltz's whirl, the tango and the nostalgia of the ballads from Eastern Europe - brought to life by the renowned gypsy jazz group, Beltuner. Beltuner promises genuine musical alchemy; three musicians, three instruments and through the sorcery of rhythms and melodies become a hundred.

The trio met in Paris and their first album came out in May 2005 with pieces recorded mostly live. They received success rapidly and following that, regularly appeared in concert halls, theatres and festivals in France, in the provinces and in Paris and abroad. Infused with more maturity and personality was their second album, released in 2008. The trio's regular emphasis on improvisation, bringing in their own compositions and including in their performances numerous influences, have contributed to increase the popularity of a style and music that had begun to disappear in the last 20 years.

Beltuner will perform on May 7 at 8pm in the Alliance Française Theatre. Tickets are \$25-\$35 and can be purchased on www.sistic.com.sg

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