

## Pre-release sneak: theremin virtuoso's new album

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You'd be forgiven if the prospect of listening to a rare new instrument makes you cringe. Especially so if the instrument in question is an electronic one invented early last century, with a sound most commonly associated with cheesy low-budget science fiction flicks. But the [theremin](#) really deserves to be cut some slack. What it needs is the right ambassador to re-introduce it to modern ears.

Singaporean Shueh-li Ong, half of the electronic pop duo [Xenovibes](#), sounds like the right woman for the job. She's got one leg in the world of geeky academia, and the other planted squarely in contemporary music, which is a perfect combination for bringing the sound of the theremin to the world without dumbing it down.

After reading all this, you might still be shocked when you spool up the new Xenovibes album, *Xing Paths*, because it's so immediately appealing that you'd be hard pressed to find anything geekily esoteric about it. It certainly doesn't conjure images of some mad scientist covered in wires creating weird noises. Well, just because something is technically interesting doesn't mean it has to jar the ears. Admittedly, some of the best recorded music is challenging - Coltrane, Bach and Battles come to mind - but that's hardly a pre-requisite. Accessibility and excellence aren't mutually exclusive.

*Xing Paths* is the third Xenovibes album. It should be officially released any moment now, but we got a sneak preview. It's less flighty than the second record, *Music From Another Land*, which sees Shueh-li show off vocals that are as interesting as her theremin playing, especially on the Kate Bush-esque track *Palindrome*. But it's also a lot more polished and mature. Shueh-li sounds like she's comfortable enough with her art that she doesn't need to show off; it's all about the music. There's a good dose of humour in there too, with a convincing imitation of a slide-guitar solo on *Sweet Talker*.

Shueh-li says her goal for Xenovibes has always been to "the melding of [her] background and persuasions", and *Music From Another Land* was a milestone on that journey, but *Xing Paths* allowed her to "relax and have fun", and that's reflected in the album.

A good gauge of musicians' imaginations is how well they re-interpret older material. *Vibe PN* was written by the other half of Xenovibes, John Martinez, on an S50 synthesizer back in 1994, but it's given a fresh new reworking in the new album. Listen closely to the lyrics, and you'll hear Shueh-li singing about prime numbers. In discussing the inspiration for the subject, she references French composer Messiaen (who wrote the cerebral *Quartet For The End Of Time*). Yup, that's how nerdy this lady can get. Altogether, Martinez contributed three existing compositions (the others being *Who Knew* and *Concrete Jungle*) for Shueh-li to re-interpret on *Xing Paths*.

The album also contains a catchily funky cover of the Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations*. But some of the slower, less dense tracks, like *Last Date* (which was previously released on Valentine's Day as a free download), give Shueh-li more space to show off the theremin's expressive potential. Shueh-li was the first musician to perform *Last Date* - written by Floyd Cramer - on a theremin last November (2008), and she thinks of her latest version as *Xing Path's* love anthem.

"The theremin is put through phase distortion and played staccato-like (minimal portamento with slight pitch bend) for that bolder, electro-pop feel without it being incongruous with the sheen of the almost smooth jazz/electronic feel of my version," says Shueh-li, explaining her approach to timbre and performance on *Last Date*.

All in all, the album is a sterling effort that sets a new benchmark for Xenovibes, and a showcase for making sophisticated music accessible to the mainstream audience. "I am proud to be an Asian that transcends her boundaries and stereotypes because she can," Shueh-li says. We're proud of you too. Now if we could just buy your albums as lossless digital downloads (they are already available as physical CDs, and lossy MP3s and AACs), we'd be perfectly happy campers.

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