

## Interview with Xenovibes

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### Interview with Shueh-Li Ong and John Anthony Martinez, Xenovibes

By Jill Hughes

**USAProgMusic:** When people ask you where your band is from, what is your response? What made you decide to move to the U.S.?



**Shueh-li:** This is an interesting question because a band requires a fixed membership. Xenovibes is a show first. The band is put together as required by the show like Cirque du Soleil does. The concept of Xenovibes the show came to me while I was working in Singapore on my 1<sup>st</sup> album to explain that I am a composer/sound designer/synthesist and performer all rolled in one. The sound was to be more assessable yet progressive and was apart from my role as Director of Electric Muse, a performance art and show production company that catered to the more esoteric clients that wanted technology designs created along with original music that were unique yet had entertainment value.

I moved to the USA in 2005 when John Anthony Martinez, who was invited to perform at the premier of Xenovibes in 2004, suggested that America might enjoy what it had to offer. It was wonderful to think that the amalgamation of the many personalities of music in Xenovibes the Show could go that step further from the seed of a concept. The concert premier in Singapore which also featured Australian flautist Michael Spicer and Singaporean guitarist Jeff Long is the idea of “disparate souls meld” in action and the meaning of Xenovibes [foreign+expressions], which is really about all of us. The harsh dividing line (attitude included) between East and West, North and South does not exist anymore. Most all of us have traveled extensively or been exposed to the cultures (both pop and high cultures) of the world; consider that one can find as many McDonalds in China as one can find Chinese takeaways in America..haha! Did I mention I am Australian born? I moved from the southern hemisphere to the equator (Singapore) before going northward bound.

The short answer to part one of your question would be, Xenovibes is not a band but a show with a lineup of accomplished musicians from diverse musical backgrounds picked from where it performs. Its core members are Shueh-li and John. Though it consists of an original show written by Shueh-li the difference is in how the

musicians interpret the music and their parts. Very jazz improv-like.

**USAProgMusic:** How would you classify your music? Do you feel it has any progressive elements to it?

**Shueh-li:** I call the music ‘XenoVibes’ with elements of eastern culture and western classical forms, virtuosic lines and musical shapes that interpose and juxtapose. On listening to the material, it sounds like a variety of popular styles with an ‘asian twist’. On closer look, you will find that the CD is me as composer-synthesist-performer-engineer and producer; with each CD featuring a guest instrumentalist. Xenovibes the show however, relies on John and I creating the atmosphere and rest of the band the show flavor.

John has the power to push, pull back and even change the feel of the rhythmic elements, e.g. *Music From Another Land*.

The rest of the band compliment each other with the “call and response” style of performance, suggest new motifs, extend the style, even offer new sounds. Shelley Carrol who played with us at our debut at the Dallas Museum of Art, did just such a move; unscripted, he removes the head of the flute from its body to imitate my Theremin, much to the delight of the audience.

I’d like to mention that Xenovibes is not fusion or world music, which is often thought of as asian flute (e.g. Xiao) playing the melody in a jazz piece or a tabla in an electronic piece; with the instrument substituting for a saxophone or beat section. My mind harvests from its training and sensibilities of its musical environments as though these were one school of practice. When I write I program sounds as I create musical lines and orchestrations.

Xenovibes is rock ‘n roll in attitude. To break out of established patterns yet be edifying not bigoted or selfish. You may say that Xenovibes has become a definition!

According to the Merriam Webster, the word “progressive” means ‘making use of or interested in new ideas, findings, or opportunities.’

I am an opportunist when I compose. My training, like my professional journey, feeds off my thirst for pushing my boundaries. I step away from my comfort zone each time and the further I step the more territory I cover. It is very similar to a fitness program where you push your boundaries only to discover on looking back how much you have achieved.

The two main areas I work “progressively” in are studio production (where I compose and produce) and live performance (and show design). My area of specialty known as Extended Synthesizer Techniques is an enabling technology, permitting me to execute intricate lines, real-time performance and sound manipulations without a tower of synths. There is a short dissertation on this on the [Electric Muse webpage](#). With that said, the music of xenovibes has elements of progressive rock, latin pop, electronica, classical (music) and ethnicity, all pushing the performer at every show.

**USAProgMusic:** Shueh-li, what kind of music training do you have? What made you decide to play the Theremin?

**Shueh-li:** In summary, I have a degree in piano performance from the Elder Conservatory in Australia. I simultaneously studied electronic music with Tristram Carey before embarking on postgraduate research in the area of Interactive Multimedia Performance where I picked up 2D and 3D animation. These were incorporated into my live performances and manipulated in real-time with the extended synth techniques. As a student of music technology, I had naturally known about one of our oldest and most treasured inventions, the Theremin. I had wanted to complete my quest for instruments that form my heritage (the Chinese Guqin became the voice of my asian lineage, the tin-whistle my Australian roots and the Theremin anchoring the music technology end of who I am, with the synthesizer the extension of my piano training).

**USAProgMusic:** How often do you get together to rehearse and/or record?

**Shueh-li:** We rehearse sparsely so as to allow spontaneity in live performance. When we get together we work more on live production issues and new ideas.

I utilize the same idea in recording. I request a feel and leave the musicians to do their stuff. It is in the postproduction that I get to analyze their performance with a microscope and bring out its beauty and what my ears consider of a quality that is unique to the performance.

**USAProgMusic:** What are your goals for the “group” short-term and long-term?

**Shueh-li:** It has taken 2 1/2 years to get to where the name Xenovibes is not only synonymous with integrity and great entertainment in the USA but also recognized as a great ‘band’. Xenovibes is an unconventional band... I hope its reputation will help us achieve our goal of taking it across America and its neighboring countries; “an international tour with enough of a budget that we can really make it an event (a la Jean Michel Jarre or Cirque),” says *John* and don’t forget we are working on a collection of Christmas music, and a third CD of new Xenovibes material!

We would like for the electronic and progressive music festivals and communities in the USA to contact us so that we fulfill our goal. The American people are some of the hardest working people I have ever come across and I am glad to have had the opportunity to work with them.

**USAProgMusic:** How has the U.S. audience received your music so far?

**Shueh-li:** They love it the instant they watch us play. They can’t believe what they are seeing and hearing. I get the feeling that people are starved for entertainment that show off a fresh approach to live performance. Where performers work hard and demonstrate skillful execution and tricks that require the audience to pay attention.

**John:** I think that the US audience has been cautiously receptive. We all know many people don’t enjoy music they don’t understand. Some might expect that the theremin and some of the other instruments Shueh-li plays will be used as gimmicks on stage. But once they come and see the show live and hear that these are serious musical works which require virtuosic performance techniques, we seem to have a lot of success in winning people over.

**USAProgMusic:** Does your music get played on the radio or in clubs?

**Shueh-li:** Xenovibes has a club setup as well which we have performed at several club venues and tracks from the CD have had airplay from internet and international radio (including Singapore of course).

**John:** Yes. There are a few college, public and internet radio stations that are allowed to play non-commercial independently produced progressive music. There are a few DJs spinning and remixing Xenovibes in Dallas. We actually did a live show with one about a year ago. It was a really nice twist.

**USAProgMusic:** What are some of your influences for your music?

**Shueh-li:** This is where I have the opportunity to explain myself a little. The music of such composers as Debussy and Saint-Saens, and Jazz, America’s own artform all have elements of the Pentatonic scale that when isolated sound like ‘asian music’. And so my work has often been described as having an ‘asian twist’ because I am asian. My asian sensibilities come from having been exposed to the environment (as a child listening to the radio, my parents’ habits) before I took a formal interest in the Guqin and the Chinese culture. My affection for playing classical music is present in Tamorgano and Farcical where a Baroque/Classical feel is doused in rock to get the progressive music guys going; myself included! I endeavor to write as a 21stC composer who has been influenced by her training and her background.

John’s background is jazz and funk though he can play almost any popular style. He is a versatile performer and very quick at picking up what is to be done then driving the song or creating an impact such as in a recent Mary Kay advertisement he played on.

**USAProgMusic:** What kind of music elements do you think are most important when you are writing your music?

**Shueh-li:** I free my mind to inspiration, some of the best ideas come 1<sup>st</sup> thing in the morning and when I am NOT in front of my equipment. I play the scenario in my head as I place ideas in it. It is usually my good intention to try something new, bearing in mind that I work with sound blocks and the music technology in the process. I am fortunate to have been given a variety of projects such as theatrical productions which take into consideration the space, emotion and impression. A fun one was locating speakers under the stalls and utilizing low frequency vibrations tastefully under a musically eruptive piece. Neu Genteels-Nuevo from my second electronic opera and found on the CD "Music From Another Land" is a good example of such work where the piece goes through stages of development.

**USAProgMusic:** Just this year you won the opening band slot for Moogfest'07. How was that experience? How did Bob Moog and/or his instruments impact your life?

**Shueh-li:** Moogfest'07 was very special to me. It was a chance to play for Bob so to speak and share the stage with some of the best musicians. I have also wanted to play in this vibrant city since I visited it last in 2005 when I also attended Moogfest'05.

Prior to acquiring Bob's Theremins (Etherwave and Epro), we had a Minimoog at the Electric Muse studio. It is difficult to explain what history does to a person when he/she sits down and tries to fathom it...then standing there to honor a man who put a mark on it. The feeling was "wow!"

John agrees it was a great honor to have been selected along with me to pay tribute to Bob's creations, and to play in the city he was born and where he acquired his music credentials (the "Fame" LaGuardia High School and later Berklee Boston).

**USAProgMusic:** If you could give advice to anyone who was thinking about taking up the Theremin, what would you tell them?

**Shueh-li:** 'Analog Days' co-writer, Trevor Pinch, describes the instrument as "notorious difficult to play because of the lack of physical feedback." A select handful have taken on the challenge to go professional because they felt an affinity with the instrument.

A strong musical foundation and a good ear greatly assist in getting started. Have such fundamentals as knowing your scales, being able to sight-sing and respond to changes quickly. Make aural training a habit. There is a different level of difficulty when creating music versus just 'squeally' lines, and when playing in a band. Monitoring can make or break the performance, so can the weather and objects on stage. Xenovibes has performed under conditions as wild as 110 degrees and 40 degrees. Vivacious cameramen have 'played' my instrument even toppled it, getting way to close in the call of duty.

Theremin connection ([myspace.com/thereminconnection](http://myspace.com/thereminconnection)) has a database of thereminists. You will find everyone has a method and a style including embellishments that are their trademark "squeals" done in a controlled manner. I have developed my own 'repertoire' to work in with my performance requirements. My theremin goes through multiple pedal effects and with each one my ear and technique have to retune; my movements tend to be more boisterous when playing through effects. At Moogfest07, we played our version of Trance to get the show started, then segued into a progressive rock piece in two movements showcasing the Epro played through 3 different effects. In a situation where you do not have a dedicated theremin monitor your monitor engineer is an important ally!

For more information go to: <http://www.Xenovibes.com>

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