



Home > Reviews > Album: Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku 和敬清寂 by Sienná

Reviews Music

Album: Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku 和敬清寂 by Sienná

By **Moataz Gwaily** - June 5, 2023



Certain magic exudes from Sienná's latest studio release. Combining the peculiar harmonic and rhythmic leanings of Björk, with a traditional Asian flavor, Sienná's Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku is an album that will test your merit for handling the experimental and the unfamiliar but will do so while providing a sensational textural arrangement, intricate and flowing compositions, and an overall polished artistic affair.

Born in Kyoto and based in Oslo, Sienná is an artist, a composer, and a songwriter who seems to thrive by straying off the beaten path, offering music that's elusive and left field, and her latest studio release offers just that. Channeling her love for what she describes as an 'east-meets-west' concept, Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku follows her "no-rules" approach to songwriting, producing an album of cinematic, stand-out pieces of meticulously weird and often entrancing tunes.

After a short introduction that paves the way for this album's traditional Japanese timbres, and Sienná's lithe compositions and nuanced arrangements, incorporating a healthy dose of tasteful dissonance and an intelligent and detailed production job on 'So May It Be', the album's first stunner is the sophomore piece, the expansive 'Ajikan Meditation'. Utilizing a few motifs, low-tempo and enthralling, 'Ajikan Meditation' features distinctive shifts in timbres in its lengthy runtime, including soaring pads, fragmented rhythms, and a striking spoken word performance. The following cut, 'Encircle Me Now' fuses an acid jazz intro, with boomy sub bass, serene pads, electronic beats, and a noodling guitar run through a filter, the piece soon shifts, using a spacey piano part, into a cinematic celebration with jubilant strings and group claps, before an electro-pop outro bookends this shapeshifter of a piece.

After the cluttered, upbeat rhythms and melodies of 'Evils In, Fortune In', the striking 'Four Stones, Three Waters, Eight Forests' marches in. An ambient piece that slowly builds up from a humble, arpeggio-driven intro, to incorporate more broken-apart rhythms and shifty string leads, for an affair that seems to build up eternally before abruptly dissipating into thin air. The horror jazz atmosphere of 'One Life, One Encounter' conjured us the smoky, dangerous back alleys of the music of Bohren & Den Club of Gore, with its hazy pads and prominent upright bass.

The wailing string pads of 'Red Bird Arises, Dragon Awakes' and its driving electronic beat and acidic synths, fused with traditional Japanese koto sounds, make for an outstanding fusion of worlds in a delicious, restrained package that begs to be explored. The ceremonial pace of the penultimate, the titular piece is perfectly difficult to locate. Landing equally fully in the realms of melancholy and celebration, this is a poignant composition that would be totally fine -and jarring- in a funeral march, or a wedding procession. Sienná pays an elegant goodbye with 'Pay It Forward'. A rhythmically challenging piece of experimental, electronic jazz that sounds like Bonobo on steroids, a final highlight of the artist's distinctive compositional and arranging talents.

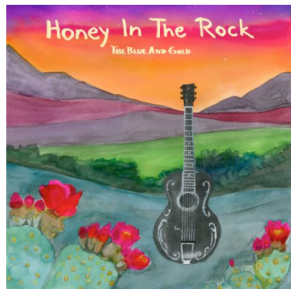
Sienná was not off when she stated that her music is not for those who follow mainstream pop, because Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku is at the total opposite end of the spectrum. An album of spicy, far-eastern soundscapes, jazzy influences, challenging compositions, and rhythms, amidst delicate and detailed production. An album that also manages to retain a level of accessibility and class that made it land far away from the unlistenable lands of experimental music, managing instead to provide a compelling listening experience that will take a moment to wash off.. and maybe a couple of mainstream pop tunes.

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