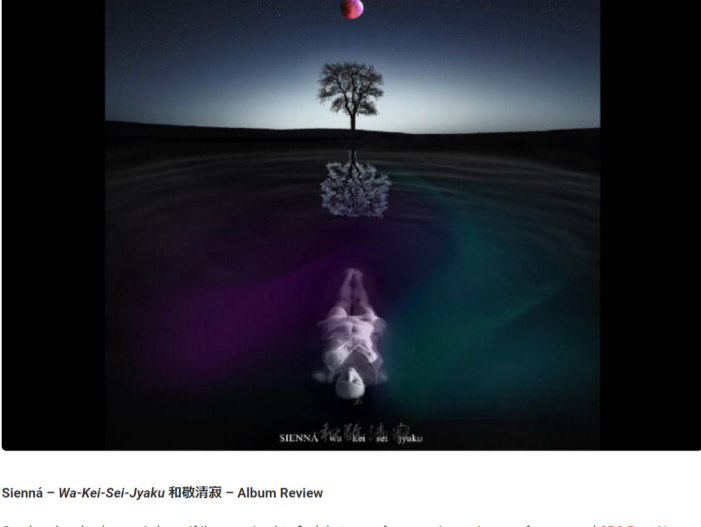


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# Sienná – Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku 和敬清寂

MUSIC REVIEWS Jer@SBS May 27, 2023 0

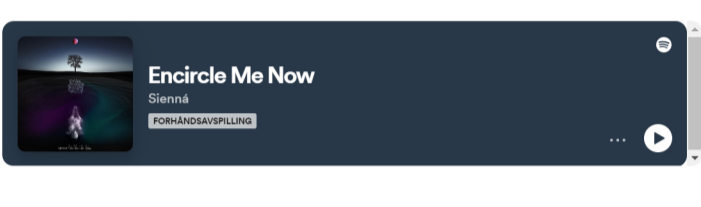


## Sienná – Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku 和敬清寂 – Album Review

Go ahead and ask me. Ask me if I'm surprised to find that one of our previous winners of our annual SBS Best New Sound (2017) is still out there crushing it with incredible music year after year. Tell ya what...in the interest of time & moving things along, I'll just tell you the answer rather than wait for the question to come my way – NO! Of course I'm not surprised! Not even remotely. I've been a massive supporter and believer in what Sienná creates, all the way back to the very first time I heard her music in 2017. You can find her all over these pages of ours, though admittedly, it has been a while since she last appeared here on the sleepingbagstudios site...it was actually more than three years ago that Sienná released her last album, Moon Rituals. Scary how quickly time flies. That being said...I don't worry about an artist as creative as Sienná is...somewhere out there, I know she's always making music and art of some kind with whatever time she's got. Given that we've all had plenty of extra minutes throughout the pandemic era, Sienná included, it makes sense that she's released what might very well go on to be considered to be her most compelling record-to-date, fifteen full years after her original debut album.

She's a veteran of the scene at this point, proficient at producing genuinely sensational crossover sound and wildly expressive cross-cultural music. As "So May It Be" started up, you can instantly hear the creativity in her sound selection, the stunning clarity in her production, and the artistic depth Sienná brings to her music. Blurring the line between analog & digital realms, her music has always been very dreamlike...almost as if she's able to pull the soundtracks from our slumber, ranging from the true bliss of serenity, to the most intense extremes, and document that through the songs she creates. "So May It Be" gives Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku a wonderfully unique opening that tantalizes our senses, and draws us all in.

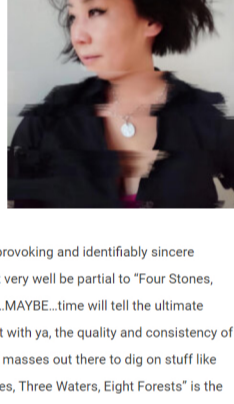
Following the album's shortest track with its longest one, "Ajikan Meditation" develops instantly into a stoic, trance-like vibe that's powerfully moving and equally captivating. Keep in mind, I'm not talking about trance-like as in what folks out there associate with digitalized vibes or Electro-based music – no – I'm talking about the actual state of being in a trance...like hypnosis of sorts, or retaining a discipline that keeps your attention fully locked onto a single moment in time. Like what true "Ajikan Meditation" would likely be about...I suppose that's what I'm saying. The internet tells me that the practice itself is based around breathing exercises, and that it's a method of meditation most often associated with Shingon Esoteric Buddhism. Which is pretty much what I can tell ya...anything else I would write down about it would be very much borrowing from anything else that's already been written about the subject out there; I have no practical or physical experience with Shingon Esoteric Buddhism or any kind of real meditation at all if I'm being truthful with you. The concept of what it is, and what it can provide to us, is certainly not lost on me...and if I was more in-tune with my soul and/or took the time for more self-care in this lifetime...perhaps I'd know more about it or be practicing something like "Ajikan Meditation" each day myself. For the time being at least, music is my church, my religion, and my purpose...and it's thanks to artists like Sienná that are able to teach me a few things in this life as I listen, that my mind is able to expand a degree or two beyond anything music-related. I really love what I hear in "Ajikan Meditation" – and if this is at all what the actual practice sounds like, believe me, I'm definitely into it. Love the addition of the spoken word element to guide us along as well...it's a very vivid, mesmerizing song that is unlike so much of what's out there in terms of its pace, composition, structure, and sound selection...it's another early sign of the innovative creativity of Sienná being as focus & potent as ever.



"Encircle Me Now" brings back one of our favorite Sienná-esque sounds, which is the low-end bass she has used so successfully on tracks like "Quintessence" in the past. There's no doubt about the different way she's using it this time around on her new album...but yeah...familiar in the sense that you know she loves that low-end vibe every bit as much as we do when we're listening. "Encircle Me Now" goes on to be an experience that's much more defined by its contrast than any one dimension...like, for example, "Quintessence" was basically all about that bass leading the way from start to finish, where on this track, it's more of an accent element within a larger concept – make sense? So don't get me wrong, you'll get enough of it in the mix to give "Encircle Me Now" a danceable vibe at points, sure – I'm simply saying it's not the completely dominant trait or perhaps even the main reason to listen to this particular track. "Encircle Me Now" makes great use of the space and melodic serenity you'll find in it as well, so that the moments where the kickass bass ain't the driving force behind the song, the rest is still carrying a large enough portion of the weight through its interesting textures & tones & airy, dreamlike sounds, that the moment stays remarkably engaging, while also displaying a whole multi-dimensional approach. I suppose the short way of saying what I'm saying is that it's really like Sienná has found the perfect way to thread to completely different main ideas together, and somehow make everything meet precisely in the middle. No one aspect of the song is any more dominant than the other, or any less interesting – and that's actually quite a noteworthy accomplishment in terms of finding the balance in her material.

"Encircle Me Now" is also a great track to lead us into "Evils In, Fortune In", which is probably arguably even closer to a song like "Quintessence" in terms of what establishes that deep irresistible groove you just wanna reach over and turn UP. As promised from her website directly, "Evils In, Fortune In" is a brilliant example of how she's able to create songs that feel like a meeting between the East and West – that's practically Sienná 101 at this point in time, and a real staple of her own signature style & sound. The way she's got "Evils In, Fortune In" subtly changing along the way as it plays is something else to experience y'all. While it's much more centered around the main low-end groove, if you're really paying close attention, you'll hear that there's a metric ton involved that contributes in behind the scenes in a more supporting role in the background of "Evils In, Fortune In." So it's like...you can almost choose how you wanna listen to this song...you can take what's clearly there on the surface for ya, start wild'n'out and getting into that main hook in its rhythm, or you can admire the high degree of art that continually surrounds the bass-line too. I reckon the savviest among us are probably capable of doing both too...and if that's you, you're bound to get that much more out of listening to this track all-around.

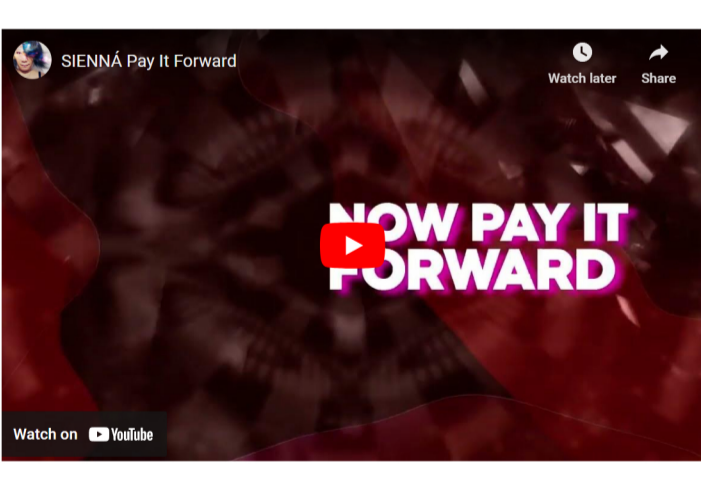
If anything did surprise me, it wasn't that tracks like "Encircle Me Now" and "Evils In, Fortune In", that are likely to be universally loved by one and all, it was more towards hearing tracks like "Four Stones, Three Waters, Eight Forests" that seem to perfectly strike the balance between melody and rhythm, in addition to straddling the realm between organic and digital sound. It goes on to not only provide one of the album's more adventurous and ambitious experiences in that regard, but also completely pulls it off as well. "Four Stones, Three Waters, Eight Forests" can be hypnotizing, mesmerizing, and captivating too, yes – but it's also got a real intense beauty to it that shines just as boldly and brightly. All-in-all, this track actually reminds me a lot of how Robert Smith was experimenting with incorporating orchestral elements into The Cure's sound way back in the Wild Mood Swings days...not the happy, ridiculous stuff, but the more thought-provoking and identifiably sincere material that made for the record's greatest tracks. So you got it folks...I might very well be partial to "Four Stones, Three Waters, Eight Forests" even more-so than the songs that came before it...MAYBE...time will tell the ultimate story on all that as it always does, but so far as I've been listening, to be honest with ya, the quality and consistency of this album has been nothing short of stellar all the way through. I'd expect the masses out there to dig on stuff like "Encircle Me Now" and "Evils In, Fortune In" for sure, but a track like "Four Stones, Three Waters, Eight Forests" is the kind of audibly adventurous serenity that really speaks volumes to me.



Similar to how "So May It Be" worked its magic on ya at the start, sometimes short tracks can be truly effective when they're created by the right people, you feel me? Sienná knows how to make the most of any length of time, but these tracks like her album opener and "One Life, One Encounter" later on down the line really seem to capture a whole lot in short space, and deliver very vivid, cinematic style sound through your speakers. The kind of sound you feel like you can practically see in your mind, you following me? "One Life, One Encounter" nearly has its own like...underground experimental jazz-lounge vibe to it...and when you add in the poetry/spoken word aspect to it, you really can't call what you're hearing anything other than a form of genuinely groundbreaking art. I've got a whole lot of love for tracks like "One Life, One Encounter" – this is soul-soothing sound with refreshing creativity, 100%.

I gotta say...I am unequivocally impressed with everything I've heard from Sienná, and as I pointed out at the very start of this review, I already think the world of her talent as an artist. Theoretically, that actually leaves her less room than most to raise the stakes, but she really has upped the wow factor on this record and seems to have tightened up all the tools she uses in her craft that much more. I listen to a track like "Red Bird Arises, Dragon Awakes", and the entire track reveals such a mastery of control. It's still fair to say that a lot of what she creates could be found on the experimental side of Electro for sure, but there's a giant difference between those out there hitting the buttons at random and getting lucky, versus an artist like Sienná that is playing with passion, purpose, and intent. With all those arrows in her quiver to pull from, it's like everything slows down...you can visualize full songs, even as you're playing them or putting it all together for the first time...you're in control of the moment, yet still able to flow in tandem with the music as it comes out. So you end up with these extraordinary compositions like "Red Bird Arises, Dragon Awakes" that have no problem at all moving quickly...that's what it sounds like to us on our end as we listen anyhow... but for Sienná, it's like she's moving around each note like Neo in the Matrix during "bullet-time" – you get what I mean? She's able to anticipate much quicker than the average artist, because her ear for sound, her interest, and her desire are all working together in unity. I mean...you know...that's my theory anyway...I'm not necessarily saying it's the gospel truth, but I'd imagine it ain't that far off the mark when it comes right down to it. We've all heard the sound of an artist going through the motions, we've all heard artists still building their skillsets, we've all heard ideas that don't quite measure up to someone's capabilities...and it's clear that Sienná has leveled-up far beyond all that kind of stuff. She's a master of her craft now, and every song on Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku has been proof of that. She's always been great – that's what I've been tellin' ya from day one – but now she's letting that greatness out at an all-star level, to the point where anything passing by could hear it. Plus, anytime she wants to get super gnarly with the kick-ass bass-lines and low-end vibes like she does once again on "Red Bird Arises, Dragon Awakes" – believe me when I tell ya, I am completely here for it. The way she contrasts the bass with the dreamy elements of melody on this song is truly awe-inspiring.

As for the album's title-track, "Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku", Sienná drifts further back into the realm of dreamy art as opposed to the more energetic Electro-based vibes she was exploring on the track before. "Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku" plays nearly like a combination of Jazz/Waltz as it begins...sounding like it's been stripped out of an era long passed...not dated so much as it is a nice reminder of the simplicity to be found back in the day...long before my own time...the stuff we read about in books and see in movies now I suppose. I think it's one of those genuinely neat tracks that'll probably go on to be one of the most polarizing of the bunch really...which in itself is interesting, given that "Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku" is essentially loaded with entirely inoffensive sounds and a very gentle demeanor. That being said, as much as I might personally appreciate the exquisite use of pace and space, or the way that Sienná plays this song with such surgical precision, there are gonna be others out there that will probably feel like this particular track might move a bit too slowly I'm sure. Our differences make the world go 'round, as they say. Ultimately I feel like a song like "Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku" still has a high degree of accessibility to it, but I suppose it's fair to say that it's got a more particular audience – make sense? Like...I don't think anyone out there will rush to turn it off or turn it down, but it's going to be the real fans of Sienná and artistic instrumentals that end up returning to it more-so than the majority of the masses I'd say. Still, I think everyone out there should be able to appreciate and admire the care she's put into making this song, the beauty in the results we hear, and the expressive nature of her audible art as it unfolds through our speakers. I guess that's the thing...some people appreciate the art & craft and all that goes into it, others are looking for music that they can sing along with & move them to the dance-floor. While "Wa-Kei-Sei-Jyaku" is definitely more of an acquired artistic taste in that regard, to be fair, Sienná's given this record a split personality that should have enough tracks to satisfy listeners on both sides of the fence, completely.



To wrap up her latest record, "Pay It Forward" serves as both the finale, and as far as I understand it, has also become the freedom from albums as well...which is an artistic choice to incline...in those kind of circumstances, there's really no wrong choice as to which song could become the gateway in for people to listen. That being said, I don't think it would have occurred to me to have "Pay It Forward" be the chosen out to bring in the masses...I'm sure I would have gone with something much more obvious like "Encircle Me Now", "Evils In, Fortune In", or "Red Bird Arises, Dragon Awakes" – but that's just me and the way I hear things. I'm never gonna be the guy that'll tell you that accessibility is the only measurement for a song or an album's success in any way – but it is usually the key to leading people in to have a listen. What I like about Sienná choosing "Pay It Forward" is that it proves she's just as unpredictable in terms of how she goes about presenting the music she makes overall. The choices I highlighted might seem obvious to me, but that might not be the case for everyone, nor is it necessarily going to be what the artist herself wants...you see what I'm saying? "Pay It Forward" is playful, sincere, creative beyond words, and absolutely unique – all of these things should be effective in bringing people in to listen, and retain them through pure authenticity & the wonder of hearing something they haven't before. It might not be the traditional definition of accessibility in that regard, but the value in hearing something genuinely unique is always priceless. The quality in her production and her ideas never drops – she consistently creates success for herself by staying true to her art, the cleverness in her craft, the precision in her production, and the heart found in the dedication she applies every step of the way – if that's not enticing enough for you to be listening, I don't know what to say other than that it should be.

Find out more about Sienná from her official website at: <https://www.sienna-web.com>

Find out what we do & how we do it at sleepingbagstudios, and be the next up on our pages by clicking here!

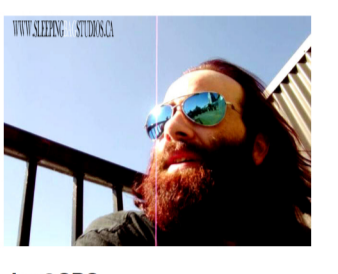
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