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War and peace



MELANGE OF RHYTHM: wHOOL. Photo: R.Ravindran



wHOOL. PHOTO: R. Ravindran

In the beginning was the end...

From a culture at the far end of the ancient Silk Road, a flautist in a Robin Hood hat drew out wisps of solemn tunes from his wind instrument to play the Indian National Anthem. It mingled with the discordant arabesques of the guitars, the keyboard and the powerful double-headed drum, to create a suite-like melody — gentle sometimes, speedy and powerful at others, each musician adding his own touch to the shared music, suggesting solidarity without conformity.

On day three of *The Hindu* Friday Review November Fest, wHOOL, a traditional Korean music band with a contemporary touch played different musical timbres — from wobbly and gliding to brittle and intense to rambunctious. wHOOL's sonic adventure saw genres, which were plentiful from jazz to Bollywood and traditional to rock, spoken in distinct tones. The instruments imitated natural sounds with the conch, the cymbals and the Korean version of the Tibetan long

horn, the dungchen, sounding out delicate trickling phrases interspersed with aggressive harp-like glissandos, from the driving melodies and echoes of the clash of swords to the peaceful trills of the pastoral flute.

The band, whose name means 'to empty and renew the mind', was founded by Yoon-Sang Choi in 2003 with Do-gi Hong, Karam Choi, Hyunsoo Kim, Dong-il Park and Halim Ryu. The members played not only their accustomed instruments but also kept time on the snare drums and the fierce double-headed drum, vocalised energetically, ran their drumsticks across cymbals and banged wood blocks. All the while, the musicians moved around, weaving in and out of the audience, trying to bring their creative energy to the crowd, while their music roamed just as widely.

Hint of harmony

In the dozen pieces that they played, the chant-like phrases from the keyboard (Dong-il Park) and the wind instruments (Do-gi Hong) was at the core of the songs: three or four percussive beats centering it while hinting at a bonding of Korean modes and Western harmonies.

Choi, arms akimbo, eyes raised to the ceiling, beat out the rhythm of life through the buk and the jang-goo while Hyunsoo Kim's cymbals whooshed and peaked like the sound of an Eastern gong. But this touch of tradition was randomly interspersed with the keyboard adding edgy techno beats and psychedelic rock, with manic melodies and relentless crescendos. The band moved Westwards, even unleashing some wah-wah vocals with plenty of scat thrown in.

Rhythm and range

Next followed individual showmanship — each musician played his instrument with the drummers (Yoon-sang Choi and Halim Ryu) winning over the audience with their percussive arsenal.

The last piece, inspired by Korean court music, invoked plentiful rain and prosperity filled with the guitar's charging runs and the jang-goo's crashing percussion sandwiched by avant-garde jazz beats. Layered sounds, strident gongs and an atmospheric horn combined in this piece to produce a sound that gathered like dark clouds. Clouds that could herald lilting rain on lush fields or the clash of battle swords in faraway lands. Or the fluted trills of a peaceful pasture.

wHOOL's music was more than a journey to the East — it was a voyage in search of it. Or at least in its whispered, bucolic end...the beginning.