

Pago Libre

Mountain Songlines



**John Wolf Brennan
Arkady Shilkloper
Florian Mayer
Tom Götze**

What the Mountains Whisper

Ten albums and a few lineups into its recording history, **Pago Libre** remains one of the most distinctive of bands in any of the various genres it has a foot in.

The quartet traverses so many. Most prominently, it combines the drive and groove of jazz, the melodic impulse of folk music, and the timbral qualities, density, and orchestration of chamber music.

That is what Pago Libre has pursued since 1989. Its 30-year history equips it with profound purpose and certainly with dazzling ensemble intuitiveness.

It embraces thrilling collaboration through “comprovisation,” where composition and improvisation are inseparable – “where the borderline is, listeners don’t need to know, and it might even be better if they don’t,” says Russian horn virtuoso Arkady Shilkloper.

With **Mountain Songlines**, the quartet arrives at a high point, inspired by alpine vistas and other grandeur. To explain the title, Irish-Swiss pianist and composer John Wolf Brennan cites two texts, both touchstones for him – and his own vast experience of exploring the Swiss Alps.

The first is a curiosity of ethnomusicology: **Alfred Leonz Gassmann’s** book **Zur Tonpsychologie des Schweizer Volksliedes** (About the Tone Psychology of Swiss Folk Music, 1936). That monograph is long out of print, so Brennan cherishes his copy all the more: “Pure electricity!”

Gassmann stated two curious hypotheses. First: that a particular sound motive – a sort of sonic DNA – seemed detectable within all Swiss folk songs. He gave the name “Holdio Uri” to that “Urmusik-Motiv.” He even identified that primeval motive as a six-four chord in F: C-C-C-a¹-f.

Did Gassmann intend to claim that that precise chord was within every Swiss folk tune? Certainly, Brennan notes, many folk tunes don’t contain the Ur-Motiv, and yet “you could say that folk music nevertheless includes the idea of the motive, or maybe the *spirit* of it.”

He continues: “I truly think Gassmann found something like the holy grail, not only of Swiss folk music, but of the whole alpine sonic world. And of course the alphorn, on the one hand, and yodeling, on the other, are the perfect epitomy of this hypothesis.”



Mountain Songlines's eighth track, **Hol-di-o-U-ri**, tests the hypothesis both comically but also quite devoutly.

But first let's consider Gassmann's second hypothesis. It was just as arcane. He posited a specific relationship between *soundscape* and *landscape*: the shapes, contours, and outlines of mountain panoramas or the silhouettes of mountain ranges impressed themselves into melodies composed among them. (This CD's cover illustrates the concept.)

Of course, as Brennan notes, such relations would depend on the composer's position within any mountain setting. So, as with the Ur-Motiv, the effect could hardly be literal, but rather metaphoric, almost mythic. Brennan says: "Gassmann's idea is bewildering, but at the same time it strikes a deep chord somewhere within the soul. You just *feel* there must be something to it."

Some 50 years after Gassmann offered his theses, **Bruce Chatwin**, the British author of merged fiction/non-fiction, published **The Songlines**, an account of his time among Aborigines of Australia. Interpreting their mythical perceptions as best he could from his Western viewpoint, Chatwin reported that the Aboriginal "Dreamtime" held that language started as song, and the ancestors sang the land and all it contained into existence.

Chatwin further speculated that when early humans, evolving on the African savanna, persistently fled large predators, they took – dreamed – their "song-

lines" as they went out into the world, including to ancient Australia.

"In my mind, the two books became one," says Brennan. "Whenever I look at the mountain skylines – and I live in a place surrounded by them – I not only see them, I *hear* them."

As in the cases of Gassmann and Chatwin, Brennan's personal response resonates with the mythical bases of Art and Song.

No doubt, he says, that effect stems in part from the weekly hikes that he and his brother Peter, during their teen years, took in the Alps with their father, Hans Wolf, a talented amateur classical pianist (while their mother was a fine singer of classical and Irish songs): "Every time he saw a special rock formation, he stopped and put his ear to the rock and said to us: 'Listen to the song the mountain is singing or whispering to you.'"

Unsurprisingly, "we considered that to be utter baloney," says Brennan. "But years later I found myself sharing and passing on this 'myth' to my three daughters."

All this explains why, for many years, Brennan dreamed of recording an album of the songlines he joined upon looking at the mountains.

Now it has happened.

In Pago Libre's translation of such concepts into music, the literal and metaphoric merge into a way of interacting with the world around, with the elusive nature of nature, and of existence. In Brennan's case, his own imaginative reach scales the Alps' contours and heft, at the same time drawn aloft and grounded to the earth.

"Exactly," Brennan exclaims, presented with this interpretation. "And remember," he says, "I live in a country with lots of exact clocks'n'watches." Hence he has inherited the urge to create and capture reality both imaginatively and mechanically.*

This is the first new studio album by Pago Libre in 11 years, since **Fake Folk** (Zappel Music, 2009). Inter-vening was **got hard** (Leo Records, 2018), recorded live with orchestra at the International Music Festival Alpentöne in 2017 and, like **Mountain Songlines**, alpine themed.

The lineup now is the same as it was then: **John Wolf Brennan** on piano, **Tom Götz** on bass, **Florian Mayer** on violin, and **Arkady Shilkloper** on horn and alphon.

The title of Brennan's **Hornborn Hymn** seems self-explanatory, but Brennan jokes that while being in the mountains takes you closer to heaven, one must beware of getting "stuck on cloud 17." He achieves this by "earthing" the piece, and all of his music for this drum-less quartet, with deep beats and grooves (in 5/4 and 6/4), as well as busily burrowing earworm melodies.

The horn is the instrument for hymns, Brennan believes, and he says "I composed the piece with Arkady's unique tone in my head." But his piano ably assists – after all, he notes, its name in German, Flügel, also means "wing."

It may be surprising to learn that Brennan relates this piece, and the Pago Libre project, to his early fascination with earthy yet buoyant African rhythms. The likes of Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath and the Nigerian Highlife icon Tunji Oyelana were crucial influences on his musical directions.

He has traveled far, since. Last year he hiked the whole of the **GTE**, or Grande Traversata Elbana, and it inspired the album's second piece. The GTE is a 60-kilometre trekking path that crosses the ridges of the whole of Elba.

Brennan has hiked the GTE several times, climbing peaks along the way including, last year, Monte Capanne. At only 1,019 metres, Capanne might not sound like much, but those metres are all above the level of a sea that is visible all around. Sea and mountain beckoned Brennan to this composition.

*cf. "Born in Ireland, now a Swiss resident, Brennan perfectly matches the romanticism of the one place with the watchmaker exactness of the other."

Brian Morton, THE WIRE



Fotos: Michael Brändli, Hardstudios Winterthur, Feb 2020



With shifting, canny variations in time and tone, it is classic Brennan. It begins with piano preparations: the first 2 minutes and 22 seconds you can hear his masterful “arcopiano” (with bowed strings) and “oudpiano” (with damped strings). Then comes the main theme in 7/4, a capricious violin escapade, echoing gypsy and klezmer elements, and a haunting horn solo, riveting even by Arkady Shilkloper’s extremely high standards – it soars over Capanne. The next section alternates from 6/4 to 5/4; that, Brennan explains, “means 11/4 together – and the intriguing thing about this bass ostinato is that you can tap it with your foot in 11/2 and every two bars you get the ‘1’ accent on the downbeat, then on the offbeat, and so on ...”

Give it a try. Tap your foot, or just let the tune tumble you along!

Urwuchs, which means “primal growth,” is Florian Mayer’s first composition for the quartet. The title refers to an experience the violinist had while the band was recording. They were in an old guesthouse in Neftenbach, a village near Winterthur. Mayer emerged one morning to tell his quartet mates over breakfast that he’s been kept awake by “strange voices” from within an ancient tree outside his window.

“Oh yes?” the band replied.

The voices inspired this piece. It demonstrates how far Pago Libre can reach into experimental contemporary music, but it also hint at the jazz anarchy that

Mayer, and Tom Götze too, heard while growing up in the former German Democratic Republic.

Armenian Princess is the second piece Tom Götze wrote for Pago Libre after joining the band in 2012. The first was the entrancing **Cümbüş** (below). The haunting melody echoes with ancient legends of the Armenian people whose holy mountain is the mammoth Ararat (5,137 metres). The composition’s tone of longing relates to Ararat’s complicated geopolitical location within the territory of archenemy Turkey. There, to the Armenians, it resembles a captive princess.

Sorrow gives way to the anxious, awe-struck co-composed and “comprovised” interlude **At the Abyss of Nothing** which prefigures Götze’s show-stopping **Cümbüş**. That’s the name of a Turkish-Kurdish “poor man’s oud,” part lute, part banjo. Its inventor, Zeynel Avidin Cümbüş, took his name from the instrument, not vice-versa. It became common in the 1930s in the mountain area of Eastern Turkey, home of many Kurdish people (which is why Erdogan, the current Osmanian despot, refers to the Kurds as “Mountain Turks.”)

The piece refers back to the Armenian princess, Ararat, and all those same troubles. Götze drives its infectious rhythm by slapping the top of the body of the bass with his hands in between playing the bass line.

Again co-composed by Pago Libre, **Ridge Walk** (whose German title “Gratwanderung” literally means “walking on the ridge”) evokes a climber’s sense, when walking on a narrow ridge trail, of the earth falling away on both sides in an awe-inspiring but unnerving way. Brennan says: “If you hike in the mountains, especially in bad weather, with an icy or snowy surface, with fog and mist, every step has to be taken cautiously. And standing still is not an option.”

Beware of vertigo.

Brennan calls attention to the track’s sense of what Arnold Schönberg called “Klangfarbenmelodie”: melodic snippets “travel” through the timbres of a succession of instruments as if it were one big instrument, “as if a hovering spirit pulls the strings at the right moments.”

Hol-di-o-U-ri is the quartet’s interpretation of Alfred Leonz Gassmann’s “Ur-Motiv.” It’d be a short composition, standing alone – about seven seconds – so Brennan elaborates on it and combines it with his cheerful, ever-so-Swiss **Tü-Da-Do**.

The combination is part fun, with its hilarious ensemble yodel at the outset, but there’s much more. What starts as an evocation of Gassmann’s motive – the one he claimed he had found within all Swiss folk music – expands to embrace Brennan’s life and musical journeys.

To a musicologist, says Brennan, Gassmann’s chord “might just seem like an ordinary Quartsextakkord

(six-four chord) of a kind that often serves in classical music as a sort of Romantic flourish – a musical curlicue.

“But of course there is more to it. The six-four is, in classical music, something like the “sus4” chord in modal jazz. You can hear it in John Coltrane’s ‘My Favourite Things’ and in Miles Davis’s modal compositions.

“The six-four often serves as a kind of prolongation of the cadenza. This ‘trick’ is used quite often in African music, as in Miriam Makeba’s ‘Pata Pata’ and many pieces by Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand).”

Into his explorations of Gassmann’s chord, Brennan entwines another variant of the six-four – **Tü-da-do**. That has special significance for him, and for any Swiss mountain dweller, because it’s the world-famous triad horn of the Swiss Postauto (postal van).

The characteristic horn of every yellow Postauto is an iconic triad in A: c#-e-a. Brennan recalls the triad as one of the first sounds he heard as a seven year old when Switzerland became his home. In the Swiss Alps, thousands of people in hundreds of valleys know it very well, too, as the Postauto is their only public transportation. Postauto drivers are renowned for politeness, helpfulness, and breathtaking skill in driving on extremely steep, narrow mountain roads and tracks.

The quartet interprets Brennan’s 7x7 variations on the triad which, if sung, sounds a bit like the “tüü-da-do” of the title. Swiss yodel singer Sonja Morgeneegg

echoes the Alpine horn with some Jüüzli. As the van wends its way, it rambles along in 4/4, taps an alphorn groove in 5/4, and don't miss the crazy solo that Shilkloper plays with only the mouth piece of the alphorn over a sequence of 11/8, 9/8, 7/8, 5/8 and 3/8. It may make you see the postal van heading past a paddock of whinnying horses.

There's an alphorn towards the end, too. Over a series of harmonic changes, the instrument can play only overtones, including the famous "alphorn fa" which is higher than "f" but lower than "f#".

Selbsanft (comprovised by Pago Libre) takes its name from a majestic mountain (3,029m – Brennan the mountaineer never names a mountain without citing its altitude) in the Canton Glarus, at the remote end of a long, narrow valley. The name means "gentle self," which seems paradoxical because the mountain's majesty is a bit intimidating. "But play it by ear!" Brennan recommends.

Most of this album's pieces evoke the world above sea level. In **The Melody of the Earth**, Shilkloper contemplates points both above and below sea level.

The composition is, he says, one for the dolphins, so follow his explanation as it sports above and below the waves: "I've been friends with the Embassy of the Dolphins for several years and am myself its messenger!

Last year, friends from the Embassy asked me to write a composition." It would be for the inaugural assembly of the organization, Nature of Wonder, in Delphi, Greece.

For his melody, says Shilkloper, he took 82 points along the 30th parallel, ones that the expedition of the Embassy of the Dolphins traveled, beginning in Tenerife, then towards Africa through Morocco, Libya, Egypt ... He located the points on a musical stave, in sequence, according to their altitude: Easter Island, the Giza pyramid complex, the Bermuda Triangle, the Great Wall of China ...

Of course, some of the 82 points were under water, in the depths of bays, seas, and oceans "for which, as we know, whales and dolphins are responsible."

He charted those on his stave, too.

To cap off the voyage, he called on vocalist Sonja Morgeneegg, from another of Brennan's projects, SOOON, to sing for the dolphins. After all, she had just returned from swimming with some, in Hawaii, and she reported that as her body remembered the sensation, she would sing them back into being.

Peter Monaghan, Canberra/Australia



Sälsbanft, Glarus, Switzerland (Foto: JWB)



Foto: Alexander Panov, Live at Zaryadye Hall, Moscow, Oct 2019

URWUCHS

hast du's gehört?
es war wohl schon immer da
aus der tiefe / der grund / die wurzel
aufgebrochen nun
über dem schutz der rinde / runzelig / schrumpelig
moosbäumchen zärtlich grünend / wie des
berghangs mikrokosmos

hast du's gesehen?
am fenster morgens / füllte der knorrige
deinen weiten / deinen dauernden blick
fühltest gemüt / und gang
die hand griff nach dem weissen tuch
der grund gab dir halt / nahm dich bei der hand
spielt *libre* / scherzt mit nadel / faden / pustekissen
alles kann wachsen / denn was ist schon tempo

tanz!
der sonne entgegen / die durch die *pagodenäste*
bricht
auch wenn's komisch ausschaut / auch wenn du
humpelst
wie ein knurriger / hurriger waldschrat

Florian Mayer

URWUCHS

did you hear that?
it was probably always there
from the deep / the ground / the root
now breaking off
above the protection of the bark / furrowed / wrinkled
small trees of moss greening tenderly / like the
microcosm of the mountain slope

did you see it?
at the window in the morning / the gnarled filled
your wide / your grieving glimpse
you felt your soul / and pace
the hand reached for the white handkerchief
the ground gave you hold / took you by the hand
playing *libre* / joking with needle / string / puffing
pillow
anything can grow / because what does tempo really
mean

dance!
towards the sun / when it's breaking through the
pagodian branches
even if it's looking funny / even if you're walking
with a limp
like a growling / howling wood gnome

Florian Mayer



Fotos: Alexander Panov, Live at Zaryadye Hall, Moscow, Oct 2019





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Fotos: Michael Brändli, Hardstudios, Winterthur

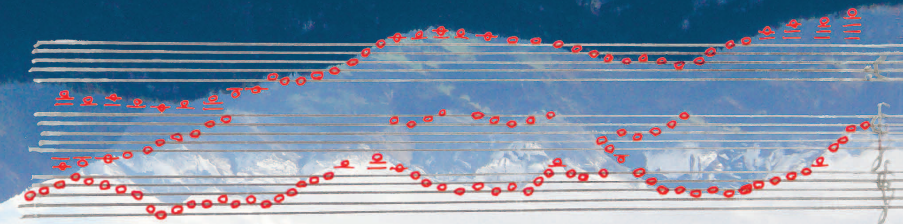


1. Anabol-Hydratation
2. Selbstseufzt
3. GTE
4. Cü-büs
5. Großwaderer
6. TÖDADOT
7. UDVUCHS
8. Armonise P.
9. Abgrund
10. DECO PX

« Bürgerstock »



Fotos: John Wolf Brennan



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