

# A REVOLUTION IN STEEL

## HOW ONE NEW INSTRUMENT HAS TAKEN THE WORLD BY STORM

BY MARK D'AMBROSIO

In the year 2000 in Bern, Switzerland, a sound was born. Brought into the world by two Swiss steel pan makers, this sound was named "Hang." Whether through Facebook or YouTube you might have caught a glimpse of this viral phenomenon as it is no stranger to internet fame. Simply put the Hang (pronounced "hung") is a melodic percussion instrument that is placed in the lap and played with the hands.

The Hang was the brainchild of instrument builders Felix Rohner and Sabina Schärer who together form the company "PANArt." Well versed in the sounds of steel, PANArt has been creating Caribbean steel pans and other experimental instruments since the 1970s. The Hang's inspiration came from an idea prompted by Swiss percussionist Reto Weber. Weber dreamt of an instrument that could combine the melodic elements of the steel pan with the rhythmic grounding of the South Indian ghatam. What followed was a convex circular instrument that has a range of notes within its perimeter, a large apex central note, and a smooth bottom shell with a resonant cavity.



Free Integral Hang (2010)

Image by Michael Paschko via Wikimedia commons

Like the steel pan, the Hang is made from steel carefully hammered into perfect intonation. The distinct UFO like shape of the Hang's body is constructed from its two convex steel sheets, which are glued to create its own Helmholtz resonator. The notes follow a unique zig-zag pattern across the top shell to facilitate the natural alternating of the hands.

Positions of the numbered tone fields indicated in the tables

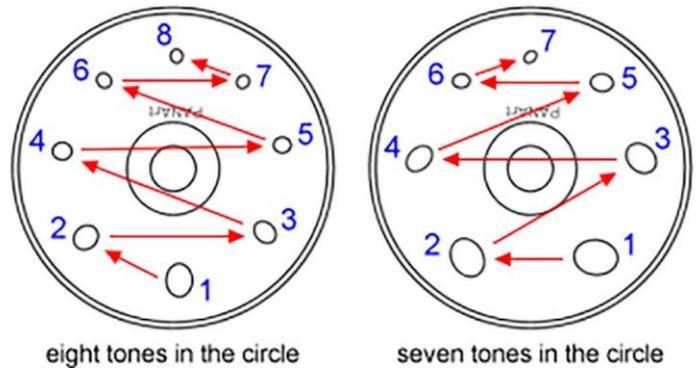


Image by Michael Paschko via hangblog.org

Each note is tuned with the fundamental pitch, the octave harmonic, and a second harmonic tuned a perfect fifth above that octave. Without enough real estate to contain an entire set of chromatic pitches each instrument has a unique set of pitches to which it is tuned. Common tunings include pentatonic scales, heptatonic scales, and various modes

Reception to the Hang was immediately and overwhelmingly positive. Something about its unique otherworldly sound drew listeners in and quickly captivated audiences worldwide. With emerging media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, the Hang rose to Internet fame that left everyone with the same question; "Where can I get one?"



Building the Hang was a deeply intricate and personal process, and ultimately PANArt lacked both the ability and the desire to meet this ever-increasing demand. Obtaining a Hang became more and more challenging as PANArt soon only built instruments for select people and refused to ship the Hang, offering in-person pickup only. Ultimately, in the fall of 2013, PANArt announced that they would be abandoning production of the Hang to pursue the creation of other similar experimental instruments.

Beginning in the late 2000s we began to see the first "Hang style" instruments being made by individuals other than Felix or Sabina. Since then, these secondary builders have grown at exponential rates. Despite initial legal pursuits from PANArt, these independent builders continued to thrive; however, their instruments needed an identity of their own. While a few builders gave their instruments their own unique names, there existed a need for a generalized term for this new instrument family. Seeing the need for this, Steel pan builder Kyle Cox of Farmington, Missouri's Pantheon Steel coined the term "Handpan." Since "hang" is a word of Swiss Bernese origin meaning hand, it was only appropriate that this term can both simultaneously recognize its Swiss origin and its steel pan roots.

Today the Handpan fosters a vibrant and quickly growing culture with a community of players, instrument builders, and fanatics spanning the globe. Still less than two decades old, the possibilities of the instrument are yet to be fully explored. The unique sound has already captured the attention of some of the world's best percussionists and found its way into the soundtracks of a number of video games, films, and television programs, and independent Handpan music has begun to form a niche genre all its own.

Despite its popularity, standardization and implementation into traditional settings has proven difficult due to both the instrument's difficult attainability and chromatic inability. However, with more Handpans being made every day, this may soon change. With the popularity boom of the Hang still unfolding, the future of this sound sculpture can only look bright.

More information can be found at [panart.ch](http://panart.ch), [madkdambrosiomusic.com](http://madkdambrosiomusic.com), [hangblog.org](http://hangblog.org), [handpan.org](http://handpan.org), or by viewing the documentary *HANG—a discreet revolution* by Thibaut Castan and Véronique Pagnon.

#### RECOMMENDED LISTENING

"The Path of the Metal Turtle" – David Kuckhermann

"Metromonk" – Manu Delago

"Lisn" – Daniel Waples

"Late Night Sound" – Dan Mulqueen

"A Whale and a Church" – Philippe Gagné

"Far From Home" – Adam Maalouf

"Real Music for Unreal Times" – Kumea Sound

"Ephemeral" – David Charrier

"The Sky's Window" – Mark D'Ambrosio and Zachary J. Rea

**Mark D'Ambrosio** is a percussionist, composer, educator, and multi-faceted musician who specializes as a Handpan player, performing across Colorado and the greater United States. This summer Mark will be touring Eastern Europe playing Handpan with the renowned World Percussion Group led by percussion duo Maraca2. When not performing, Mark is an avid composer, arranger, and music producer. He has released two EPs to critical acclaim, which have been featured in numerous creative projects. Additionally, he serves as an educator for various area institutions in the Western Colorado region and is an organizer of the Steel Mountain Handpan Gathering. Mark is currently pursuing undergraduate studies in music at Colorado Mesa University. **RIS**



MARKDAMBROSIOMUSIC.COM