

## Carried away to sacred spaces

By Ruth Ostrow

THE sound of the sarod vibrated in waves around me. The musician on stage cleaved his sarod, an Indian stringed instrument not unlike the sitar, to his body as one would a lover.

Before the performance he told me that perfect sound was what he was chasing - that moment when the fibrillations along the fret were so perfect, they came together in the centre of the note and exploded.

Such perfection happens only once or twice a year. But when this occurs, the musician is said to get a spark from his instrument so intense as to knock his body backwards. It's rumoured that one such instrument exploded in flames once during a performance in India, in front of many witnesses. Such was the intensity of perfect sound. In cabbalistic wisdom, it is a sound that summoned the Lord and created the universe.

It is the perfect note that, when harnessed, is believed by the Sufis and mystics of the orient to connect man to God.

The musician, Adrian McNeil, sat crossed-legged on the floor on a raised, wooden stage, the sarod between his legs catching glimmers of light in its metallic face. His partner, tabla (Indian drum) player Bobby Singh, sat next to him. I sat in the front row.

They began playing a raga, a traditional melodic piece. McNeil began moving his hands down the strings, stopping, moving again, slowly sliding his fingers over and over the same area, pushing out myriad different sounds -- all in the same soul group -- a tribe of sounds in a tapestry of music.

Up and down, up and down, he played until I began to sweat. Searching for the perfect centre, his fingers obsessed, going back and forth with such intensity as to bring a pain to my heart. A sharp sound, majestic and sweet, ran through the centre of my body. It seemed to pulsate at the base of my spine.

As the music heated up, so did my body temperature. In the intensity, my heart started racing. It was as if each note, each drumbeat Singh was playing, was inside my body, vibrating my body, and suddenly my mind was out of my body floating in a vast expanse of bliss.

Afterwards, I went over and talked to the musicians. I had so many questions. Why had I been so intensely enveloped by the music? Why did I have such a transcendental reaction? I felt I was literally surfing the music towards heaven. What was going on?

McNeil, senior research fellow at Sydney's Macquarie University music department, explained to me that sometimes mystical things happen during a concert. The music becomes a vehicle to take the soul higher and higher.

"When we are playing, both Bobby and I feel like we're entering a sort of doorway to another reality," he says. "We can be in the room, playing, concentrating on the notes, the technical perfection, and suddenly we're out into this vast space, vaster than any reality we know, and riding the notes towards something sacred."

"It becomes a deeply spiritual experience for player and audience. Music that is exquisite to people's taste causes an alchemical reaction. In Sanskrit it's called adrishta phala, a benefit beyond sight."

Ironically, the day after the concert, I met Michelle Mahrer, a dance film-maker, who has just made a documentary called Dances of Ecstasy with producer Nicole Ma, exploring how different cultures around the world connect with the divine through music, rhythm, and dance. The film is to be released at the International Festival, in Melbourne, in October.

Mahrer, through her dancing, became fascinated with the intoxicating, ecstatic and healing qualities of music and dance. Then she set about exploring through her films the transcendental effect they can have on body and soul. "For me, dance is a spiritual practice like meditation," she says. "It's the kind of experience that takes you to a place beyond the mind. After a while all the walls inside dissolve and you start to glide into an infinite expansive realm, following a flow of energy that comes from within. The repetitive rhythm of the music helps the mind to relax."

For many, this then becomes a mind-altered state called trance, as practised by shamans in primitive cultures.

"Around the world people are being drawn back to the primal energy that comes from music and ecstatic dance because we've lost touch with the sacred in our day-to-day lives," Mahrer says.

Her research has found that ecstatic states come from tapping into a universal energy that connects us all.

"It's a force that is mysterious and beyond what the rational mind perceives," she says. "There are dimensions to life that we don't understand and they are very beautiful."

McNeil agrees that music -- in its many forms of expression, melody, rhythm, dance, chanting or song -- can connect us to profoundly spiritual states. If we allow ourselves to relish these experiences, they take us to the divine. If his recent concert with Singh was anything to go by, I can only concur.

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