

Choteau, Montana

Someone lights candles and places them in the middle of the swept cement floor. I'm hesitant about the idea of a "circle"...too much like church-fellowship with its overly sweet sentiments. To my relief, the members of Mandir steer us right past the shoals of language.



We're singing, but not songs, or even melodies. Following Matthew Marsolek's lead, we sing pure tones, and Ralph Paulus' empty grain bin sends them back to us wildly etherealized.

Mandir is the Montana ensemble that includes those vortices of creativity, Matthew and Michael Marsolek, the originators of Drum Brothers. Both are polymathically musical, as are the other members of the group, Lawrence Duncan and Beth Youngblood. Choteau's Performing Arts League has brought Mandir to town for a week. They'll engage students from Bynum to Augusta, and after the fortification of nightly potlucks, lead adult workshops each evening.

Matthew observes that the height of the grain bin fits the wave-length of a certain note, and he sings it. It seems not to come from him at all, but from somewhere above the enclosed space, accumulating ringing layers of harmonics. Michael evokes barks and howls from his didgeridoo fierce enough to raise the hackles of any wild creature. This is no warm-fuzzy fellowship circle. This is an experience meant to induce awe at the power of sound.

Something similar happens in Drum Brothers' drum circles and classes, using big-toned African drums and complex polyrhythms. Groups of students, even novices, learn patterns that at first appear unrelated, but when played together overlap and syncopate in astonishing ways. The rhythms create an overall fabric of sound that engulfs the group, sustained by everyone and no one.

For Matthew, Michael and their cohorts, music is a boundless prairie of possibility. Rhythmic order and soundscapes lie all around us and inside us: why should we limit ourselves to the packaged and pre-formed variety? As Matthew says, "If you can breathe, you can sing". Why not in the grain bin? Why not all the time?



Months later, still under the spell of that evening, I pace the shore of an ice-bound reservoir trying to duplicate the pure tones it makes as it refreezes in the deepening cold. And what about a ruffed-grouse drumming circle somewhere in the woods this spring?

-Hannah Hinchman