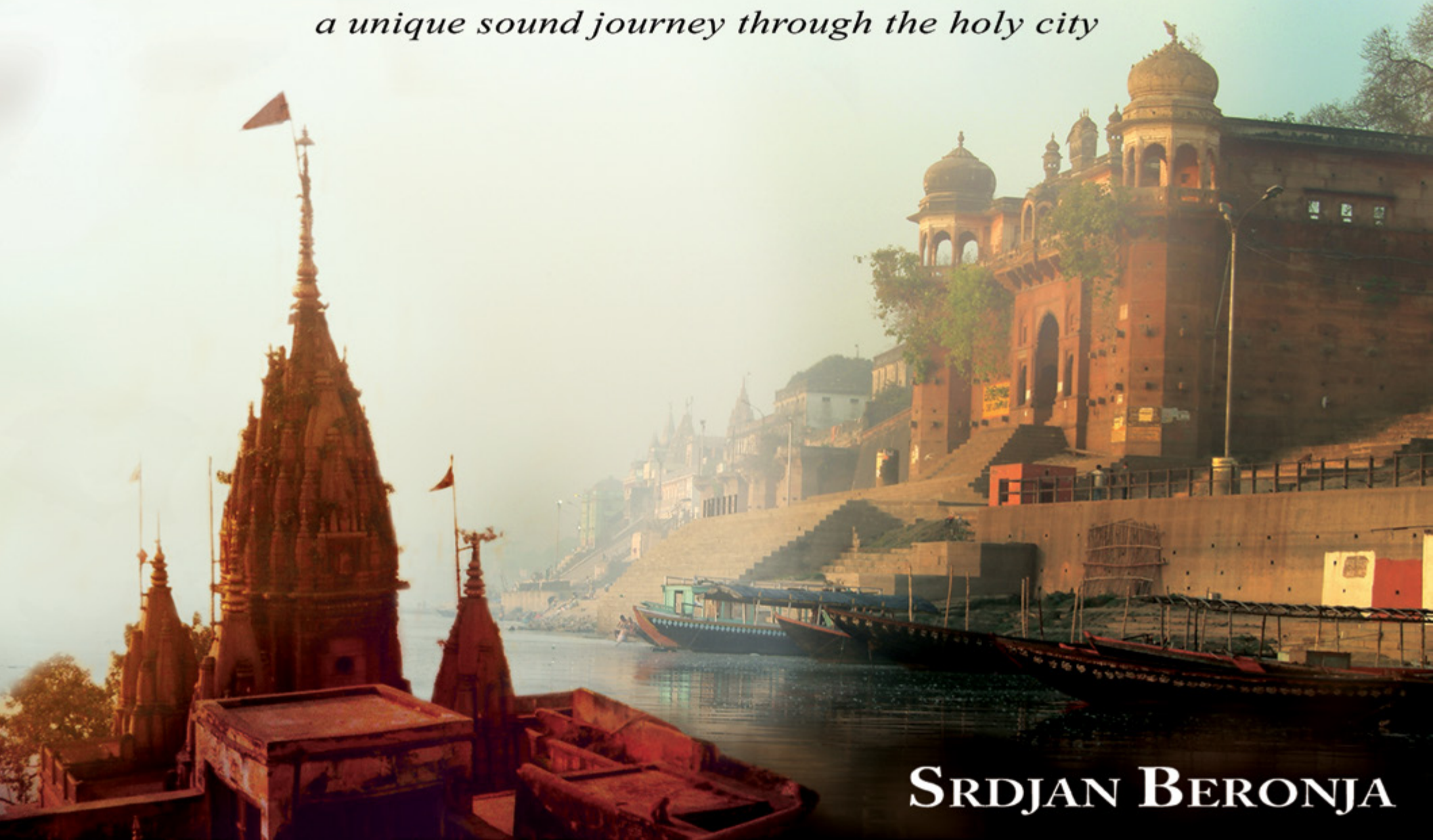# THE SOUNDS OF
VARANASI

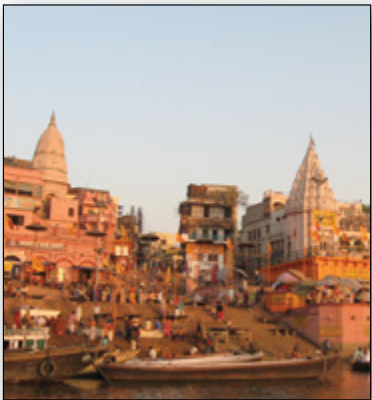*a unique sound journey through the holy city*

SRDJAN BERONJA

SRDJAN BERONJA (born 1976 in Novi Sad) is a Serbian percussionist, composer and writer. His work includes concerts, composing, field research and writing. Between 2001 and 2011, Srdjan lived and worked in the triangle between the Balkans, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, in a number of countries including India, Pakistan, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Israel and others. He travelled over a hundred thousand miles overland, researching various forms of music, traditional musical instruments and the cultures of these three regions. He collaborated and performed with numerous musicians and groups from various cultural backgrounds, particularly in the city of Varanasi, where he lived for a longer period and studied classical Indian tabla and music. Being his 'home in his heart', with its celestial music and unique colourful sound palette, the holy city of Varanasi and its sounds were an inspiration that eventually became the story presented on this album.

www.srdjanberonja.com

A UNIQUE SOUND JOURNEY
THROUGH THE HOLY CITY

This album represents live recordings of music on traditional Indian instruments and local field recordings of ceremonies, praying recitals and other unique sounds of the holy city of Varanasi (Benares) in India.

The character of the city is reflected in the colouful combination of authentic sounds and music: Sanskrit recitals, the sounds of streets and animals, ceremonial bells and drums, composed and improvised music, as well as traditional and classical Indian music.

"The Sounds of Varanasi" is a unique story about the intimate atmosphere of Varanasi, about the sounds and the music that is born and lives there.
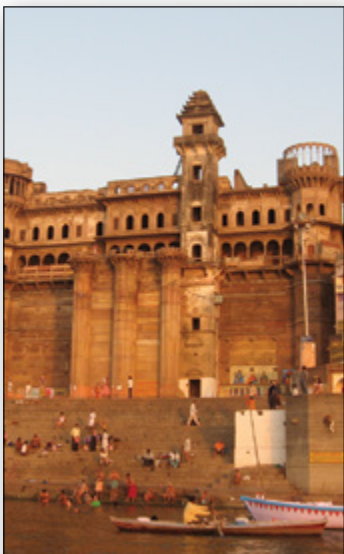
1. MORMING MANTRA *(dhyan / field recording)*

At dawn, a group of old wise gentlemen gathered to practice Sanskrit recitals. Performed in a meditative manner, this type of recital is called *dhyan*, from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, meaning *meditation*. As a prelude, the chirping of green parrots opens this mantra in the awakening morning.

2. RAGA MADHUVANTI: ALAP & JOR *(sitar / classical)*
Pt. Dhruv Nath Mishra – sitar

The word *raga* is a noun derived from the Sanskrit term *ranj* meaning *to colour*, and it is interpreted as *colour* in a sense of emotions or sometimes, *passion*. The raga is the most characteristic form of classical Indian music. It is unique in its form and it consists of several parts. The first part is called *alap*, from the Sanskrit term *alapana* which means *to speak*, *to narrate* or *to communicate*. Alap is the opening part of raga and it is a leisurely, relaxed introductory piece, in which the musician explores the raga. There is no rhythm instrument, nor particular lyrics in the case of vocal compositions. Alap is a setting-up of the raga and it represents a dialogue between the musician and the raga. Alap also contains two sub-parts called *jor* and *jhala*.

At the beginning of the composition, the tempo is very slow in order to present the scale and the key structure of the melody. The use of *shruti* microtonal intervals plays a key role. The theme develops and the expression slightly increases moving into the second part of this composition called *jor*. The term *jor* or *jod* means *to join*, and it represents the 'face' of the composition. The use of *chikari* (sympathetic strings) starts, tempo and rhythm are felt, everything increases, creating the third and last part called *jhala*, meaning *sparkling*, in which the strings are played in a more expressive manner. The composition ends peacefully, leaving an open dream-like space within the final notes.

The term *madhuvanti* is derived from the word *madhu*, literally meaning *honey*, which defines this raga, based on *srinagara rasa* or *loving sentiment*. Its sweetness and simple philosophy of romance carries a great emotion, expressed through the positive impulse presented purely on sitar.

3. RAGA MADHUVANTI: GAT I
(sitar, tabla / classical / rupak taal)
Pt. Dhruv Nath Mishra – sitar
Ravi Tripathi – tabla

The second part of the raga is called *gat*, from the Sanskrit term *gati*, meaning *motion*. Gat is the fixed part of a composition which evolves from alap. Usually, there are two gats within one raga and they differ mainly in the melodic theme, tempo and often the metre. The first gat has a relaxed melody played in a slow tempo (*vilambit laya*) or up to a medium tempo (*madhiya laya*). Often various metres such as 7, 9, 10 beat rhythms and similar are used, as well as 16 beat metre *teen taal* (the main, basic rhythm in classical Indian music). Each raga has its *aroha-avaroha* structure or *ascend-descend* scale defined by the rules of each individual raga.

Here, in the first gat of the raga *Madhuvanti*, the rhythmical part develops as the tabla joins, enhancing the expression of the sitar and the feeling of a melody. Sitar and tabla are corresponding, improvising and creating this composition based on the basic scale notes of *raga madhuvanti* and the rhythm *rupak taal* (7 beats). This particular rhythm has unusually accented points, therefore some parts of the composition appear surprising, emphasised with sharp cuts and accents. The tempo or *laya* remains almost the same, with a slight tendency to increase towards the end. The main theme starts and slowly develops throughout the composition. One of the main characteristics of the raga and Indian music are improvisation and intuition, as in the Sanskrit phrase *manodharma sangeeta - intuition-driven music*. As improvisation is enhanced, expression increases towards the end. The composition finishes in a most classical manner with a part called *tihai*, meaning *three times*. This determines a particular part of the composition where the same phrase repeats three times and then finishes on *sam - together*, on the starting point of a rhythmic cycle.

4. **RAGA MADHUVANTI: GAT II** *(sitar, tabla / classical / teen taal)*
Pt. Dhruv Nath Mishra – sitar
Ravi Tripathi – tabla

The third and the final part of *raga madhuvanti* is the second gat of the composition. The second gat differs from the first in melody; the melody is tightened, very expressive, with an uplifting impulse which stimulates both players to gradually increase in speed. In a raga, the second gat is played in fast tempo (*drut laya*) and it is increasing from the beginning towards the end. Various *taals* (rhythms) could be used in the second gat, following their different number of beats and differently accented structures. Usually, the most basic classical Indian rhythm of 16 beats, called *teen taal,* is played in the second gat.

Teen taal:

X				2				0				3			
DHA	DHIN	DHIN	DHA	DHA	DHIN	DHIN	DHA	DHA	TIN	TIN	TA	TA	DHIN	DHIN	DHA
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16

By striking the *chikari* sympathetic strings, the sitar invites the tabla, while the tabla invites the sitar by pushing the beat forward. Together they are pulling each other towards the climax of the composition called *jhala*. Here, the *chikari* are heard, while a dynamic rhythmic melody is played, followed by an ecstatic tabla tempo. Before the very end, sitar and tabla enter into a conversation called *sawal jawab*, while everything culminates in the final part of the classical Indian music composition called *chakkardhar tihai* or *circular tihai*, where the *tihai* phrase is repeated three times. The raga passionately finishes on the *sam* point, at which all concentrated energy powerfully bursts into one dot, loudly determining the finale of the composition.

Raga Madhuvanti represents a piece of Indian classical music or *shastriya sangeet*, actually meaning *scientific music*, as the term *classical* was borrowed from the West. The Sanskrit term *shastriya* refers to the science of music, notes, rhythmic structures and their influence on the human body, emotions, objects, the surrounding nature and the universe.

5. MONKEYS & ROTI *(field recording)*

What happens when one piece of *roti* bread is offered to a group of monkeys? Often funny, sometimes frightening – monkeys arguing in a narrow alley of the old city is a typical picture in Varanasi. Monkeys are highly respected, as can be seen in depictions and figures of Lord Hanuman, the *Durga Mandir* or *Monkey Temple*, but also in street scenes of people feeding monkeys while they are posing threateningly with their big sharp teeth. Living together with people, yet being wild animals, monkeys and their games are an inseparable part of the city's life.

6. DADRA: RAGA MISHRA KHAMAJ
(Indian violin, tabla / classical / dadra taal)
Pt. Sukhdev Prasad Mishra – Indian violin
Vikas Tripathi – tabla

This piece is performed on the Indian violin. The 'Indian violin' was borrowed from the West and incorporated into Indian classical music, purportedly at the end of the 18th beginning of the 19th century. The Indian violin does not differ from a classical European violin in the instrument itself.

The differences lie in the tuning, the holding position and the playing technique. Differing from the standard Western G-D-A-E tuning, the Indian violin has tunings such as D-A-D-A or F-C-F-C. The way of holding the Indian violin plays a crucial role, as it gives the character of sound similar to the *sarangi* fiddle and other Indian bowed instruments. It is played sitting cross-legged, with the scroll supported on the foot, giving the left hand freedom of movement on the fingerboard. This allows free sliding and the use of *shruti* microtonal intervals, producing the characteristic 'rounded, sinuous' shape of Indian classical melodies, as different from the more 'square, regulated' shape of European classical music.

This composition belongs to a group of semi-classical or light classical music called *dadra*. Played in raga *Mishra Khamaj*, its charming twists convey a joyful feeling in the melody, followed by a dynamic rhythm *dadra taal* (6 beats) that gave this type of composition its name. Throughout the piece, violin and tabla are communicating and creating a versatile dynamic that keeps going until the very end. In contrast to the usual ending with the *chakkardhar tihai* phrase, in this raga, after the main theme is repeated and excited with *rela* or fast rolling beats on the tabla, the composition finishes suddenly, leaving a joyful feeling at its peak.

7. BANSURI & TABLA
(bansuri, tabla / Indian fusion)
Pt. Atul Shankar – bansuri
Ravi Tripathi – tabla

This composition belongs to a musical style commonly called "fusion". It was performed on the *bansuri* bamboo flute and accompanied by tabla drums, representing a classical Indian setup, but in this case with an innovative approach.

The composition starts suddenly with a sonorous syncopated phrase, keeping and developing its uplifting vibe. Funk rhythm of 8 beats is mixed with classical tabla phrases, and with unusual ornamentations, such as a sort of *glissando* produced by pulling of *hathauri* (the tabla tuning hammer) over the *siyahi* (black spot on the membrane). The flute develops the main theme into an improvisation that corresponds with the tabla phrases throughout the piece. The composition ends with its beginning phrase.

With its great passion, innovative approach and energetic performance, this composition represents one of the finest examples of fusion music in Varanasi today.

8. SITA-RAM *(kirtan / field recording)*

This *kirtan* prayer song was recorded in a narrow alley beside a temple dedicated to the goddess Sita and Lord Rama. It is believed that by endlessly reciting their names "Sita-Ram-Sita-Ram", the two become closer and closer. The performers in the temple are singing this prayer without stopping, which can be heard in their voices which are so obviously exhausted by the constant chant. Their singing is simply accompanied on a *dholak*, a two-headed barrel drum and *kartal* hand cymbals. Occasional sounds of animals and people in their daily activities in the streets enliven this authentic picture of the old city neighbourhood.
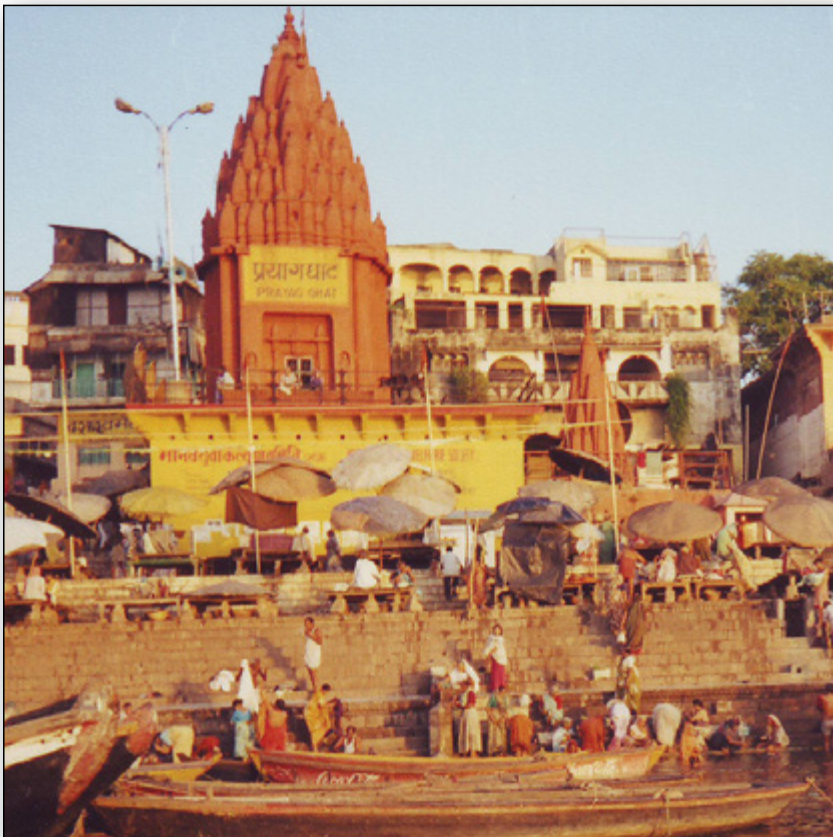
9. NAMASKAR TUM HAI BARAM BARA
(vocals, harmonium, tabla / bhajan / teen taal)
Prakash Bimlesh – vocals, harmonium
Pt. Kailash Nath Mishra – tabla

This composition belongs to a *bhajan* vocal style. Bhajan is one of the most common amongst vocal compositions and is a light classical or semi-classical style. Having a strong, devotional expression, *bhajan* has no fixed form as it might be recited as a mantra, sung as a song or performed in a more classical form such as *dhrupad*. Simple lyrics to express the emotion for the divine and 8 beat rhythms are the foundations of bhajan songs.

NAMASKAR TUM HAI BARAM BARA

ANTARYANI TRIBUHAN SWAMI
BRAHM DEV TUM PALAN HARA

NAMASKAR TUM HAI BARAM BARA

MAN MANIDR KE JYOT JALAO
MUKTI MAHAL KE RAAH DIKHAO
MAYA JAGAT ME BHUL GAYA THA
AB TO KIJE NATH SAHARA

NAMASKAR TUM HAI BARAM BARA

KARUNA SAGAR NAAM TUMHARA
BHAKT JANO KA SAATH TUMHARA
KONE DISHA ME JA KE CHUPE HO
AB HUME HAI AASH TUMHARA

NAMASKAR TUM HAI BARAM BARA

DEVAKI NANDAN AASH NA TORO
HEY DUKH VANDAN SAATH NA CHHORO

DARSHAN DO PRABHU DO PRABHU DO PRABHU DO

Meaning *Praying to you again and again*, this song was written to praise the Lord and it is a *guru-bandana* or a *teacher-bondage* song. It belongs to a tradition of *kathak* dance songs, as *kathak* dance finds its origins in northern India and it is one of the landmarks of the city's tradition.

With the captivating, joyful feeling of the melody composed in raga *Malkauns* and 8 beats *kaherwa taal*, filled with passionately accented patterns to enhance and support a dancer, this song represents an original piece from Banaras (Benares, Varanasi).

10. WEDDING DRUMS *(field recording)*

These impulsive sounds were recorded in a narrow alley of the old city, where a wedding took place. Weddings are very traditional and very colourful in Varanasi, ranging from a few to a few thousand people, often followed by bride and groom on horses. They are predominately arranged marriages, but younger generations more and more prefer *love marriage*. With the overwhelming sound of the wedding drums on one side and the happy children on the other, this recording presents an authentic wedding atmosphere.

11. PAHARI DHUN

(bansuri, tabla / semi-classical / kaherwa taal)
Hari Poundwal – bansuri
Ravi Tripathi – tabla

This composition belongs to a musical style known as *dhun*. Dhun is a type of composition that might be played as a part of a raga, but it is a rather free piece mainly derived from folk tunes or religious practices.

From the word *pahar – mountain*, and the word *dhun – tune*, this composition was played as a mountain breeze, a relief from the heat brought by the end of the dry season (mid April until July). At this time, many residents move to northern regions of India and Nepal in the Himalayas to escape the intolerable heat of the days, approaching 50°C / 122°F.

The *bansuri* flute introduces the composition with a short *alap*, after which the tabla starts with *kaherwa taal* (8 beats) in a slow tempo. The composition continues with leisurely improvisations on the flute, while the tabla changes the rhythmic patterns, while keeping a steady laid-back beat. Relaxing and joyful, this meditative composition is truly defined by the word *lehar* meaning *lilting*.

12. RAGA CHARUKESHI

(Indian violin, tabla / classical / addha taal)
Pt. Sukhdev Prasad Mishra – violin
Vikas Tripathi – tabla

This is another piece performed on the Indian violin. The word *charukeshi* is associated with a woman with beautiful long hair, as this charming raga conveys *srinagara rasa*, emotions of love, beauty and attraction, but also longing and lust.

The violin starts slowly with alap, introducing the composition. After the main theme is revealed, the tabla joins in an easy, syncopated *addha taal* rhythm of 16 beats, allowing some beats to be extended and some omitted. The composition reveals itself, while violin and tabla are improvising and communicating with various rhythmic structures, evolving a dominating melodic theme. They are unpredictably making sudden cuts that characterise this syncopated moving composition.

13. DRUT MANTRA *(rudri / field recording)*

Performed in fast or *drut* fashion, this *rudri* recital was recorded at dusk in one of numerous Varanasi temples or *mandirs*. The term *rudri* is derived from the word *rudra* which denotes Lord Shiva. With almost inaudible separation between the words, this mantra was recited with sacred devotion and mystery behind the fast-spoken Sanskrit words.

14. PAAYAL KI JHANKAAR BARANIYA
(vocals, harmonium, tabla / bhajan / teen taal)
Prakash Bimlesh – vocals, harmonium
Srdjan Beronja – tabla

This famous *bhajan* is a devotional romantic love song associated with Lord Krishna and his consort the goddess Radha. It describes a woman who is going to meet her beloved, while complaining about her *paayal* ankle bells, which will give her away as she draws near.

PAAYAL KI JHANKAAR BARANIYA
JHANA NANA BAAJE KAISI MORI
PIYA SE MILAN KO JAAUN AB MAIN
PAAYAL KI JHANKAAR BARANIYA

BIRHA SE TAN TAAP TAPAT HAI
ANG ANG SAB LAAG RAHILA
SADA RANGEELE UTHATA JIYA HOOKA
PAAYAL KI JHANKAAR BARANIYA

The composition is performed in raga *Jaunpuri*, in medium-fast tempo of the classical *teen taal* (16 beats) rhythm. It starts with a lilting, emotionally expressive alap that is suddenly interrupted by a tabla phrase. With its imposing tabla rhythm, its raw harmonium tones, the sentimental voice and wonderful *sangat* or a sort of connection and understanding between the players, this composition conveys great emotion from the beginning to the final note. It is one of the best-known of all *bhajan* songs and one of the finest Indian classics.

15. DASASWAMEDH GHAT GANGA AARTI
(field recording)
The term *ghat* means *steps* and it refers to the steps leading to the river's bank. The *Dasaswamedh Ghat* is the main ghat on the sacred river Ganga in Varanasi. According to the Hindu mythology, Lord Brahma created this ghat to welcome Lord Shiva. The term *aarti* means *adoration* in Sanskrit, and it is a religious ritual of worship where the light from wicks soaked in *ghee* butter is offered to one or more deities. *Aarti* is also a term referring to the type of prayer-song sung in praise of a deity. At the Dasaswamedh Ghat, a group of priests followed by thousands of visitors are performing *Agni Pooja* or *Worship to the Fire* dedicated to Lord Shiva, river Ganga, Surya the sun, Agni the fire and the universe.

At the beginning, the sound of a *shankh* shell invokes the Lord, followed by the sounds of ceremonial bells and drums. Everything gradually culminates and suddenly stops, allowing a prayer recital to take place. The singing of various *bhajans* begins afterwards, as the famous line *Hare Hare Mahadeva Shambhu Kashi Wishwanath Gange* bursts through the overloaded loudspeakers. Everything is followed by drumming and ringing of bells that continues until the end of the ceremony.

Dasaswamedh Ghat Ganga Aarti lasts about an hour and it is an exceptional and very powerful experience, a true symbol of the Holy City of Varanasi.

16. **DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA** (*vocals, harmonium, dafly / bhajan*)
Prakash Bimlesh – vocals, harmonium
Srdjan Beronja – dafly frame drum

Uncharacteristically accompanied by a large *dafly* frame drum, this especially arranged song is a *Rada-Krishna bhajan*. The song tells a story about Radha complaining about Krishna, as he is catching her hand and not leaving her alone.

DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA
RAAG MACHAWAT KADAM KI CHAINYA
DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA

MAI HOON RADHA GAON KI CHORI
DEKHO KANHA KERO NA BADIJORI
CHHOD DO KANHA DEKHO MORI KALAIYAN

DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA
RAAG MACHAWAT KADAM KI CHAINYA
DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA

BANSI BAJAWAT MANGAL CHAWAT
KAHI NA JAWE KANHA GAIYA CHARAVE
VINATI KARAT TORI LAGE HAI PAHINYA

DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA
RAAG MACHAWAT KADAM KI CHAINYA
DAGAR CHALAT MOHRI PAKARAT BAHIYA

The *dafly* is an instrument considered to be of a lower hereditary group, as it is played by wandering street musicians and is used in simple folk music. Here, the intention was to show another way of using the dafly drum and to present its potential to be used in Indian classical music on an equal level with the other classical Indian drums. The Hindi word *dafly* is derived from the name of the Middle Eastern frame drum *daf*. Therefore, the original *daf* rhythm of 8 beats inspired by a mystical Sufi dance was arranged with different rhythmical phrases and accent points in mind, but also variously tuned points on the drum itself in order to support the 16-beat *teen taal* cycle. The original melody is composed in a 16 beat cycle, but arranged to follow these changes creating an unusual, yet profound piece of music.

The dominant sound of the harmonium represents Krishna, the sentimental shallow voice Radha, and the expressive rhythm of the drum is the storyteller in this *bhajan* filled with emotions of love, desire and passion.

17. EVENING MANTRA *(rudri / field recording)*
This *rudri* recital (referring to Lord Shiva) was recorded beside the temple, in the late evening hours announced by the crickets in the background. Melody, rhythm and profound Sanskrit language pulsate as priests are singing with their deep voices expressing adoration. A trance-like rhythmic recital that leaves behind a deeply sacred feeling in the *atma*, the *soul*, the very being within…

18. RAGA BHAIRAVI
(sitar, tabla / classical / teen taal)
Pt. Dhruv Nath Mishra – sitar
Ravi Tripathi – tabla

At the end of this album, this raga pictures the passion and the true soul of Banaras (Benares, Varanasi). Raga *Bhairavi* derives its name from the Sanskrit term *bhairava*, which means *terrific*, *terrible* or *frightening*. In Hindu mythology, Lord Bhairava is a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva, while *Bhairavi* is a fierce aspect of Devi, the consort of the Lord Bhairava. The main concept evolves around the terrifying emotion, as Bhairav represents annihilation.

After an introductory tabla phrase called *mukhra* or *face*, the composition starts decisively with the heart-pulsating rhythm *teen taal* in a fast tempo. The sitar starts its melody passionately, expressing emotions in serious, peaceful and somewhat sad moods. Throughout the composition, the tabla keeps the tension and a steady beat, while the sitar improvises in a light classical mode, passionately describing this powerful emotion. The composition ends with *sawal jawab*, *dialogue* in the Urdu language, a question-and-answer part between sitar and tabla, while the entire piece is crowned with a *chakkardhar tihai*. This composition was performed with majestic passion and with a feeling for the melody overwhelmed by hair-raising emotions, as the word *bhairava* suggests.

Raga Bhairavi is usually played in the evening and as a concluding piece at the end of a performance.

Special thanks to **Ravi Tripathi** for his engagement and involvement in this album.

Deepest thanks to everyone who helped make this album and to all dear friends and heart-warming people of Varanasi.

Namaskar!

Featured musicians:
Pt. Dhruv Nath Mishra – *sitar*
Pt. Sukhdev Prasad Mishra – *Indian violin*
Pt. Atul Shankar – *bansuri*
Pt. Kailash Nath Mishra – *tabla*
Prakash Bimlesh – *vocals, harmonium*
Hari Poundwal – *bansuri*
Vikas Tripathi – *tabla*
Ravi Tripathi – *tabla*
Srdjan Beronja – *tabla, dafly*

All titles recorded live in Varanasi, India 2001 – 2011 by **Srdjan Beronja**

All titles recorded, arranged and produced by **Srdjan Beronja**.
Except titles 2, 3, 4, 7, 11 & 18 recorded live in **Mahadev Studio**, Varanasi.

Produced by **Srdjan Beronja**
Musical director: **Srdjan Beronja**
Engineer and mixer: **Srdjan Beronja**
Mastered by **Srdjan Beronja**
Final mastering by **Diz Heller**

Cover photograph: **Tripura Sundari Mandir**
Photography: **Srdjan Beronja** / *Artwork:* **Sarah Ash**
Liner notes: **Srdjan Beronja** / **Diz Heller**