

Simon Broughton

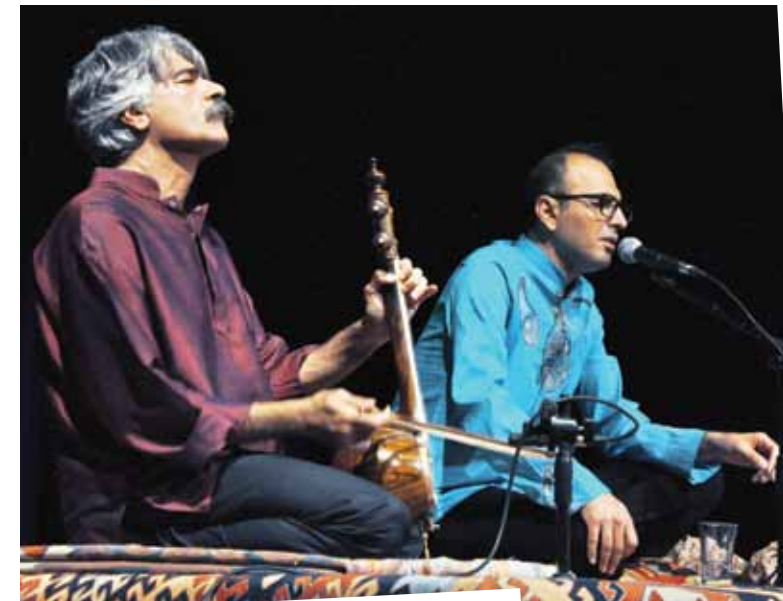
# Konya Mystic Music Festival

The Turkish city of Konya is famous for its shrine to the 13th-century Persian Sufi poet Rumi. **Simon Broughton** makes the pilgrimage to its annual festival that culminates on Rumi's birthday in September

**K**onya is a large city on the windswept Anatolian plateau. It's on the itinerary of many travellers to Turkey because of the mausoleum and shrine of Jalaluddin Rumi situated there. Rumi (1207-1273) is probably the best-known Sufi mystic worldwide. He's venerated particularly in Turkey and Iran (he wrote in Persian), but his lyrics are translated and used in *qawwali* and other South Asian Sufi traditions, they're known in Arabic and through Coleman Barks' English translations he's become one of the best-selling poets in the US. Although he was a Muslim scholar, his message of finding God in the human heart has a universal appeal. His followers founded the Mevlevi brotherhood, also known as the whirling dervishes. So Konya is a place of pilgrimage, not just for Muslims, but for

people from many faiths from all over the world. The city receives two and a half million visitors a year, half a million from overseas. "Rumi loved music and uniting people," says Feridun Gündes, Konya Mystic Music Festival's programming director. "The festival brings these things together and creates a feeling of unity, which is what he stood for." The festival has its 12th edition this year and always finishes with the *sema*, the whirling dervish ceremony, on September 30, Rumi's birthday. Konya also has a huge festival in the days leading up to the anniversary of his death on December 17, but the city is pretty cold then. Compared to Istanbul or the Turkish coast, Konya is a rather sober place – literally, as due to religious reasons alcohol isn't widely available. But there are impressive

architectural relics from Konya's heyday as the capital of the Seljuk Empire in the 12th and 13th centuries. There's the Alaeddin Mosque, one of the oldest in Anatolia, the beautifully tiled Karatay Madrasa where Rumi taught, and of course the green-domed Rumi mausoleum, which has a good museum in its dervish complex. Like everywhere in Turkey, Konya has fantastic food with tasty local specialities. What the Mystic Music Festival brings is a reason to stay and spend some time in the city. Over the course of eight days top quality international artists are invited and the performances are free. Most of the artists are from the Islamic world, but not exclusively. Last year the group Resonet brought pilgrimage songs from Santiago de Compostela, a nice connection as the cathedral



Clockwise from left: Sain Zahoor from Pakistan; Iranians Kayhan Kalhor and Hossein Alishapour; the green-domed Rumi mausoleum; whirling dervishes at the *sema*; the Mevlana Culture Centre

in Santiago was consecrated during Rumi's lifetime. And both cities are important places of pilgrimage. This year there's Tuvan throat singing group Huun Huur Tu, Japanese ceremonial dance, and Rabbi Haim Louk with his wonderful Arab-Andalus Jewish repertoire.

Among last year's musicians from the Islamic world was Pakistan's Sain Zahoor, a unique personality in Sufi music as he sings into his *ektara* (one-stringed instrument) and spins to the Punjabi songs of Bulleh Shah. "Whenever I sing his songs, it's not me singing," he says, "it's as if Bulleh Shah is singing inside me. 'I don't go to the mosque of the *imam*,' Bulleh Shah said, 'I go to the mosque of the heart.'"

For Sain Zahoor and many of the musicians, just the fact that they're in the home town of Rumi gives their performance an extra depth. Most of them are really moved by going to the shrine. Kayhan Kalhor's performance with singer Hossein Alishapour was all based on Rumi's poetry. Iranian musicians inevitably have a really

strong connection to Rumi and this year the singer Shajarian is performing.

"Mystic music isn't something that you can really define," admits Gündes, "and we keep it as wide as possible. We try and programme music that is performed in sacred spaces, or has a sacred content or origin." In Konya, it's also about introducing a range of music that people are not familiar with. They might know about Rumi, but they probably won't be familiar with the Malian music of

Bassekou Kouyaté and Ngoni ba, the *santoor* playing of Shivkumar Sharma or the Sufi music of Morocco, as performed by the Ensemble Thami al-Harrak. "Many of the most enthusiastic listeners to this music are in Europe or the US," continues Gündes, "we want to create an interest and a demand for it here." Which is why the concerts are free.

The concerts take place in the Mevlana Culture Centre, a tent-like building constructed about ten minutes walk from the mausoleum. It's nicknamed the *hamam* (Turkish bath) because the main hall is so

echoey, but the smaller hall where the concerts take place is a good, if slightly formal, venue of about 750 seats. After the concerts, kids gather for spontaneous music sessions outside and there are other places in town where musicians meet. It would be good if more local music could be featured in more informal venues alongside the main festival.

The Mystic Music Festival ends on September 30 with the *sema* ceremony, performed by the Konya Turkish Sufi Music Ensemble. It takes place in the big arena of the Mevlana Culture Centre, which seats thousands, so it's lacking in any atmosphere and is a big show with coloured lights. If you've never seen a *sema* ceremony, it's worth seeing, of course, but it's nothing as atmospheric as the Galata *tekke* (now a museum) in Istanbul, which is a real *semahane* (whirling hall) founded in 1491 (although rebuilt since). But in Konya the ritual is meticulously performed with a band of seven musicians and eight singers. The dervishes solemnly enter, bowing towards the *sheikh* and then cast off their cloaks and start to whirl.

There are four *selams* (whirling sections) and it ends with a prayer as the dervishes put on their cloaks and exit.

It's a spectacle and it would be mad to come to Konya and not see the *sema*. But it's actually the other mystic music performances that are the real highlights of the festival. ♦



**+ DATES** The festival takes place from September 22-30  
**+ ONLINE** [www.mysticmusicfestival.com](http://www.mysticmusicfestival.com)