

It's just like a conventional concert—except that the musicians are submerged and the audience floats in the sea.



Lanie Goodman takes the plunge

Water music

The sun is setting behind the red rocks, the Mediterranean has turned a deep indigo, and the dress rehearsal can now begin. On this small, sandy cove near Cannes, the concert soloist changes into his evening black suit – askin-tight rubber scuba outfit – straps an air bottle on to his back, fastens a pair of sizeable weights to his legs, and shuffles toward the water. He is holding half a dozen percussion mallets, but his instrument is nowhere in sight. As audiences will discover tonight and tomorrow, a specially conceived vibraphone, which resonates like a futuristic bell, has been anchored to the floor of the sea.

When Jules Verne wrote his adventure novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, little did he dream that more than a century later, French electronic music composer Michel Redolfi would stage an underwater concert to honour the utopic visions of Captain Nemo. The multimedia event, entitled *Mare Sonans*, is undoubtedly the most avant-garde of Cannes' official programme of summer festivities, but perhaps the most accessible.

"Like most free outdoor concerts, you can enjoy the balmy night, and gaze at the moon and stars while you hear the music," Redolfi explains. "One difference is that some of the listeners will also be floating on their backs in the water."

Redolfi, 47, pioneered the concept

of underwater music in the sea and heated Olympic pools in the 80s, while living in San Diego, California. "It was a fluke," he smiles. "A friend gave me a discarded underwater speaker from the navy surplus. I started experimenting and realised that certain timbres, such as the harp, flute and female voices, work really well underwater; electric guitar and funky bass riffs do not." Specialist of musical cybernetics and sound design, Redolfi has been developing the idea ever since, performing large-scale concerts in Europe, Brazil and Australia with his team of computer-savvy musicians and singers.

But how do you hear the music? Aside from the live performance of Alex Grillo, the immersed vibraphone player, over a dozen enormous underwater speakers are strategically placed throughout the cove, connected to a mini-studio of control panels and synthesizers up on the rocks, where Redolfi is in command. What makes the experience particularly tantalising is that the sounds are only audible once you put your head in the water. "You don't even have to get your ears wet, since it's your bones and skull that vibrate and conduct the sound," he explains.

"Basically, your skeleton turns into one big tuning fork, and for the first time, you can hear from within. The deeper you dive, the more intensely you feel the vibrations." Curiously, the feeling of stereophonic sound disappears. "It's really cool – like you



Not drowning but playing... Michel Redolfi's underwater musicians in action, with audience members floating above them

PHOTOGRAPHS: PIERRE PERRIN

had earphones stuck all over your body," chimes in 23-year-old Arnaud, one of the technical crew.

Though for most of Redolfi's events the ideal listening position is horizontal, the upcoming *Mare Sonans* is also a vertical concert, with two interconnecting layers of music, one dry, one wet. "Instead of purely electronic and acoustic sounds, I also orchestrated parts of traditional Mediterranean choral works that are inserted into the score." These shepherd lullabies and ancient mariner songs, performed live by the ensemble *Corou de Berra*, are also for those who prefer to remain ashore.

Perched on another corner of the rocks, actor Michael Lonsdale (who appeared in *Remains of the Day* and *Jefferson in Paris*) will be reciting excerpts from *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. "In Verne's novel," says Redolfi, "there are some amazing descriptions of Nemo's hallucinations during his underwater wanderings – not only in terms of colours but about how clear the sound is, since sound travels four times faster than it does in the air."

Meanwhile, below the surface, the concert stage will be illuminated with highly sophisticated lasers, so that swimmers can admire giant-peggle sculptures by Lyonel Kouro as they swirl through the dreamlike, liquid soundscape.

Despite all the impressive cyber technology, Redolfi refers to his latest show as a gentle poetic journey into zero gravity. "It's not a megawatt Jean-Michel Jarre-type extravaganza," he warns. "Don't expect anything splashy. Like in virtual reality, I try to bring my audience closer to the dream of floating in space and walking upside down. Now that we're in the 21st century, people deserve some kind of unusual aesthetic experience, and it doesn't have to be through the internet."

But is it safe? "As I found out after working with oceanographers at the Scripps Institute in La Jolla, California – at best, my concerts may attract some fish; and at worst, some sharks," Redolfi grins. "And since Cannes-la-Bocca is 100% shark-free, I guess only the sea urchins will have a spine tingling experience."

Though a crowd of 500 is expected to show up with masks and snorkels at the cove at Cannes-la-Bocca, anyone who takes a late-night dip within a kilometre of the concert may hear the vibrations:

"The sea is the next open space for art – it's the last frontier before we go to the moon or Mars," Redolfi says. "We've already seen land art, but the ocean has yet to be explored. I like to think of my concerts as an invitation to pass through that big liquid mirror and experience the other side of the looking glass."

Mare Sonans at Cannes-la-Bocca, France, today and tomorrow. Information: +33 (0)4 92 99 31 08.

Berio's elusive new opera doesn't get the treatment it deserves at the Salzburg Festival, writes **Andrew Clements**

Beating heads against the wall