

Inside Sanctum, the hot new fitness class that will make you cry

The class combines ancient chanting with Eighties-style church hall aerobics, and is so good fans claim to have ditched their therapist. Kate Spicer gives it a go

Kate Spicer

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There's a simple rhythmic chant coming from Peckham's gorgeously crumbling Asylum Chapel. The chanting gets louder as I stoop through the little wicket gate in the high old oak doors: "Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha." The chapel is dark, save for a hot cluster of candles arranged around the baby-faced blond man in microshorts on the raised altar. In the gloom, where congregations once sat under pockmarked memorials, is the black outline of 50 people – and where the man goes, 100 blue lights on Bluetooth headsets follow, still going, "Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha."

Welcome to Sanctum, which sits somewhere between church hall aerobics and a Shaolin monk's silent disco (listening to the class on headphones helps with focus and introspection, apparently). We are bobbing in a squat position while flinging arms wide, as if trying to rip our ribcages apart. "By opening your chest and activating energy centres running through your spine, you tap into a pure consciousness and eradicate your ego," says the cofounder Gabriel Olszewski. "We physically use the body to awaken the mind. Sanctum is not about booty or abs. Instead we allow people to release their energetic body to shift low-frequency feelings like jealousy or hate to a higher state of being such as gratitude, bliss and love.

If your workout delivers mere cardiovascular benefits, you may want to upgrade — if it isn't blessing you with tearjerking, spiritual benefits, well, in 2023 that isn't enough.

In between the arms outstretched, “heart-opening” moves, we are sent back to clutch our hands to our chest and go inwards. When the class draws to a close, our instructor says: “Don't be afraid if there is a little salty tear.”

Sanctum's cardiothoracic soul surgery will be a hot ticket when it arrives in London for the first of regular weekly visits next month. Its founders are our instructor, Luuk Melisse, 29, and his partner in life and business, Olszewski, 39, who is a former global marketing lead for the drinks giant Diageo. Melisse is a retired ballet dancer who “couldn't find the emotional release of dancing in sport”, so decided to try to replicate it with a sequence of physical exercises.

Some Sanctum devotees in the Netherlands, where it has thousands of fans, have apparently dropped their talking therapists since attending classes. Within a few weeks a Dutch politician and Vogue staffers were in the congregation. There has also been a pop-up at David Lynch's supercool Parisian private members' club, Silencio. And, less glamorously, for 300 employees of booking.com. While Olszewski and Melisse are Amsterdam-based, Sanctum and its 12 instructors are nomadic. (One wonders about the carbon footprint of all this “cathartic mindful movement”.)

The influences behind Sanctum include kundalini (a form of meditation), Native American vision quests, Buddhist shaking therapy (aka Waidangong), Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*, primal movement methods, t'ai chi, Albert Einstein . . . the list goes on. Meanwhile, the “ha” chant is borrowed from the Japanese martial art aikido.

What the couple don't mention is that Sanctum is not dissimilar to Taryn Toomey's wildly successful *The Class*, with its signature

heart-opening moves and repetitive monosyllabic grunts and chants. Rumours are that when the two headlined at the same wellness festival last November there were hard stares and awkward moments.

When asked about similarities between the two classes, Olszewski says: “Our concepts are different in vision and execution. The Class and Sanctum are both mindful fitness, but we have a heavy community aspect while The Class is focused on the individual. We encourage people to hug, look into each other’s eyes, while The Class advise ‘Stay with yourself’. The Class is a workout, Sanctum is a vehicle to reach the mind and the heart.”

Nathalie Kuhn, co-CEO of The Class, says: “We discovered our first copycat within nine months of launching [2013]. It’s disappointing when we see our system put in the hands of people with no relationship to The Class. But there’s a difference between inspiration and plagiarism, and there’s room for us all.

“We use loud music and calisthenics and yoga-based moves,” she continues. “We use the body to observe the mind. [For example] three minutes into a round of squats fatigue sets in and the mind resists: ‘I hate this. Get me out.’ The teacher guides you to address that thought and use the body to observe the mind. Training offers an opportunity to tune in to the heart, the body and the mind.”

The Class quickly became a cult smash in New York and LA – endorsed by the queen of wellness, Gwyneth Paltrow. One open-air class in Brooklyn during the pandemic pulled in 500; their largest class was a whopping 1,500 at the conference of “a household-name brand”. The pandemic took The Class global: “Awareness spread like wildfire,” Kuhn says. Today online attendees span 71 countries. It has been to the UK before for private and corporate clients, but, like Sanctum, it also has its first public outing in the UK this spring.

The British tablescaping guru Fiona Leahy is already a fan. “It’s like Jane Fonda on acid,” she says. “It’s a rigorous aerobic workout to amazing music coupled with yogic aspects like heart opening and introspection. It’s a long way from Barry’s Boot Camp.”

“The problem is it’s a wellness trend now,” Kuhn says. “The concept of ‘emotional strength’ has entered the wellness marketing lexicon. Studios are layering it on to existing classes.” Emotion-washing, if you will. “But people can tell when something isn’t the real deal.”



Love Supreme offers yoga and chanting sessions in west London KAREN YEOMANS

In the 1970s Gabrielle Roth’s 5Rhythms was all the rage and it is currently enjoying a revival in alternative-leaning neighbourhoods such as Glastonbury, Forest Row and Totnes. Meanwhile, when Manizeh Rimer, a veteran jivamukti instructor recently opened Love Supreme Projects, her yoga studio in Stella McCartney’s old HQ on Golborne Road, west London, she had zero publicity yet it was packed. The studio’s motto is “Crack your heart open”, and you can buy cool stickers at reception saying just that. “Now it’s less about [aerobics-style] rocket yoga. People want meditation and chanting,” she says. “Our chanting circles are more packed than yoga now, with all ages: 15-70 is completely normal.”

Love Supreme has a generosity of spirit in a corner of west London where yoga classes in slick studios can cost £35. After each class there's free chai, rose tea (heart-opening, innit) and homemade cookies. It reminds me of yoga back in the Nineties, when it was a less sleek and a less costly pursuit. "The pandemic had a huge impact on the industry: flashy studios are closing, and if you weren't a great teacher you couldn't survive on Zoom," Rimer says. "The teachers that are left are the real deal, deeply grounded in yoga."

Rimer says this heart-expanding route is the way forward: "Any backbend or movement that pushes your heart forward; anything like chanting or singing that gets you out of your head and into your heart." Anecdotally it's said to be good for anxiety. Research confirms there is a lot of that about, especially among women between 25 and 55. For all that it can be easy to laugh at wellness trends, this is one answering a real need with real, felt answers. And, as Rimer points out: "Opening the heart isn't a fad — it has been around for thousands of years."

wearesanctum.com, theclass.com, lovesupremeprojects.com