

Harmony!

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Ludwig Pesch on Carnatic Music and art education.

Photo: R. Shivaji Rao



Music's companion Ludwig Pesch.

Three decades ago, it was still the age when Ludwig Pesch could have been mistaken for a hippie tourist in Madras, clad in kurta-pyjama, a flute in his hand and a canvas bag slung on his shoulder. Pesch, though, was a young student of Kalakshetra, specialising in the Carnatic flute under Guru H. Ramachandra Shastry. Defying the usual banes of hot, humid weather, mosquitoes, and the tough life of an institution that was then run like a monastery, he stayed on, augmenting his practical training with research and interviews with a range of senior musicians of the time. Not surprising the Amsterdam-based Pesch is a known musicologist today, with a number of publications to his credit. Perhaps that is why Oxford University Press thought it fit to ask him, rather than an Indian scholar, to pen “The Oxford Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music” — whose second edition recently hit the stands.

This is no mean feat for any individual musician, but it is perhaps his familiarity with both Carnatic and Western classical music that helped him through such a painstaking compilation.

Interest in Carnatic music

Discussing perspectives on Indian classical music in Europe, Pesch, on email from Amsterdam, says, “The growth of interest has been steady but not explosive.”

He also points out a significant factor for performing artistes to consider. “Not all Carnatic musicians touring abroad seem to realise that interest in Indian culture and music has long been sincere and sustained over several generations. I noticed that some performers inadvertently offend their listeners by ‘talking down’ to them, offering random bits of music theory right from the concert stage with the best of intentions.”

He feels that by taking a lecture-demonstration approach they lose out on popularity. Hindustani musicians “enjoy an edge over their Carnatic counterparts and get more invitations by professional organisations by concentrating on their music, the very purpose for which they are invited,” he adds, conceding that many Carnatic musicians are no longer offended by such advice.

Another possibly unpleasant but undeniable issue is that of sound augmentation. Pesch says, “Most Carnatic

performers still seem oblivious of the new opportunities to showcase the subtleties of their music in an unobtrusive manner. Indeed, I believe that attention to this crucial aspect of any type music — the realisation of the sheer beauty of unadulterated sound — will open many more doors also for Carnatic music. I trust that a change of attitude will provide Carnatic musicians and their listeners with unprecedented opportunities they deserve.”

Staff notation

The Companion is replete with examples written in staff notation. Is it then targeted at a readership of Western classical musicians and scholars? “I trust most interested readers, even those not yet familiar with staff notation, will see this approach as a bonus rather than an obstacle,” says Pesch. “Staff notation furnishes visual information that matches our subjective perceptions of ‘low’ and ‘high’ notes, rising and falling scales, or phrases combining all of these in quick succession.” He points out that solfa systems (notation using the swaras by name) are less adequate from this point of view, though they “proved more than adequate in oral transmission on a daily basis and over a very long period of time.”

In this context he recalls the gurukula system of music education, “which I was privileged to experience myself.” He also notes that his effort has been to familiarise readers with the required conventions without having to refer to other works.

Teaching

Pesch is certainly a teacher at heart. But his teaching is not only for the specialised or the academics. “In recent years,” he says, “I have mainly worked with educational institutions in Switzerland, partly for joint research on the lines of ‘integrated music education’, partly to design and implement educational events.” Acknowledging his range, he says he is glad to have balanced “ivory castle work” and “hands-on teaching work under varying cultural and economic conditions”.

Pesch, who says he loves to collaborate “with performers, museum curators, educators and academics for the benefit of children (at times with special needs), their parents or guardians, students in different fields and the general public”, advocates the social benefits of the arts. “Although many highly specialised musicians do not seem to be interested in this issue, I feel it is important to acknowledge that making music together is the most exciting and novel experience for many if not most people today. It comes as a shock to realise that, more often than not, even basic music education at school cannot be taken for granted any longer,” he remarks. He calls his work “an exploration of uncharted paths in the arts and education” and notes that the failure of education systems to provide opportunities for self-expression results in a heavy “fallout” which “includes lowered self-esteem accompanied by vulnerability to peer pressure, a prime factor in the increase of violence at school just as at home.”

Convinced of music as a means to healing problems such as substance abuse and behavioural disorders, he says he is committed to working towards “providing access to suitable music as a way to prevent or alleviate (such) problems” — which, he points out, “obstruct progress and social harmony even in communities where all the other basic needs seem to have been met in ample measure.”

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