

# For the love of Carnatic music

Ludwig Pesch is a man possessed by South Indian classical music. A life-long and passionate devotee of Carnatic music, Pesch learnt flute from the late Ramachandra Shastry at Kalakshetra in Chennai and co-founded Sampradaya, a major music documentation centre and archive in the Tamil Nadu capital. A scholar under the Indo-German Cultural Exchange Programme and the German Academic Exchange Service, Pesch has performed all over South India, with his guru as well as solo. Pesch's passion has also resulted in two online courses — 'The Music of South India' and '*Musik und Künste im südlichen Indien*' — that have been acclaimed by performers, teachers, students and lovers of Indian music.

But Pesch's most significant contribution to his beloved field perhaps has been 'The Oxford Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music', which he co-authored with percussion virtuoso TR Sundaresan. The Netherlands-based author has also authored 'Ragadhana: An Alpha-Numerical Directory of Ragas' (1992) and 'Eloquent Percussion: A Guide to South Indian Rhythm' (1996, co-authored with Sundaresan), but quite surely Oxford University Press publication is his most precious piece of work. The book, which has recently been republished in a completely revised and updated format, brings in a single volume the various forms of South Indian Classical music, instruments used in it, biographical entries on all prominent composers, theorists and musicians, and staff notation for all the 72 scales and hundreds of ragas. All this is embellished with more than 100 line drawings, photographs and staves by well-known artists.

Quite naturally, Pesch is excited about the compendium. "The second edition is in response to many inquiries after three reprints when the book, originally brought

out in 1999, went out of print. My focus was, therefore, to update the available contents before making it available again. In the process it also became more comprehensive, up-to-date with many more images. This edition has a much more differentiated bibliography that will be of interest to students, performers and scholars alike."

Pesch, who was decorated with the Cross of the Order of Merit on the Ribbon of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2000 and the 6th Rabindra Nath Tagore Cultural Award of the Indo-German Society in 2003, is quite eloquent about his passion. "Carnatic music does not constitute a static art tradition from a remote past; nor does it thrive in isolation. Instead, it relates to a wide range of cultural expressions and associations today as in the remote past. Like a colourful fabric, it is strengthened by the many strands and knots to which many hands and minds have contributed. The way in which this happened is probably unique in the world of music. Thankfully, there is no dearth of interesting publications shedding new light on the history of South India's arts and the way it is being experienced in and outside the regions where it originated," he says.

The book has already travelled far and wide. "This has to do with several developments, each increasing the demand for accurate and up-to-date information: increased mobility among artists from India as well as visiting non-Indians interested in first-hand experience of Carnatic music; globalisation of the mass media, including the Internet in which migrants from India became a force to reckon with; and not to forget, the enormous interest in Carnatic music generated by educational and cultural institutions all over the world. Short-lived exotism is giving way to long-term commitment," he explains.

The book is the result of some 25 years of



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collecting information in person as well as a number of published and unpublished documents, which kicked off with the collective effort to gather and disseminate background information under the 'Sampradaya' archival project. What has encouraged him is the interest the book has been able to generate among lay readers. "After all, I had tried to share my own delight by way of making Carnatic music accessible when others felt that this could simply not be achieved as this music was too 'cerebral'," he says.

Pesch, in his effort to promote South Indian classical music, has also launched more than one online project, including [www.carnaticstudent.org](http://www.carnaticstudent.org), AIUME and Sampurna. "There are so many different facets to the theme of Carnatic music. Each institution or group of visitors is more interested in some particular aspect. As a result, these pages stand side by side while their common denominator remains in the background," he explains about his multiple online projects in the field. Of course, he points out that it is important to distinguish between those aspects of any art that needs to be absorbed under the personal guidance of a teacher and others that can be imbibed and refined by any other means, such as through the Internet, that suits the purpose. "In this sense, the virtual classroom is merely an extension, not a substitute for anything else," he says.

Pesch's journey into the world of Carnatic music itself has been quite interesting. In his own words, "Some things are essential as part of civilised life, and music is one of these 'things'. Music is the art that, more than any other, touches people irrespective of our cultural background but requires congenial circumstances and attention. This brought me into Carnatic music when I was a student of music and musicology in Freiburg and heard Carnatic music for the

first time. I was fortunate to have open-minded teachers there and later in Kalakshetra and elsewhere in India when I was offered scholarships to pursue my interest in non-European music; some in a formal teacher-student relationship and others by way of inspiration, guidance and lasting friendship."

It was in 1977 that Pesch became interested in Carnatic music while studying to become a high school music teacher. He had heard a French radio discussion about the music of the late Ramnad Krishnan, whose reputation as an outstanding Carnatic vocalist grew after his demise. That accidental listening to a great Carnatic singer, following a daily midnight poetry reading that he was fond of, was a turning point for him.

"I knew nothing about this music. Yet I instantly sensed that it had to do with my own musical quest and therefore was worth finding out more about," he says. The result was that he searched the university library for more information about Carnatic music and a few months later took leave from his regular course of study to visit South India, where he met his guru, H Ramachandra Shastry at Kalakshetra.

The love affair with Carnatic music that began then, still continues. And why not? As he says, "This year, when Charles Darwin's 200th birth anniversary is being celebrated all over the world, the role of music in human existence, even the question whether man could exist without it, is being debated in scientific circles. The interesting point here is that in many countries, even scientists who are either non-believers or non-practitioners of any organised religion, appreciate music for shaping the more agreeable facets of civilised life since time immemorial just as for the joy music gives us today, every day."

Utpal Borpujari