

Why Carnatic Music Matters More Than Ever

by Ludwig Pesch

Music is the purest form of art, and therefore the most direct expression of beauty, with a form and spirit which is one, and simple, and least encumbered with anything extraneous. ...

No one of its notes is final, yet each reflects the infinite.

Rabindranath Tagore in
Sadhana, the Realisation of Life.¹

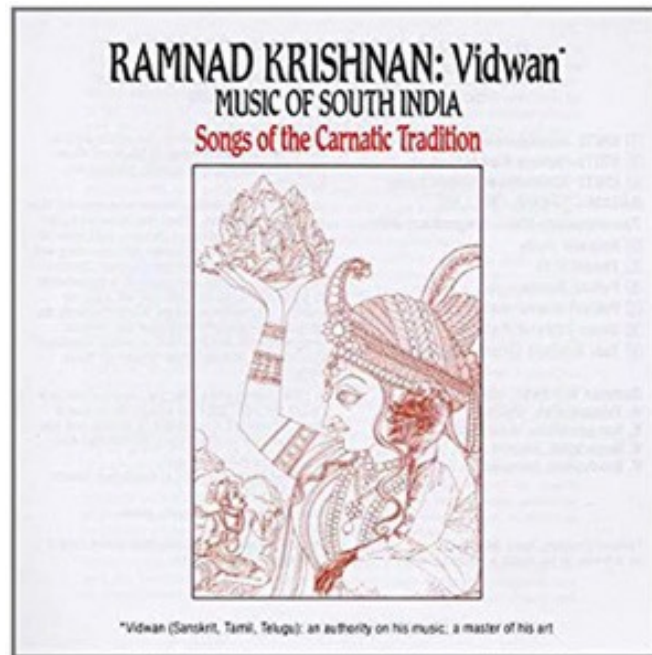


Rabindranath Tagore portrayed
by Martin Monnickendam
in Amsterdam (1920)

Listening to French radio one night in 1977, I noticed a recording by Ramnad Krishnan being discussed at great length.² This happened to follow a daily poetry session I loved listening to, so Carnatic music was not what I had tuned in for. Yet, to me, being a student of western music, keen on learning more about all kinds of music, this music was a revelation. To my ears, this music was more than just one among others, each worth appreciating in its own right.

I realized that this experience answered some questions I had long been pondering about: could there be any music that is, at the same time, "ancient" and "flourishing" in the sense of unbroken continuity with scope for self-expression?

And if such a music could be found, would it make someone like me feel welcome? Without having grown up in its cultural context? Little did I know that the second question had long been answered in the US where Carnatic music was in the process of becoming one of the best-studied music traditions ever, thanks to Wesleyan University's "visiting artists" program that had invited Ramnad Krishnan to the US.



Cover art: Nonsuch Records NY 1968

As for the first question, it took me several years of study at Kalakshetra, at the invitation of its founder Rukmini Devi-Arundale, to realize that the history of Carnatic music (including its name and variants like "Karnataka Sangitam") is a highly contested one.³ Studying such a music was therefore bound to be a lifelong pursuit.

Blissfully unaware of any possible pitfalls that would delay my grasp of Carnatic music, I became a student of flute vidwan Ramachandra Shastry. Learned musicians and scholars guided me on various aspects; most generously Vidya Shankar, S. Rajam and T.R. Sundaresan, noted for their ability to brighten the lives of music lovers in often unexpected ways.⁴

As it turned out, Carnatic music is many things to many people, a fact rarely reflected in scholarly works, yet evident wherever musicians, listeners, and learners congregate.

Their shared pursuit is all about a joy that transcends – and often contradicts – "common sense". This is an attitude valued and clearly expressed in Carnatic lyrics, particularly those of Sri Tyagaraja for whom music was a source of unmitigated bliss and fulfilment, even conducive to liberating oneself from trivial pursuits. Could this be akin to modern concepts like "total immersion" and "mindfulness"? For instance in song lyrics like *Intakanaanandam*, *Manasu svadinamaina*, *Aparamabhakti*, *Nidhitsuala Sukamaa* wherein Tyagaraja also invokes legendary role models in accordance with older conventions.⁵



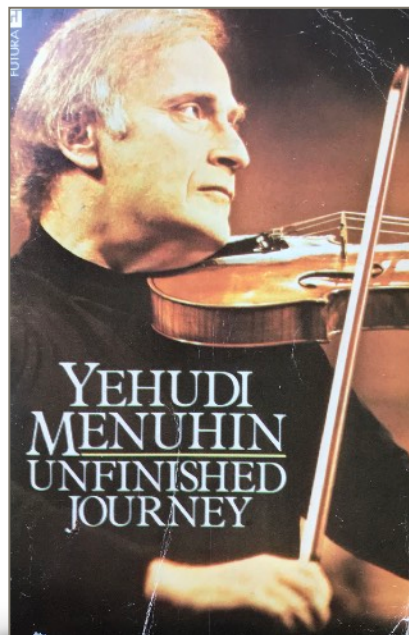
The author in a class with Sri H. Ramachandra Shastry at Kalakshetra in 1978.
Photo: Rainer Horig

In other words, does this not sound like a message or "remedy" for some of the "ills" of our times? Like the many distractions imposed by modern lifestyles, our inability to focus on the task at hand, hence putting our most important relationships in jeopardy. The difference being, obviously, that Carnatic music at its very best relies on a heightened involvement in several realms at once. For this reason, most of South India's music is hardly suited to being used as a sonic background merely to create a pleasant ambiance. This may even stand in the way of ever getting "popular among the masses" (though some have claimed success in such an endeavor).⁶

This brings me back to what greatly matters to me as regards *all Indian music* and stated succinctly by Yehudi Menuhin, the violin virtuoso to whom Hindustani and

Carnatic music were of equal interest, though mainly remembered in India for collaborating with Pandit Ravi Shankar:

"An oral tradition is a wonderful thing, keeping meaning and purpose alive and accessible. As soon as an idea is confined to the printed page, an interpreter is required to unlock it."⁷



Book cover, 1978 ed.

Little remains to add to this insight by a globally acclaimed musician, other than asking ourselves: should we allow our favorite music to be limited by convention or reduced to a "definite" performance, fixed forever on any medium like paper, CD or other digital media?

I doubt this makes sense from any point of view, be it artistic, social, pedagogic or historic: after all, today's performances hardly look or sound like anything past composers could have anticipated as regards their own creations such as *padas*, *kirtanas* or *kritis*. Regardless of a given *sampradaya* (lineage of gurus and followers), this may have made little difference. Nor have their interpreters objected to the introduction of new, formerly "alien" instruments (tambura, violin, saxophone and electric mandolin); or to the adoption of instruments from dance and folk ensembles (flute, ghatam, kanjira and morsing) – on the contrary, all of these instruments have long since been played by men and women from different social backgrounds, often to international acclaim.



Pt. Ravi Shankar with mridanga vidvan Sri T.R. Sundaresan.
Private photo: T.R. Sundaresan

However, the "message" of revered poet-composers still finds its most congenial expression in community programs rather than in sleek stage and studio performances, going by "their key motives in cultural creativity which include, psychological satisfaction and bliss".⁸ In other words, "popularizing" Carnatic music may well succeed, provided more of its exponents dare reaching out to laypersons instead of reducing them to passivity: treating them as participants again, which they had indeed been not so long ago. It goes without saying that this calls not only for patience and creativity but greater sensitivity to the special needs of participants from different cultural backgrounds and age groups.

In search for words to explain what attracts people like me to Carnatic music, I compare the experience to that of looking at one of the large and colorful mosaics found in ancient sites: an impression produced by countless elements of infinite colors and shades, each contributing to such splendor though rarely noticed in its own right. This brings home the fact that our minds need to enter "the greater picture" before paying attention to the finer details and appreciating accomplishment on the lines of *rasa* (refined taste).

It may have been this wide range of expressions that first drew me to the music embodied by Ramnad Krishnan, and through him to Carnatic music in general. His secret may have been this, in the words of *Sruti Magazine* Editor in Chief, V. Ramnarayan: "Ramnad Krishnan's choice of the veena-like, delicately modulated style of singing was a decisive deviation from the general trend." If its appeal remains undiminished in the year of his birth centenary, this may be due to the possibility raised by singer T.M. Krishna, namely that Ramnad Krishnan's special aesthetics would have come naturally to him.⁹

What better way to follow in his footsteps than by building bridges between different cultures and creeds – thereby linking generations, different artistic disciplines, and so much else? Doing so on a regular basis fosters mutual respect while boosting cultural resilience in the face of dominant trends.¹⁰ Such an effort sensitizes us to subtle nuances in a noisy world, reduces stress due to constant distractions, and enables us to care for what really matters – not just to ourselves.



Vidvan Sri S. Rajam at home with one of the drawings inspired by music; an artistic genre for which he became as famous as for his efforts to enrich the repertoire with rare ragas and compositions. Photo: P.V. Jayan

Yet I also realize that there is another way of explaining how a Carnatic musician like Ramnad Krishnan could instill a sense of wonderment in a novice like myself: from an idealistic point of view, this music beckons one to join a cultural

movement stretching across time and space as active participants.¹¹ And this quite independent of any particular specialization, like vocal and instrumental genres, or favorite composers (Tyagaraja in my teacher vidvan Sri Ramachandra Shastry's case).



Veena vidushi Vidya Shankar during a lecture recital at the Max Mueller Bhavan Chennai in 1999. Photo: P.V. Jayan

The strength of music is that its beauty arises in the mind, emerging in seemingly unrelated processes over a period of time, always in need of being created anew rather than constituting a definite "work of art". This realization can be a source of strength in the face of adversity, the inevitable challenges posed by human history and natural forces. Becoming conscious of these processes is as gratifying for those starting this journey later in life and in all modesty as for seasoned performers and teachers weary of routine.¹²

"Modesty" may be the key to even more benefits, still latent in Carnatic music, some already corroborated by modern science, others still waiting to be discovered and harnessed by therapists and caregivers.¹³ Such new insights may readily be applied without putting the sanctity of tradition into doubt. So for me, this is an experience everyone may share. There are simply no inherent barriers in this music as for inspiring creativity, be it among hereditary practitioners or others.

As part of this pursuit, I have long worked towards greater appreciation of the "real" tambura, always highlighting its role in “the wonder that *is* Carnatic music”. I quite believe that such appreciation, in combination with hands-on experiences, makes Carnatic music more accessible also to audiences and learners hailing from other cultures.



Art: V.C. Arun for
www.aiume.org

To conclude, there are many reasons to believe that Carnatic music matters, perhaps more than ever and almost anywhere in the world.¹⁴ So why not perform and teach it in the service of better education for all, for ecological awareness or in order to promote mutual respect in spite of all our differences? And attempt this where other means have failed to make a difference?

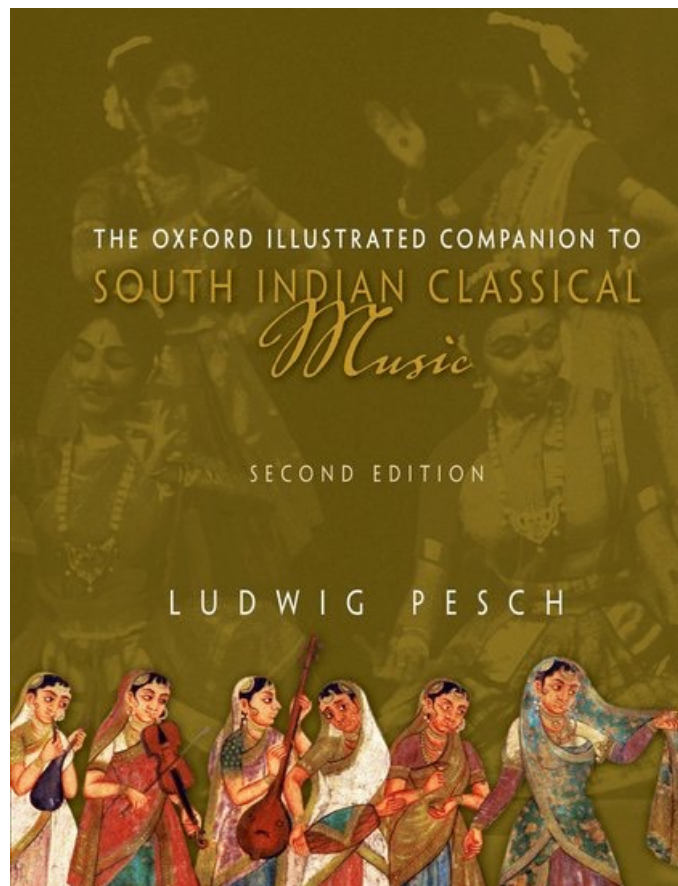
In *Paramatmudu*, Tyagaraja points in this direction by celebrating the wonder of life in all its manifestations, extolling "a joyful subtle insight into that in all its beauty".¹⁵ To start with, by listening to a rendition of *Paramatmudu* and similar songs *together*, followed up by a frank exchange of ideas: to figure out *together* what this may mean for any living being we – as Tyagaraja in this song – can think of. Then moving to the next level by getting involved beyond the music as such – realizing what makes a particular tune so enticing, keeping tala – thereby getting invigorated and better equipped to tackle the larger issues at hand.

About the author

Ludwig Pesch is a musician, musicologist and educator interested in “other” ways of sharing music. He studied South Indian music at Kalakshetra after serving as church organist and studying music and musicology in Freiburg (Germany). His critically acclaimed *Oxford Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music* has been in print since 1999.

He specialized in flute playing under the guidance of Sri H. Ramachandra Shastry (1906-92), adherent to the personalized *gurukula* system of teaching with whom he performed on many occasions.

For more information, visit www.aiume.org and www.carnaticstudent.org.



Notes

¹ *Sadhana, the Realisation of Life* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1st edition. 1913, reprinted 1964); for a long excerpt on music visit Deepak Raja's blog:

<https://swaratala.blogspot.com/2007/05/rabindranath-tagore-music-is-purest.html>

Tagore was fond of Tyagaraja's compositions, even inspired by Carnatic music as seen in some of his own compositions (known as *Rabindrasangeet*); for details, see Reba Som: *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song* (Penguin 2009); a summary is provided in my essay titled "Unity in Diversity, Antiquity in Contemporary Practice? South Indian Music Reconsidered"; an essay based on a presentation to the music conference titled "Music | Musics. Structures and Processes" (Göttingen, 4-8 September 2012), p. 201.

<https://www.aiume.org/unity-in-diversity-antiquity-in-contemporary-practice-south-indian-music-reconsidered/> (open access)

The portrait seen here is the preliminary sketch for a painting by Dutch painter Martin Monnickendam, made on the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's lecture at the *Vrije Gemeente* ("free church") in Amsterdam. None of the final paintings seems to have survived. His visit was part of a widely publicized lecture tour in September 1920.

The present thumbnail is found in the database of the Stadsarchief Amsterdam (the city's archive and copyright holder), along with three more portraits by the same artist; to view all the available sketches, search "Tagore" here:

<https://beeldbank.amsterdam.nl/>

² The recording later turned out to be Ramnad Krishnan's album *Vidwan: Songs Of The Carnatic Tradition* (a double-LP, later made available on CD); recorded in New York City in 1968 and published by Nonsuch Records; I heard it being discussed on a nightly Radio France programme, "Poésie Ininterrompue"; details are found here:

<https://www.discogs.com/Ramnad-Krishnan-Vidwan-Music-Of-South-India/release/1395518>

³ This being the case still, many years later, I wrote the above mentioned essay to try and make sense of a concept reiterated in different contexts: "Unity in Diversity, Antiquity in Contemporary Practice?"

<https://aiume.org/education/unity-in-diversity-antiquity-in-contemporary-practice-south-indian-music-reconsidered/> (open access); for analysis by noted scholars, see my [recommendations](#).

⁴ See my acknowledgments in *The Oxford Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music*, a reference work which would have been impossible to compile without their patience in explaining the concepts for which they – S. Rajam, Vidya Shankar and T.R. Sundaresan – are well-known specialists:

<https://www.carnaticstudent.org/service/free-melakarta-raga-course/>

<https://www.carnaticstudent.org/more-about-the-course-and-the-tutors/>

⁵ Find these and other song lyrics instantly with the help of the custom search engine I have placed here:

<https://www.carnaticstudent.org/resources/links-research>

⁶ There may be many reasons for this, particularly the habit of over-emphasizing "complexity" for its own sake. Attempts at dumbing down are similarly counterproductive, especially when *gamaka* "ornamentation" and other essential traits are sacrificed. Rather than harping on "complexity" or "antiquity" in a condescending manner, Carnatic musicians may identify what matters most to them, in their daily practice. For their peers this will open the doors to a give-and-take in the sense of a true intercultural dialogue: a musical conversation on eye-level.

⁷ To understand the importance of Indian music for Yehudi Menuhin, read his autobiography titled *Unfinished Journey* (London, 1978), pp. 340-343: "participation in Indian music means much to me – urging in sequences which will never be repeated the savoring of each note; heightening the ear's perception of the notes, the rhythms and the flexible tensions between them."

⁸ Recommended reading: William J. Jackson's books, here quoted from his *Tyagaraja and the Renewal of Tradition: Translations and Reflections* (Delhi: Motilal 1994), p. 220.

⁹ "A master of ragas like no other"

<https://srutimag.blogspot.com/2017/09/>

¹⁰ Arve Gunnestad (Norway): "In resilience research we are trying to find out what helps children to cope and develop normally in abnormal circumstances. ... *Serious problems can arise* when a majority tries to acculturate a minority to the majority culture by taking away or not recognizing important parts of the minority culture. This has happened in many cases where the majority has forced its language, way of living, dress and other cultural expressions on the minority." –

"Resilience in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: How resilience is generated in different cultures" in *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, ISSN 1404-1634, 2006, issue 11.

<https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr11/gunnestad.htm>

¹¹ A critical analysis of idealistic representations is found in *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (London: Harvard University Press 2015) by John Stratton Hawley, who "ponders the destiny of the idea of the bhakti movement in a globalizing India".

<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674187467>

¹² Yehudi Menuhin, in his aforementioned autobiography, expresses this inherent disadvantage in all humility: "Naturally I am a novice in the matter, having neglected at the age of three to begin the necessary schooling and to anchor myself in the tradition."

To this many a modern scientist or educationist would add that *active involvement in music* is a worthwhile pursuit for many reasons; hence such involvement deserves being promoted both, among the young and among the "young at heart"; ideally as an intergenerational, collective pursuit, perhaps similar to the informal, domestic *gurukulavasa* learning process I benefited from alongside the regular classes followed in Kalakshetra College in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹³ See the discussion by Dale Purves of "a group of tonal relationships that tend to convey a different emotional state" (i.e. in raga music marked by elaborations, figures and *gamaka* ornaments also found in Baroque music): *Music as Biology: The Tones We Like and Why* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: 2017), p. 97, Ch. "The Expression of Emotion in Eastern and Western Music".

<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674545151>

¹⁴ Discussed in a chapter for *Integrated Music Education: Challenges of Teaching and Teacher Training* (a book released at the biannual ISME 2018 world conference for music education:

<https://www.aiume.org/integrated/>.

For publishing details and/or finding a copy in a library near you soon, see

<https://www.worldcat.org/title/integrated-music-education-challenges-of-teaching-and-teacher-training/oclc/1039921554>.

¹⁵ Excerpt from William Jackson's translation of *Paramatmudu* by Tyagaraja:

"Being in all that's made of sky, wind, fire, and water, in beasts and birds and hills and trees by the tens of millions, always in the lifeless and the lively, the Lord whom Tyagaraja adores in this world – That Supreme Being pervades like light! Have a joyful subtle insight into that in all its beauty." – *Tyagaraja: Life and Lyrics* by William J. Jackson. (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 291.