



MUSEE MUSICAL

175 YEARS AND GROWING STRONGER...



Just beyond one of Chennai's noisiest quarters, a dusty driveway makes way for an old and much adored building, which houses the city's legacy of the colonial era - Musée Musical. One wonders about the enormous doors that leads into the music salon; our doubts would soon be put to rest by the CEO of the company, Kishore Das, who would tell us that the building was the erstwhile shelter of the ceremonial elephants of the Parthasarathy Temple. The softboard just outside is a colourful quilt of newspaper and magazine clippings about the organisation, young as well as yesteryear musicians, event invites and information charts.

If the fragrance of sandal, javvadu, and camphor are closely associated to temples, Musée Musical is no less. One is pleasantly accosted by the fragrance of pine oil, leather polish and other wood polish coming off all the gleaming musical instruments standing in suspended animation in their well-lit glass racks. The rack behind the cash counter cum

reception looks old and aesthetically worm eaten but renewed to perfection. Just above the entrance foyer is a tastefully designed cluster lighting made of a few hundred clay pots that were also probably balancing the acoustics of the showroom. Just beyond the foyer, eyes lock on majestic grand pianos with their luminous ivory and ebony keys. Two gorgeously refurbished columns hold up a mezzanine floor that boasts more polished racks holding violins, guitars and shiny saxophones. A beautiful spiral stairway with concealed lighting leads the way up and one is astounded by the variety of both common and less familiar instruments.

As we take in the sights and sounds of the showroom, one can only imagine that the air we are breathing is thick with the dreams and aspirations of legends and doyens of the art world who might have made their humble beginnings along these corridors. We are joined by Sri Kishore Das who is only too happy to recount the history of Musée Musical, a 175 year old institution.



Founded in the year 1842 by a Portuguese music lover called Misquith, in the rarer environs of the Nilgiris, it was then a one man show, tuning and repairing pianos and organs in private homes and churches all over India and in far flung lands such as Lahore and Penang. Misquith and Co. was briefly held by a German and soon came to be owned by the French-Spanish duo of Prudhomme and Amy Rozario, who gave it its current name. It was also under them that the company began the sale of musical instruments like harpsichords and violins in addition to the servicing.

Around the 1940s, during the Independence-movement, Sri Giridhar Das the then financial director of the company, bought it over and became the first Indian owner of Musée Musical. Soon after Independence, when the government began imposing taxes on foreign instruments as luxury goods, purely as a service to music as a global tradition, the institution began renting out musical instruments at a nominal rate to keep alive the Western Music



Education in India, and began selling Indian instruments too. The institution began its music school in 1966 and has been associated with the Trinity College of London, holding exams and certifying since then. In the last two decades Musée Musical has acquired the expertise and begun handcrafting western instruments in India. From being an importer of musical parts, and instruments to becoming an exporter of all things related to music, the company has given Chennai a special position in global music scenario.

In terms of patronage, the institution has been associated with gems like of M S Subbulakshmi, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali, Ustad Bismillah Khan and Pt Ravi Shankar, servicing and tuning their instruments for concerts in the city and abroad; and very close, almost personal associations with greats like Veena Balachander, Chittibabu, Vikku Vinayakram, Mandolin Srinivas and Drums Sivamani. In terms of footfall, the company has attracted many of Chennai's musically



inclined, taught them and honed them into artists and musicians of global acclaim. From Maestro Illayaraja who frequented the store to study books on western music notations, to honing Oscar Awardee

A R Rahman, to the youngest Turk on the music radar, Director Anirudh - all of whom have been students at Musee Musical, given exams and earned accolades.



Some of the lesser known events in the timeline of the store include being commissioned to service vintage pianos including a Steinway that had once been played by Smt M S Subbulakshmi, a piano that had been played by Nobel Awardee Rabindranath Tagore and a long forgotten one in an Indian Air Force Officer's Club in New Delhi. Some of the stories associated with these instruments are legendary in themselves.

While selling instruments to the established and professional musicians and providing services is their bread and butter, the institution prides itself on having propagated music learning among the wider sections of society as a means of nurturing the inner self, as a form of wholesome education and a means of self-healing. Today the clientele includes high flying doctors and corporates who began as students and continue to engage in music as a form of hobby and spiritual self-help. Many of the students of Musee Musicals are involved in Music Therapy and research in Music as Therapy.

The institution holds events to showcase its students, plays a key role in promoting classical music as a career, and to identify talent that is capable of being trained

in music conservatories abroad. Amongst the roster of talented students who have been hand-picked and trained to be performers, teachers and committed examiners of great repute, are differently abled artists, wherein Musee Musical has played a game-changing role in their lives. Musee Musical prides itself on being a touch and learn showroom where clientele are encouraged to play the instruments and arrive at the one most suited to them. The institution reaches out to the less privileged students and provides scholarships to the deserving amongst them, and also provides them opportunities to interact with well-known musicians. They host landmark collaborative events bringing together Philharmonic orchestras from abroad and Music ensembles in India, to facilitate interdisciplinary learning.

From the business of music to manufacturing instruments, to the imparting of skills to identify ideal materials and unique engineering practices associated with hand crafting instruments, Musee Musicals has come full circle setting a bench mark as a unique industry. With a 360 degree influence on the music industry, Musee Musical is a one of a kind institution in India in terms of its service to the Music Community.

- Aruna Suresh