

Marudavalar Ramalingam (Pandit): For the Love of Music

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Considered by many in the Singapore Indian classical music scene as the first and most influential teacher, Pandit Ramalingam had taught hundreds of students. Besides being a composer, he was a radio host and a Tamil-language teacher.

From the time he came to Singapore from India in 1937 at the age of 24, until he died at 73, Marudavalar Ramalingam devoted his life to the service of teaching music. Known and loved for his calm demeanour, refined manners, consideration, and ready smile, Ramalingam once said to a reporter, “If I had not left India...I would have remained one among thousands – an unknown figure.

“I would have missed the opportunity of serving the musical circle of this island republic. After coming to Singapore, I was able to contribute to the growth of Indian music here. I consider this a great honour.”

Born in Madurai, India, Ramalingam was well educated, and could read and write Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit. Along with his brother, he also studied music there and in Kerala.

In 1935, he was offered a job in Singapore – to be an *othuvaar* (singer of religious hymns in the temple) at the Dandayuthapani Temple in Tank Road. For this form of singing, it was not necessary to have any formal training. As more temple-goers heard his voice, so too more and more began asking him to teach their children traditional South Indian singing.

He began teaching, with the permission of the temple which had realised his talent: the way he could teach and spread the love of music. By 1940, Ramalingam had formed the Sri Ram Orchestra, and had taught the musicians how to play South Indian classical music as an orchestra. With them backing him, he performed at many community and national events including the National Day Parade. He was also President – and remained so for many years – of the Indian Music Art Society which was founded in 1940.

By the time he became a part-time musician with the Indian section of the then Radio Singapore in 1944, he had been married for a year. His marriage to 13-year-old, Maragathamvalli, took place during the Japanese Occupation. He was 34.

Ramalingam’s involvement with radio was to provide a platform for his talents for many years, during which time his career was interrupted by a crisis of doubt.

In 1946, he decided to return to India as he felt that there was limited scope in Singapore. In India, he was appointed Assistant Music Director at Gemini Music Studios in Chennai. After a year, and at the persuasion of his brother, he returned to Singapore, to his job at the temple, and as music teacher to many.

As the first person to teach Carnatic music in Singapore, the ranks of students swelled, and he conducted several classes each day, on top of regularly travelling to Kluang and Penang to teach students there. During this time, he also worked with Bhaskar's Academy as a music composer, and gave Tamil tuition.

By the early 1960s, the second eldest of his nine children, Yogeswari R., 13, would take over some of his classes because of the teaching load. All his children were exposed to South Indian classical music forms and took up various instruments. Today, Yogeswari is a full-time vocal and *veena* teacher at the Temple of Fine Arts, a Singapore-based Indian performing arts school, and has taught about 700 students over the years.

Between 1950 and 1979, Tamil radio listeners in Singapore and Southeast Asia were introduced to Ramalingam's talents as well. He presented many programmes, among them, *Isai Vilakkam* (explanation of music), a particularly well-remembered one which introduced readers to *ragas* and various special features of South Indian classical music. He also featured in a programme about *ville pattei*, a type of comedic music which is a dying art form. He was also involved in some of the first Tamil TV shows, and composed music scores for Tamil dramas.

Hailed for his contribution to the development of South Indian classical music – performances, compositions, talks on classical music, and teaching – Ramalingam was a familiar figure in Indian music circles. He was one of the founding members of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. He travelled regularly to Malaysia to perform in Indian concerts there as well as to teach. His favourite instrument was the harmonium.

Over the span of his career, he composed hundreds of songs, and taught hundreds of students music and the Tamil language. Many of his students went on to achieve acclaim and to start their own schools.

The only stable income Ramalingam earned was from his work in radio. As a teacher, he was known for never asking for money. As his daughter Yogeswari says: "Money was not important to him – he just wanted to spread the music. He did it for the love of music and teaching, but it was a financial struggle. Many people took his lessons for free, and never thought of whether he could make a living to support his family."

The family – nine children all born a year apart – were also exposed to his training. All five daughters learnt classical Indian dance and music, and two son play the *tabla* and the *mridangam*. Says Yogeswari: "His dream was for all of us to go to the University, although we knew he couldn't afford it. But at least one of us did made it."

Ramalingam continued teaching for many decades, until a viral attack weakened him in 1980, and resulted in complications from which he passed away in 1985. When he died, he was hailed as one of Singapore's best-known Indian musicians.

Awards

Early 1960s: *Public Service Star Medal (Silver)*

Compositions

*List has never been compiled.

References

Interview with daughter, Yogeswari, R.

(1985, November 1). Indian Musician 'Pandit' Dies, *The Straits Times*, Home, p.19.

Raman, A.P. (1985, November 15). Great Loss to Music, *The Straits Times*, p.8.