

Nomination For Best Teacher: Mrs Maragatham Ramaswamy

2005 Best Teacher

Nomination for

Mrs Maragatham Ramaswamy

Musician, Music Teacher, Innovator, Coach, Drill-Sergeant and Friend



**From the Students of Ragamalika
Past and Present through its 15 years..**

Maragatham Ramaswamy

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Summary

In the opinion of her students, events such as the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana and individuals like Maragatham Ramaswamy are part of why Indians have not only retained their identity but also contributed immensely to the enrichment of Indo-American culture. Mrs Ramaswamy's students would like to provide a testimony to her dedication, devoted teaching and a passionate pursuit of perfection.

Maragatham Ramaswamy was formally educated and trained in Carnatic music as a vocalist and a violinist. Earning the title of Sangeetha Vidhwan at an early age in these two pursuits, she has performed at prestigious *sabhas* in Madras and at All India Radio, Madras before she moved to the United States in the 1980s with her family.

Her reputation in Madras preceded her arrival in Northern Virginia. She was approached by many interested students and parents for assistance in learning Carnatic music. She responded because of her love for teaching. She saw this as an opportunity to inculcate a love for Carnatic music in young minds and hearts. Very soon her love of teaching overtook her own aspirations as an individual performer.

In 1987, she set up an institution called "Ragamalika" that reflects her unique vision: to provide musical training that combines hands on practice with theory - and above all, training vocalists to "play" their voice like a delicate instrument. The website for this organization (located at <http://www.ragamalika.net/>) was lovingly put together by her devoted students. This website was first launched during the 15th anniversary of Ragamalika as a tribute to a great guru and an active and lively musical organization that she leads. The website continues to be maintained by her students on a volunteer basis.

Maragatham lives for the day when one of her students, is on stage, surpassing everything that she herself achieved. For her that day vindicates all the efforts she has put in, in her teaching.

Qualifications:

Education and Training

- Maragatham started training as a violinist at a very young age and then later added vocal music to her repertoire.
- She graduated from the prestigious Music College of Madras with a Gold Medal for outstanding achievement.
- The title *Sangeeta Vidhwan* was conferred on Maragatham for violin and vocal music in April 1963 by the Government of Madras (Tamil Nadu).
- She was honored by "Tamil Thenral Radio" for her outstanding contribution and achievement to Carnatic Music in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area.
- She auditioned and was accepted as an All India Radio artiste for violin and vocal performances, at AIR, Madras.
- Maragatham Ramaswamy has received many awards from prestigious organizations such as the *Music Academy* and the *Krishna Gana Sabha* for her vocal and violin performances.
- Prominent music critics in major Indian newspapers (Hindu, Indian Express, Ananda Vikatan) have recognized Maragatham for her musicianship. (See Attachment B)
- In 1994, Maragatham was the music consultant for Terrence McNally's "A Perfect Ganesh" performed at the Arena Stage in Washington D.C.
- Maragatham and Mrs. Usha Char have released a double cassette album containing rare compositions on the Hindu deities 'Vinayaka' and 'Devi'. (When)

Violin

- Maragatham comes from a musical family. She grew up listening to her sister Kalaimamani Radha Narayanan playing the violin.

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- She received her initial training under Trivandrum V. Harihar Iyer
- Later she honed her skills under the guidance of famous musicians like T.N.Krishnan, M.S. Anantharaman and Lalgudi Jayaraman.

Vocal

- Maragatham started her vocal training under renowned vocalist, late S. Kalayanaraman, a disciple of the late maestro G.N. Balasubramaniam.
- She has also received vocal training from prominent musicians such as Palghat K.V.Narayanaswamy, T.M.Thiagarajan, and Ramnad Krishnan.

Experience:

Performances/Works:

Maragatham's own concerts are too numerous to list. Attachment B contains some newspaper clippings that represent reviews of these concerts. We present a few samples of concerts where Maragatham performed along with her students. This will provide a flavor of the competence, skill and confidence that she has inspired in her students.

- She and her senior students released an album on Lord Muruga, the proceeds of which were donated to the Murugan Temple in Maryland. (1999)
- She and her students participated in the U.S. Army Fort Belvoir Research, Development and Engineering Center's closing observance of "Asian Pacific American heritage Month" on 29th May 1991.
- She and her students gave a performance of classical music in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institutions Washington, D.C in 1996.
- In July 1997, Maragatham participated along with her students in the Festival of American Folklife: "Sacred Sounds", in Washington DC.
- Maragatham and her students performed two years in a row at the 20th and 21st Takoma Park festivals in September 1997 and 1998 respectively.

Achievements of Maragatham's students:

Some of Maragatham's former students themselves have become teachers. For example, Usha Iyer teaches Carnatic Music in the Baltimore (?) area. In addition, Maragatham's students have performed at various venues over the past 15 years. A sample of various student achievements is listed below for the last few years:

Public Event	Date	Student (s)
Thyagaraja Aradhana Cleveland OH 2004	April 2004	Abhiram (Violin) Aravind (Violin) Keerthana (Vocal) Vikram Rao (Vocal),
Sangeeta Lahiri Mini Concert, Reston VA 2003	November 2003	Deepta Mathavan (Violin) Varun Rajan (Vocal) Vikram Rao (Vocal)
Durga Mandir Mini Concert, 2004	August 2004	Deepta Mathavan (Violin) Vivaek Shivakumar (Vocal) Sahana Mukundan (Vocal)
All India Radio Yuva Vani Program, Madras India	Summer 2002	
Rajdhani Mandir Fund Raiser Concert 2003	February 2003	Deepta Mathavan (Violin) Rohini Ravada (Vocal)

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Music Competition 2 nd Place, Pennsylvania Smithsonian Music Festival, Washington D.C.	May 2002 1997, 1998	Rohini Ravada (Vocal) Kripa Rajan (Vocal) Lavanya Ramakrishnan (Vocal) Prashant Rajan (Violin) Sandhya Ramnath (Vocal) Siva (Vocal) T.C. Ratnapuri (Vocal)
20 th and 21 st Takoma Park Music Festival (MD)	1997, 1998	Kripa Rajan (Vocal) Lavanya Ramakrishnan (Vocal) Prashant Rajan (Violin) Sandhya Ramnath (Vocal) Siva (Vocal) T.C. Ratnapuri (Vocal)
Annual Thyagaraja Aradhana in SSVT, Lanham MD	Last 15 Years	Many Students
Annual Nadatangini Thyagaraja Ardhana in SSVT Lanham MD	Last 10 Years	Many Students
Sangeeta Lahiri Trinity Festival, George Mason University, Fairfax VA and other venues	2002, 2003, 2004	Many Students
Sangita Lahiri Children's Day Programme at Durga Mandir, VA and other venues	2002, 2003, 2004	Various Students
Fundraiser Concert for Murugan Temple, MD	1999	Lavanya Ramakrishnan (Vocal) Sandhya Ramnath (Vocal) Siva Singaravelu (Vocal) T.C. Ratnapuri (Vocal)
Andal Kalyanam for Shiva Vishnu Temple Lanham MD	January 1999, January 2000	Lavanya Ramakrishnan (Vocal) Sandhya Ramnath (Vocal)
Fusion Music CD Release	(Get Details)	Kripa Rajan (Vocal)

Present any other relevant information explaining why they consider the teacher to be eligible for the award.

For this nomination, Maragatham's students were surveyed to try to capture what made her teaching style unique – so unique that she deserved the Best Teacher award. Here is what they said:

Maragatham customizes her style to the student...

She has a tremendous capacity to adjust her teaching style based on the abilities of her students.

- To the beginner, she is a beacon, providing illumination on the basics of Carnatic Music, its foundations and key concepts. She lays down a concrete foundation with a rigor and discipline that is needed to imbibe more advanced concepts. She ensures that the beginner has a firm grasp of *swarasthanas*, *gamakas* and *taalas* before introducing them to *keerthanas*.
- For the middle level practitioner, she starts to raise the bar and gradually introduces them to more difficult compositions. She teaches them how to evoke *bhava* in their renderings.
- For the advanced students she is a guide to the vast ocean of Carnatic Music, teaching *alapanas*, *neraval*, *swaram*, and ultimately preparing them for their own individual performances. She is at once a coach, a teacher, a friend and a guide for the advanced performer. Ultimately she hopes that her advanced students themselves pick up teaching techniques and become teachers themselves.

Maragatham uses innovative techniques...

Maragatham's teaching techniques includes a wide variety of teaching aids, props and exercises. The exercises and aids differ with the level of difficulty for which the technique is being used. She has a knack for deconstructing complex concepts into simple steps that can be taught, assimilated and internalized by the student.

- For example, to explain the concept of *swarasthanams* to a child, Mrs. Ramaswamy might ask her to run up the stairs, singing one note for each stair, to explain the ascending order of swaras in a practical manner. To explain the descending order of swaras, the student could be asked to run down the stairs, again singing a single note for each stair. To illustrate the large gap between notes (R1, G2) she may will ask the student to skip a step. This technique is based on the idea that voice manipulation often imitates physical movement.
- To get a student to master a *gamakam*, she effectively uses a technique by which she breaks the *gamakam* into logical sections. Logical sections mean generally grouping the first, middle, and end part of a gamakam together. She then, could make the student practice each note of each section individually, thus ensuring that each of the notes is in the correct swarasthanam and is accurate. Once each note is perfected, the notes in the section are then joined together, and sung very slowly. After this is done for every section of the gamakam, the various sections are then joined together.

Maragatham herself is learning constantly...

- She follows the principle that one never stops learning.
- She is always listening to recordings and picking up tips by observing other artistes. If she hears a song that she likes, she will take the trouble to write down the notation with the swara and sahitya, ready to teach her students.
- She makes efforts to attend live concerts regularly to appreciate and keep in touch with the state of Carnatic music practice.
- She is constantly adding to her repertoire of teaching techniques by borrowing from her students! When she finds that one of her students is able to grasp a particularly difficult phrase more easily than his fellow students, she discovers the rationale behind this enhanced grasping ability. She then tries to convey that particular technique to all her students.

Maragatham believes that to truly appreciate and perform good music, knowledge is also essential...

Her quest for making the learning process easier is never ending. In each class the student does not learn just a piece of a song. The student understands the tala, the raga, the family of that raga, the differences behind the implementation of that raga in that particular song and the various intricacies that go behind the structure of the raga. Her knowledge of music is like an *akshayapathram*.

A testimony to her ability to unearth latent talents and interest in students is legendary. Even accomplished students or those students who feel that they are accomplished on account of years of learning and practice, find that there is a considerable gap between their perception and reality. Once they accept that fact, Mrs. Maragatham's teaching techniques convert even the most adamant cynic into a devoted follower of Carnatic music. The student is able to appreciate his or her own progress after each class. As had been mentioned earlier, not only is the student singing a particular song fluently, the student is also aware of what is being sung. The theory being imparted enables the student to understand the song and as a result the bhava flows into the rendition without any special contrived effort.

Maragatham transfers musical complex styles to a broad level of student abilities

Maragatham is renowned for her compositions that are lively, sweet and capture the essence of the undelying. Her renderings that may seem difficult and daunting at first to beginners. Maragatham does not dismiss the early learner and dissuade them from complex renderings. She actively coaches and prepares them to take on increasingly difficult pieces. With her interpretations and coaching, students at many levels are able to grasp, absorb and render complicated sangathis with brighas and gamakas.

She transfers the unique characteristics of her own heritage and learning from her renowned gurus to her students.

Maragatham prepares her students for Alapanas and Kalpanaswaras

There is a belief in Carnatic music that Alapanas and Kalpanaswaras come magically with sufficient listening and years of practice. In reality, without understanding the science behind these, the average student becomes quickly frustrated and gives up. Maragatham's technique involves two components: (1). As she is teaching every keerthanam, the student is taught to sing the swara along with the gamakas. (2) She explains the gamakas in every raga. (3) She shows the student how to develop exercises that are the building blocks for improvisational aspects of Carnatic music. Once the foundation gets strong, the student's creative juices take over.

Maragatham's Personal Qualities as a Teacher

Her unselfish mode of teaching has endeared her to all her students. Her humility has kept her from advertising her skills but the waiting list to get into her class around the DC area is very long and slots in her music training programs are treasured.

Maragatham is very sensitive to people's self-view. She does not put down any student in public or in any forum where that person's self image is likely to be affected. She is a strict but fair teacher who is patient when people "don't get it"; she will not tolerate laziness, indiscipline or lack of practice.

Maragatham is a stickler for perfection

She is a stickler for perfection. Every note, every *gamaka* has to be perfect. As a result, when her groups perform, they produce a harmonious and homogenous blending of voices that sounds like one – the Holy Grail of Carnatic music group songs. She will not move on to the next song, until the previous one is rendered to her satisfaction – again and again.

Maragatham believes that the voice is an instrument, and Carnatic music should sound sweet

Many students either struggle to reach the *tara sthayi* (upper octave) or attempt to bellow their way to the upper *panchamam*. Her instructions on effectively using the larynx, practicing breath control, making the eye look down rather than the ceiling when traversing the upper octave and not straining the neck muscles, which psychologically fools the body into thinking that there is no effort, have immensely helped students. On stage they seem to sing effortlessly. She also makes students watch some of the current top performers and points out how they are able to render a complicated phrase. This makes the student realize the rationale behind her lessons on the use of the mouth, the tongue and the different visual facial techniques that would help a student hit a particular note or a series of notes. This emphasis on voice culture has been the foundation of her insistence on "*Sowkhyam Sangeetham*".

Maragatham has extended standard notation techniques to add more detail and precision

She has developed her own detailed style of notation that she uses for all her songs. She takes the trouble to detail every *gamaka*, every *brigha* of a *sangathi* in her notation. As a result of following the notation the student learns how to sing a *sangathi* accurately and this gives the vocal performance a clarity that is usually the prerogative of instrumental music.

Summary

In summary, from her student's point of view:

- Classes are fun. Kids and adults alike, look forward to their weekly lesson at Maragatham's. The hour goes by quickly, and no one is waiting, well past the hour as well.
- She really knows her material. She knows the compositions, she knows the theory, and she has clarity of tone, clarity of thinking and clarity of communication.
- She provides a non-threatening environment where students feel free to ask questions.

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- She is extremely patient when she sees the student trying to absorb what she is imparting. She will try many techniques to explain a particularly difficult concept. Some of these are unorthodox or homegrown techniques that hit the spot during a especially difficult passage.
- She uses a variety of techniques to motivate her students. From throwing challenges to serving coffee in the back office, she is determined to coax the best out of her students. At the same time, she is a firm disciplinarian with students who are careless or lax in their practice or tardy in their attendance. In her book, perfect and regular practice makes for perfect performances.
- She promotes camaraderie and *esprit de corps* with her monthly musical evenings where students get a chance to perform and the annual Ragamalika annual concert.

Nominating Maragatham Ramaswamy as the best teacher in the USA is a labor of love, as far as the students are concerned. They do not need to be convinced of this fact! They know, as attested by their testimonials in Attachment A.

ATTACHMENT A

Personal Testimonials from Ragamalika Students
(Past and Present)

“Carnatic Music is my favorite hobby”. Just like me, I’m sure many students who learn from Mrs. Maragatham Ramaswamy would say this. With her, learning music is fun, informative, and a real art by itself.

My teacher is a combination of perfection, friendliness, sincerity and dedication. Each class is always interesting. We really feel happy to know how well and how much we have learnt in just the hour we spend with her every week. She thinks nothing is impossible. She believes that any of her students, taught properly, is capable of great performances. Every time I watch our Ragamalika programs, I’m surprised and astonished by the uniformity amongst the groups.

I started learning from her when I was 5. I have always marveled at her perfectionism. She wouldn’t let us treat *swarasthanam*, *shruthi*, or *thalam* lightly. She ensured that we followed *thalam*. Learning from her, I have always felt, makes one feel great. The art of listening that I learnt in her school, has helped me come a long way in Carnatic music. I can identify the differences between the way others sing and the way the students from our school sing. So much so, that I travel all the way from North Carolina to Virginia to learn music from her. I have always had the satisfaction of learning a song perfectly when I learn it from her. When we finish it, we know the beauty of the song, the beauty of the *raga* in which it is composed, the *swaras* which make the *raga* beautiful (*jeeva swaras*), the *gamakas*, and the techniques of rendering this *raga*. We learn it so perfectly that it is easy for us to identify this *raga* when it is sung by any artist in any concert, even when they start their *alapana*.

My teacher is very friendly and caring. Her extreme interest identifies individual shortcomings and finds easy ways to overcome hurdles. We can always count on her and talk to her about our problems in singing and be sure that she would find a way to solve it in our next class. Her classes are always fun. She never raises her voice but makes sure that we do what she wants us to do in her own way. I have enjoyed her classes for the past 7 years and I’m sure this enjoyment will continue well into the future.

Sahaana Mukundan Age 12
Current Student

"Smt. Maragatham Ramswamy gave excellent leadership to the group and never overshadowed the group singing. It was obvious that the group was singing in total unison, with rarely an miscues, especially in the majestic rendering of Devi Jagajjani. ... The volume of talent hidden in Smt. Maragatham Ramaswamy, an extremely humble and sensitive person, is phenomenal."

-- excerpt from an article by Hema Murli, published in Express India 10/12/1990

Attachment B: What the critics said...

11/5/1982

Calcutta Fine Arts Four Day Music Festival, Srinivas Sastri Hall, Mylapore.

Mylapore, Madras

"Concluding concert in the festival was provided by Maragatham Ramaswamy tidily supported by M.S. Anantharaman (violin) and Thanjavur Ramadoss (mridangam). For those who look for the unusual, Maragatham provided excellent material in Sri Kamakshi, an outstanding composition of Annaswamy Shastri in Saaranga. She sang a disciplined version of the song. Among the ragas essayed by Maragatham were Dhanyasi (Balakrishnan) and Vachaspati (Kantajoodumi) and Sankarabharnam (Swara Raaga). Dhanyasi stood out for dignity and Vachaspati for hints of colorful artistry."

The Hindu

11/5/1982

9/18/1981

Varasiddhi Vinayakar Sath Sangam, Besantnagar

Besantnagar, Madras

It was a welcome relief from the feverish course which concerts generally take to listen to Maragatham Ramaswami - - The selections were far from sluggish but she sang them with a poise and clarity that blended a relaxed quality with tempo. For instance, the Saurashtram song "Ninnu Juchi" was sung with a lucidity of song line and sangati sequence that concealed its pace - -

Hindu

9/25/1981

4/26/1980

Music Academy's Rama Navami Series, TTK Auditorium

TTK Auditorium, Madras

"...Maragatham Ramaswamy gave a sweet and relaxed concert. Mahaganapattim (Natai) and Kamakshi (Bilahari) were good bright starters in her high pitched voice... Fine ideas coherently linked and presented in leisurely manner made her Sri Ranjini and Kalyani very appealing. The neraval swaras for the charmingly sung kritis Sr Ramachandro and Sandehamo revealed imaginative and substantial music substance. Encased in that smooth wrapping of firm and precise laya that arrests attention in a concert, the Hindolam tillana was sweetly sung. "

Indian Express

4/26/1980

12/25/1979

Indian Fine Arts Society (Vani Mahal)

Vani Mahal Madras

"There were brilliant musical phrasings ...her scholarship was evident in her delineation of Sankarabharnam in which she rendered Swara Raaga Sudha.."

Indian Express

12/25/1979

4/21/1978

Raja Annamalaipuram Cultural Association

Madras

"It was indeed a tidy performance that Maragatham Ramaswamy provided for the Raja Annamalaipuram Cultural Association last week accompanied by Radha Sundareshan (Violin) and Nagai Sundarajan (Mridangam). Endowed with a sharp high pitched voice capable of comfortable movement, Maragatham proved herself to be a classical singer of sweet and effortless competence... She sang a Saurasthran alapana of clean color without at any stage getting it tangled with Chakravakam. In between she provided a bright version of the beautiful kedaram piece Marachevaadana which is very rarely heard these days. The raga essays of Kalyani (Yevara Madugudura) and Sri Ranjini (Sri Ramachandro) were marked by a facile and pleasing sense of elaboration. The fact that Maragatham was able to make her version of Sri Rajnini a more rewarding experience than Kalyani testified to her aesthetic musical resources."

The Hindu

4/28/1978

8/16/1974

Viveka Cultural Center, Srinivas Sastri Hall, Mylapore

Mylapore, Madras

"A very likeable aspect of her competent display was the complete lack of fuss in

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her presentation mode. ... Dhanyasi and Kalyani were among the raagas offered with fluent and captivating movements by Maragatham."

The Hindu 9/16/1974

10/20/1972 Parthasarathi Swami Sabha, Triplicane

Triplicane, Madras

"Maragatham Ramswami (violin) contributed a sweet Bhairavi in this recital which was supported unobtrusively on the mridangam by Nageswaran."

The Hindu 10/20/1974

1/1/1900 Event to be ascertained.

Madras

"Maragatham Ramaswamy is the sister of the popular violin artiste, Radha Narayan. I had heard about her two years ago and decided to give her a hearing.

Her music was very sweet. Her rendition of the swarams and exposition of the Ragams are comparable to that of an accomplished artist and she sings with a sense of full commitment. Many vidhwans have also expressed their appreciation

<Tamil Magazine> 1/1/1900

1/1/1900 Event to be ascertained.

Madras

"The musical knowledge of Maragatham Ramaswamy, who sang in the evening, could be ascertained just by her rendition of the "Reethi Gowlai" ragam. It was flawless. Her exposition of the kirtanam, "Raga Rathna Malika" in this ragam was exquisite. She is definitely a rising star."

<Tamil Magazine> 1/1/1900