A new sound of music

Indian-American singer teaches Freeport siblings her novel approach to improvising Indo-jazz

Rohini Ramanathan is standing at the piano, creating a new piece of music in her unusual East-meets-West style that’s more free-form than formal, more scat than predictable.

The Indian-American singer-musician, who lives in Oceanside, received a $2,500 grant from the Decentralization Program of the New York State Council on the Arts to develop “Improv Music Vignettes: Indian Classical Music and Jazz-based,” a work in three parts. “When I left India [42 years ago], I thought I was leaving my music behind,” Ramanathan says.

“I never, ever thought it was going to stay with me.”

She oozes confidence and pride in what she’s accomplished, a far cry from her days as a child when she performed on All-India Radio Delhi, a national radio network in her native country. Though flattered about having the opportunity to perform on such a large scale, she had to deal with stage fright, a problem she conquered through extensive practice and learning to feel at one with the music. “I had other issues, like identity crisis. I go back to those days and think I did music because it was an escape from my other issues,” she says.

“I had mixed feelings. I was doing...
A musical blend melds

COVER STORY from E23

something very special, but nobody else was doing it, so I also felt very alone and very insular.”

Those insecurities are no longer a part of her makeup, and she’s embraced working with others in pursuing her musical endeavors. The grant, administered by the Huntington Arts Council, requires community involvement, so to help perform her new music Rohini Ramanathan has been working with a new trio, who are all members of the same musically inclined Freeport family.

Kevin Jackson, 18, is the group’s piano player. His brother, Kyle, 14, handles the saxophone. And their 22-year-old sister, Crystal, sings. Rohini Ramanathan selected them at an audition and trained them in her novel composition techniques. On a humid July afternoon, they’re gathered around a piano for a rehearsal and jam session. But it’s like no other jam session generally seen or heard around these parts.

Ramanathan, who plays the tamboura — a large four-stringed lute that resembles a sitar — says her methods draw on both jazz and Indian classical music. There’s no sheet music to read from, or much direction. Ramanathan simply urges the younger folks to “just let the music come out,” Crystal says.

Facing the piano as Kevin plays, Ramanathan weaves her voice around a simple tune selected in advance. Her notes rise and fall along the pentatonic (five-note scale) of raga. Soon, Crystal takes over the vocals, her powerful school choir-trained soprano improvising scat-like in the same raga style.

Crystal finds Ramanathan’s directorial style inspiring. “She’s there as a support system and a guide; she tells me to use my imagination, just let the music come out of me and don’t hold back anything,” Crystal says.

‘Unique fusion’

These long weeks of practice, Ramanathan hopes, will result in a melding of Eastern and Western music that is unfamiliar to most Long Islanders. Her music has a very different sound from popular music, which is what helped to win her grant. Ramanathan’s “unique fusion of two different types of music” impressed the arts council’s panel of judges, says Shelby Hintz, the council’s grant coordinator.

Riding a trend in Indo-jazz fusion, it will be performed for the first time over a two-hour session on Aug. 6 at 3:30 p.m. in the Grand Hall of the Zion Cathedral in Freeport. “We’ll bring the 3,000-year-old classics together with the jazz,” Ramanathan says. In a telephone interview she said, “Especially at a time in New York when fusion music is taking off, I feel very blessed because I have so much to bring to the table.”

The concert, which is free, will consist of three sections or “items,” Ramanathan says.

“Sound of the Swan,” features Kevin’s music with a vocal improv by Ramanathan and then Crystal. “Seeking,” the second item, begins with scatting, and then a lyrical translation of a Sanskrit verse (“Lead me from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light and from mortality to immortality”) and then improv. The final all-improv section, “Sound of the Forest,” is meant to evoke the feeling of being in a forest.

Presenting an original work of Indo-jazz in public is another milestone for the New Delhi-born artist, who did not want to give her age. Ramanathan had feared her music career would end after her family moved to America when she was 18.

“She is able to bring the Indian tonality to a Western audience in a way that makes it really accessible and understandable,” says Julie Lyon, president of the Greater Westbury Council for the Arts.

In the past, Ramanathan has been honored as an ethnic artist by Long Island Traditions, the Port Washington-based organization that works with artists and musicians who carry on traditions learned within their families and communities. Nancy Solomon, the organization’s executive director, says, “Rohini is a powerful woman who has incorporated her traditional Carnatic [the main style of classical music in Southern India] repertoire with Western music forms, creating a contemporary feel.
to an age-old tradition. Her grasp of music composition is well recognized within the diaspora of South Asian performers and composers. Francesca Cassio, associate professor in the Hofstra University Music Department, who holds the University’s Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh Musicology, said in an email that the fusion of Indian and Western music here is a fairly new phenomenon, which reflects a “recent Indian immigration wave in the country.” It also has a precedent, she says: “In the early 2000s, the Anglo-Indian songwriter Susheela Raman gave a twist to the movement, incorporating Indian languages and instruments into jazz songs.”

Early training
Ramanathan began her music training in New Delhi, around age 8, when her mother, also a musician, signed her up for five-day-a-week music lessons. “For me, music was always a serious hobby,” she says. “I never had a day when I didn’t sing or practice.” She moved to the United States after her father, an Indian government official, was posted here, but her music studies continued with the same Indian teacher. “After I left India, I was lucky to have my teacher visit the U.S., and he would stay with us while he was on tour. And my mother then lived here and music did flourish,” she recalls.

Ramanathan’s subsequent career has been varied and multicultural. She taught Indian classical music at the New School in Manhattan and performed at Lincoln Center’s Bruno Walter Auditorium. She also worked on “Sesame Street” episodes, she says, first as a consultant in a non-musical capacity, but then got to do some improv with music director Robby Merkin, who went on to compose for the 1989 Disney movie “The Little Mermaid.”

“All I said was these are the notes. Take it away and do what you want, as long as you don’t trip me up,” she says. “What came out was amazing, and he was in tears.”

In recent years, she has performed at nearly two dozen libraries in Nassau County, always including diverse musical styles in her shows, including compositions by Ashwin Ramanathan, the younger of her two sons. “He’s also a math person, and you know what they say, that math and music go together,” says Ramanathan who has been married for more than 30 years and is private about her family.

“In my performances, I have used his CDs as background music. He composed short pieces. He played the bass at one time and learned the piano.”

Diversity is a key component of Ramanathan’s repertoire. “I also sing a Yiddish lullaby . . . because I have had a mixed audience, and then I throw in some Bollywood at the end,” she says. “I’ve performed with other bands, too, and taken my music and blended it with their music.”

For the past eight years, she’s been singing in a Lutheran choir in Rockville Centre. “I never say no to a musical opportunity,” she explains.

As festival day approaches, Ramanathan looks forward to the debut of her latest music, especially as it brings out her more adventurous, artistic side. “If New York is not where you experiment,” she says, “where are you going to experiment?”

Jim Merritt contributed to this story.

The peformance
“Improv Music Vignettes: Indian Classical Music and Jazz-based”
WHEN | WHERE 3:30 p.m.
Aug. 6, Zion Cathedral, 312 Grand Ave., Freeport
INFO Free; 516-623-9466

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