

Ancient voice

Vidya Subramanian sings and teaches Indian classical music

By **SAM BRADEN**

Special to the Times Union

On April 25 Clifton Park library will be home to the music of Southern India when a local woman brings a trio of musicians for an informative performance of an unusual and exotic art form. The dominant language used in the music, Sanskrit, may be a dead language, but the music still thrives.

Vidya Subramanian lives in Clifton Park now, but it was in her birthplace of Chennai, India, that she was exposed to the type of Indian classical called Carnatic music. It uses a blend of structure and improvisation that demands improvisational ability along with encyclopedic knowledge of the many compositions available.

Subramanian likened the style to jazz, where standards are often reinterpreted by musicians. So what would someone unacquainted with Carnatic music look for in a performance?

"It's going to be interesting to see how we perform improvisation without sacrificing the natural harmony that flows in the music," said Subramanian in a recent phone interview. As the singer in a trio, she will be improvising on top of the melodies already provided in the composition, which can range from the 13th century to today. Her accompaniment of a violin and a *mridangam*, an Indian drum, will take turns improvising both rhythmi-

Vidya Subramanian

- **When:** 2 p.m. Saturday
- **Where:** Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public library, 475 Moe Road
- **Cost:** Free; registration requested
- **Contact:** 371-8622; <http://www.cphlibrary.org>

cally with the tala component and harmonically with the raga.

Sound complicated? It is. "The Raga system is best studied under an expert," said Subramanian, before mentioning her own noteworthy mentor, guru and composer Lalgudi Jayaraman. She began advanced level instructions from him in 1993 in Chennai. And now she's a teacher herself.

She doesn't just teach face-to-face. "After moving to the United States, I found that I was getting inquiries from people who live all around the country who were interested in getting instruction in this style of music," she explained, so she decided to take advantage of modern technology to teach students.

Although she received an MBA in finance from Boston College, she decided to dedicate her life to the music that she loves.

"I've always been pursuing my passion in music in a very seri-



JAMES GOOLSBY/TIMES UNION

CLIFTON PARK resident Vidya Subramanian sings and teaches Carnatic music, a traditional Indian style.

ous way, but I decided in 2004 to devote my energy full time to my pursuit of learning and teaching Carnatic music," she said.

She developed a podcast, Raagarasika, where she interacts with a colleague in Seattle who acts as a student by asking her questions. "There's a lot of terminology that we use that a Western listener may not be familiar with," she explained, but it's not just the unacquainted who are served by the

free podcast. She also uses Skype, an instant messaging program with phone and webcam capability, to instruct students while they look at notes electronically.

"With people traveling out of the country to study or work, a lot of people are interested in keeping links to the roots," said Subramanian. "Through the Internet and online teaching and podcasting, we are able to bridge the barriers of distance."

Subramanian will be joined by the musicians Ravi Srinivasan on violin and Ganesh Sankaranarayanan on mridangam, on Saturday, where she will conduct a performance seminar, explaining the style and performing pieces.

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