

Devotion touches pinnacle

FULFILMENT Her unquenchable thirst for the abhang has made Aruna Sairam reach this milestone. Catch up with her at the Music Academy.

GEETHA VENKATRAMANAN



ECSTASY: Aruna Sairam. PHOTO: ARCHIVES

Concerts of Aruna Sairam are a class apart. The unusual timbre, selection of songs and presentation make them a different experience. But it is her abhang that gives it that special touch, served as delicious dessert. What if she chooses to present an entire concert of abhangs? Aruna is doing exactly that on Sunday, **October 23, 7 p.m.** at the Music Academy. 'Rang Abhang,' the concert, will be preceded by the release of a CD of the same title.

For Aruna it is a dream come true. Cliché? But there is no other way to describe it, according to her.

In a voice choked with emotion she traces the journey. "It was with trepidation that I started singing abhangs in concerts in Chennai, 15 years ago. First such foray was at the Narada Gana Sabha, where Swami Haridas Giri used to conduct an annual bhajan mela dedicated to the Saint of Thapovanam. The audience liked it. Thereafter I made it a point to include an abhang in every concert."

About the album

"It is an experiment of sorts," says Aruna. Over a dozen instruments, most of them North Indian, including the tabla and the pakhawaj, accompany her. Are the songs familiar to her ardent fans?

"I have sung the regular ones but there are some new songs as well." Aruna is especially happy about the concluding song. "Sung in the vein of aarati, it is intended to counter any evil eye that may have been cast on Vittala. Simple in content, the tune is folksy and lilting. A friend in

This is Aruna's second full-fledged abhang concert in Chennai, the first being at the *Friday Review November Fest* five years ago. "I have always wanted to release an album of abhangs. I thank the Chennai audience, whose overwhelming response has made this possible. I feel blessed."

Training in Carnatic music and abhang singing – were they simultaneous? "Well, I spent my childhood in Mumbai, where abhang is sung by people at all levels – from the mendicant to the labourer, musician to the flower vendor. Each in his own way, sincere and with total devotion. I absorbed all

A Blessing

- Aruna considers it a blessing to have got the opportunity to sing at Pandharpur and Alandi, where the samadi of Ganeswar, pitamaha of the genre is located. The Varkari yatra to Pandarpur begins here with the saint's picture placed in a *phalki*.
- Composed by several saints – Gorakhmbar, Namdev, Sena Navi – the songs mainly are about Vittala, although Ganapati, Rama and Vittala's consort also figure.

that. Even before my lessons in Carnatic music started in earnest, I had imbibed the abhang. It was a natural process, result of constant listening. And I loved them."

How are they different from the bhajans of the South?

"The word 'abhang' means to free. It is therefore more physical. The singer just lets himself go. The focus is Vittala, the deity of Pandarpur. Mind and soul melt as the songs pick up momentum. The body responds with the arms and feet moving without inhibition. Remember, pilgrims sing the songs as they make their journey to Pandarpur, danc-

ing most of the way. Bhajans do move one to tears but the charged atmosphere makes the abhang something unique."

Did she learn the songs from a guru?

"Well, my mother arranged a teacher for a brief period. I have found 'Abhang Gita,' a collection of about 5,000 songs available in Mumbai, a rich source. But by and large I learnt them listening to masters, Pt. Bhimsen Joshi in particular. He was my inspiration. And I tune songs too."

Aruna recalls the Sawai Gandharva annual festival two years ago, in Pune. She was invited by Pt. Joshi to perform and her joy knew no bounds.

"It was a typical Carnatic kutcheri and I elaborated Thodi. And then I started singing 'Tirtha Vittala,' an abhang that Joshi had made famous. I was nervous but the 15,000-strong audience received it with ecstasy. Panditji later said, 'I was moved.' That was the ultimate seal of approval." Aruna cherishes a photograph of Joshi with her sitting at his feet.

Does she sing abhangs when she performs in Mumbai?

"You bet," she replies with laughter. "My style has a strong Carnatic flavour, which they love."

CD release

The function at 6.30 p.m. will be a simple affair with film director, K. Balachander, releasing the album and Leela Samson, Kalakshetra director and Chairman, Sangeet Natak Akademi, receiving it. The over two-hour concert will feature songs in the CD and many more.



Aruna Sairam with
GV Pt. Bhimsen Joshi