

A new season of promise

After a six-month sabbatical, Aruna Sairam has been welcomed back with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award

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If it was a winter of discontent having missed the warmth of legions of rasikas at her otherwise full-house December Season concerts, Aruna Sairam is in the heat of musical action with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Carnatic music and a global jazz festival in Canada.

On a sweltering summer afternoon, sitting on a couch amid the serene, all-white décor of her new house, it's hard to imagine the hectic creative pace the vocalist keeps.

Back after a six-month hiatus during which she skipped the crucial Margazhi fest, Aruna looks refreshed in an elegant silk sari well-matched with understated jewellery.

"Sometimes it's nice to step back from individual pursuits when there are other things calling for your immediate attention," she says, explaining her long absence on our way to Valluvar Kottam for the photo shoot.

"Whoever you may be, we all need to deal with life's simple concerns and the challenges it throws at you at times. Work life, after all, is the secondary ring of your ex-



GOING PLACES Aruna looks forward to a global jazz convention PHOTO: R. RAVINDRAN

istence; the primary comprises your loved ones. And when you are happy, they are happy. It reflects in your work." Her emotion reiterates the normality of the quiet trials of everyday life. And she seems to draw strength from them

for her artistic quest.

"You feel a child-like abandon when you are in the middle of a great piece of music. When you surrender totally to the art, it's amazing the way it transforms itself into a caretaker, accepting you with

all your negative and positive situations," she says as we reach the location.

The photographer is delighted with the hospitality of the official on duty at the landmark structure. The official and his two music-loving

friends stand with hands folded in *vanakkam*. They wait till the photo shoot gets over and see us off with a *vanakkam* again. "Such moments and interactions are the most rewarding experiences of being an artiste," she says, on our way back.

"That's the power of music. Just imagine, even as I wondered how fast I would be able to pick up from where I left six months ago, I was welcomed into the musical fold with the Sangeet Natak Akademi award. Sitting about two weeks ago in the hallowed precincts of the Durbar Hall in Rashtrapati Bhavan, I realised art has its own unique balance sheet — you gain some, you lose some."

Brought up in an environment where expressing yourself through music was well-endorsed, Aruna embraced every sound that fell upon her ears. Growing up in Mumbai and living around the country after marriage, Aruna's art acquired an exceptional cosmopolitanism. She knew an open-minded approach was the way forward.

"I remember the first time I rendered an *abhang* in a *cutcheri*. I was petrified but

the audience response stirred the experimentalist in me. I have heard these *abhangs* sung in Pandharpur, by Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, by porters in Bombay local stations and by *ramas* (domestic helpers) in our apartment. These strong memories became my muses," she says, now seated in her tastefully done-up second floor drawing room.

Not just within the tradition, Aruna looks beyond borders to undertake cross-cultural and genre-bending exercises. The upcoming world jazz convention is one such.

"For the first time, they are going to have an Indian classical artiste among them to understand our multi-layered aesthetics. Technology may have shrunk the world but art is about personal interactions, soul-to-soul connect. You cannot digitise emotions," she smiles.

And has she planned anything special for rasikas here who have been longing to hear her?

"That's definitely on the cards. I don't want to think far ahead. I want to enjoy today. I want to make sure that I enjoy tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day."