

Music of the mystic

CONCERT O.S. Arun and Sanjeev Abhyankar will bring alive the honeyed richness of Surdas' verses



POETIC EVOCATION O.S. Arun and Sanjeev Abhyankar

DATE:
November 20, 7.15 p.m.
VENUE:
The Music Academy

When musicians O.S. Arun and Sanjeev Abhyankar were asked to do a *jugalbandi* at the North-South Sangeet Sammelan in 1995, they had no clue about each other's style or approach to music. But what joy it was to plunge into a soulful bhajan "Maayi sanwaren rang ruchi" set to music by Abhyankar's guru Pandit Jasraj! The singers had a great time with ragan-tanam-pallavi in Kalyani as well. As they got to know each other, the singers discovered that they had much in common. If Arun was trained by his father, vidwan O.V. Subramaniam, with traditional rigour, Abhyankar was groomed by a no-nonsense Pandit Jasraj in the Mewadi gharana. They sang in the same *sruti* — C sharp, 1 1/2 katta) — which avoided strain. They revelled in light classical bhajan and abhang

Adventuring in other genres interested both. If Abhyankar sang memorable film songs in "Maachis" and "Sanshodhan", or won a National Award for playback singing in "Godmother", Arun composes and sings for senior dancers, has done fusion and film music, conducts a festival for young talent, and has played Kovilan in a Carnatic opera! He has made a name for himself in devotional music.

In addition, both artistes attract an eclectic young crowd, and have an attractive stage presence. They also have an unexpected sense of fun.

"We are excited about singing together in Chennai for the first time," they beam. "Our 'Sur Sagar' is not a *jugalbandi*. This is a duet, *saha gayan*." Arun is particularly happy that he is singing at *The Friday Review* November festival in the silver jubilee year of his singing career.

Arun and Abhyankar agree that every great bhakti

poet has power and emotion. So why did they choose Surdas? Says Arun, "Because I love his many moods — from *vatsalya* to surrender. There's one bhajan where he becomes the *gopi* and scolds Krishna like a *Khanabta mayika* saying, 'Don't touch me! I'm only a maid for you while she's a queen! Surdas can also be scholarly one moment and wholly bowl you over with his ability to paint Krishna in all his splendour." Surdas' *atmipata*, or closeness with his God, appeals to Abhyankar. The honeyed softness of Surdas' words enriched the language itself. Abhyankar adds, "I feel the melody in the words even when I speak the lines. No jerk at all in syllable, feeling or image."

He explains more, "Arun and I want to try our best to present Surdas' bhavani (sentiment), not our own feelings as musicians. We will treat the raga as a means to evoke the poet's experiences, *pyar se* (with love), stand in his shoes, go into his

soul. Abhyankar ends by singing one of Surdas' most moving verses: "Prabhu mere avagun chit na dhara."

When interviewed for this story, Arun was in Pandharpur, waiting to sing before Vittoba and Rukhmayi. Abhyankar was in Goa for a recital. They had exchanged their CDs of bhajans, and plan to choose the best from their repertoires. "The Jasraj favourite 'Chir jeevo-gopal' will definitely be there," Arun assures us as he sings a snatch mellifluously, while Abhyankar laughingly promises not to miss out *shringer* in a bhakti overload.

What is Krishna without *raas bha*? The musicians will render the dancing visuals and catchy rhythms of *raas* with their 'Gopi gopal' set to the Carnatic *melakarta* 'Gomanastana' by Arun. The raga corresponds to the Hindustani 'Purya Dhanashri'. Will the audience join in? "We hope so!" says Arun with mischief in his voice.

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN