

Choral recall

The city's oldest choir conductors share memories of carolling on stage and the streets on chilly nights, and what the last two years of virtual concerts have meant for congregational singing

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY



ALFRED D'SOUZA

'We were the first choir to introduce movement'

▶ **ALFRED D'SOUZA, Stop Gaps**

WE are one of the oldest choirs in the city, and are the force behind the Festival of Festive Music at the NCPA, the longest running music festival here. We invite choirs from all over India to participate and this is our 30th year. We set a standard where everybody came in proper costumes, and we were the first choir to introduce movement.

A happy memory is of the time we sang at the Horniman Circle Gardens. I also remember the year of the police riots [1982], when we set up stage, but our show had to be cancelled. In the past, we used to go carol

singing on the streets, raising money for various charitable causes. People would welcome us into their homes and give us Christmas sweets that they were making. If we were singing the whole night, many would even wait up for us. Unfortunately, that spirit of going from home to home and carol singing in the night has died out.

In the last two years, we had a virtual festival, where all choirs recorded their songs from their homes and sent it to us and so we continued things virtually. It has not stopped us from doing what we wanted to do. The Academy also runs a young talent contest series in the months of June, July and August. We were delighted to

be back at the Tata Theatre last Sunday with social distancing. Every alternate seat had to be sold and we had to take precautions. Anyone who was not doubly vaccinated and had that 14-day coverage could not perform, but we had a very successful concert despite the pandemic. Everybody has realised in these two years what a difference it makes to be singing together with that feeling of camaraderie as compared to singing from one's own home. So, they value the coming together even more. I am looking forward to more participation in the years ahead. Whatever we've done, we've done basically for charity. There's a lot that we do by just making music together.



The choir at the Festival of Festive Music 2021 with the Stop Gaps Junior Choral Ensemble at the Tata Theatre, NCPA, earlier this month



Blossom Mendonca at her house in Cuffe Parade. **PIC/ATUL KAMBLE**

'When ladies didn't turn up for rehearsals, men sang in falsetto'

▶ **BLOSSOM MENDONCA, The Living Voices**

THE choir began 40 years ago with a competition and then it remained a Christmas choir for years. We'd gather about a month-and-a-half before Christmas, sing at the Tata Theatre and even go carolling on the streets of Bandra. It's only in the last 17-18 years that we've been doing more serious shows, but our first love was Christmas carols. It used to be chillier than that it is now and we used to rehearse at night. While going home everybody would wear scarves and mufflers

to keep our throats intact. It wasn't just about the singing, it was the whole Christmas feeling with people making hot tea and cakes. One year we had to give Christmas messages before we sang. That was the time when awareness around noise pollution had begun. We began with the introduction of Silent Night, and then the pianist continued playing, while the choir mouthed the words and I conducted. Soon, the auditorium was filled with giggles. Another Christmas, the ladies (sopranos and altos) hadn't turned up for rehearsals and so, I trained the men to sing in falsetto and we sang the beau-

tiful Gloria without them, causing the audience to listen with rapture. Our choir was invited to sing at the Lincoln Centre in March 2020, but five days before the concert, the show was cancelled due to COVID-19. Since then, we haven't met. We hope to begin again in a few months, and I would love to do something because it is our 40th year. But our rehearsal spaces in Mumbai are not big enough for everyone to maintain two feet distance from each other.

▶ **CHRISTMAS FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY CONSCIOUS PG24**

A sea of Santas

A Christmas procession started in 2013 in Thrissur has seen the largest gathering of Santas in the world

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

IN 2014, a Christmas procession started a year before by the Thrissur Archdiocese of the Syro-Malabar Church, entered the Guinness World Records for having the largest number of people dressed up as Santa Claus. A total of 18,112 people in Father Christmas costumes turned up at the event called Buon Natale held annually in Thrissur in Kerala, leading the authorities to declare it "the largest gathering of Santa Claus".

In 2013, the procession began with about 7,000 people. Ravi Jose Thanickal, a resident of Thrissur and an associate of the event's organising committee says it was Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath who originally came up with the idea, inspired by a similar event celebrated somewhere in Europe, and keen to recreate it in his hometown. The event is celebrated under the auspices of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Archeparchy of Thrissur which has nearly half a million Syro-Malabar Catholics now,



and which used to be the largest Catholic diocese in India when it included the Syro-Malabar Catholic Diocese of Irinjalakuda until 1978 and Syro-Malabar Catholic Eparchy of Palghat until 1973. It is the parishes under the Archdiocese that appoint a certain number of people every year to appear in the red and white costumes.



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▶ The cultural event itself includes dances, flash mobs, prize distribution ceremonies, giant life size floats, children dressed as angels, and thousands of Santas.

▶ The Buon Natale procession entered the Guinness World Records in 2014 for having "the largest gathering of Santa Claus" with 18,112 people. Thrissur Archbishop Mar Andrews Thazhath accepted the honour



7,000
Number of Santas who turned up in the first year of the event in 2013

The event is held annually a few days after Christmas, says Thanickal, and not on December 25 which is reserved for church, home and family. Starting in the early hours of the evening from St Thomas College, the procession usually winds through the Swaraj Round in the heart of the city accompanied by different sets of bands. The cultural event itself includes dances, flash mobs, prize distribution ceremonies, giant life size floats depicting the Vadakkunnathan Temple in Thrissur, the Taj Mahal and the St Peter's Basilica in Vatican among other cultural and religious symbols, children dressed as angels, and Santas on stilts and wheelchairs. "The main attraction of the event are undoubtedly the Santas," says RJ Subbu, formerly part of Red FM Thrissur who has

attended the event more than once. "It is colourful, rhythmic, and aerial shots of it look great," he says, fondly remembering the little Father Christmases who would gather huffing and puffing in their costumes in the warm December evenings of Thrissur every year.

This event was also started to raise funds for charity, notes Thanickal. There are several sponsors, he says, who support the event, the money being directed towards causes like building houses for the poor. In 2020, the event, due to the pandemic, was held online, as it will be this year as well. Carols will be sung in churches, and these will then be telecast on 24-hour Malayalam entertainment television channel Flowers.

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'Our choir has seen a lot of generations come and go'

▶ **MIMOSA ALMEIDA PINTO, The Santa Cruz Ensemble**

I founded my choir in 1992. It was the year of the riots. The show at the NCPA was postponed that year, so we started singing at the festival from 1993. I had, of course, been playing at the festival from a very young age, even before I formed my own choir. We've had a lot of families in our choir and seen a lot of generations come and go. We have also regularly been singing in churches for the Sunday mass, the midnight mass, Easter services as an extension of the church choir. We've been part of many concerts at St Andrews and Rangsharda to support causes and charities like CRY, Concern India Foundation and Udayan. The last two years have been challenging, but we have been in touch virtually. In our virtual concert last year, I had singers joining me from Australia, Canada, UK, US and different parts of India. But we



MIMOSA ALMEIDA PINTO

missed rehearsing together and the last-minute frenzy before a show. This season is special because everyone gets to meet and have a good time and a good plate of snacks is always welcome. I always say that the choir that eats well sings well! The hope is that we can do a lot more live singing in the coming year. The true test of a choir is singing shoulder to shoulder in harmony, blending voices. It generates a sense of community. Live music makes you want to be a better musician because at that moment you have to sing it all at one go.



'We went around Indian cities to tell everybody that we existed'

▶ **COOMI WADIA, Paranjoti Academy Chorus**

I sang in Dr Victor Paranjoti's choir from 1961 to 1966. After he died in 1967, I was chosen as the conductor to take on the Paranjoti choir. Within four months, we had our first concert in May 1967 and it was a huge success. At the time, we used to rehearse at the Wesley Church in Colaba. In 1968, we went around India in cities like Calcutta, Delhi and Bangalore to tell everybody that we existed. Then in 1972, The Lincoln Centre was inviting choirs from colleges from around the world to sing. I went as an observer-conductor. It was my first step out of India as a conductor, but the choir couldn't come because we weren't under the umbrella of a college. My first European tour as a conductor was in 1974. There were others in 1977 and 1981 and a world tour in 1989. In 2009, I performed Handel's Messiah with a choir and an

orchestra and Mozart's Requiem in 2017 at the NCPA in Mumbai.

On Christmas, we have performed in churches everywhere in the city from Afghan Church in the south to churches in Malad and Chembur in the north. Years ago, we did a concert in the middle of the St Xavier's quadrangle. We don't perform our Christmas concert every year but when we do, we make sure to go to different churches. Christmas concerts are very special to us because we love singing in atmospheric places, doing Silent Night, for instance, only with diyas which makes it very evocative, giving it a holy, mystic quality, something that can't be achieved in a concert hall. There is a magic to singing carols by candlelight in a beautiful church. I like doing Christmas carols from around the world representing all cultures.

We don't earn money. The choir and the conductor are not paid. When we are paid, it goes in the kitty of the choir to help get more



COOMI WADIA

Coomi Wadia with the Paranjoti Academy Chorus at the Tata Theatre, NCPA. Wadia started conducting the choir in 1967, which travelled all over the world with her, giving more than 200 concerts in 18 countries

things for the choir. It's totally for the love of the music that we do it. I haven't seen the choir in the last two years. We just had a meeting with the committee a few days ago and we're wondering how many will return. They have all dispersed and gone different ways, living with their children in Singapore and the UK. I don't know who's going to come back.

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Pinto with The Santacruz Ensemble which she founded in 1992