

On a festive note...

While talking to some of the members of Capital City Minstrels, one realises that there is more to singing in harmony than simply hitting the right notes at the right time

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The first week of December 2017 was dipped in the festive cheer of Christmas by choral performances from the Capital City Minstrels across the city. Renowned as one of India's premier choirs, the members brought a novelty of sorts for the people: An American Christmas. Along with the traditional carols, such as *Silent Night*, *A White Christmas* (where the conductor encouraged the audiences to join in), were also compositions by American composers like Charles Ives's *A Christmas Carol*. The eclectic aspect of the choir's repertoire is what really made it more than carolling; they even performed a traditional African-church spiritual number titled *My Soul's been anchored* and, an Appalachian carol, *Brightest and Best*.

The choir was founded back in 1994 by Zohra Shaw, and has grown from twelve choristers to over sixty today. Reem Khokhar, the spokesperson and one of the choristers with the Capital City Minstrels (CCM), expounds upon the variety of the outfit, "We've got members from all walks of life – students, musicians, doctors, lawyers, architects, teachers, development professionals, corporate executives, diplomats and more. The members range in age from 15 to 80 years. We have (and had in the past) choristers from various parts of In-

dia, and the UK, Australia, Germany, Hungary, South Korea, Austria, the U.S., Switzerland, France, and many more countries."

The members are part-time choristers and full-time professionals from various walks of life, which means that there is a severe amount of training along with passion that goes into the making of any performance that is put up. "CCM has two performance seasons in a year," says Reem. "We rehearse from January to May for our summer concerts, which are performed in early/mid May and from August to December for our Christmas concerts. We meet every Wednesday for a few hours, and when we get close to a per-



In sync: The Capital City Minstrels in performance • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

formance, we have weekend practices as well." It's also significant to note that their efforts go beyond the windows of practice. "Learning tracks are created for each song for each voice part to help everyone practice outside of rehearsal," shares Reem.

Vocal range

A choir, also, is a large ensemble where each voice, for its own capabilities, is located very strategically. Reem has much to enlighten over the subject. "The choir is organised into four sections of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. One is sorted into a section based on your vocal range with the sopranos being the singers who are able to sing the highest notes." She continues, "The altos mid-range, the tenors are usually male voices (sometimes female) who sing a higher range, with the basses being the ones to hit the lowest notes."

Reem, having spent several years with the choir, has

learned a lot about music itself, which happens to be the case with many members. As a matter of fact, Reem divulges, most choristers have no background of musical education or vocal training. Such a situation makes the position of the conductor pivotal; they happen to be significant contributors to the learning and performing experience. "Each conductor will interpret a piece of music differently," remarks Reem. "And all the choristers learn to always follow the conductor to ensure that the tempo, style and dynamics of the piece are sung according to these instructions."

"Singing in a choir is not only about singing correct notes and rhythm," says Lindsay Ross Boyd, the conductor for CCM, "It's also about communicating something to an audience, whether that means joy, sadness, suspense, or excitement." Talking about conducting, Lindsay, who has been the Director of Bands at Woodstock school, Musso-

rie, and is currently, the Head of the Music department at Pathways World School in Gurugram, observes, "Conducting a choir is also about building community and finding a safe and comfortable space for one to express themselves."

Furthermore, being in a choir inculcates a process of acquiring musical knowledge. "Harmonising is something everyone learns in a choir, as only one section of the choir may have the melody/tune while the rest of the section will have supporting harmonies," says Reem, adding, "but most of the learning happens when we are together in rehearsal – singing with your section, listening to each other, balancing the sound and voices and bringing each piece together to make music as a whole, not as separate individuals."

The Capital City Minstrels stride much beyond carolling during the course of the year; starting from gospel and carols, they go on to Western classical arrange-

ments, Bollywood, Hindustani classical, Broadway, ballads, Rock and, even, Pop. But it isn't all about the music, and that's a point to be noted. A choral performance may offer its countenance in music but there is much going on behind the scene. Annie Sinha, the Choir's President, states, "There is an Executive Committee, which includes the Conductor, that works on the day-to-day functioning of the choir, which involves everything from booking rehearsal and concert venues, music selection, marketing and publicity to costumes, daily communication with the choir, managing finances, and so on."

Rejuvenating experience

Besides all the technical jargon and hours of effort there is also something rather unique, and riveting, that the choristers have to say about their experience. "I've sung in choirs since school and when I discovered CCM seven years ago, I knew I had

to join. Whether I'm really busy, in good times or bad, coming here just makes me feel rejuvenated," tells Reem. "Many of the choristers are close friends now and the people and the music are what keep me coming back season after season." For other choristers it's quite the same, Neeraj Devraj states, "This choir gives me that amazing environment where I can offer food for my soul through singing. And the best part is that I get to do this with some of my best friends who are more like family."

The choir has performed at various venues in India and abroad – Germany, Hungary, Switzerland – and, are about to perform in Britain in June 2018. And, Lindsay couldn't help but say, "If you have an interest in singing with the choir, I strongly recommend that you join us next season for an audition. Singing in a choir is not about being able to sing solos and sticking out, but working as a unified force to create something as a unit."