

This class is all about smiles and sing-alongs

By Meher Marfatia

Mumbai: Remember the simple appeal of that old favourite, 'I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony'? Clearly, Celeste Cordo does. Twice a week, this music teacher conducts a free class for about 50 children between the ages of five and 15. Not satisfied with this gesture, she and her melodious crew have just staged concerts for the destitute children in Snehasadan and the old inmates of Cheshire Home—bringing into their often grey days a medley of 'Hark, the bells are ringing',

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'Freddie the little fir tree' and other colourful Christmas carols. Glee Hive is a singing class conducted from Ms Cordo's home in a leafy Bandra bylane. Twice a week it resounds with a series of *Ha ha ha ha ho ho ho ho ho* *Hey hey hey hey hey* *Hee hee hee hee hee*—followed by rhythmic exercises, the 'ooh-oohs' vital for strong vocal chords and catchy tunes accompanied by energetic click-clap-roll-and-up actions. The sheer effervescence of these sessions is infectious.

Given the dearth of dedicated music teachers and the exorbitant fees charged by many, 43-year-old Cordo is truly unique. For she is determined not to charge the pupils who throng her classes. Convinced that no child is tuneless, she believes in exploring musical abilities together in a relaxed atmosphere rather than training individual talent. "As it is, the world is one big competitive mess. Shared music promotes a rare understanding of interpersonal relationships," she says. The idea isn't to be up there in the lights, just to love what you're doing.

Finetuning budding voices comes easily to Ms Cordo. A piano and violin teacher once associated with schools like Fort Convent and St Aloysius, she shudders at the thought of mu-

sic being imposed on children for achievement rather than enjoyment. It is, after all, a far cry from the way she grew up, singing with abandon as a junior member of the original Glee Hive; an enthusiastic bunch of families singing under the baton of Melville Rebello. Given that her parents and a brother, between them,

advocate communal peace, *Azaadi* celebrates freedom.

'Pennies From Heaven' talks about how tragedy often brings mixed blessings—a concept mirrored in Ms Cordo's own life as one of her three daughters is hearing-impaired. "People view it as an irony, a music teacher with a deaf-mute child," she says. "For me, Na-

Hemant Shirodkar



Celeste Cordo and the Glee Hivers.

professionally played or taught the piano, clarinet and guitar, Ms Cordo was quick to recognise music as a discipline she found stimulating.

Slowly, she tried convincing parents about the crucial role that the together element plays in singing, helping children to develop not only pitch and tone but a sensitivity to others. That this approach touches a chord in her little students is apparent.

"We love singing with Auntie Celeste because she makes it so much fun," say seven-year-old twins Pia and Tara Sutaria. Adds their friend Rebecca Valadares, "Singing keeps you happy." When Ms Cordo noticed the paucity of suitable music for children—"in fact, little more than nursery ditties aimed at the very little"—she decided to tackle the problem in her inimitable manner. She is currently working on an album of fresh lyrics set to swing-style beats, addressing relevant themes. *Dustbin Blues* looks at pollution, *Aren't You Glad to Be You* offers a quiet reassurance of individual differences, Hindi songs like *Jeena*

sia's handicap opened up an uncharted world of teaching special children like her to play the keyboards following vibrations from hands placed on speakers."

Ms Cordo feels simple but interesting introductions to classical composers can hone a finer sensibility—it's a matter of steering taste in the right direction, developing a fondness for what is not as readily available as pop. Being able to guide pre-teen boys with their changing voices is also a matter of satisfaction. "Faced with raging hormones plus a strange cracking voice, it's difficult to know quite which note to hit," she says. "I help them find that new voice, so at least an important part of their changing identity falls into place. Today all kids, boys and girls, are attacked by different pressures from every side. It's confusing, hard to decide which way to be pulled. Music may be an answer. It can mediate.

I hope to get them with its purity and peace."

(This column chronicles the brave initiatives and sunshine stories that light up the city.)