



MUSIC

A school with a difference

PARVATHI MENON

in *Kalkeri*

The Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya is a residential school of music run by a family of French Canadians and caters to the musical and general education of underprivileged children.

PICTURES: K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



Tabla teacher Ravi Kudalgi with students at the Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya.

IT is a routine morning of musical instruction at the Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya, a residential school of music located at Kalkeri village, 15 kilometres from Dharwad in Karnataka. Through the open windows and door of a classroom in a thatched hut comes the sound of children singing in unison, their young voices swelling and falling as they follow their teacher's voice through the lines of a popular Kannada *vachana*. Strains of music drift out of other classrooms - a musical sentence left suspended in the air, spurts of frenzied tabla pounding, a harmonium's ripples. Children, some of them carrying musical instruments, scamper along the paths and dart into their respective classrooms.

The school's infrastructure comprises a cluster of thatched houses scattered along the slope of a picturesque hill that falls away into a natural tank. Kalkeri, the nearest village, is a couple of kilometres away. The classrooms are swept clean but have no furnishing except for mats on the floor and several rows of cane baskets strung up neatly against one wall. These are for the children to store their clothes and other possessions for at night the classrooms double as their dormitories.

The Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya was started in 2002 by a family of musically talented and socially committed French Canadians. Mathieu, Blaise and Agathe Fortier came to India in the early 1990s as students. Mathieu and Agathe learnt music at Benares (now Varanasi) and later went to Shantiniketan to learn Bengali. They moved to Dharwad in 2001 to learn music under Pandit Rajashekhhar Mansur, an eminent vocalist and the son of the late Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur. Blaise joined them later. "We had always been concerned about social injustice, and had this dream of starting a school which would teach music to the underprivileged," said Mathieu. They first started an evening school in Dharwad for the children from a nearby slum at which tabla, sitar and vocal music were taught. "There was talent and interest amongst the children, but no regularity," said Agathe. It was then that they decided to move to the countryside and set up a full-fledged residential school.

The Fortiers established the Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya Trust in June 2002. Pandit Somanath Mardur is the Trust's chairman. Ustad Hamid Khan, Director of the Department of Music, Karnataka College, Dharwad, who is a well-regarded performer and teacher of the sitar, is a trustee. Around the same time, they also set up the Young Musicians of the World Trust that started an evening music school in Quebec. Run free and located in a working class area of the city, the school focusses on the teaching of traditional folk music of the region.

The Fortiers acknowledge the influence of the tradition of musical philanthropy established by Pandit Puttaraja Gavai and the Veereshwara Punyashrama on them. "Pandit Puttaraja Gavai is a living saint of music, and a constant inspiration for us," said Blaise. "He has created a web of culture in Karnataka by training tens of thousands of musicians." While inculcating the best practices of the Punyashrama into their own project, the Kalkeri trust has departed from Pandit Puttaraja's model in many ways. First, the Kalkeri school admits girls. Secondly, they put a great deal of emphasis on the academic programme in the school. "We want to give the children an education that will give them all choices and options. Music will be with them whatever they do," said Mathieu.



A classroom at the school.

The school provides free food, accommodation, clothing, and musical and academic training to about 50 students from poor working class and village families. At least half the children are from Dalit and tribal families. "The morning sessions are for musical training, and the afternoon sessions for general education," said Leelavathi Patil, a former school headmistress, who joined the Kalkeri Vidyalaya in June 2004 to oversee its academic programme. "From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., the children learn classical vocal, *laghu sangeetha*, *vachanas*, *bhava geetha*, harmonium, tabla and sitar," she said. "I have come here for the love of the children. I feel so proud to hear them singing so well," she said. The afternoon sessions are devoted to teaching environmental science, mathematics, Kannada, Hindi and English.

"We decided that to begin with, we must put our investment in good teachers and performing artists, and in good food," said Mathieu. Musical instruction at the school is given by Pandit Somanath Mardur, a well-known exponent of the Kirana Gharana, who has trained under Pandit Puttaraja Gavai, Pandit Basavaraj Rajguru and Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur. His children Veena, Vani and Kumar Mardur teach harmonium and vocals. Ravi Kudalgi, a senior disciple of the celebrated tabla artist Pandit Ragunath Nakod, teaches tabla. Shivanand Salimath, a disciple of Pandit Mardur, who accompanies him on the harmonium at all his performances, also teaches harmonium and vocals.

"I myself wanted to start a residential school," Pandit Mardur told *Frontline*, "but the Fortiers fulfilled my dream, and so I joined them. Most of the children who study here have never gone to school because of their parents' poverty. The goal of our Trust is to give music and education to the poor. As you can see, the children are very talented and sing beautifully."

The Fortiers fund the school in a creative way, although they are also aware of the unsustainability over the long term of this funding mechanism. Every year, they hold a benefit evening in Quebec City to which they invite leading professional musicians from Canada. The money they raise funds the Kalkeri school for a year. The organisation of such a benefit concert is a major administrative undertaking, and Blaise spends six months of the year working towards it. "This year will be the fourth benefit concert we are holding, and we are expecting several international performers," said Blaise. "Last year we raised Canadian \$80,000, or roughly Rs.15-20 lakhs. Our running expenses for the Kalkeri school are in the region of Rs.1.5 lakhs per month. We are just able to cover our costs. But our student strength has gone up to 60 for the next academic year, and we need to improve the infrastructure of the school." The Fortiers are now looking for other sources of funding. "If we can run the school successfully for the next 10 to 15 years, we will certainly begin to get government assistance," added Pandit Mardur.

In addition to the regular teaching staff, there are at any given time between 13 and 20 volunteers, most of them students from Canada and Europe, who live and work at the school for between three and six months at a nominal cost. Some of the volunteers learn music from the school staff in addition to their duties at the school, which include manual work like maintenance of the campus and construction of school buildings. They also help with administrative matters, care of the children, and teaching.



Mathieu (sitting, left) and Agathe Fortier with their children and Mathieu's brother Blaise.

Vani Mardur nods in appreciation as her class of eager boys and girls render back each line of the song she sings for them. They are in perfect tune, although their childish voices are not quite able to reproduce the inflexions and cadence of their teacher's lovely voice. "I gave up a government job in Dharwad to work with these children in this peaceful environment," Vani said. "When I first came, there were only two or three children. They are all so talented."

The children of Kalkeri school are now little performers in their own right. They are called for concerts, and a group of them were taken by the Fortiers to perform at the World Social Forum in Mumbai last year. Gautam Sarkar, the 14-year-old son of a rickshaw puller, is an accomplished tabla player. Seventeen-year-old Ramesh Kidarji is a budding Hindustani vocalist. "We believe in *sangeetha kranti*, the power of music to change society," said Mathieu. "It has given our children self-esteem and confidence, and we are already seeing the results."



Students practising music.

Strengthening the academic programme of the school is a priority task for the school administrators in the coming academic year. Two of their students took the Class VII examination and scored over 80 per cent marks. Affiliation to one of the recognised school boards for the purpose of introducing an examination-based syllabus is a priority task for the school's administrators.

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