

METRO PLUS

Mortal men, immortal melodies



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APRIL 05, 2018 00:00 IST

UPDATED: APRIL 05, 2018 04:30 IST

Madan Mohan refused to tailor his music to the demands of the market. Neither did he succumb to his critics. He stuck to his beliefs with remarkable conviction and created songs that remain unsurpassed to this day

Madan Mohan passed away at 51, he was ill, and also sad about this callous world which he had made so rich with his musical genius. In a career that began with the film *Aankhen* in 1950 and lasted till 1975, where in 25 years he composed music for 100 films. He was a composer who surpassed his times, but was less understood. In an essay titled, 'An eternal composition called Madan Mohan', Sudhir Raikar writes, "But during his lifetime, this connoisseur composer had to face the music of several purists and populists of the film world. The plagiarists were of course having a field day like they do even today. Orthodox musicologists grumbled that Madan Mohan employed classical ragas only at a surface level and hence fell short of elaborate musical explorations in the unrelenting focus on melody.

For them, Madan Mohan was a musical craftsman at best; content to dress melancholic poetry in melodic garbs. The populists on the other hand opined that Madan Mohan failed to address market needs of foot tapping numbers." Ironically, radio broadcasts and live film music shows across the country even today, discredit these "allegations" made against one of India's greatest musicians. It probably emerged from envy and malice, which did enough damage to Mohan's emotional fabric during his lifetime, but his music survives, unscathed.

Born in Baghdad, Mohan had a brief training in classical music when his father moved to Lahore. His real training in classical music happened when he joined All India Radio, Lucknow, in 1946.

He was a great admirer of the inimitable Jaddan Bai, and the queen of ghazals, Begum Akhtar. In fact, in his entire musical output you find a blend of both these forms – khyal and ghazal vocalism. He interpreted the two styles in a manner so unique that none could perhaps equal

him in the way he exploited the melodic harmony of the khyal as well as music that poetic imagery of the ghazal evoked. In his abundant repertoire, there are songs where you cannot even separate this seamlessness.

Mohan was a versatile mind – he composed a range of songs and remained a classicist in the true sense. His detractors said he used the raga “superficially”; but on the contrary, his musical imagination was so complex and rich, that it was not merely a challenge for the singer to render them but even to make sense of it. If one terms his creative flights nothing short of a wonder, it is the truth. Madan Mohan changed the way Hindi film music was construed with his unique sensibility.

‘Chayee Barkha Bahar’ (*Chirag* , 1969, Lata Mangeshkar) is a song that remains my all time favourite. When the song opens you have no clue where it will take you: going by the opening passage of orchestra, it is an exuberant folk narrative. The soulful shehnai enters but throws only a minor hint, because it again moves back into a vibrant folk chorus. Lata’s breezy melodic improvisation in raga Megh is not a giveaway either. The suspense is broken only with the utterance of the first word, *Chayee* . The word ambles in with a stately presence – what was a gallop so far suddenly transforms into a majestic gait – altering the idiom totally. The entry of the sitar, with a *jod* -like interlude, and the august support of the tabla... it introduces the second register to the song. Mohan moves effortlessly from plot to context: while the Himachali folk narrative pertains to the plot, the khyal intense main melody weaves in textures of longing and an eternal promise of togetherness of the protagonist and his beloved. In a split second, the composer reverses the equation and the sub text becomes the main text of the song. Mostly composed in Megh, it has flashes of Brindavan Sarang and Shahana Kanada (but for the introduction of the second *nishad*), and it is hard to tell where they meet and separate. Even classical musicians wonder how Mohan could think of bringing these ragas together in a composition so extraordinary.

‘Kadar Jaane Na’ (*Bhai-Bhai* , 1956, Lata Mangeshkar) in essence is a ghazal-inspired melody, but his interpretation of rhythm makes the song sound different. It is not just the interpretation of rhythm but even the raga Bhairavi (tending towards Mishra Bhairavi) has a different appearance (madhyama becomes shadja). Story has it that when Begum Akhtar listened to this song, she was overcome by emotion. She called Madan Mohan and showered praises on him. Begum Akhtar requested him to sing the song for her, and could Mohan refuse the empress of ghazal – he sang the song again and again for her, for twenty minutes.

The song in Madan Mohan’s version – just to the support of harmonium and tabla, with no trappings of its filmy account – is heart rending. So is the case of his rendition of ‘Mai Ree’.

Madan Mohan not only had a way with music, he also had a way with words. He used musical techniques to heighten the effect of the lyrics. For instance, notice the treatment of the words ‘aaj’ and ‘bhar aaye’, and several other words too during the song, ‘Aaj Socha to Aansoo Bhar Aaye’. There is a pause, and an elongation that loads the song emotionally – in music it is called *theheraav* , a technique that is used to enhance the effect. Madan Mohan is a master at it: you can watch him do it in ‘Ruke Ruke Se Kadam’ (*Mausam*) and the phenomenon of a song ‘Dil Dhoondta Hain’ (*Mausam* , 1975). The way the words are articulated changes the impact of the melody.

The song ‘Aaj Socha’ (raga Shivananjani) itself acquires a symphonic stature with the way he builds the orchestral passages. When Madan Mohan sang this song for Lata, she is said to have broken down. He cancelled the recording that day, and asked her to come the following morning.

The intensity and passion of this composer is evident from his compositions – the most stunning ‘Lag Jaa Gale’, ‘Rasme Ulfat’, ‘Zara Si Aahat’, ‘Aap Ki Nazarone’... the list is endless. They were subtle and evocative. He was a perfectionist, and each song was sculpted to excellence.

Madan Mohan gave his all to his songs, and demanded the same from his musicians. He never forgave musicians who turned up late for recordings, he sent them away. During the recording of ‘Nainon Mein Badara Chaaye’, the orchestra apparently kept making mistakes, and Lata Mangeshkar had to repeatedly sing the song. Mohan was so frustrated and angry that he banged his head on the glass window of the recording room – he bled profusely but refused to go to the doctor till the recording was over.

Madan Mohan was uncompromising with his music as well his beliefs, and society did not look upon it with respect. No awards came his way, he never went seeking for them either. As Raikar rightly observes, as a nation we are collectively responsible for his illness and early demise.

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