

Islamabad diary

By Ayaz Amir

KUNDAN Lal Saigol, perhaps the subcontinent's greatest popular singer ever since music and song began to be recorded, died January 18, 1946. He was born in Jullandar, East Punjab, in 1904, which makes this year the hundredth anniversary of his birth.

Saigol died young, aged only 42. Tragic but not unduly surprising. Whom the gods wish to immortalize they often cause to die very young. Not all but enough to make the point: Shelley, Keats, Byron, Mozart, Alexander the Great.

Master Madan too, haunting voice, accomplished singer, a figure more ethereal than earthlike, who died aged 14. I don't know how many of his songs were recorded and how many survive. I've heard only two; *Hairat say tak raha hai jahan-i-wafa mujhe* and *Yoon na rah rah kar humain tarsaiyay*. But even these are enough to assure him everlasting fame.

(Just now, while writing these lines, I called someone in Islamabad to check up a point and he downloaded a Master Madan song from the web, *Goree goree bainyan* — (White, white arms). So now I've heard three.)

My generation grew up listening to radio. TV hadn't arrived, it being a moot point whether it was wholly to the good when it finally did. And only the moderately affluent had the gramophone. (If you had the Grundig gramophone on four legs you were considered lucky.) And the first time I listened to Saigol was on radio.

At 7 every morning the Urdu Service of Radio Ceylon used to broadcast old songs but to round off the programme there always was a Saigol song. What was so special about this guy, I wondered?

Around the corner from our house in Chakwal was a small tea-place called grandly and somewhat misleadingly the Gulanaar Hotel, the distinction

Art K. L. Saigol: 1904-1946 16.1.04

between hotel and restaurant lost on its owner. I was in the Military Academy at the time and while home on leave I and a few friends would walk over to Gulanaar's in the evening to take tea (there being nothing better available).

To my surprise I discovered that the proprietor had a few Saigol 78 rpm records, gathering dust in a corner. I insisted he clean them up. From then on we took tea to the sound of Saigol, often to the bemusement of some of the other patrons.

Music, the selling and buying of it, was not the flourishing business that it is nowadays, at least not in our parts. The Japanese not quite having come into the market, much less storming it as they were to do very soon, tape recorders were a luxury. The cassette recorder had yet to be invented. So it wasn't easy getting your hands on good music.

But in Karachi, where I was first posted, I discovered an out-of-the-way music repair shop in Sadder whose proprietor had a collection of Saigol songs. I got them on tape, the large spools which pre-dated the cassette, thereby affording me the lordly pleasure of listening to Saigol in the privacy of my room.

What's so great about Saigol? First the voice: golden, husky and haunting, more baritone than anything else, cured somewhere deep in the earth in a mixture of magic and honey. Never palls, doesn't tire you, as even the best singers after a while can.

Then his sheer musicality. Everything that Saigol sings — bhajans, ghazals, love songs, self-pitying songs, ditties for children, drinking songs — is musical, which is to say, pleasing to the ear. HMV has issued a five-cassette set of his songs. Go through the entire collection and not once will you say that it doesn't sound right.

There have been other ghazal singers, Begum Akhtar, the great Farida Khanum and our own Mehdi Hasan. Each has a distinctive style and thank God for that. Saigol sang ghazals with no embellishments. I don't know how to convey this point clearly. His was straight ghazal singing with none of the variations that you would perhaps get if you heard Ghulam Ali singing. But very musical and haunting, two

adjectives which I may be on the verge of over-using but which perhaps come the closest to describing Saigol.

Take Ghalib's famous "Nukta cheen hai gham-i-dil". ("My heart's sorrow is my critic" — or is this a lousy translation?) Others have sung it but Saigol knocks you out primarily because if his voice was made for anything it was to express the pain of the heart. The underlying quality of Ghalib's poetry is the sorrow resulting from unfulfilled desire. Saigol's voice has the same quality. That's why no one has quite sung Ghalib like Saigol.

A voice not for the midday sun, it sounds best just before sunset or when twilight is slipping slowly into darkness. Or when the moon is out. Or when you're in the kind of mood expressed in the Shakespearean sonnet: "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes..."

For what Saigol really does is pluck at your heartstrings. The voice of love but perhaps more than that, the voice of doomed love, of love unattainable and therefore tragic. There are some joyous songs too, for instance "chupo na, chupo na, chupo na." Saigol also had a great laugh, which you can hear in some of his songs. But what his voice conveys best is the sadness of the human spirit when face to face with the prospect of its loneliness. If he could be understood, Saigol would be a hit with most students and professors of metaphysics.

That's why even Saigol's happy songs have a touch of sadness about them. A bit like Shakespeare's Falstaff. When the laughter subsides, excited incidentally by some of the greatest rhetoric in literature, a hint of sadness remains.

Great art, of any sort really, has an echo to it. Count Keyserling saw the Rajput fortress of Chitor and went into a reverie about human history (I doubt if any current anthologies of literature have his essay "Chitor" in them). The Fasting Buddha in the Lahore Museum takes you back to the dawn of history. Beethoven's music, anything by him, concerto, string quartet, symphony, transports at once you to a place with high mountains, deep valleys, flashes of lightning and crashing peals of thunder. Often just the first

flourish, the first bars, and you're in a strange land.

"If man's fate is to suffer in an unfriendly universe, Beethoven's music creates the spirit to endure and even to exult in the book of great lives I read in high school. When you want to put human frailty in perspective, nothing like trying a bit of Beethoven.

I am not classing Saigol with him (nothing, absolutely nothing, can be classed with Beethoven). Only trying to say that Saigol's voice too has an echo. You hear him and your imagination starts rolling. The sound triggers a mood, as indeed all good music does.

And another thing: the very greatest singers don't have one voice but several to suit the occasion. Much like birds around the North Pole whose plumage changes with the seasons.

In some arias Maria Callas's voice is deep and husky, in others sharp and clear. The strength of feeling is the same, the ability to assault our senses the same, but the quality of voice, like the plumage of the birds, subtly changing to accommodate different moods. So with the great baritone, Tito Gobbi, whose voice had a different pitch depending on the role he was singing.

Not so with the Nightingale of India — or rather the subcontinent's nightingale, for Lata belongs to no one country — the pitch of whose voice, regardless of whether she is singing a song, ghazal or bhajan, is always unmistakably the same. Our Nur Jahan, however, had the varying quality, the voice responding to mood and sentiment.

So too with Saigol. At places his voice is husky, at others sharp and clear. Take these two songs "Prem ka hai is jag mein" from the film *President* and "Preet mein hai jeevan jokhon" from *Dushman*. The voice is very deep and husky, with a thick quality to it. And take the famous "Babul Mora" from *Street Singer*. The voice is sharp and stays high.

The subcontinent has produced some truly great popular singers whose songs will endure long after much of what we see is gone. But if from this outpouring of talent and even genius an Oscar has to be given to just one person, I think the choice will be Kundan Lal Saigol.