

Sebastian D'Souza

Ask who is Sebastian D'Souza and you may get as many answers as the number of people who venture to give it. Footballer ?, Electrician ? School teacher ? Fr.. Sebastian?? anything but music arranger.

Sebastian D'Souza is easily the most prolific arranger in all of Indian film music. Spanning a career from 1952 – 1974 much of it with the famed duo of Shankar Jaikishan Sebastian created scores for over 125 films and over 1000 songs.. No musical arranger of popular American music let alone Hollywood films of that period can match his output. Sebastian should have been in the Guinness book of records. Instead a search on google hardly throws up his name.

Volume of output apart, for sheer imagination and variety of orchestrated music Sebastian stands head and shoulders above them all. Sebastian had an imagination not equaled by the same men on whom books have been written and whose names occupied the marquee in the same period Sebastian's development of harmonic concepts extended across a wide range of Indian, Latin and western instruments to create a unique effect. While Anthony Gonsalves started that trend, Sebastian carried it on enlarging and embellishing the concept He is largely responsible for changing the entire harmonic structure of the hindi film song to create an extremely listenable full body of sound behind the voice of the singer .And hence a major influence on that era. If you thrill in the songs of that period from 'Aawara', 'Boot Polish', 'Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai', 'Sangam', 'Mera Naam Joker' all from the RK banner and want to hear them over and over again it is invariably because Sebastian was the hidden hand behind their creation.

It is said that Mukesh who playbacted Raj Kapoor had Sebastian select the instruments, provide the counterpoint in Shankar Jaikishan's melodic structure and create the music behind the star crossed lover portrayed by Raj Kapoor Together with him and his rhythmic partner Dattaram the SJ duo created history. Raj it is said, was close to Sebastian and was present in every recording because Raj believed that what Sebastian did was key to his role. Take away that background music from the RK films and you will plunge into a huge void.

Till the late 40s, background music to the singers voice was merely a narrow range of instruments playing the same tune as sung by the singer. There was no concept of counters, fills or cadences. Rhythms employed were very limited. The effect was sonorous. Beginning the 50s, Anthony and Sebastian changed that all.

And how did that happen? Brought up on a staple diet of operas and symphonies of Mozart, Schubert, Haydn, Tchaikovsky which he absorbed, Sebastian employed harmonic variation with telling effect on to hindi film music. Sebastian came to Bombay in search of work from across the border post 1947 and stumbled into hindi films. Before that he was a big band leader in hotels from Allahabad to Mussorie to Lahore where he earned a name for leading the most popular orchestra of that time at the Stiffles hotel.



Starting as a violinist he moved up rapidly. O P Nayyar gave him his break as an arranger with C H Atma's "Pritam Aan me lo" and later in the film 'Aasman'. With O P he forged a super relationship and what followed is still on many lips ;the songs and the music from 'Aar Paar' (Sun sun sun sun jalim'), Mr & Mrs 55'(Udhar tum hasin ho idhar dil jawa hai'), Howrah Bridge (' Mera naam chin chin choo,chin chin choo') and so many more....each a classic not equaled fifty years after their time.

Creativity such as this is genius and geniuses are sometimes known to be irregular, erratic and difficult with time being their first victim. Not so with Sebastian who was known to be regular, consistent, methodical and disciplined. With strong writing skills, he invariably created and translated what was going in his head into written scores on the spot in the studio for the orchestral sections and the soloists and adjusted them while rehearsing. Usually, one song took a day .But it is said that on one occasion Sebastian created 5 songs in a day traveling to different studios across the city .

But these are just snippets. Take another glance at his history sheet .Consider these; 'Aaja sanam, madhur chandni mein hum'; 'Yeh raat bheegi bheegi' from Chori Chori. 'Teri yaad dil se bulane chale hum' from 'Hariyali aur Rasta'. 'Dost dost na raha' from 'Sangam', 'Aae malik there bande hum' from 'Do Aankhen Bara Haath', Aaja re.. pardesi' from Madhumati.'Aansoo bahri hain yeh jeevan ki raahen'

From N Dutta's Chandni ki Deewar' listen closely to Talat's song 'Ashkon ne jo paya hai'. The violins play in three sections, embellished by a vibraphone and cellos behind Talat's voice. The sadness of the lyric is captured in one of the most poignant violin solos in the annals of hindi film music.

It is said that Jaikishan was so taken up with Sebastian's counters and fills he put together all of those and hey presto he had created a brand new song.

Sebastian worked tirelessly till 1974. The advent of Bhappi Lahiri and styles of that kind did not call for his skills. A self effacing man who spoke less and did more, he quietly retired to Goa and began a new life teaching children, away from the stars and the greats whom he had helped create .Little did the children whom he taught quietly, know that they had the wisdom and experience of an all time great. Shocked they were, when journalists, musicians and aficionados of the music world would descend on Sebastian's modest home to sit at the feet of the man and reminisce. As the children grew up they were amazed that he was the same person behind all those wonderful songs.

When he died, he instructed that no money be spent on his funeral and all that was saved should go to charity; such is the modesty of greats. Sebastian left behind a rich musical legacy which will live into generations after his time.

As so often happens to modest, silent and quiet achievers in India, he received no honours from the city of Bombay where he lived created and worked but a belated award from his home state of Goa