

Mehdi Hassan – the ghazal maestro

The other day I went to BJ's – a popular restaurant in Redmond Town Center. Due to Covid restrictions it wasn't too busy. I noticed that our "server" was wearing the name tag "Mehdi". It immediately caught my attention because for me there is only one Mehdi in the entire universe – Mehdi Hassan! I was surprised to find out later that this server guy also knew about *the* Mehdi Hassan. After all Mehdi Hassan now seems like an ancient relic of a distant era.

My first encounter with Mehdi Hassan took place back in Syracuse, where I attended graduate school. I lived in a 2-bedroom apartment with two other friends. I had taken the living room since I cared more about saving money than privacy. One fine day as I walked in from a late morning class, I heard an Urdu ghazal playing on our living-room cassette-tape player. Compact discs (CD) were around then, but they were still out of reach of poor graduate students. Plus, we mostly lived on pirated music – and tapes were the best way to store the pirated stuff.

Anyway, when I listened to this Urdu ghazal a bit more intently, I was completely mesmerized. I don't remember now exactly which one it was. It was either देख तो दिल के जॉ से उठता है (dekh to dil ke jaan se uthata hei), कैसे छुपाऊं राज़-ए-गम (kaise chupaaun raaz-e-gham), or गुलशन गुलशन शोला-ए-गुल की (gulshan gulshan shola-e-gul ki).

I was spellbound. What was this music? Who was this guy singing this ghazal? How come I – the self-proclaimed ghazal connoisseur – had never heard him before?

It turned out to be Mehdi Hassan. Our good old friend Ashfaq Khokhar had apparently lent his cassette tape – a beautiful collection of Mehdi Hassan's studio-recorded ghazals – to us. My love affair with Mehdi Hassan started on that day! The next thing I did was to put a blank tape in the second slot of the cassette deck and press the "copy" button!

I basically went mad after that. I was copying Mehdi Hassan left and right wherever I could find his music. My car tape player played Mehdi Hassan incessantly. And so did my personal tape player in my room. Morning, evening, it did not matter. Some of my friends got worried about this madness. In fact, a female friend commented on this new-found craze of mine. Remember I was of an age when guys take every word that their female friends utter very seriously!

So, this kind female friend of mine in Syracuse was once riding with me in my car and upon hearing one of the sad ghazals of Mehdi Hassan emanating from my tape player, she said, "Abhay, why do you listen to such sad music? You are going to get depression!"

Fortunately, my love for Mehdi then was stronger than my age-appropriate tendency to heed advice offered by girls. I explained to her that to me music was never sad or happy, it was only beautiful.

Looking back, I am impressed at myself for saying that line. But I think I still believe in it. Of course, music can be sad or happy; but for some reason, its beauty can be so overpowering that the emotion does not affect me adversely.

Fast forward today ... it has been so long after my first encounter with Mehdi Hassan that I would not even tell you, because like everyone, I like to hide my age. Even today, Mehdi Hassan is my top choice when I am wondering what music to play on Spotify. Thankfully the days of needing to hoard tapes and CDs are gone.

Why do I still love Mehdi Hassan so much? I like to believe that till today, I have listened to a large number of wonderful artists of a variety of genres, nationalities, and even languages. Ghazal continues to be my most favorite genre and in that too I have heard hundreds of artists. It is my favorite pastime to explore YouTube to see how the same ghazal is sung by different people.

Why does Mehdi Hassan continue to dominate my musical universe?

If one decides to do a technical analysis, music could mean a number of things: quality of voice, fidelity of notes, the tune itself, artist's ability to maintain the beat and tempo, the lyrics, his/her ability to match the emotion in the lyrics, and so on. In Marathi all this is aptly captured in the words **सूर, ताल, लय, भाव, चाल**.

Mehdi Hassan's music seems perfect if you apply any of these technical tests. And there is probably good reason for it. He was a classical vocalist for half his life before he turned his attention to singing ghazals. He had a musical family lineage and took lessons from the foremost classical artists of his time and perfected his technique.

The fact is my approach to music is more emotional than intellectual. I am able to ignore bad lyrics if the musical composition is good. I care more for melody than voice acrobatics. The mathematics of the rhythm matters less to me than its flow and its tango with the instruments or the vocalist.

It is probably impossible to fully convey in words the beauty of Mehdi Hassan's music. You must listen to him to appreciate him. His voice is delicately melodious, like velvet. His range is amazing – even at high notes, there is no trace of strain, extra effort. His command of the rhythm is fabulous. Most of his ghazals are in a slow tempo and they flow like a beautiful calm river or a gentle creek – at a perfect pace, almost mathematically precise, but without any jerks. He sings as if the guy playing the Tabla does not exist. The beat is in Mehdi Hassan's veins, he does not need to make any effort to keep the beat. In fact, in some of his live programs I have heard him gently reprimand the percussionist to maintain the tempo!

(For some of these same reasons, I also love Lata Mangeshkar's music.)

Mehdi Hassan's mastery of Urdu helps him bring the emotion appropriate to the ghazal. Ghazals are rarely happy or bubbly. You can't play them at birthday or dance parties. They are usually sad or

melancholy – full of love and longing, or philosophical. Mehdi Hassan uses his considerable expertise in classical music to create the most beautiful tunes for his ghazals. His compositions sound deceptively simple. If you listen closely though, you find places that are extremely intricate and yet very delicately weaved into the rest of the music.

Understandably, Mehdi Hassan's voice was at its best in his younger days. As he grew older, his voice became more mature, more rich, more deep. But it did not lose any of its strengths.

I am grateful to Mehdi Hassan for creating a beautiful musical universe in which I am always eager to take refuge.

If you think you have not heard of Mehdi Hassan, think about रंजीश ही सही (Ranjish hi sahi). I am sure you have heard some version of this beautiful ghazal originally sung by Mehdi Hassan. Also try these other gems:

देख तो दिल के जॉ से उठता है (dekh to dil ke jaan se uthata hei)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lljU2ZkDCu4>

कैसे छुपाऊं राज़-ए-गम (kaise chupaaun raaz-e-gham)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7niBtYZEjO4>

गुलशन गुलशन शोला-ए-गुल की (gulshan gulshan shola-e-gul ki)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bD-nadm48E>

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