



FAVOURITE FOREVER: Five decades on, *The Sound of Music* is set for a huge celebration.

Maria's music to come alive at 50

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

When *The Sound of Music* opened in 1965, the era of American musicals had faded away. In fact, the days of great dancing and singing stars like Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers had disappeared in the late 1950s.

Robert Wise's *The Sound of Music* – an extraordinarily fascinating film that rolled from frame to frame through unforgettable songs – was in fact an attempt to rekindle the magic of musicals. And the movie succeeded.

In India, the 1960s were a period of melodrama – where music and drama mesmerised audiences. Dev Anand, Shamma Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Madhubala, Nutan and Waheeda Rehman among a host of others lisped the songs sung by Mohammed Rafi, Mukesh, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle. And these were set to lyrics penned by poets.

It was in times such as these that *The Sound of Music* opened in India, and I remember seeing it in Calcutta's famed Globe Cinema, bang opposite the historic New Market. The movie's enthralling plot and innumerable numbers caught the fancy of the city. Incredible as it may sound today, the man on the street – bhadrak or otherwise – was then heard singing *Edelweiss* and *Do Re Mi*.

Fifty years later, *The Sound of Music* – starring Julie Andrews and Christopher

Plummer – is all set for a huge celebration. This will begin on March 2 in Britain and March 10 in the US with the release of a five-disc blu-ray-DVD-digital HD collector's treasure. The blu-ray disc will include 13 hours of additional content with a brand new documentary – *The Sound of a City: Julie Andrews Returns to Salzburg* – telling us all about her recent visit to that city of melody and mirth where she was once Maria, a young woman in a secluded abbey training to be a nun – one that other Sisters found it as hard to pin down as a cloud.

The film opens with a shot of Maria singing *The hills are alive with the sound of music*, and the camera captures her as a distant dot on a marvellously undulating patch of green with the Alps in the background, before zooming in on her. As “the songs they have sung for a1,000 years fill her heart, and as it wants to sing every song it hears,” the Sisters at the abbey are wondering what to do with Maria when she rushes in – late as ever for the prayer. “How do you solve a problem like Maria,” they burst into a song – smiling and good natured though, a reflection of times perhaps when kindness and compassion ruled our lives.

The Golden Jubilee commemoration will continue on March 26, when Turner Classic Movies (TCM) will pay a tribute to Andrews and Plummer with an opening night screening of *The Sound of Music* at the sixth TCM Classic Film Festival, running from March 26 to 29. Movie historian Robert

Osborne will introduce the brilliantly restored film, and moderate a Q & A with Andrews and Plummer (who plays Captain Von Trapp).

This meeting of Maria and Von Trapp will be sheer nostalgia for two of the greatest actors we have known. In fact, no scene in the history of cinema has had such intense tension as the dance number in the movie where the two are doing the Landler, an Austrian-German folk form, which was forbidden in parts of Europe for about 50 years in the 18th century.

The Sound of Music, which won five Academy Awards – displaced *Gone With The Wind* (which was already 26 years old in 1965) as the highest boxoffice grosser of all time.

And why was it such a big hit? The answer is simple. It had an absorbing story that moved seamlessly through some of the sweetest songs one had heard. Top this with Andrews' exceptional performance against the superbly scenic Salzburg, and we have success written all over.

In fact, Andrews was the first choice of Wise, although his list included Grace Kelly and Shirley Jones. Kelly and Jones might not have been quite suitable for the Maria I saw on the screen – bubbly, mischievous, innocent, sincere and utterly lovable.

Otherwise, how could a widower like Von Trapp – so strict that he used the whistle to call each of his seven children – fall so deeply in love with this simpleton, not chic or polished. Remember that scene when she

rings the bell at the Captain's villa. When a man opens the door, she announces: “Captain, I am your new governess”. To which he answers: “I am your butler.”

Wise had seen Andrews in *Mary Poppins*, which was not yet released then. A few minutes into a special show of the film, Wise told his producer, “Let's go sign this girl before somebody else sees this movie and grabs her!”

The Sound of Music was inspired by the Von Trapp family singers. Many things were changed in the film. The Von Trapp family had 10 children; seven were from the Captain's first marriage, and three more children came after Maria and Georg Von Trapp married. In the movie, the children's names, ages and genders were also changed.

The real Captain Von Trapp was a warm and good-humoured man, not the hard and cynical character seen in the film. This inaccurate portrayal distressed the Von Trapp family greatly. But they could do nothing about it, I suppose.

Another major deviation in the movie was that the real Maria did not fall in love with the Captain at first sight. She once said: “I fell in love with the children and married their father; I got used to the father, and we were very happy!”

Even the climax was tweaked. The Von Trapps did not flee to Switzerland trudging over the Alps, an escape made possible by the nuns at the abbey who pulled out a wire in the car used by the Nazis to chase the family. The Von Trapps left by train to Italy in clear daylight. Eventually they made their way to the US, mostly with the money they made through singing. Once in America, they settled in Stowe, Vermont.

Despite these so-called inaccuracies, *The Sound of Music* was adored by generations of cinema buffs. And when it opens again, it probably will be one of the favourite films – as favourite as “bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens. Or, brown paper packages tied up with strings.”

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