

In the wistful, singing kingdom of Portugal something interestingly sad is going on. It's nothing new - in fact, it's immensely old. Except for one big thing: a long-awaited Prince of Fado has arrived.

Fado is the song of Lisbon; Lisbon's own love affair with itself. It's poetry set alight by the unadorned voice of heartache, longing and life; a sophisticated form of melancholy difficult to sing and play.

Fado is dominated, quite rightly, by its two greatest singers, both as good as alive in the demanding, slow-changing and robustly traditionalist Portuguese music scene. Call them the Queen and King - everyone will know who you're talking about.

They are, of course, Amália Rodrigues and Alfredo Marceneiro. Let it be said right away that their royalty is undisputed and unthreatened - for that is the way of Fado. Forgetting is taboo; just as regrets are compulsory. As I said, it's very difficult. Almost everyone in Lisbon sings Fado and, on any single night, the choice of professional and amateur performers is breathtaking.

So it does take thirty or so years for a change to come about. And, when it comes, it never means an actual change - rather a perfect recapturing, in a new voice, thoroughly humbled and enchanted by its few chosen forebears, yet full of ancient echoes never heard before, of the pure essence of old - of the old Fado.

Which can never be old, in the same way love, heartbreak, illusion and nostalgia must always exist in the timeless present.

All a change means is this: someone else singing new songs as if they were old; singing old songs as if they'd just been written. A new voice; a new name; finally a Prince. Mind you, a Prince, not a 'new King', for a true Fadista would be appalled at the thought of replacing the Masters.

Understand this paradox and you understand all there is to know to enjoy Fado. Forget the Portuguese language - you know what it's about; you've been there; you just marvel that words have somehow found to be sung.

All the more extraordinary, then, that a small revolution has been taking place in Lisbon. A whole new generation of young Fado singers, lyricists, composers and guitarists, precisely because of their deep respect and knowledge for the form and their undiluted appreciation of its purest interpretation, as laid down by Amália Rodrigues and Alfredo Marceneiro (as well as Argentina Santos and João Ferreira Rosa, Lisbon's two outstanding live performers) is taking over Fado, making it their own and breathing life into the old, beloved, tear-drenched song.

It should be no surprise that the new generation's most astonishing singer, Camané, was the only Fadista singled out by the great Amália as, in the modest praise which passes for eulogy in the trade, "being able to sing Fado as it should be sung".

I've often been moved and floored by listening to Camané singing a few feet away from me - his intense sincerity; a candid fire of emotion and regret; full of the non-mathematical proofs of life, he has the fortunate tendency to do this to whoever is within range of his expressive hurricane.

But all that "you had to be there" gumpff, as is the case with Amália and Marceneiro, is a load of elitist nonsense - you get the same maudlin overload from his records; even when you listen to them early in the morning, with not a shot of whisky to help you along.

Fado can't be faked - and so it can't be "authenticated" or somehow made more impossibly truthful either; by a circumstance; a setting; a table in one of the few decent Fado houses in Lisbon.

This is why Canadians, Japanese and Italians, who know not a word of Portuguese, while listening to Amália sing "Povo Que Lavas No Rio" or "Maria Lisboa" on an old, beaten-up vinyl pressing, weep the same tears as we Portuguese do; although we know the words by heart; have met the people involved and have slept in the bed where the poet first thought of the song. It makes no difference. It's universal. We're human. End of story.

You might say, dear Reader, that these lines speak little of Camané and a lot about Fado - but that's as it should be.

Let me end with some words about the undisputed Prince of Fado, the spiritual son of Marceneiro and Amália; lest you think he has little to offer the all-encompassing universe of Fado.

By being able to formally reach and perfect the canonical strictures of Fado, Camané - thanks to his astounding voice, his unrelenting honesty, his disarmingly modest personality, so firmly anchored on his respect for, and understanding of his natural, chosen predecessors and his absolutely surrendered interpretations - has been able to bring about the small revolution Fado quietly, but truly, needed after the death of Marceneiro and Amália,

Camané is a startling Fado phenomenon because, while being emotionally and technically able to sing Fado according to its most stringent and exacting standards, by sheer virtuosity and "gusto" reviving its thoroughbred lifeline as if it had been born yesterday - he has effected the small, discrete and therefore lasting revolution that only the keenest and most talented pupils are capable of.

Although Fado is traditionally conservative - not in the political sense of being right-wing, but in the sense of being against change - Camané has brought a new, deeply humanistic perspective to it, with a generously left-wing, egalitarian flavour. His interpretations of the extremely talented and passionate José Mário Branco's versions of Fado are a convincing example of this. Fado is above politics. This, in itself, is a lesson Camané has taught us.

However, his lasting contribution to such an obdurate form of Fado is his insistence on happiness. For Camané, pain and suffering are not the be-all and end-all of human experience.

For Camané, Fado means the recognition of suffering; its due avowal; duly rejected in the name of life. Fado is escape; it's running away; it's almost ... therapy.

So it's Fado all the same and nothing has changed since he started singing. The only difference - which is very big - is that suffering, instead of being the be-all and end-all of Fado; might yet be a half-way house to - God forbid - happiness or, at least, life. So ...

Listen and join in.