

## **J.H. Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* and Karm Scerri**

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### **Abstract**

*Karm Scerri, the former organist of Luçon Cathedral - until his internment for four years in a German camp in France - and later the organist of St John's Co-Cathedral, was a foremost composer of liturgical music of the twentieth century Malta. The theme of this article is a hand-written letter by Scerri which was discovered by accident by the author. This document is proof that Scerri was requested by Joseph Augustine Sammut to adapt Cardinal John Henry Newman's theological poem The Dream of Gerontius for organ music. Furthermore, this document supports the claim that Scerri was not aware that Newman's work had already been the subject of a musical composition and much less of the fact that the latter was one of the major works by the leading British composer Edward William Elgar.*

... The Dream of Gerontius, a  
powerfully dramatic setting for  
soloists, chorus, and orchestra of a  
poem by Cardinal Newman that  
tells the story of a dying man's  
encounter with God.  
(Terry Teachout)

Dun Karm Scerri (1905-1981) was a Maltese organ player and a composer of sacred music of the second half of the twentieth century. He was known as Carmelo (often shortened to Carm) and more popularly as Dun Karm. Scerri had authored several compositions for liturgical music which – according to the list provided by Schiavone – include the following: *Missa Polifonica*, *Missa Brevis*, *Missa Solemnis*, *Missa de Requiem*, *Incipit oratio Jeremiae prophetae*; *Crux fidelis*, *Inno*, *Is-Seba` Kelmiet ta` Kristu fuq is-Salib*.<sup>1</sup> Correspondence retrieved recently by the author sheds light on the fact that Scerri was invited by Joseph Augustine Sammut to adopt Cardinal John Henry Newman's celebrated narrative poem *The Dream of Gerontius* to music suitable for organ playing.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Scerri never came across the libretto and music composition bearing the same title by Edward William Elgar, a British composer of the late Romantic period.<sup>3</sup>

### The Scerri family of musicians

Karm Scerri was the second generation of a well-known musical family from Naxxar.<sup>4</sup> His first music education was through his father Victor (1858-1942), an organ player, but then he

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<sup>1</sup> M. J. Schiavone, *Dictionary of Maltese Biographies* (Malta, 2009), vol. II, 1425.

<sup>2</sup> Newman wrote *The Dream of Gerontius* in January-February 1865 and published it in two parts in the Jesuit journal *The Month*, namely in the issue of May and of June 1865 (S. Banfield, "The Dream of Gerontius at 100: Elgar's Other Opera?," *The Musical Times*, 2000, 141 [1873], 23–31).

Newman had historical links with Malta both as a visitor and in the famous libel which he had lost against the ex-Dominican friar Giovanni Giacinto Achilli (1803-1860), a convert to the Protestant evangelical cause. On Christmas Eve of 1832, Newman arrived in Malta and spent Christmas on board the packet boat heading towards the Peloponnese. He arrived again in mid-January 1833 and was quarantined at the Lazzaretto until the 23 January 1833 – time which he spent writing verse, prose, and playing music (T. Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour* [Malta, 2009], 172). From 23 January until his departure on 7 February 1833, he was a guest at the Beverly Hotel, West Street, Valletta. Most of his stay was spent in bed due to a bad cold contracted from the windy and humid rooms at the quarantine station (ibid, 172). His physician was John Davy (1790-1868), the brother of the inventor of the miner's safety lamp Sir Humphrey Davy (1778-1829). With respect to Newman's letters whilst in Malta see P. Cassar, "Two Letters by Cardinal John Henry Newman in Malta: Their historical background," *Scientia*, 1967, 27 (2), 64-71. On 21 June 1852 the criminal libel trial instituted by Achilli started. Four days later Newman was convicted by the Queen's Bench in London of defamatory libel. In June 1841, Achilli, who was suspended from administering confessions and sentenced for three years of penance after he was convicted by the Roman Inquisition of sexual promiscuous conduct and rape, was five years later appointed professor of the Protestant College in Malta (see *Achilli vs. Newman: a full report of the most extraordinary trial for seduction and adultery charged against Dr. Achilli, the apostate Catholic priest, by the celebrated Dr. Newman, the Oxford Puseyite, both of whom are seceders from their former creeds* [New York: 1852?]).

<sup>3</sup> T. Teachout, 'Unloved Elgar,' *Commentary*, Jul/Aug 2004, 118 (1), 42-45.

<sup>4</sup> Dun Karm had a brother Emanuel and a sister Giovanna. Emanuel (1901-1982) was also a foremost 'secular' musician who had emigrated to Tripoli (Libya) in 1922 and moved to Tunis (Tunisia) in 1928. In Tunis he became well known as a pianist, conductor of chamber music and opera and was then appointed professor at Tunis's National Conservatory of Music. In 1978 Emanuel moved to France. On the other hand, Giovanna's son also took to music and came to be well known as Mro Joseph Fenech (1917-2010). For an overview outlining the music legacy of Scerri's family see V. Scerri, 'Għamlu isem fil-Muzika,' *Torċa*, 1985 (13

moved on to advance his studies in music whilst preparing for priesthood at Chavagnes-en-Paillers in France. During this period he specialised in organ music as well as, more specifically, in Gregorian and polyphonic music direction and composition. Although he was appointed teacher of music whilst still a seminarian reading philosophy and theology, according to the Professor Aquilina:

*... he continued his advanced musical studies under the tuition of the celebrated Prof. A. Courtonne, organist at Nantes Cathedral, who was himself a student of the renowned Gabriel Faure.*<sup>5</sup>

Following his ordination and his post as vice parish priest of Saint-Mesmin, Vendée, he continued his studies in composition. Meanwhile he also taught music and supported the setting up of choral groups. By 1933 he held the position of organist at Luçon Cathedral, a post which in Ġuże Aquilina's words was "the crowning recognition of Dun Carm's outstanding musical talent."<sup>6</sup> All came to an end in 1940 when the Germans occupied France. Given that he was a Maltese 'British subject,' he was interned in 1940 at Saint-Denis camp until liberation by the Allies four years later, a period which left an indelible mark on his personality as manifested in his autobiography entitled: *Erba` Snin f`Kamp ta` Koncentrament Germaniz*.<sup>7</sup> After his release, he returned to Luçon and, a year later, he came to Malta where he re-settled, with his first position being the organist at St John's Co-Cathedral. Following communication with Scerri in 1963, Inga Boissevain<sup>8</sup> notes that:

*He feels that the organ is the proper instrument for church music, its music is worthy of God. In his recitals he also plays secular music, but only that composed for organ.*

*... Organ music is not always easy on the ear, some pieces take a conscious effort to listen to, but the result of an hour at St John's, listening to Father Scerri's music, is a feeling of spirits uplifted, a head sometimes vibrating with the mighty sounds, and one's old beliefs of what is and what isn't "melody" shaken.*

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October), 22 and J. Vella Bondin, 'Mro Joseph Fenech: a 90th anniversary portrait,' *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 2007 (7 July), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Ġ. Aquilina, 'Gallery of Distinguished Maltese: Mgr Carmelo Scerri (1905),' *The Times of Malta*, 1980 (27 May), 5. This article is a concise review of Dun Carm's priesthood, his studies in France and ends with listing his musical contributions.

<sup>6</sup> Aquilina, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> K. Scerri, *Erba` Snin f`Kamp ta` Koncentrament Germaniz* (Malta, 1971). In correct Maltese the title should have been written as *Erba` Snin f`Kamp ta` Koncentrament Ġermaniż*. Bernard Vassallo, through the local media, requested assistance to translate this book into English (B. Vassallo, 'Fitting tribute', *Times of Malta*, November 29, 2012. Available at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20121129/letters/Fitting-tribute.447387>). Tony C. Cutajar was keen to take up the task (T. C. Cutajar, 'Fitting tribute', *Times of Malta*, December 1, 2012. Available at <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20121201/letters/Fitting-tribute.447637>). This title is a misnomer. It was an 'Ilag', an internment camps set by the German Army for civilian nationals from territories belonging to Allies, including nationals of the British Commonwealth, who surrendered to the Blitzkrieg. The conditions in these camps were remote from the notoriety of the German concentration camps. The one as Saint-Denis, where Scerri was held, was essentially an old flea-ridden barracks with a library, a theatre and a sports facility (W. Wynne Mason, *Prisoners of War* [Wellington, 1954], 145-6):

*But Red Cross food made their otherwise sparse diet a healthy one, and a good library, theatre, and sports field provided recreation. Clothing was still very short and men were worried over the financial position of their relatives outside the camp...*

<sup>8</sup> I. Boissevain, 'Father Carmelo Scerri – organist at St John's,' *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 1963 (7 April), 8.

In 1960, the French Government bestowed Scerri with the title of *Chevalier des Palmes Academique Francais*.<sup>9</sup> His golden jubilee of priesthood and his simultaneous nomination as monsignor of the Metropolitan Chapter had inspired *Missa Sancte Joseph*, the magnum opus of his nephew Mro Joseph Fenech (1917-2010).<sup>10</sup> This liturgical work, set for choir and orchestra, was premiered on 1 June 1980 during the same thanksgiving mass celebrated by Dun Karm.<sup>11</sup>

### **In the name of art in architecture**

My discovery of the correspondence between Dun Karm Scerri and Joseph A. Sammut was accidental. Fourth year undergraduate students majoring in architecture were working on an art exhibition in the foyer of the Faculty for the Built Environment of the University of Malta. Some of the art pieces included recycling books to form part of some of the exhibits. One of the books was the second edition of Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* published in London by J. Hewetson in 1907 in the 'Queen's Quartos' series.<sup>12</sup> On the very first blank sheet one could note a signature in black fountain pen ink reading 'Joseph A. Sammut' and, in pencil, 'Lt. Col. J. A. Sammut, 89, Main Street, Lija' (see Figure 1).

Besides, at the back of the book, folded in two, there was a letter written in Maltese by Scerri to Sammut, dated 30 November 1973 (see Figure 2). This letter is hand-written in blue ballpoint ink on Basildon Bond writing paper measuring 9 inches by 7 inches and which paper has the watermark of the brand. The sheet is a typical one included in the 40 leaf Basildon Bond writing pads available at the time.<sup>13</sup> A translation of this letter from Maltese reads:

*I have sent you the book which you have lent me and I apologise a lot for keeping it for so long. I have been meaning to send it back for some time. I could not commit myself to that piece of work you desired. First of all I never came across the music of this opera and if I did I do believe that its music was likely prepared for an orchestra and to condense it for organ playing would have been a task I did not have time for. Thus I apologise once again.*

To appreciate the queries raised by this correspondence it is imperative to critically review this theological work of Newman in poetry form and its translation into musical arrangement by Elgar – the former as a Catholic priest based in Birmingham and the latter, a self-taught Catholic composer and founder of the music department in the same city. It was through Elgar's musical composition that Newman's poem became famous.<sup>14</sup> A recent

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<sup>9</sup> Schiavone, 1425.

<sup>10</sup> Vella Bondin, op. cit.

G. Mulè Stagno, 'Mro Joseph Fenech's work', *The Sunday Times of Malta*, May 11, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20080511/letters/mro-joseph-fenechs-work.207583>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Mro Joseph Fenech, known in his native village of Naxxar as *Gużepi l-organista*, was the organist of local Parish Church for over four decades, a post which he held since the age of twelve. Due to personal reasons, Fenech retreated from the music scene in 1971 and made a brief comeback to liturgical music in 1980. As a composer, he was most prolific in liturgical works and he did not limit himself to this genre (ibid).

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius* (London, 1907). All the personal belongings of Sammut were auctioned through Belgravia Auction Galleries (Dr John Bugeja Caruana, personal communication. Bugeja Caruana was a family friend and neighbour of Sammut).

<sup>13</sup> The Basildon Bond brand of stationery was established by Millington and Sons in 1911 (A. Room, *Dictionary of trade name origins* [London, 1983]).

<sup>14</sup> E. Taylor, 'Elgar's Dream of Gerontius', *Blackfriars*, 1951, vol.32 (373), 156-157.

publication in *The Elgar Society Journal* addresses this work in the context of theology applied to music.<sup>15</sup>

### **Preliminary observations**

The copy of the edition did actually belong to Joseph Augustine Sammut (1903-1994), a Lieutenant Colonel of the Royal Malta Artillery [RMA].<sup>16</sup> His residential address stated in the *Malta Who's Who* issued in 1969-70 and in 1987 tallies with the name and address written in pencil on the book, thus proving that it did actually belong to him.<sup>17</sup> On 1 January 1954 he was appointed 'Ordinary Officer of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire'.<sup>18</sup> The record of his recommendation for granting this award, bearing reference number WO 373/161/283, is held at The National Archives at Kew.<sup>19</sup>

There is no reason to doubt that Scerri's letter, which makes no reference to *The Dream of Gerontius*, does in fact refer to this work. It is nonetheless remote that he was referring to some other text, a question which is not the subject of this article. The letter was addressed to Sammut nearly two decades after he was given an award by Her Majesty, as Mr and not by his official title of Lieutenant Colonel.<sup>20</sup> The book belonged to a high-ranking, respected official in the military, an individual trained in military order and discipline. Furthermore, as most owners of books did at the time, Sammut had put down his name in ink – this being an enduring marker – even though one also finds his name, official title and residential address written in pencil. This indicates that he may have used this medium not to leave a permanent mark and possibly to be erased if need arises.

### ***The Dream of Gerontius***

*The Dream of Gerontius* was written and published by Newman in 1865,<sup>21</sup> two decades after his full membership with the Roman Catholic Church. In 1899 Elgar was approached to participate in the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival to celebrate 'the turn of the century'. Elgar's libretto was half the length of Newman's poem. In his music composition he assigns the roles of Gerontius, the Angel and the Priest to a tenor, mezzo-soprano and a baritone, the latter also assigned the role of the Angel of Agony intended for a bass. The premiere, held on 3 October 1900, was a complete failure for four reasons: the members of the chorus were amateurs; the chorus master passed away unexpectedly and was replaced by a director who was not able to comprehend Elgar's music; the full score was available to the conductor a day

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<sup>15</sup> L. Bianco, 'Theology applied to music: The Dream of Gerontius revisited', *The Elgar Society Journal*, 2016, vol.19 (5), 26-34.

<sup>16</sup> Malta Family History, *Maltese Soldiers 1800-1972*. Available at <http://website.lineone.net/~stevebidmead/soldiers.htm>

Sammut was credited with the design of the badge of the RMA (D. A. Darmanin, 'The Badge of the Royal Malta Artillery'. Available at <http://maltacommand.com/RMA%20badge.html>

<sup>17</sup> *Malta Who's Who 1969-70* (Malta, 1970), 327.

J. Manduca, *Malta Who's Who 1987* (Malta, 1987), 147.

<sup>18</sup> *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 1 January 1954, 7.

<sup>19</sup> War Office and Ministry of Defence, *Recommendations for Honours and Awards for Gallant and Distinguished Service (Army)* (Kew, 1954).

<sup>20</sup> The correspondence was addressed as 'Għażiż Sur Sammut' which translates into English as 'Dear Mr Sammut'.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion on the theological themes in the *Dream of Gerontius*, see R. Juan and G. Vélez, 'Newman's Theology in the Dream of Gerontius', *New Blackfriars*, 2001, vol.82 (967), 387-398.

prior the first rehearsal and; lastly, two of the three soloist were in poor voice on the day of the premiere.

Despite the weak performance, music critics realized that it was not due to the quality of Elgar's work but owing to the ill-prepared performance. Elgar was the Peyton Professor of Music at the University of Birmingham from 1905 until 1908 when he resigned as he detested the teaching environment.<sup>22</sup> From 1924 until his death in 1934, he was the "Master of the King's Musick and the Musician Laureate of the British people," a post which secured his place as the most distinguished musician for the British monarch.<sup>23</sup>

### **Scerri and *The Dream***

Scerri's letter to Sammut, dated November 1973, contains five direct and two implicit claims, the former concerning Scerri whilst the latter relates to Sammut. The direct claims are the following:

1. Sammut had requested Scerri to adapt *The Dream of Gerontius* to organ playing: "*biex tirriduċiha għall-orgni*,"<sup>24</sup>
2. Sammut had lent Scerri a copy of Newman's text *The Dream of Gerontius* and not Elgar's libretto,
3. Scerri never came across the music composition for *The Dream of Gerontius*.
4. Scerri did not accept the task requested by Sammut as it is "something/a task for which I [Scerri] do not have time to undertake". Scerri hints that Sammut's request is much demanding in time; and
5. That such a request was made much earlier than 1973. The letter states: "*Jiena bghattlek il-ktieb li kont sliftni u skuzani hafna li zammejtu daqsekk żmien. Ili hafna biex nibgħatulek*".<sup>25</sup>

The implicit statements made are the following:

1. Sammut, whose main hobbies were motoring and photography,<sup>26</sup> had a copy of Newman's work, and;
2. The fact that Sammut lent Scerri a copy of Newman's text and not Elgar's libretto implies that Sammut did not have it ... but possibly did hear of *Dream of Gerontius* adapted to music.

These claims and statements give rise to a number of questions. Answers to these provide some insight into Karm Scerri's knowledge of contemporary history of music / musicology at the time, as well as his comprehension of the theological poem which was adapted for the organ.

Scerri was certainly neither aware that *The Dream of Gerontius* was adopted to music composition nor that it was the theme of the choral work of Elgar. T. Teachout notes that, accept for a few English critics, Elgar "is more like Sergei Rachmaninoff or Richard Strauss,

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<sup>22</sup> At the time, "the English musical establishment was dominant by 'gentleman composers' with university degrees who taught on the conservatory level" whilst Elgar was self-taught (Teachout, 43).

<sup>23</sup> J. N. Moore, *Edward Elgar: Letters of a Lifetime* (Oxford and New York, 1990), 384. His post was the theme of a news item entitled 'Master of the King's Musick', *The Times*, 5 May 1924, 16.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase 'biex tirriduċiha għall-orgni' translates into English as 'to condense/apply it for organ playing'.

<sup>25</sup> This translates as 'I have sent you the book which you have lent me and I apologise a lot for keeping it for so long. I have been meaning to send it back for some time'.

<sup>26</sup> As stated in *Malta Who's Who 1969-70*, 327 and Manduca, 147.

a genius born too late to have fit comfortably into his own time”.<sup>27</sup> All Elgar's major works were neglected until the 1950s. *The Dream of Gerontius* was not included in *The Record Guide* of 1955. Since then more than a dozen recordings were made.<sup>28</sup> This is partly due to the founding of The Elgar Society in 1951 with the objective to promote Elgar's music. Although the first acoustic recordings of extracts from *The Dream of Gerontius* were undertaken in 1916 by Sir Henry Wood, the first complete recording was made in 1945 by EMI when the work was conducted by Malcolm Sargent with the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Liverpool Philharmonic. In 1964 this same studio made its first stereophonic recording, this time conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. Thus, it is not surprising that Scerri was not familiar with the music composition of Elgar.

## Final Comments

Recalling the quotation from G. Aquilina cited above with respect to Scerri's music education in France,<sup>29</sup> Fauré (1845-1924) was a lead organist and composer of his generation.<sup>30</sup> He was personally acquainted with Elgar and after the latter's First Symphony in 1908, both dined together.<sup>31</sup> If Scerri were to take the challenge and adapt *The Dream of Gerontius* for music composition suitable for the organ, he would have joined and enriched this tradition

*For him, organ playing is not simply a technique, it is indissolubly linked with his vocation as a Christian and priest. Music is for him one way of expressing his religion.*<sup>32</sup>

Prior to Elgar, the Czech composer and organist Antonín Leopold Dvořák (1841-1904) had considered adapting *The Dream of Gerontius* for music composition fifteen years earlier. In fact he discussed it with Newman before giving up on the idea,<sup>33</sup> but he “found the subject too placid and lyrical for his special style.”<sup>34</sup> Following the criticism which Dvořák received for his performance of *Stabat Mater* in Vienna, in February 1888, he thanked the Austrian–Hungarian conductor Hans Richter (1843-1916) for his “courage and devoted sympathy.”<sup>35</sup> Richter's was first introduced to England in 1877 by Richard Wagner (1813-1883).<sup>36</sup> Being the principal conductor of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival, he led the first performance of Elgar's choral work *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1900. On autographing a copy of the score, Richter wrote “Let drop the Chorus, let drop everybody—but let *not* drop the wings of your original genius.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Teachout, 42.

<sup>28</sup> A. Farach-Colton, ‘Vision of the Hereafter’, *Gramophone*, 2003 (February), 39.

<sup>29</sup> Aquilina, 5.

<sup>30</sup> J. Duchon, *Gabriel Fauré* (London, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> J. N. Moore, *Elgar – A Creative Life*. Oxford, 1987, 547.

<sup>32</sup> Boissevian, op.cit.

<sup>33</sup> J. N. Moore, *Edward Elgar: a creative life* (Oxford, 1999), 291.

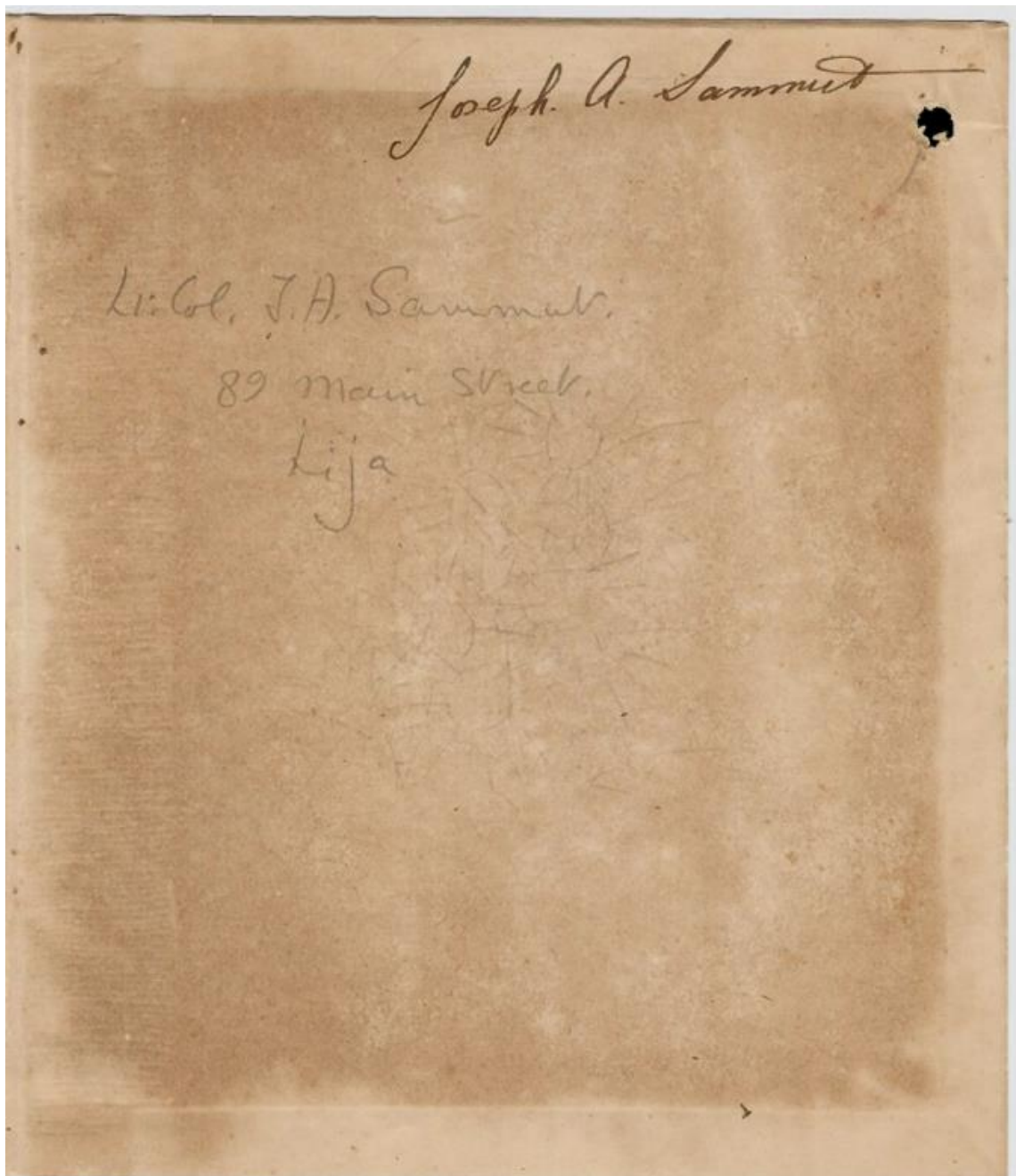
<sup>34</sup> Quoted in G. Melvin-Mason, ‘Dvořák and Elgar,’ *Rethinking Dvořák: Views from Five Countries*. Edited by D. R. Beveridge (Oxford, 1996), 225-233, who makes reference to Moore, 291. Moore, in turn, quotes this statement but his reference number 22 states the source as ‘Newspaper cutting at the Elgar Birthplace’.

<sup>35</sup> J. Clapham, *Antonín Dvořák, Musician and Craftsman* (London, 1979).

In 1891, the University of Cambridge conferred Dvořák with an honorary degree, an honour conferred later on Elgar.

<sup>36</sup> C. Fifield, *True Artist and True Friend: A Biography of Hans Richter* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> *The Musical Times*, 1 November 1900, p. 734. An image of the autographic copy of the score is reproduced in Bianco (33) by the kind permission of the Elgar Birthplace Museum.



**Figure 1:** First blank page of the copy of *The Dream of Gerontius* which Sammut had forwarded to Scerri.



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30/11/73

Għażiż Sur Sammut

Genia b'għatlekk il-kteb li kienet skiftni  
u shujani ta' bna li jgħammjeju daqskelk qmien.  
Għi ta' bna b'ix nibgħatulek.

Genia ma stajtx midhol għal dik il-  
pieċa se għal li imbi otaq. L-urveluati il-muzika  
ba 'din l-opra, qatt ma għet b'idejja: u kienet għet  
nataw li il-muzika ta' għal aħbar kienet għal-  
orkestra, u b'ix b'inducija għal-organu b'is tagħ, u  
li ma kienet ibelli qmien oghamila

Għatlekk shujani mill-għet  
u nelli għatlekk b'na

Dun Tarm Scerri

Figure 2: Scerri's letter to Sammut, dated 30 November 1973.