

## Origins and Development of a Contemporary Maltese Orchestra: The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra

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Although there has been a long tradition of western art music in Malta since the Middle Ages, it has always been rather restricted in nature. First of all, the population of the island was relatively small and it was geographically isolated on the periphery of Europe. During previous centuries this meant that the kind of patronage that existed for classical music in other countries was much less widespread in Malta.

Maltese musicians could only develop their musical tastes for a number of reasons: Firstly, the island was predominantly Catholic, and the church was the only significant patron of music, so the majority of the local composers wrote extensively for ecclesiastical or sacred purposes. Secondly, up to the Second World War the two main types of classical music performed in Malta were Italian opera (due to the strong Italian cultural influence on the island) which was performed either at the Royal Opera House or at the Manoel Theatre Valletta; and British 'light music'. Maltese audiences displayed little interest in other kinds of classical music, such as orchestral and chamber music. Thirdly, there were very few performing groups (which were mainly small chamber ensembles) with whom Maltese composers could arrange to have their orchestral works performed. Consequently, very few Maltese composers wrote compositions specifically scored for large ensembles or orchestras.

Given that the musical infrastructures in Malta were so underdeveloped in comparison to most other European countries, it was several decades into the twentieth century before a reasonably sized standard orchestra was established. The audience for any other form of classical music other than opera and church music remained stubbornly small, and the audience for new music was smaller still.

To further a better understanding of the musical infrastructures developed throughout the centuries in Malta, the first half of this paper will present a brief historical background of the musical ensembles that performed sacred and secular music from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. In the second part, it focuses on the historical development of the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, from the early twentieth century to the present day.

### Sacred and Secular Chamber Music up to the Nineteenth Century in Malta<sup>2</sup>

The earliest form of chamber music in Malta comprised a group of musicians known as the *cappelle di musica*. According to Anne Schnoebelen in the *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music*,<sup>3</sup> the earliest known polyphonic music on the island dates back to 1573, when the Cathedral Chapter initiated the formal teaching of *canto figurato*. Schnoebelen<sup>4</sup> records that by the early seventeenth century Gregorian Chant (*canto fermo*) was widespread and an organised *cappella musicale* began to take shape, comprising various groups of musicians and voices.

In 1619 Bishop Baldassere Cagliares proposed reforms to the Cathedral's *cappella di musica* with the

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<sup>2</sup> Lydia Buttigieg, 'Carmelo Pace (1906-1993): The career and creative achievement of a twentieth-century Maltese composer in a social and cultural context' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Durham University), Chapter 1, 20-28. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/view/creators/BUTTIGIEG=3ALYDIA=3A=3A.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://sscm-jscm.press.illinois.edu/v7/no1/schnoebelen.html> - [Accessed 23 January 2011].

<sup>4</sup> Schnoebelen's article *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music* indicates a synopsis of Franco Bruni's catalogue. Franco Bruni, *Stampe musicali italiane alla cattedrale di Malta: Storia e catalogo della collezione (ACM, Mus. Pr. 1-159)* (Malta, 1999) is a detailed catalogue of those music prints conserved in the *Museo della Cattedrale di Malta*, housed in the eighteenth-century *Palazzo del Seminario* at Mdina. The 159 prints encompass the dates 1568 through 1698. In a brief introduction Bruni states that his work aims to study the process by which the cathedral accumulated this collection of Italian music prints, and to illuminate the activities of the *cappella musicale*. There follows a short history from the earliest, sparsely documented, appearance of music in 1473 through to the seventeenth century.

aim of bringing in musical instruments to complement the voices and organ. Vella Bondin states that ‘the Sicilian Don Francesco Fontana, maestro between 1616-23, purchased musical works from Venice in April 1622 and later that same year ‘un controbasso grande, due violini, due tenori di contralto,<sup>5</sup> cinque archetti e tre scudi di corde con il loro cassone’ [a double bass, two violins, two violoncellos, 5 bows and three scudi worth of strings with their cases<sup>6</sup>]. Subsequent important maestri included the Sicilians Antonio Campochiaro (between 1626-7 and 1635-8) and Andrea Rinaldi (1627-31).<sup>7</sup> In his catalogue *Musica e Musicisti alla Cattedrale di Malta Nei Secoli XVI–XVIII*, Franco Bruni documents the pivotal relationship that existed between Malta and Naples. The Maltese Chapter sent local musicians to Naples to develop their musical abilities in conservatories—especially *castrati* for the *cappelle musicale*. The *cappella* was subsequently augmented with wind instruments in the latter decades of the century. Bruni’s catalogue provides information about the personnel of the *cappella musicale*, and a detailed description of its repertory and music collection.

It was customary that the musician appointed *maestro di cappella* was a composer who would write works for liturgical use. According to Vella Bondin:

After 1711 the cathedral employed only Maltese *maestri*, encouraging promising candidates to advance their musical proficiency in Neapolitan conservatories, a course subsequently followed for two centuries by leading Maltese musicians. Outstanding *maestri* of this later era were Benigno Zerafa (1726-1804), Francesco Azopardi (1784-1809) and Pietro Paolo Bugeja (1772-1828). Compositions by the cathedral’s *maestri* form the backbone of the Mdina Cathedral Museum music archives, a rich and little known collection of manuscripts (including the compositions of Zerafa and Azopardi) and printed scores (among them unique 17th-century publications.<sup>8</sup>

Thus by the end of the eighteenth century a strong tradition of Catholic liturgical music had developed on the island, and it blossomed throughout the following century. Several important ecclesiastical establishments employed a full-time *maestro di cappella* who directed a group of singers, instrumentalists and organists—including the Mdina Cathedral,<sup>9</sup> the Conventual Church of St. John<sup>10</sup> (now the co-cathedral<sup>11</sup>), and the Matrice dedicated to the Assumption of our Lady (which subsequently became Gozo’s Cathedral<sup>12</sup>). Other churches employed a freelance *maestro* on a part-time basis. Generally, these had their own group of musicians and singers at their disposal to perform at liturgical services on important feast days, such as the titular feast of the village. Vella Bondin states that if the *maestro*’s compositions pleased the clergy, he was eventually rewarded with a permanent post. Especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the professional *maestro di cappella* enjoyed an exceptionally respected social position. To keep their permanent posts, the *maestro di cappella* had to ‘compose new material and engage the best possible solo singers, mainly Italian opera singers, to perform it.’<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the Catholic Church, the Knights of St. John were also important patrons of music. As Bondin points out, they were responsible for important initiatives, such as commissioning a series of cantatas which were performed annually on the eve of May Day throughout much of the eighteenth century. The cantatas were created by notable composers of the period, including the Italians Gianpaolo di Dominici, G.A.Giai, Matteo Capranica and G.B. Lampugnani, and the Maltese Filippo Pizzuto and Michelangelo Vella. The Knights of St John were also responsible for the construction of the Manoel Theatre in 1732 which, it is to be noted is the oldest European theatre still functioning in its original.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the theatre was by no means

<sup>5</sup> A term for a string instrument, most often denoting a type of viola or a small cello.

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘cases’ refers to the cases of the instruments purchased.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Vella Bondin, *Malta’s Musical Heritage, A Historical Overview*, 3.

J.Vella Bondin, et al. "Malta" Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online (Oxford University Press), accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40886>.

<sup>9</sup> Canon John Azzopardi, curator of the Mdina Cathedral Museum, has written extensively about *the cappella di musica of the Cathedral*, ‘*La cappella musicale della cattedrale di Malta e I suoi rapporti con la Sicilia*’ and also Franco Bruni ‘*Musica e musicisti alla Cattedrale di Malta nei secoli XVI – XVIII* (Malta, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Vella Bondin, ‘The Cappella di Musica of the Order of St. John’, *The Sunday Times*, 24 Jan 1993, 28-29; 31 Jan 1993, 30-31; 7 Feb 1993, 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> For an account of the two musical chapels during the 19<sup>th</sup> century see Franco Bruni: *Musica Sacra a Malta: Le cappelle della Cattedrale di San Paolo e della Concattedrale di San Giovanni Battista nel XIX secolo* (Malta, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> A. Grazio Grech, ‘*Mill-Istorja Muzikali ta’ Ghawdex*’, (Gozo, 2002), Chapter 1, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Azzopardi, Bruni and Vella Bondin, *The Nani Composers (XVIII – XX cent.) – A Historical Assessment and a Catalogue of their Works*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

confined exclusively to operatic productions. It was also a venue for dramas and comedies, as well as 'veglioni'<sup>15</sup> and various other types of musical events.<sup>16</sup> During the eighteenth century it remained an important venue for operatic performances until it was superseded by Malta's Royal Opera House, which opened its doors in 1866. It was designed by Edward Barry, who had also designed the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden.

Unlike other European countries, where local rulers supported and encouraged the arts, secular patronage for music in Malta was virtually non-existent. From the late eighteenth century onwards, musical infrastructures began to develop quite rapidly in France, Italy and Germany, and new middle-class audiences for classical music emerged. Orchestras and choral societies were established, concert series were set up, opera houses opened, and educational institutions were developed to train up-and-coming composers and performers. As Adam Carse claims in *The Orchestra in the XVIII Century*, German orchestras outnumbered those of other countries. In every court of the many German and Austrian states, large or small, and in nearly all large households, royal, noble or ecclesiastical, there was musical activity.<sup>17</sup> Carse continues to state that the '[...] decentralisation caused a widespread cultivation of musical art, which in France and in England was centred largely in the two capitals. The musical centres in Italy were more numerous and more widely distributed than in France or in England, a condition which again tended towards decentralisation [...]'<sup>18</sup> In comparison, the situation in Malta was very different. Malta's musical history is similar to that in other small countries, such as Ireland, in which the classical music tradition remained marginalised and underdeveloped well into the twentieth century.

The precedents leading to the formation of the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra are therefore rather different to those in the rest of Europe. While in other European countries musical infrastructure was well-established, in Malta, despite the island's two functional operatic theatres, a fully-fledged orchestra was not established until midway through the twentieth century. These circumstances had far-reaching implications, especially for a composer such as Carmelo Pace, who, as the first Maltese composer to evolve a modernist post-tonal idiom, had to work in comparative isolation, and found it difficult to arrange performances of his compositions.

### Musical life in Malta –the Twentieth Century

The development of large-scale musical establishments similar to those across central Europe was very slow in Malta. Until the late 1970s and 1980s Malta only had one semi-professional group capable of performing symphonic and chamber works properly. The orchestras in Malta were at The Royal Opera House (until its destruction) and the Manoel Theatre. Here the orchestra was formed from a core of musicians who were performing under the British Navy Force. It was known as the C-in-C Orchestra (Commander-in-Chief's orchestra) until its rebranding as the Manuel Theatre Orchestra in April 1968.<sup>19</sup>

Another important figure to promote secular music on the island was Maestro Paul Nani. Already recognised as a popular composer and conductor, Nani produced a remarkable series of outstanding concerts between 1936 and 1952.<sup>20</sup> These were the first classical concerts in Malta to be transmitted live,<sup>21</sup> and were broadcast on Rediffusion from Nani's own studio in South Street Valletta.<sup>22</sup> From 1939 onwards the concerts were sponsored by the British Institute and Nani agreed to give twenty-two concerts annually – fourteen orchestral and eight instrumental. As Vella Bondin writes:

The concerts became so popular that they drew regularly an audience of around 800 persons. The importance of these concerts lies in the fact that for the first time ever, Paul Nani introduced to the Maltese public, accustomed to operatic and liturgical music, previously ignored orchestral and vocal forms by composers which up to then were only names in a book. Moreover, he utilized these concerts to promote Maltese composers and performers. He regularly went out of his way either to listen to or to examine the full scores of new works by

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<sup>15</sup> The term *veglioni* refers to the masked balls held during carnival in the Manoel or at the Royal Opera House.

<sup>16</sup> *Imma l-iskop tat-Teatru Manoel ma kienx ta' teatru għall-opri biss, dawn kienu l-aktar parti importanti iżda l-intenzjoni ta' l-Ordni kienet li jkollu teatru generiku li fih setgħu jinzammu wkoll drammi, kummiedji, veljuni, ricevimenti, kantanti, u kull xorta oħra ta' mużika.* (Buttigieg, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Adam Carse, *The Orchestra in the XVIIIth Century* (Cambridge, 1940), 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.maltaorchestra.com/the-orchestra/> - [Accessed 20 March 2013]. In 1997, the Manoel Theatre Orchestra 'became an independent body and was officially re-named the National Orchestra of Malta.

<sup>20</sup> Azzopardi, Bruni and Vella Bondin, *The Nani Composers (XVIII – XX cent.) – A Historical Assessment and a Catalogue of their Works*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Vella Bondin, *Il-Muzika ta' Malta fis-Seklu Dsatax u Għoxrin* (Malta, 1987), 162.

Maltese composers and even if he found their musical idiom unsympathetic, he would include them in a concert as long as he considered their standard acceptable.<sup>23</sup>

Such initiatives were laudable as they made a valuable contribution despite the fact that orchestral activity in Malta remained rather restricted in scope. In the early decades of the twentieth century there was no professional symphony with a full complement of full-time players. Instead, the ensembles attached to the Manoel Theatre and Royal Opera House appear to have come together on an ad hoc basis, formed of semi-professional and amateur musicians.

Initiative to foster wider interest in chamber music included chamber music recitals organised by the Maltese Cultural Institute (MCI). These were established by Professor Gaston Tonna-Barthet (1905-1987),<sup>24</sup> with the aim of promoting ‘the activities of the Maltese people in every field of Culture, including Literature, Science, Fine Arts, Music and Drama.’<sup>25</sup> Tonna-Barthet sought in particular to revitalise the cultural life of the island, which had been severely affected by the Second World War. The first meeting of this society (MCI) was held in the presence of the then minister for education, Godwin G. Ganado (1910-1964)<sup>26</sup> on 2 January 1949. Dr. Ganado explained the importance of starting such a ‘circle’ in Malta in order to seed other intellectual activities in Maltese society generally.<sup>27</sup> After its inaugural concert on 15 February 1949, held in the Concert Hall of the Hotel Phoenicia at Floriana, the society endeavoured to hold high-profile concerts and to promote promising local musicians.

PROGRAMME			
MALTESE NATIONAL ANTHEM			
PART I.		PART II.	
1. Orchestra	<b>Themes from "Masters singers"</b> <i>The Mozart Amateur String Orchestra.</i>	WAGNER.	1. Orchestra <b>Minuet from "Don Giovanni"</b> <i>The Mozart Amateur String Orchestra.</i> MOZART.
2. Romanza: (Ballo in Maschera)	<b>Eri tu.....</b> <i>Mr. J. Bezzina.</i>	VERDI.	2. Romanza: (Sanson et Dalila) <b>Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix</b> <i>Mrs. Jane Buttigieg Depiro.</i> SAINT-SAENS.
3. Song	<b>Sérénade Berceuse</b> <i>Miss Lucy Parlato.</i>	GOUNOD.	3. Piano Solo <b>Scherzo in E minor</b> <i>Miss Connie Muscat L.R.S.M.</i> CHOPIN.
4. Violin Solo	<b>Romance in F.</b> <i>Mrs. Bice Herrera.</i>	BEETHOVEN.	4. Romanza: (Ferrandot) <b>O PARADISO</b> <b>Nessun Dorma</b> <i>Mr. J. Sammut-Harrison.</i> PUCCHINI. <i>AFRICANA</i> MEYERBEER
6. Romanza: (La Favorita)	<b>O Mio Fernando</b> <i>Mrs. Rosa Sammut.</i>	DONIZETTI.	5. Song <b>L'Ancien d'Argent</b> <i>Mrs. Violette Galea.</i> CHAMINADE.
6. Piano Solo	<b>Rhapsody No. 2</b> <i>Miss Eileen Fiorini L.R.S.M.</i>	LISZT.	6. Violin Solo <b>La Gitane</b> <i>Mrs. Bice Herrera.</i> KREISLER.
7. Romanza: (Otello)	<b>Credo</b> <i>Mr. G. Sutariano.</i>	VERDI.	7. Romanza <b>La Resurrezione</b> <i>Mr. A. Galea.</i> ALFANO.
8. Piano Solo	<b>Les Collines d'Anacapri</b> <i>Miss Yolanda Abela L.R.S.M.</i>	DEBUSSY.	8. Piano Solo <b>Rhapsodie</b> <i>Miss C. Mangion L.R.S.M.</i> DOHNANI.
9. Duet: (Madame Butterfly)	<b>Bimba dagli occhi.....</b> <i>Mrs. Alice Tonna and Mr. A. Galea.</i>	PUCCHINI.	9. Romanza: (Andrea Chénier) <b>Nemico della Patria</b> <i>Mr. G. Sutariano.</i> GIORDANO.
	<i>At the Piano: Mrs. Bice Bisazza Pitre, Miss Pandolfino L.R.S.M. and Maestro G. Camilleri.</i>		10. Orchestra <b>Polcaise</b> <i>The Mozart Amateur String Orchestra.</i> PACE.
<b>GOD SAVE THE KING.</b>			

Figure 1: The Programme of the MCI Inauguration Concert, held at the Hotel Phoenicia on the 15 February 1949 – Courtesy of MCI Institute

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. These concerts included works by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Coleridge-Taylor, Debussy, Elgar, Gibbons, Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Offenbach, Purcell, Rimsky-Korsakov, Schumann, Schubert, Sibelius, Smetana, Tchaikovsky, Vivaldi, Wagner, Wallace, Walton, and Weber. Some of the Maltese composers who had their works performed were Mallia Pulvirenti, Diacono, Fiamingo, Pace, and Paul Nani.

<sup>24</sup> Schiavone, *Dictionary of Maltese Biographies*, Vol. II, 1545-1546. In 1930, Tonna-Barthet was the first person in Malta to receive pictures by radio. Six years later he invented an instrument to determine sound waves. In 1938, he discovered two special coleopteran in Malta. In his research he collaborated with famous international scientists, including Sir Edward Appleton.

<sup>25</sup> <http://maltaculturalinstitute.yolasite.com/resources/MCIPresentation.pdf> - [Accessed 20 March 2011].

<sup>26</sup> Schiavone, Vol. I, 895. Ganado was well-known for the number of foreign languages he had mastered, including English, Italian, French and German, and which he taught up to 1945.

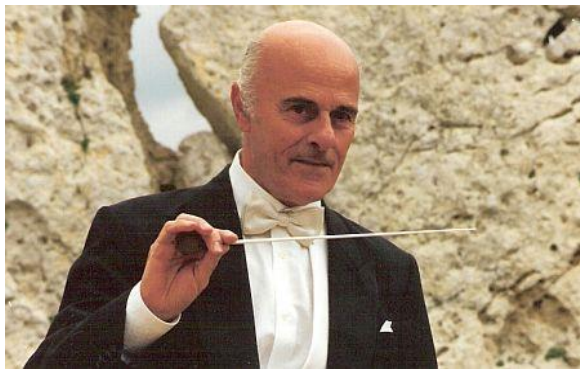
<sup>27</sup> Article taken from <http://maltaculturalinstitute.yolasite.com/resources/MCIPresentation.pdf> - [Accessed 20 March 2011].

Between the inaugural concert in 1949 (see **Fig. 2** above) and 1987, Maestro Carmelo Pace (1906-1993) was the main musical advisor and recital series organiser. He was also the founder and conductor of the Institute's Amateur String Orchestra.

### The Conception of a Maltese National Orchestra

The Maltese National Orchestra has military links. As stated in the *Times of Malta*, the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) orchestra 'dates back to 1926. Before the Orchestra was formed, every British battleship stationed in Malta had her own orchestra made up of Maltese musicians'. Moreover, the article claims that:

there was a lack of musicians on the island. Sicilians came to the island and after taking up Maltese citizenship, joined as 'Maltese' musicians with these small orchestras. It was at the time when Royal Marines musicians were replacing the Maltese that the C-in-C's Orchestra was established at the Old Admiralty House in South Street, Valletta. It was composed of musicians collected from the various warships.<sup>28</sup>



According to Maestro Joseph Sammut, each battleship consisted of around twenty-four Maltese musicians, who ranged from paddy officers (cooks) to stewards. All the musicians wore tailored band uniforms, with hand-made gold-thread badges that were meticulously pinned onto their hats.<sup>29</sup>

#### Maestro Joseph Sammut (Conductor)

Also noted by Sammut, all the musicians on board these battleships were trained specifically to perform with two different instruments, mainly from the brass or string families. When the Royal Marines were on parade on land or on their battleships, they

generally played brass instruments, and when they performed as an orchestra, they used both brass and string instruments.

From 1821 to 1961 Admiralty House was the official residence of the British Naval Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet.<sup>30</sup> After Malta's Declaration of Independence, the palace was returned to the Maltese government and started being completely overhauled and restored. Its inauguration as a Museum of Fine Arts took place on 7 May 1974 and it now houses the national art collection.

As detailed explicitly by Patrick Middleton in *Admiral Clanky Entertains*, the Mediterranean Fleet (better known as the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, which was first launched in 1665 and continued to exist until 1967) was second only to the Home Fleet in size and firepower, and the C-in-C was one of the most senior Admirals serving. In between the two major wars, apart from the Royal Marines Band, the C-in-C orchestra was made up of Maltese civilians 'who were seldom out of their dinner jackets'<sup>31</sup>. In 1920,

<sup>28</sup> 'The Future of the C-in-C's Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 2 September 1966, 7.

<sup>29</sup> These badges were made specifically by Grixti, a shop situated on Republic Street in Valletta, near the La Vallette band club. Grixti was the only shop in Malta permitted to supply navy uniforms and hand-made badges made out of gold thread. These hand-made gold badges, stripes and uniforms were made by Maltese women who were directly employed by Grixti. This information was given by my mother Edith Buttigieg (b. 1932), who lived in Valletta, Malta for nearly 25 years.

<sup>30</sup> The British Mediterranean Fleet was part of the Royal Navy. The Fleet was one of the most prestigious commands in the navy for the majority of its history, defending the vital sea link between the United Kingdom and the rest of the British Empire in the Eastern Hemisphere. The first Commander-in-Chief for the Mediterranean Fleet may have been named as early as 1665 and the Fleet was in existence until 1967.

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Middleton, *Admiral Clanky Entertains* (Leicester, 2010), 3.

a treasury audit recommended that the orchestra constituted an unreasonable expense, and should be disbanded. In return, the treasury eventually agreed that the members of the orchestra could continue to serve until they retired. Thereafter, whenever a member was due to retire, a successor was secretly appointed, to take on the role his predecessor. By the time war broke out in 1939, there had been no reduction in the number of players in the orchestra.<sup>32</sup>



**The Malta Police Band in the 1920s<sup>33</sup>**

It is an interesting that the Commissioner of Police Lieutenant Colonel Harry William Bamford established the Malta Police Force Band in 1919:

[...] by forming up the bands' men emanating from King's Own Regiment and the Malta Royal Artillery. The band was under the charge of its first Director of Music, Maestro. E. Magro, who happened to be an ex-director of the C-in-C orchestra in Malta. [...] 'Due to service exigencies, the Band was disbanded for several instances, and it was again reactivated in 1994, on the 180th anniversary of the foundation of the Force. It made its debut in the presence of a well-known Russian Police Band and the famous 'Banda dell' Arma dei Carabinieri' during a march past and Guard of Honour at St. George's Square, Valletta.<sup>34</sup>

According to Maestro Francesco Bellizzi (1891-1956):<sup>35</sup>

[...] joined the Royal Navy in 1904 and in 1914 was appointed band sergeant, becoming the C-in-C bandmaster in 1920 on the battleships, serving under various admirals. During his service in the Royal Navy, Bellizzi conducted in front of many distinguished personalities, including the Prince of Wales, King Alfonso of Spain, the Duke of York (later known as King George

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> 'The Malta Police Band in the 1920s', *Times of Malta, Police force reform and appointments till Independence Malta Police Force set up 200 years ago – Part 2*, Eddie Attard, 13 July 2014, <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20140713/life-features/Police-force-reform-and-appointments-till-Independence.527693> - [Accessed 2 October 2015].

<sup>34</sup> The Malta Police Band, <http://www.police.gov.mt/en-us/mpoliceband.aspx> - [Accessed 15 July 2013].

<sup>35</sup> Schiavone, *Dictionary of Maltese Biographies*, Vol. I, 194.



VI), and Princess Elizabeth, the future Queen Elizabeth II. Bellizzi was also the first conductor of the Melita Band Msida, and was assistant conductor of La Valette Band.<sup>36</sup>



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Under Admiral Sir William Wordsworth Fisher GCB, GCVO (1875-1937)<sup>37</sup> - in office between 1932 and 1936 - the Royal Marines were trained for professional performances. Admiral Fischer decided to keep the very few musicians who were employed on the battleships that were engaged to perform with the C-in-C orchestra, which was transferred to the Admiralty House (now known as the National Museum of Fine Arts),<sup>38</sup> on South Street. Recorded in the history of the orchestra's life were the numerous attempts to discard it:

when Admiral Sir William Fisher was C-in-C in 1935, [...] the strength of the orchestra was reduced from 24 to 16. That was the time when the order to disband the orchestra was definite. Sir William refused to bow to Admiralty suggestions. Eventually the order was revoked and, much to the relief of the Maltese musicians, the orchestra was retained. It has remained the only professional orchestra on the island.<sup>39</sup>

Fisher developed a great affection for Malta where a street is named after him (Fisher Road).<sup>40</sup> During his four years as admiral he enhanced the orchestra by employing new musicians in the C-in-C orchestra.

Before and after the outbreak of the Second World War, the C-in-C orchestra, which comprised around 18 musicians, entertained guests during dinner and cocktail parties at Admiralty House. A 1966 article in the *Times of Malta* notes that the C-in-C's Orchestra was:

a civilian organisation the cost of which is covered by the Ministry of Defence. The members wear a Petty Officer's uniform on special occasions, such as dinner parties given by the Commander-in-Chief. It costs £3,000 annually to be kept.<sup>41</sup>

The orchestra was divided into the four standard orchestral sections, including a saxophone and timpani. In addition, the C-in-C Orchestra also indulged in performing classic music, as well as British compositions. In addition, the orchestra also participated in various programmes arranged by the British Institute. It is difficult to glean the standard of the orchestra due to a dearth of reviews or eyewitness accounts in the archives, but according to an unknown *Times of Malta* correspondent, the C-in-C orchestra, under the baton of Maestro Bellizzi put on 'an entertaining concert' on 20 February 1948. They felt, however, that Carmelo

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> H. G. Thursfield, *Fisher, Sir William Wordsworth (1875-1937)*, rev. Marc Brodie, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online ed., Jan 2012 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33147>, [Accessed July 2013].

<sup>38</sup> Admiralty House in Valletta, Malta

<sup>39</sup> 'The Future of the C-in-C's Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 2 September 1966, 7.

<sup>40</sup> After his appointment as full admiral of the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Fleet on 31 October 1932 Admiral

<sup>41</sup> 'The Future of the C-in-C's Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 2 September 1966, 7.

Pace's Tone Poem *Bernardette*, which received its premiere at this concert, needed 'a full orchestra [to] render full justice to the work', and furthermore, that in John Ireland's Prelude *The Forgotten Right*, the orchestra 'did not fully master the technique of this composition and was definitely not at its best.' The concert ended with a work written by the British light music composer Eric Coates, *The Three Elizabeths*.<sup>42</sup>

Between 1950 and 1952, Bellizzi was succeeded by Abeli Calleja from Floriana after retiring from his post as bandmaster. When Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten, Earl Mountbatten of Burma (1900-1979, known as Lord Mountbatten), was appointed Admiral of the Commander in Chief Mediterranean Fleet after Admiral Sir John H. Edelsten GCB GCVO CBE (1891-1966),<sup>43</sup> the orchestra found itself without a resident bandmaster. Among the candidates who participated in the auditions were: Edgar Lowell, first clarinetist in the C-in-C orchestra; leader of the violin section, Emanuel Falzon; and Joseph Sammut, a bassoonist and the youngest member of the orchestra.

A three-month period of study leave was awarded, during which each participant was told to become proficient in composition, sight-reading and conducting. Assessed by the Fleet bandmaster Summers, of the Royal Marines, the auditions consisted of a short selection taken from the opera *Rigoletto*<sup>44</sup> including a sight-reading test at the piano playing from orchestral scores. Sammut was the only candidate who succeeded in the auditions and was appointed bandmaster in 1952. He is now considered Malta's leading post-war orchestral conductor.

Maestro Sammut, had always wanted to be a musician<sup>45</sup>, and was heavily influenced in this decision by his father Vincenzo Sammut, first bassoonist with the Royal Opera House and a cellist with the Commander-in-Chief's orchestra, and also his uncle Joseph Sammut, a first bassoonist with the C-in-C.

During Admiral's Mountbatten's term in office, Sammut furthered his studies abroad. Between 1952 and 1968, as resident conductor of the Commander-in-Chief's orchestra, he was able to obtain a British Council scholarship in London, where in 1952 he had six months' private tuition with the eminent conductor Sir Malcolm Sargent (1895-1967). This was later followed by a further period of study of six months in 1954. In 1960, Sammut obtained another scholarship to further his specialisation in British music with conductor, composer and pianist Dr Robert Clarence Raybould (1886-1972).<sup>46</sup>

Sammut was indebted to Ethel Farrugia for one of his scholarships, which came after Farrugia had seen the former conducting in the Phoenicia Hotel ballroom in Malta. In his role as secretary of the British Council in Malta, Farrugia asked Sammut whether he was interested in taking up a six-month scholarship, on condition that he conducted two concerts annually for the British Council. Situated at the Auberge d'Aragon,<sup>47</sup> the performances consisted of symphonic concerts, and included musicians from the Royal Marines, the Commander-in-Chief orchestra and other Maltese musicians employed as part-timers. Sammut praised the British Council for their efforts to promote classical music in Malta.<sup>48</sup>

The first full-scale symphonic orchestra in Malta was established by Maestro Paul Nani (1906-1986) in 1939, and was known as the Malta Symphony Orchestra. Nani opened a music studio in 1936, where over two hundred musicians received training. The symphony orchestra, comprising around seventy musicians were mostly from this particular music studio. Most of the concerts put Classical and Romantic repertoires into the programme, including composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Elgar. According to an article from February 1951 in the *Times of Malta*,<sup>49</sup> Nani noted that:

The Malta Symphony Orchestra could eventually be augmented; but one has to keep within the limits of financial possibilities as our public is yet not fully accustomed to orchestral works.

Nani criticized the shortage of certain orchestral instruments, such as the harp, which he said restricted the choice of scores he could use. However, he contradicted himself when he noted that 'as no harp is available

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'Concert at B.I., Maestro Pace's 'Bernardette', *Times of Malta*, 24 February 1948, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Eric J. Grove, *Edelsten, Sir John Hereward (1891-1966)* (Oxford, 2004), online ed., Jan 2008.

<sup>44</sup> The audition took approximately 10 minutes.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Future of the C-in-C's orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 2 September 1966, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Raybould was an English conductor, pianist and composer who conducted works ranging from musical comedy, operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan, and the standard classical repertoire. He also championed works by contemporary, particularly British, composers.

<sup>47</sup> 'Situated in Independence Square, this is the oldest of the seven Auberges built by Girolamo Cassar, and one of only two which have survived in their original condition. Though externally plain, it contains fine Renaissance rooms. The building also housed the Prime Minister's residence and still contains the historic table on which Malta's independence was drafted out.'

<sup>48</sup> 'The Future of the C-in-C's Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 2 September 1966, 7.

<sup>49</sup> 'Malta Symphony Orchestra "Profile of Maltese Musicians," *Times of Malta*, 2 March 1951, 9.



then you cannot have a symphony orchestra. Ninety per cent of the symphonies have no part of the harp.' Although Nani's orchestra was not backed financially by the government, he was grateful for the support of the British Council, as without them 'most probably Malta today would have no symphony orchestra.'

A few days after Nani's article appeared on the *Times of Malta*, Geoffrey Tankard, a Professor of the Royal College of Music, London, wrote to the same paper to argue that local correspondents in Malta seem to define their desire for a symphony orchestra in terms of the numbers of players, where in actual fact, 'no such definition can be given. It is a question of finance, expediency, taste or modesty.'<sup>50</sup> He claimed that in England there are many orchestral societies of no more than fifty musicians, but to do justice to important symphonic works:

no less than 75 players are necessary, each a picked man, the leaders being artists in their own right. For festival occasions orchestras of 100 are not uncommon. The Royal Opera, Covent Garden, has about 75 players, but for an opera like *Salomé*, this is increased still further.<sup>51</sup>

Tankard wrote that a committee should be established, which should include a patron/president, chairman, honorary treasurer, secretary and about twelve members, four of whom are players of the orchestra. Tankard further states that the conductor should 'devote his talents purely to musical work leaving the committee all responsibility for finance, and practical arrangements.'<sup>52</sup>

In fact, an orchestra of some considerable size was amassed on Malta for a concert of operatic and light music in February 1953, combining members of the Orchestra of the Mediterranean Fleet, the third Commando Brigade and the Orchestra of the Commander-in-Chief, under the direction of Commissioned Bandmaster Ough, LRAM., RM. According to a review in the *Times of Malta*, the concert 'exceeded all expectations with an extremely agreeable repertoire'.<sup>53</sup> Paul Mallia, a music critic argued in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, that Malta needed to establish a permanent symphonic and operatic orchestra and a permanent chorus along the lines of those abroad, and that the lack of professional and well-trained musicians on the island was a problem that needed addressing. Accordingly, as the operatic season opened between 6 and 25 January 1955, Mallia wrote of his concerns that

the standard of the orchestra throughout the opera season was generally low and, except on very rare occasions, gave signs of being under-rehearsed, while the chorus was rough and untrained. This lack of training could not but affect the Director's own interpretation of the score; it could, indeed, be one of the reasons why, at times, the interpretation appears heavy and lacking in finesse.<sup>54</sup>

Along similar lines, Michael Kissaun commented in a 1957 article in the *Times of Malta* on the necessity of creating a permanent national orchestra made up of Maltese instrumentalists.<sup>55</sup> Kissaun suggested in his article that the Rediffusion and Film Reuters could make a financial contribution, in return for a percentage on takings from films and live entertainment.<sup>56</sup> With the support of the British Council, the Arts Council and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, the orchestra would be able to tour foreign countries, introducing English and Maltese music, thus promoting Maltese culture abroad, through a medium which 'appeals to all human beings irrespective of colour and creed.'<sup>57</sup>

Although the Malta Symphony Orchestra did not survive for very long, and the C-in-C orchestra was diminishing in numbers, Admiral Sir John (Graham) Hamilton GBE CB (1910–1994), who served as the last admiral of the British Fleet in Malta, decided that the island required its own national orchestra. As the majority of the musicians were Maltese, the first official orchestra known as the Manoel Theatre Orchestra was instigated on 1 April 1968, with Maestro Joseph Sammut as resident conductor. According to an article by a staff reporter on the *Times of Malta*, the orchestra members were:

Band Corporal Carmelo Abela of Birkarkara (Pianist and Viola),  
and bandsmen Mr. Anthony Galea (Horn),

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<sup>50</sup> 'When is a Symphony Orchestra Not a Symphony Orchestra?', *Times of Malta*, 28 March 1951, 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> 'Combined Orchestras at Manoel Theatre', *Times of Malta*, 23 February 1953, 8.

<sup>54</sup> 'The Need of a Permanent Symphonic Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 6 March 1955, 12.

<sup>55</sup> 'The Manoel Theatre – Permanent National Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 7 March 1957, 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Mr. Joe Agius of Valletta (Trumpet),  
Mr. Joe Briffa of Birkarkara (1<sup>st</sup> Clarinet),  
Mr. Joseph Busuttill of Zurrieq (Oboe),  
Mr. Joseph Curmi of Valletta (Percussion),  
Mr. Joe Galea of Birkarkara (1<sup>st</sup> Violin),  
Mr. Manuel Micallef of Sliema (1<sup>st</sup> Violin),<sup>58</sup>  
Mr. Romeo Micallef of Kospikwa (Flute),  
Mr. Victor Miggiani of Valletta (Double Bass),  
Mr. Carmelo Schembri of Hamrun (2<sup>nd</sup> Clarinet),  
Mr. Clement Sciberras of Birkarkara (Trombone),  
Mr. George Spiteri of Valletta (1<sup>st</sup> Violin),  
Mr. Lawrence Bellizzi of Valletta (2<sup>nd</sup> Violin)  
Mr. Arthur Pace of Sliema (Viola)  
Mr. Joseph Galea of Sliema (1<sup>st</sup> Violin)<sup>59</sup>  
Mr. Alfred Tonna of Floriana (Violoncello), and  
Mr. Alfonso Vella of Hamrun (1<sup>st</sup> Violin).

When interviewed, Sammut commented that the orchestra was rather ‘lopsided’ for the simple reason that there was no horn player, and thus, the orchestra was reduced to fifteen members. When asked whether the C-in-C’s orchestra would be a suitable core group from which to form a National Orchestra. Sammut remarked that the orchestra would be excellent for this purpose. Sammut further added though that if a national orchestra were to be formed, it would have to contain 60 musicians. He remarked that there was a great need for more string players.<sup>60</sup>

The Manoel Theatre Orchestra’s first rehearsals were held on stage at the Manoel Theatre. It comprised of around sixty-five full- and part-time musicians, including the sixteen members from the C-in-C orchestra. To what came to be known as the Manoel Theatre Orchestra, Sammut remained chief conductor until 1993, when Prof. Michael Laus (b.1960) took over, remaining in charge until 1997. Obtaining the position of Chairman of the National Orchestra between 1999 and 2003, Laus was appointed Musical Director of the National Orchestra in 2003, today the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra.

After the commencement of the Manoel Theatre Orchestra in 1968, the orchestra produced orchestral works during their performances. As the orchestra had a mixture of part-time and semi-professional musicians, they were reluctant to produce large-scale symphonic works due to the sheer scale and professionalism needed. The majority of the musicians had not undergone formal professional training in a conservatoire or college. Instead they had acquired their knowledge and expertise by performing with the orchestra over the years. Such musicians were selected by Sammut himself, who valued the musicianship developed by playing regularly in the orchestra. This is confirmed by Emmanuel Spagnol, a former horn player who performed regularly with the orchestra for thirty-two years, and Godfrey Mifsud, a relative newcomer and a professional concert clarinettist, who was engaged with the orchestra since 1993.<sup>61</sup>

Subsequently the orchestra programmed a variety of orchestral works, including small-scale symphonic works (such as those by Vivaldi, Haydn Beethoven and Mozart) and piano concertos of the classical and late-romantic style such as Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1, which they performed with the Maltese pianist Cynthia Turner (b.1932).<sup>62</sup> They also performed 20<sup>th</sup>-century works, such as *Five Dances from Checkmate* (1937), a suite taken from a one-act ballet by Sir Arthur Bliss (1891-1975). He conducted this work on 29 September 1967 at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta, at a concert which also inaugurated the theatre’s concert piano. During this concert Maestro Sammut conducted Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 4, with Dennis Matthews as the

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<sup>58</sup> After Manuel Micallef ended his term, George Spiteri was next as the first violinist.

<sup>59</sup> When Joseph Galea ended his term, Alfonso Galea was employed with the first violinists.

<sup>60</sup> ‘The Future of the C-in-C’s Orchestra’, *Times of Malta*, 2 September 1966, 7.

<sup>61</sup> A questionnaire was sent to Emmanuel Spagnol and Godfrey Mifsud and was received on 8 March and 6 April 2015 respectively.

<sup>62</sup> Schiavone, 1552-1553. Cynthia Turner is a well-known concert pianist and recitalist in Malta who has participated in various concerts in Italy, France, Germany, and Egypt. After obtaining the Licentiate of both the Royal Academy and Royal Schools of Music, Turner continued her studies in Germany under Horbowky in Stuttgart, where she was a finalist at the Bayreuth and Munich piano competitions. She studied in Rome under Carlo Zecchi, and under Francis Poulenc in Paris, who highlighted the score of his piano concerto with interpretative annotations for her. Turner later performed this work for Queen Elizabeth II at the Manoel Theatre in 1967. Apart from being a Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Palmes Academiques, Turner was made member of the National Order of Merit (MOM) in Malta.

soloist.<sup>63</sup> In a curtain speech, Sir Arthur Bliss praised the orchestra's players and their conductor. Sir Bliss also stressed that the standard of their performance was extremely high considering that they were not all professional players and that he was 'grateful for what they are doing for the art of music.' He also commented that the island was in desperate need of a National Orchestra.<sup>64</sup>

Over the years that followed, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the orchestra has undergone a complete transformation, both in terms of its administrative structure, the musicians and their training, and their repertoire. According to Godfrey Mifsud, by the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, musicians were only employed after their performance and musicianship were thoroughly scrutinised. They had to undertake an extremely challenging selection process, in order to fit more easily into their section and produce a homogenous sound.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, musicians recruited more recently have all undergone proper instrumental and orchestral training at music conservatoires or universities, under professional tutelage from world-renowned performers and tutors.

During the past two decades, since Malta joined the EU, it has been obliged to open posts to musicians from other EU member countries. Both Spagnol and Mifsud remark that as a result they have seen a positive change in the attitudes of the orchestra's musicians. As it stands today, the orchestra is staffed by professional musicians, who easily adapt to various repertoires. In addition, the orchestral sound has seen quite a drastic improvement to its overall balance, blending and intonation. Musicians are more aware of the sound of each section, and how this affects particular orchestral compositions – especially works produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In contrast to foreign orchestras, which often have musicians engaged on a rotational basis, the members of the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra strive to perform weekly, thus giving themselves a heavier workload than their European counterparts.

By the end of the twentieth century, the orchestra had already become an independent body and was officially named the National Orchestra of Malta (in September 1997). Two months after its inauguration, it was given permission to start the process of augmenting its complement of musicians to Philharmonic standards. The fully-fledged orchestra was launched on 12 January 2008 as the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra on the occasion of the official Euro change-over celebration concert marking Malta's entry into the Eurozone.

In the years that followed its birth, the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) continued to grow in size and professionalism. The orchestra has established a series of concert events (open-air classical concerts and a chamber music series), which not only promote the younger generation of composers in Malta, but also programme music ranging from the Baroque period to the twentieth century. In 2001-2 the MPO toured Belgium for the first time, and performed at the City Hall in Brussels under the direction of Michael Laus. In the same season, the orchestra toured Sicily 'in collaboration with the Teatru Manoel (Malta) and Operalaboratorio of Palermo, where the orchestra took part in a five-performance production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at Teatro Orione.'<sup>66</sup> In June 2003, 'the National Orchestra participated in the production of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* at Rome's Teatro Argentina, followed by a concert in the evocative ruins of Villa Adriana in Tivoli.'

Subsequently, in August 2006, members of the MPO string section joined the Brno Philharmonic Orchestra through the EU's Leonardo Mobility Project, 'which enabled a number of our string musicians to join one of the world's top orchestras in workshops and two concerts held at the Spilberk 2006 Festival in Brno, Czech Republic, under the direction of Petr Altrichter and Leos Svarovsky respectively.'<sup>67</sup> The following year the MPO joined the Orchestra Sinfonica di Pesario for two concerts at the Mediterranean Conference Centre, Valletta in Malta and the Teatro Gioacchino Rossini in Pesaro, Italy, under the direction of Paolo Ponziano Ciardi and Michael Laus respectively. In March 2008, the MPO '[...] performed Rossini's *La Cenerentola* on two consecutive nights with great success at the Palazzo dei Congressi in Lugano, Switzerland'.<sup>68</sup>

Among the many distinguished conductors and soloists who have performed with the Orchestra one can mention Peter Stark, Charles Olivieri-Munroe, Paolo Ponziano Ciardi, Rene Clement, Brian Schembri, Eugene Kohn, Jonathan Butcher, Alexander Rudin, Sergei Glavatsky, David Campbell, Roberto Cominati, Andrea Griminelli, Igor Ardasev, Carmine Lauri, Lukas Vondracek, Mats Rondin, Cecilia Gasdia, Ghena Dimitrova, Miriam Gauci, Joseph Calleja, Andrea Bocelli, Jose` Carreras, Kate Aldrich, Daniela Dessi, Fabio Armiliato and the Royal Choral Society of London.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> 'Sir Arthur pleads for a National Orchestra', *Times of Malta*, 3 October 1967, 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> A questionnaire was submitted by Godfrey Mifsud on 6 April 2015.

<sup>66</sup> The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra - <http://www.maltaorchestra.com/the-orchestra/> - [Accessed 5 September 2013].

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Since it started to engage European musicians from outside Malta the orchestra has become more vibrant and performed a new repertoire under various renowned conductors. Works by Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Adams, Reich, Bruckner and Mahler are currently performed on a regular basis throughout the year. However, tackling such repertoires requires a large number of musicians, especially in the strings section; thus, part-time Maltese musicians are brought in to help the orchestra create a fuller sound. Over the years, many conductors have visited the orchestra, and most have returned to take part in additional concerts. According to the clarinettist Mifsud, thanks to this exchange of ideas and musical visions, the orchestra continually develops its musical knowledge and learns through experience. This rotation of visiting conductors also helps to keep the musicians motivated and musically challenged for whatever repertoire they might have to tackle next.<sup>70</sup>

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the orchestra provided a platform for the younger generation 'to gain first-hand experience playing in an orchestra and, more importantly, to participate in the joy of ensemble music-making'.<sup>71</sup> The Malta Youth Orchestra made its first public appearance in December 2004 during a concert held at the President's Palace in Valletta under the direction of Michael Laus. After a period of a few years where the orchestra was not publically performing, the MYO was revived, and on 27 April 2011 performed at Sir Temi Zammit Hall at the University of Malta, under the direction of its current artistic director and conductor Professor Joseph Vella, meeting on a regular basis every Saturday morning at Robert Samut Hall.<sup>72</sup> The MYO frequently engages in various classical concerts, including a special Maltese event called 'Notte Bianca, Christmas concerts organised by the Ministry of Finance, a themed Battle Music concert specifically designed for the Ziguzajg Kids and Youth Arts Festival, and the highly successful MPO and MYO in Concert at Pjazza San Gorg, Valletta'.<sup>73</sup>

Apart from the MYO, the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra organises educational performances for the Ziguzajg Arts Festival for Children and Young People. The aim is to bring the orchestra and its music to the widest possible audience by interacting with the younger generation, performing for children of different ages and involving them in creative talks and workshops.

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<sup>70</sup> A questionnaire was submitted by Godfrey Mifsud on 6 April 2015.

<sup>71</sup> The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra - <http://www.maltaorchestra.com/the-orchestra/> - [Accessed 5 September 2013].

<sup>72</sup> Robert Samut Hall is a Neo-Gothic building, completed in 1883, which was originally the Floriana Wesleyan Methodist Church house of Protestant worship. In 1975, the building came under the control of the Maltese government and was inaugurated as a centre for cultural activities.

<sup>73</sup> The Malta Philharmonic Orchestra - <http://www.maltaorchestra.com/the-orchestra/> - [Accessed 5 September 2013].