



Façade of the Teatro Pubblico, detail (Cabreo Vilhena, Courtesy National Library of Malta)

Italian Opera Singers in Malta in the middle of the eighteenth century

Simon Mercieca adds important information to the fairly little known so far regarding theatre in 18th century Malta

In his pioneering work on the history of the Manoel Theatre, Paul Xuereb brings out the difficulties that any researcher who intends to study the early history of secular music in Malta, in particular opera, will have to face. “Unfortunately, little information is extant about the Italian players or their production, for apart from the absence of the theatre archives, reviews or notices of plays very rarely appeared in contemporary newspapers, unless they were productions for charity”.¹ Research difficulties increase for the period under study since no newspaper existed.

This essay should be considered as a work-in-progress paper aimed at shedding new light on some of the opera singers at the Manoel Theatre in the 1760s. In fact, the scope is to share, with the reader, the preliminary results of an extensive research that is being carried out in Malta and Italy on the presence of Italian singers in Malta.

In Italy, these studies find in Prof. Luisa Cosi, the person responsible for the course of *Musicologia e Beni Musicali* at the University of Salento (Lecce), the key player behind this research. Thanks to a number of studies already undertaken by

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Façade of the Teatro Pubblico (Cabreo Vilbena, Courtesy National Library of Malta)

local scholars, we know of a number of Maltese who went abroad to study music during this period. Naples was one of the most important European cities for the study of music at the time. So important was music in Naples that it had four active music conservatories.

It is a known fact that Malta attracted a number of foreign singers, composers and musicians during this period, but very little information has been forthcoming. Alexander Bonnici in the third volume of his work on the Inquisition in Malta refers to the engagement of foreign artists during the 1750s. In 1752, the Teatro Pubblico,



as the Manoel Theatre was known at the time, had as impresario a Hospitaller knight by the name of Carafa. In that year, Carafa brought over a Flemish dancer to Malta to give performances during Christmas time. The resident inquisitor in Malta at the time, Paolo Passionei, reports that Carafa was planning to bring over to Malta more foreign dancers to give choreographic shows at the Manoel Theatre during carnival time in 1753.²

Such anecdotes corroborate other information already published³, and to which I shall return in this paper, that theatre impresarios were bringing foreign artists to Malta during this period.

Thanks to the endeavours of Luisa Cosi and the collaboration that has been established with the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta, a few new names of the artists in the music field have been revealed. Three important Italian musicians who worked in Malta during this period were Michele Mazziotti, Vincenzo Anfossi and Pasquale de Santis. Whilst the connection of the last two with the local music field is relatively known, that of Michele Mazziotti breaks new ground. Definitely, he was one of the most important singers to be attracted to Malta in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Michele Mazziotti

The musical career of Michele Mazziotti is the subject of research by Ricardo Baptista Fernandes. Michele Mazziotti was an important Italian tenor from Salento who was born in Apulia (Taranto) around the 1730s. During this period Taranto was a province of Lecce, or, as it was then known *Terra d'Otranto*. Attracted to Malta by the music opportunities that existed at the time, he moved to the island, settled in Valletta, and took up residence in the parish of Porto Salvo. Mazziotti's presence in this parish is linked to his profession as singer at the Manoel Theatre as

Niccolò Piccinni (1728-1800). Pasquale de Santis performed at the Teatro Pubblico in three of his comic operas: *Le Donne Dispettose*, *Le Gelosie* and *Il Curioso del suo Proprio Danno*



well as at the Conventual Church of Saint John.

Michele Mazziotti married a Maltese lady, Theresa, daughter of Balthasar and Anna Grech. The marriage took place at the parish church of Porto Salvo in Valletta on 15 June 1763. The Marriage Acts specify that Michele was the son of Xaverio and Fortunata.⁴ In Malta, Michele had one daughter, Elisabetta who was baptised at the parish church of Porto Salvo on 27 August 1765. Her full name was Elisabetta, Fortunata, Augustina, Baptistina, Rosaria, Aloysia. One of her godparents was Petrus Paulus Dorell.⁵ Existing historical information shows that the Dorell family patronised the arts, in particular music, during this period. The other godparent was Theresa's sister. The officiating priest was the parish priest, the Dominican friar Santos Grech. This is the sole baptism recorded at Porto Salvo concerning Mazziotti. Presumably the couple left the island sometime after the birth of their first born, Elisabeth.

More information about Mazziotti's early childhood and education is to be found in his *Status Liberi*, an ecclesiastical document concerning foreigners and locals who wished to marry in Malta after having spent some time abroad. Mazziotti presented his application to be granted permission to get married in Malta at the Bishop's Palace, in Valletta, on 8 November 1763. As was the case with most foreigners, he lacked the necessary ecclesiastical documents attesting that he was single. He requested to be exempted from producing such documentary evidence. But in so doing, he had to go through a court procedure which meant he had to testify and also present witnesses to attest to his status of being single. Mazziotti's case has survived.

His testimony was given on the same date when he made his deposition, wherein he stated to being 24 years old, and the natural and legitimate son of Xaverius Mazziotti and Fortunata who originally hailed from the city of Taranto. He further stated that when he was two

years old, his parents moved to Naples. He spent his boyhood and early adulthood in Naples until June 1763 when he left for Malta on the Neapolitan felucca, owned and captained by Padron Gennaro, arriving in Malta after 8 days at sea. Michele presented two witnesses, Vincenzo Anfossi and Pasquale de Santis, who were also musicians and to whom I shall be returning shortly.⁶

All the witnesses brought by Michael testified in his favour stating that he was a practising Catholic and the son of Catholic parents. Anfossi signed his testimony and gave his name in full.

Around 1766/67, Mazziotti returned to Naples with his family, and immediately got involved in the music world there, becoming one of the most acclaimed singers invited to sing in the major cities of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

In 1759, the city of Lecce inaugurated its new theatre, aptly naming it the Teatro Nuovo, and in 1769, contracted Mazziotti's services.⁷ In 1775, Michele Mazziotti, together with counter-tenor Luca Manna and bass Luigi Bianchini, left Naples for Portugal. The Royal Theatre of Lisbon was then seeking to engage Italian opera singers for its productions. Luca Manna was also one of the singers engaged by Lecce's Teatro Nuovo between 1768 and 1770.

Mazziotti went to Lisbon accompanied by Giacinta one of his daughters. In Lisbon, Mazziotti is recorded to have had another daughter, Francesca Rita Mazziotti, who was born around 1770 and eventually married João da Costa Cordeiro. But most importantly, Mazziotti was musically very active in Lisbon, as can be proven by the presence of his name in a score, dated 1775 and conserved at the National Library of Portugal. Eventually, Mazziotti returned home to Italy. His daughter Giacinta got married on the 16 December 1789 to another singer, Loretto Franchi, who hailed from the parish of S. Lorenzo in Salerno.

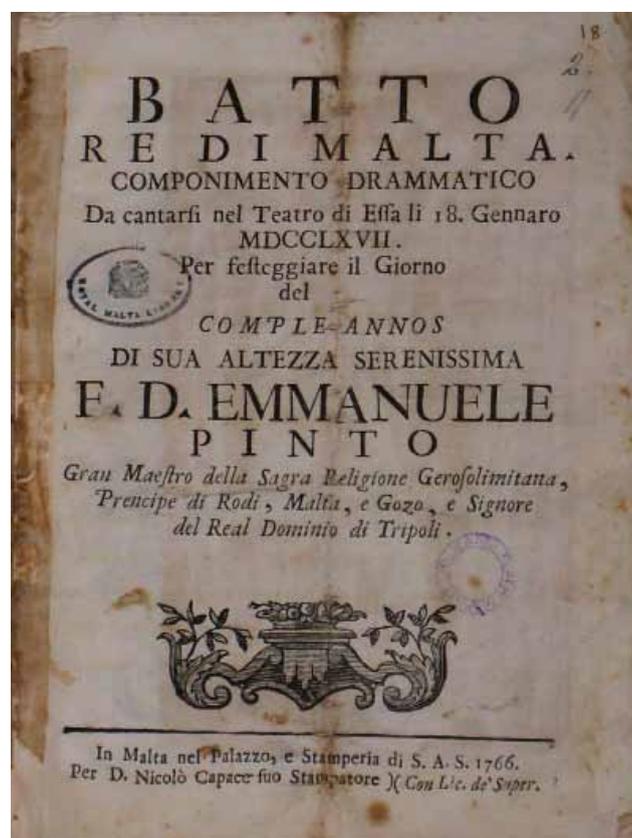
Libretto of
Vincenzo Anfossi's
opera *Batto Re di
Malta* performed
in Malta in 1766
(Courtesy National
Library of Malta)

Mazzotti's stay in Malta should be linked to the presence of Italian singers during the period 1762-63. Xuereb records that during this period "there was a professional Italian company, recorded as the *Compagnia dei Comici Lombardi*, who performed a number of works, including an intermezzo, a musical work."⁸ Moreover, Mazzotti had close contacts with a certain Balthasare Grech who appears in the records as his father-in-law.⁹ Existing records show that a certain Baldassare Grech, was a very active impresario at the time and presented, to quote Xuereb's words "a much-performed opera by a composer then of considerable fame, Baldassare Galuppi, *il Filosofo in villa*"¹⁰ There should be no doubt that this Baldassare Grech was the same Balthasare Grech whose name appears in the records of Porto Salvo as the father of Mazzotti's wife. It is thus legitimate to conclude that this contact which Grech had established with Mazzotti, helped him professionally during the seasons he sang at the Manoel Theatre.

Vincenzo Anfossi

The *Status Libero* of Michele Mazzotti gives us information about two other musicians who were working in Malta at the time. The first one was Vincenzo Anfossi. According to the information given by Anfossi himself, he was born at Naples around 1738 and his father's name was Domenico.¹¹ Anfossi's testimony can help us clarify a number of issues about this composer's life, whose music is not known at all to-day, whilst some of the published biographical details are not historically correct since in the past he was erroneously addressed to by the title "Don", which in Malta already then stood for a clergy man, and also labelled a knight of Malta.¹²

Anfossi's musical career was studied by both Paul Xuereb and Alfred Miceli. Thanks to the works of these two gentlemen, we know that Vincenzo Anfossi was very



active during this period, most probably collaborating with Baldassare Grech. Vincenzo is known to have composed an oratorio-like work in 1767, entitled *Batto, Re di Malta*. According to Alfred Miceli, it was Malta's first world premiered work.¹³ Amongst the other known operas of Vincenzo Anfossi are *La Nitteti* in 1775¹⁴ and *Ulisse in Feacia*. He was still in Malta in the early 1790s.¹⁵ The opera *Zenobia in Palmira* by Anfossi, music from which was performed at the Manoel in 1589, was in all probability not by Vincenzo but by Pasquale Anfossi, who is known to have written an opera of that name in 1789.

Vincenzo Anfossi was considered to be the brother of the famous eighteenth-century Neapolitan composer, Pasquale Anfossi (1727-1797). Perhaps this new

AVVISO TEATRALE

Venerdi 19. Novembre

IL SIG. FERDINANDO FRAENZL

Professore di Violino, e Virtuoso
di Camera di S. A. S. l'Elettore Palatino
di Baviera,

avrà l'onore di dare un'Accademia
Vocale e Instrumentale

NEL TEATRO.

I Pezzi eseguiti saranno i seguenti.

PARTE PRIMA.

- I. Una gran Sinfonia del Sig. HAYDN.
- II. Un'Aria di Soprano del Sig. TOZZI.
- III. Suonerà il Sig. FRAENZL un Concerto di Violino di sua composizione.
- IV. Un'Aria buffa del Sig. PAISIELLO.
- V. Una Sinfonia.
- VI. Un Terzetto dell'Opera: ZENOBIA IN PALMIRA del Sig. PASQUALE ANFOSSI.

PARTE SECONDA.

- I. Una Sinfonia concertante a due Violini del Signor FRAENZL: fonata da lui, e dal Sig. EMANUELE NANI.
- II. Un Recitativo e Rondò di Tenore del Sig. ANFOSSI.
- III. Una Sinfonia.
- IV. Un Rondò di Soprano del Sig. SARTI.
- V. Suonerà il Sig. FRAENZL un Concerto di Violino da lui composto.
- VI. Si terminerà con un Quartetto Serio Vocale del Sig. GUGLIELMI.

Il prezzo del Biglietto per i Signori Cavalieri, sarà di tari 12.

Per i Signori Maltesi, tari 6.

Si darà principio ad ore sei e mezza.

Bill advertising an evening of vocal and instrumental music at the Teatro Pubblico on 19th November [1790]

information may help clear the exact date relationship between the two. Based on information published in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* and *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Pasquale was born at the town of Taggia, a municipality in the province of Imperia in the Italian region of Liguria.¹⁶ However, the *Dizionario Biografico* acknowledges the existence of other sources which claim that Pasquale Anfossi was born in Naples.¹⁷ He definitely studied in this city at the Music Conservatory of Loreto. If one accepts that the two were brothers, one would be justified in favouring the idea that Pasquale was born in Naples.

As stated earlier on, Vincenzo Anfossi was one of the witnesses called by Michele Mazziotti to testify in his

favour. Like Michele, Vincenzo's reason for coming to Malta was music and he too took up residence in Valletta. He had studied music for the last fourteen years in one of Naples's conservatories and it was in connection with his studies that he came to know Michele Mazziotti who frequented a different music school. Anfossi declared that he left Naples together with Michele on the same felucca of Captain Gennaro, arriving in Malta after eight days travelling by sea.

“Conobbi il sud(dett)o Michele nella città di Napoli sin da quattordici anni con occasione ambidue imparavamo la musica in seminari separati ciò però non ostante spesso ci trattavamo e quattro mesi in circa sono ambidue partimmo da Napoli colla feluca di pardon Gennaro colla quale

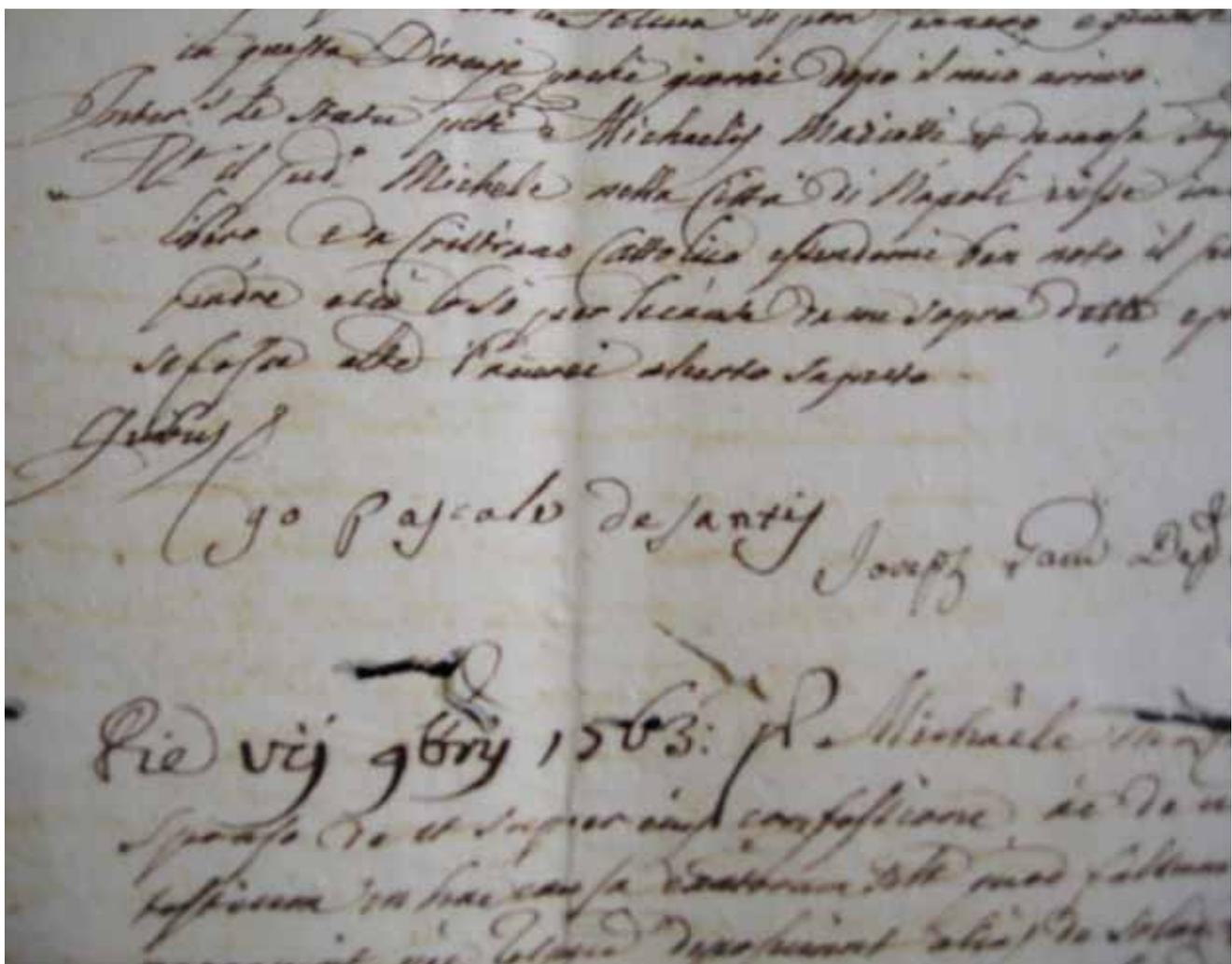
Extract from Michele
Mazziotti's *Status
Liberi* document
showing the signature
of his fellow-singer
Pasquale de Santis.

approdassimo frà lo spazio di otto giorni in questa Diocesi.”

In his attestation in favour of Mazziotti, Vincenzo declares to have been working as “*maestro di cappella di questo teatro*”. There should be no doubt that by the word *teatro*, he was referring to the Manoel Theatre which was the sole theatre in Valletta at the time. Yet how the scribe referred to him could be interpreted in two ways. The first is that the principal conductor of the Manoel Theatre was

known at the time, as *maestro di cappella*, an expression that was normally associated with the principal choir master of a church. Incidentally, this is not the sole case where Anfossi is referred to as *maestro di cappella* in relation to his work at the Manoel Theatre. A manuscript at the National Library containing operas written by Anfossi and produced at the Manoel Theatre, refers to him as *maestro di cappella*.¹⁸

The second interpretation could be that the scribe or scribes were referring to Vincenzo Anfossi's second position



as *maestro di cappella* at Saint John's Conventual church or in one of our local diocesan churches.

I tend to favour the view that this definition was not a misunderstanding on the part of the scribe who was taking down the *Status Libero* of Michele, but is actually the nomenclature by which conductors at the Manoel Theatre were referred to at the time.

In 1791, Franzl produced an opera entitled *Philoctète*. The lyrics of this opera were adapted by Charles de Saint-Priest from the work of Jean-François de Harpe. This work was produced in the presence of Grand Master De Rohan.¹⁹ It is also recorded that Anfossi composed a number of works for the Calendimaggio celebrations in 1764, 1767, 1768, 1769, 1770 and wrote a *Serenata* in 1774. Unfortunately, all this music has been lost.²⁰

Vincenzo Anfossi's musical contribution in Malta was not limited to the Manoel Theatre; his works were also played in the Conventual Church of Saint John, the principal church of the Knights of Malta. Joseph Vella Bondin explains that Vincenzo Anfossi became the principal organist at Saint John's while his assistant was the Bormla born organist, Isidoro Schembri. Unlike Mazziotti, Vincenzo decided to stay in Malta for we know that in 1791 Nicolò Isouard was employed as his assistant replacing Isidoro Schembri. Furthermore, Isouard's job description affirms that Isouard was promised "*futura successione*". Indeed Anfossi was succeeded by Nicolò Isouard who went to become a famous composer.²¹

In Malta, Vincenzo Anfossi also gave private tuition. For example, he taught Emanuele Nani (1788) counterpoint. Anfossi was engaged in other work such as occupying the post of *maestro di cappella* at the church of Saint Laurence in Birgu²² for which church he also composed music some of which has survived.²³

Pasquale de Santis

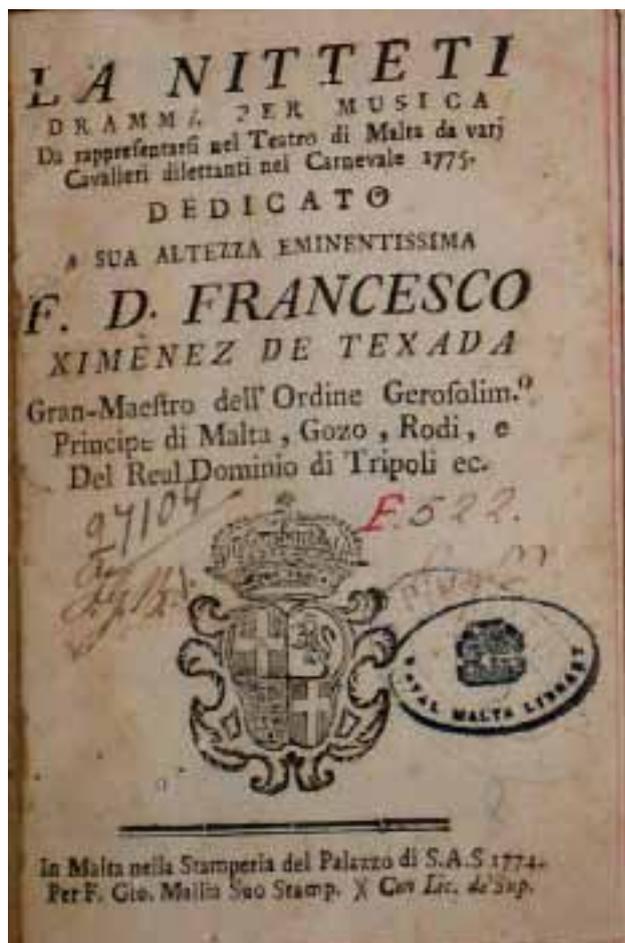
Pasquale de Santis came to Malta at the same time as Michael Mazziotti and Vincenzo Anfossi. In fact, from the *Status Libero* of Mazziotti, it clearly appears that de Santis was their friend. Pasquale de Santis was the son of the late Francesco and came from a town in the province of Cosenza in Calabria. He was 28 years old at the time and as in the case of Anfossi, he testified before the Curia advocate, Baldassare Grech.²⁴ Whilst it is a bit strange that the same name appears again in the records, most probably, this Grech was not the same Balthasare Grech whose daughter married Mazziotti.

The *Status Libero* states that de Santis was asked by Michele to take the witness stand. It was customary in those days for a witness to be warned about the penalties he would face if he gave false testimony under oath.

Under oath, de Santis declared that he was living in Valletta and was a bass singer at the Manoel Theatre. He also declared to have known Michele for a long time. Around 1749, he had moved from Bisignano, his home town, to Naples to study music. Three years later he met Michele Mazziotti who was also studying in Naples. De Santis affirms that he was at the same school of Music as Mazziotti and that both frequented the same music lessons for eleven years and four months. Eventually, they were contacted to come and work at the Manoel. De Santis left Naples on a *Speronara* 20 days before Michele Mazziotti.²⁵ His name appears with the list of singers performing at the Teatro Pubblico in the year 1764 and 1765 in operas by the Italian composer Niccolò Piccinni.²⁶ In 1764, Pasquale de Santis performed in Piccinni's *Le Donne Dispettose* while his name appears again in the following year in the same composer's operas *Le Gelosie* and *Il Curioso del suo Proprio Danno*.

At this stage one wonders whether there was any family connection with a certain Giulio De Santis, who was an impresario at the Manoel Theatre, at least during the years

Vincenzo Anfossi's *La Nitteti* received an amateur performance by the Italian knights of the Order in 1775. (Courtesy National Library of Malta).



1764, 1766 and 1767, whilst in 1765, the theatre was in the hands of Balthassare Grech. If it can be proven that this Balthassare Grech was the same Baldassare whose name appears appear as advocate of the Bishop's court, then one is faced with the same clique actively working at different professional levels.

This sort of commercial fraternity is further strengthened by the information produced by Alfred G. Miceli, who affirms that Giulio De Santis was the impresario who put on stage Vincenzo Anfossi's work, *Batto, Re di Malta*.²⁷ Was this Giulio related to Pasquale De Santis?

This short study confirms the close knit community that was created in Malta around the Manoel Theatre at the time. Artists literally dragged one another to come to Malta. They studied together at the same music conservatory

and when job opportunities arose, they travelled together and took up residence in the same locality, in this case Valletta. One hopes that this contribution, prompted by the discovery of hitherto unknown documents, has filled some of what Paul Xuereb termed as the *yawning gaps* in the history of music at the Manoel for most of the 18th century.²⁸

Notes

- 1 Paul Xuereb, *The Manoel Theatre, a Short History*, Malta, 1994, p. 57.
- 2 Alexander Bonnici, *Storja ta' l-Inkizizzjoni ta' Malta*, Vol. 3, Malta, 1994, p.183.
- 3 Xuereb: p.23.
- 4 Porto Salvo, Vol B. 13 Matrimonii (1755-1779) p. 126.
- 5 Porto Salvo, Vol. D. 22 (1754-1765), p. 493.
- 6 AOM 804, 1763, no. 142r., Michelle Mazziotti, f. 317r and f. 318r.
- 7 "I primi dieci anni di attivita' del Teatro Nuovo di Lecce. 1759-1769" (*Recercare* II/1990).
- 8 Xuereb, p.23.
- 9 Porto Salvo, Vol B. 13 Matrimonii (1755-1779) p. 126.
- 10 Xuereb, 24.
- 11 CEM AOM 804, 1763, f. 320r.
- 12 Alfred G. Miceli, *L-Istorja ta' l-Opera f'Malta (1631-1866)*, Malta, 1999, p. 13.
- 13 Ibid, p. 13.
- 14 Ibid, p. 14.
- 15 Xuereb, p. 24.
- 16 Michael F. Robinson, Mary Hunter and Marita Petzoldt MacClymonds, 'Anfossi Pasquale', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie, Second Edition, Vol. 1. 2001, 646.
- 17 *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 3, p. 183.
- 18 National Library Malta, Misc. 274.
- 19 Carmen Depasquale, "Une Littérature d'Institution: La production française de l'Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle", *Travaux de Littérature publiés par l'Adirel avec le concours du centre National du Livre*, L'Adirel 2006, p. 234.
- 20 Vella Bondin, p. 100.
- 21 G.C. A Dictionary of Music and Musicians Vol 2.djvu/36
- 22 Joseph Vella Bondin, *Il-Muzika ta' Malta sa l-A ar tas-Seklu Tmintax*, Malta, 2000 , p. 137.
- 23 G. B. Gauci Private Music Collection, Gozo, has a composition by Vincenzo Anfossi entitled *Nisi Dominus*. See Noel D'Amato "The music archives of the Gozo Cathedral" in *Guardians of Memory*, ed. Charles J. Farrugia, Malta 2008.
- 24 AOM 804, 1763, f. 321v.
- 25 Ibid. ff. 321v-322r.
- 26 Alfred G. Miceli, *L-Istorja ta' l-Opera f'Malta (1631-1866)* Pin, 1999, pp. 12-13.
- 27 Ibid, p. 13.
- 28 Xuereb, p.10,