

Hailing Malta-Bulgaria

Music relations

Lino Bianco and Andriana Yordanova

The music rapport between Malta and Bulgaria go back to the 1970s following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Various published literature and official documents relate to this theme (Borg, 2000; Fenech, 2000; Micallef Judge, 1975; Miceli, 2001; Yordanova, 2015a). The main research to date was undertaken at the National Academy of Music Prof. Pancho Vladigerov, Sofia (Yordanova, 2016).

Background

Since 1975, leading Bulgarian opera singers who performed in the Maltese islands included Boris Christoff, Raina Kabaivanska and Ghena Dimitrova (Yordanova 2015b). Prior to this date there are no available records regarding Bulgarian classical singers performing in Malta.

Over the years, particularly in the late 1980s, Maltese-Bulgarian music relationships started to blossom. The peak was between 1982 and 1987 during the term when H.E. Agatha Barbara was President of Malta. Many concerts by visiting Bulgarian artists, masterclasses in opera singing, and a week of Bulgarian culture were among the initiatives. At the end of 1980, between 24th

and 30th December, a group of Bulgarian musicians including three leading opera singers of the time namely soprano Blagovesta Karnobatlova-Dobreva, soprano Lyudmila Cheshmedzhieva and baritone Nikola Vasilev together with the Folklore Ensemble of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski were invited in Malta to present a week of Bulgarian Culture. The event was supported by the Ministry of Labour, Culture and Welfare of Malta, the Minister being Agatha Barbara.

Christoff-Kabaivanska and Dimitrova

The music rapport between Malta and Bulgaria commenced in the mid 1970s through the performance of Bulgarian bass Christoff, the



Boris Christoff during an interview on Radio Malta with Emy Scicluna (Courtesy: Emy Scicluna, Personal archive).

brother-in-law of the Italian baritone Tito Gobbi. Christoff was a prominent voice teacher and a legend of the Bulgarian and European opera scene. He is widely considered as one of the top basses in the history of opera. He is much remembered for his roles in operas: Philip II in *Don Carlo*, Padre Guardiano in *La Forza del Destino*, Boris in *Boris Godunov*, Seneca in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and a number of others. Christoff had set up at his residence in Rome the Academy for Bulgarian Culture, now known as L'Accademia d'Arte e Cultura Bulgara Boris Christoff, for future generations of Bulgarian singers to study with some of the best Italian vocal coaches including himself and improve their knowledge of the Italian language. Unfortunately his connection with Malta consisted only of one performance in 1975 when he was invited to give a song recital at the Manoel Theatre. This event was supported by the

Italian Ambassador at the time H.E. Massa Bernucci. The programme of the bass consisted of works by Franz Schubert, Leonardo Leo, Sergey Rachmaninov, Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky among others.

The next Bulgarian opera star visiting Malta and performing one of her significant roles was the soprano Kabaivanska who was at the peak of her career. She was invited by the Aurora Theatre in Gozo to perform the role of Manon in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (Miceli, 2001; Yordanova, 2016). Kabaivanska is one of the best interpreters of Verdi and Puccini. Unforgettable are her roles of Tosca, Madama Butterfly, Leonora in *Trovatore*, Nedda in *I Pagliacci* etc. At the age of 82 she is still very active and fully dedicated to the pedagogy of the young generation.

In 2000 the Maltese audiences had a chance to hear and see a live performance of another

Blagovesta Karnobatlova-Dobrevva with former Prime Minister Edward Fenech Adami and Lino Attard (Courtesy: Lino Attard, Personal archive).



unforgettable Bulgarian voice – the dramatic soprano Dimitrova. She performed one of her top roles – Laura in Ponchieli’s *La Gioconda*. The performance was a triumph. She shared the stage with another Bulgarian, a tenor – the soloist of Sofia State Opera – Rumen Doikov (Borg, 2000). Dimitrova was one of the greatest interpreters of the dramatic and demanding repertoire like Turandot in *Turandot*, Abigaille in *Nabucco*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Tosca in *Tosca*, Amelia in *Un ballo in Maschera*, Norma in *Norma* and many others (Manolova, 2016).

Karnobatlova-Dobrevva and the setting up of Opera Studio

After this cultural programme which was well received by the audience and the public in general, Karnobatlova-Dobrevva was invited to Malta on many other occasions. In addition to being an established

opera singer, she was a professor and a former Dean of the Vocal Faculty at the National Academy of Music Prof. Pancho Vladigerov. Her visits were as a performer, lecturer and teacher to voice students. Soprano Tanya Parlato Trigona, a former student of the Maltese operatic soprano Antoinette Miggiani, attended her master classes.

After a significant interest from local singers, an Opera Studio for young opera singers, a private Maltese initiative, was set up in 1989. Once again Karnobatlova-Dobrevva was brought over from Sofia as the main protagonist in the field of pedagogy in classical singing in Malta (Yordanova 2015c). This music education was at first supported by the Government of Malta but later relied on the support of Maltese benefactors notably baritone Lino Attard and Emy Scicluna, main founders of the studio. The Opera Studio remained active for some



Karnobatlova-Dobрева with Maltese friends; Dr Abraham Borg, later Malta's Ambassador to Israel, is second from right (Courtesy: Lino Attard, Personal archive).

four years. It presented many concerts with different themes in Italian, French, Russian, as well as opera productions which included Mozart's *Così fan tutte* and Rossini's *Cambiale di Matrimonio*.

Official celebrations of Cyril and Methodius in Malta

The celebration of the feast of Cyril and Methodius, the apostles of culture and education, started to be hosted by the President of Malta H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca at the official Presidential Palace of San Anton as from 2016, the year which marked the 45th anniversary since the establishment of Malta-Bulgaria diplomatic relations (Bianco, 2016). Furthermore, the aim of celebrating these apostles of

education and culture has been to help bring together and acknowledge the existing Bulgarian diaspora in Malta. These celebrations comprised a number of events including a vocal recital. Given that the official event in Bulgaria is held as per Gregorian calendar, that is 24 May, the event in Malta is celebrated during the weekend closest to the 11 May, the day marking the saints as per the Julian calendar.

Tenor Boiko Zvetanov, one of Christoff's last and best loved students, was invited for the 2016 event. Considered the musical 'heir' of Christoff, he was for decades the leading tenor in Zurich Opera House. He is loved for his outstanding technique and top register. Among his best interpretations are Calaf in *Turandot* by Puccini, Guglielmo in

Guglielmo Tell by Rossini, Manrico in *Trovatore* by Verdi and many other leading tenor roles. This recital included Andriana Yordanova, a soprano from Varna who made Malta her second home. Since 2001 she has dedicated herself to the Maltese opera scene as a performer and as a vocal pedagogue, an area of expertise which she majored in during her studies at the National Academy Prof. Pantcho Vladigerov. The piano accompaniment was by John Galea, the Head of the Music Department at the University of Malta. Galea had extensively corroborated in the past with Karnobatlova-Dobrevva and still works closely with recording studios, colleagues and singers in Bulgaria. The programme of the evening consisted of Italian and French popular pieces. New for the audience were Bulgarian and Maltese pieces from *Lud Gydia* by Parashkev Hadzhiev, songs by Dobri Hristov, Carmelo Pace and John Galea (Bianco, 2016).

In the spirit of the continuation of this Malta-Bulgaria music legacy, the vocal recital for this year included Iwaylo Mihaylov, a soloist tenor in Plovdiv State Opera, soprano Maria-Eleonora Schembri and mezzo soprano Christine Dalli. Mihaylov, a former graduate of the National Academy of Music Prof. Pancho Vladigerov, was, and currently is, under the mentorship of the prominent Bulgarian tenor Kaludy Kaludov who performed

on a number of occasions in Malta (Yordanova, 2016). Schembri and Dalli, both students at the Johann Strauss School of Music, are respectively studying under the direction of soprano Miriam Cauchi and soprano Yordanova. Both Cauchi, a former student of Karnobatlova-Dobrevva, and Yordanova, a former student of Ilka Popova, are graduates of the same National Academy and are the living continuation of the Maltese-Bulgarian music relationship and inspiration for young singers. Both teachers are working in the field of voice pedagogy and are introducing them to the music traditions not only of the known West European countries, but also to Maltese and Bulgarian voice treasures.

The 2017 programme included the Neapolitan songs *O, sole mio* and *Mamma son tanto felice*, arias 'Recondita armonia' from *Tosca* by Puccini, 'Kuda, kuda' from *Eugene Onegin* by Tchaikovsky, 'Quando me'n vo' from *La Boheme* by Puccini and pieces by Parashkev Hadzhiev, Georgi Zlatev-Tcherkin, Alex Vella-Gregory and Joseph Vella.

Final Comment

This year's vocal recital celebrating the patrons of Bulgarian education Cyril and Methodius is a manifestation of the symbiotic development over the past decades in the sphere of



Karnobatlova-Dobrevva with Maltese students (Courtesy: Lino Attard, Personal archive).

music culture between the two countries. Furthermore, it is a commemoration, and an attempt to recall the contribution of various Maltese to make this happen. Two such personalities include Scicluna and Attard. The former played an active role in the visit of Christoff. Baritone Attard, who was the main bridge with Karnobatlova-Dobrevva.

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29. Nov. 1975

Caro Sciclunoff,

Grazie molto per la lettera
e del Suo interesse per il
disimpegno dei miei dadi
H.M. Price. Sono queste cose
visibile e non sanno guardare
nemmeno i loro interessi!

In mia parola: sono ne-
gativi per il corso della
Arte.

A fine a sua Napoli in-
vis, molto a nome della
mia corrente, gli auguri
per venturo.

Ed Arriva la bella Napoli!

Con
Giovanni Christoff

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Communication between
Christoff and Scicluna,
addressed as 'Sciclunoff'
(Courtesy: Emy Scicluna,
Personal archive).