

# Endearing recital by Joanne Camilleri

by Dr Simon Mercieca

**J**OANNE CAMILLERI recently gave a piano recital in which she successfully underpinned Baroque piano music with classical, romantic and modern pieces.

In the intimate ambience of the Music Room at St James Cavalier, she expressed the musical knowledge and training she is currently receiving at the Royal Northern College of Music of Manchester, where she is reading for her B.Mus. Honours degree. She has finished her second year of studies having, more than once, been placed first in examinations and is rightly considered by her tutors as one of their best students. She played pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Hough, Liszt and Chopin.

The recital opened with the *Prelude and Fugue in D Minor (BWV 875)* by J.S. Bach. Joanne Camilleri successfully brought out the 'virtuoso' elements of this prelude and the polyphony of the intertwining voices of the fugue. The clavier resounded the sparkling prelude at the articulated touch of the pianist's fingers as they sought to bring out the searching character of the work.

Beethoven's *Sonata in C Minor, Op. 13, "Pathétique"* was perhaps the most popular piece of the evening. This is one of Beethoven's earliest masterpieces containing revolutionary elements evident from the first notes of the solemn introduction. It is a ceaselessly edifying piece of piano music.

The next piece was new to most of those present and was, very probably, a Maltese premiere. Written by the British composer S. Hough about two years ago, it is a work intended to test the dexterity and virtuosity of the pianist and is rightly called *Etude de Concert (La Russe)*. It is a demanding piece; the numerous semiquavers make the nimble fingers of any pianist quake on the keyboard.

The last three pieces were all romantic in nature. The first was Liszt's *Concert Study in F Minor (La Leggerezza)*, which is a popular piece with debuting pianists playing in a public concert. In this piece, Liszt has left a great imprint of his character. Its flowing melody and rhythm aim to seduce the listeners and leave them yearning for more. The heightened passion of the piece is reached when the melody, played by the left hand, is accompanied by a series of descending chromatic scales in thirds by the right hand. Joanne Camilleri's execution of this passage commanded a spontaneous applause.

The next two compositions were by Chopin: *Berceuse in D flat Major, Op. 39* and *Scherzo in B Minor, Op. 20*. The first work was the only piece of the evening that conveyed a sense of calm. For six minutes, we were taken back in years, to a childhood experience when our mothers used to sing us a lullaby, as the ears were tuned to the sweet and ornamental melody of a cradle song.

The last work contrasted with the



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relaxing notes of Chopin's lullaby. After having taken the audience on a trip of childhood memories, Joanne Camilleri sought to bring them back to reality using the music of the same composer. Chopin's *Scherzo in B Minor* oscillates from electrifying notes to the gentle touch of a Polish Christmas carol. It was as if Joanne did not want her listeners to be totally weaned from childhood tranquillity.

This piece seems to have been composed after the Polish uprising against Russian domination, when the flame of 1830s revolts spread all over Central Europe. The forceful character would soon take over after the short interlude of the Polish character, and the work closed, as it had opened, with a dramatic coda.

It was unfortunate that this virtuoso pianist failed to grab the continuous applause of the audience at the end of the concert for an encore. It is also a pity that St James Cavalier fails to offer backstage facilities for musicians. I saw the pianist trying to find a place where to relax before the recital and especially during the interval.

**T**his piano recital was not Joanne Camilleri's first public performance and it was heartening to see that, despite the lack of publicity, the concert succeeded in attracting a high-quality audience. Besides giving concerts in Manchester and other towns in England, in April, she gave another impeccable performance at the Sala Isouard of the Manoel Theatre. On that occasion, music was mixed with culture as it was combined with a talk by Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith.

Despite her youth (Joanne is still 20), she can be described as a "veteran" in Maltese public concerts, as at 13, she participated in a public concert at the Manoel (with Ann Rachlin) to play music by Mozart. Three years ago, she was again a guest of the Manoel Theatre in a recital of 20th century music with Vladimir Ovchinnikov.

I wish Joanne success in her studies and hope that the Maltese public will have other occasions to hear her professional interpretation and sensitive execution of piano music.

# Caravaggio reborn

**T**HE play-writing contest organised by the Department of Culture was conceived with the aim of encouraging Maltese writers to produce worthy plays in their native language. The need was felt because, unlike poetry, which was boosted by an upsurge of young poets in the post-independence decade, Maltese drama remained distinctly lacking in its output throughout the years.

Apart from Francis Ebejer, the one shining light whose name has been chosen as the inspiration for the contest, and to a lesser extent Oreste Calleja and Alfred Sant, no other playwright has had a major impact on the Maltese theatre.

The five editions of the contest, held over the last ten years, yielded some interesting scripts, signed by names already well-known in drama circles. Last year's winning entry, *HAJJA MILL-ĠDID* (produced last week by *Talenti* for the Department of Culture at the Greek Theatre, Ta' Qali), is among the best. Its author, Anthony Portelli, has had varying degrees of success with other scripts, most notable among them being the controversial *Il-Borg Pisani* which made a hit at the Manoel some years ago.

*Hajja mill-Ġdid* runs on two parallel tracks. The main plot takes us to Rio, where Miguel and Josè, two young men born and bred in the favelas, beg and steal for their survival. Josè, a transvestite, is happy to earn his daily ration, but Miguel is out to seek his fortune. He joins the henchmen of Senhor Carlos, a ruthless drug

lord, and introduces his girl Juanita to him. Both Miguel and Juanita become the "property" of Senhor Carlos. What promised to be a future of riches and luxury turns into a tale of jealousy, betrayal and death.

On its second track the play shows us Caravaggio, from his miserable beginnings, seeking his fame and finding it in the Papal court, and finally falling out with the Order of St John and dying at their hands.

The message I prefer to read between these parallel stories is that the poor will always be with us, and there will always be those who, with nothing to lose, stake their all to seek their fortune, often to find only more misery and despair.

But Portelli underlines a different theme. He places before us the argument of reincarnation, and asks us to believe that Miguel, the delinquent, is the reborn Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

**T**he author very shrewdly wrote an ambitious script demanding a spectacular production. The ingredients are various and are craftily, almost expertly, blended together. The Brazilian carnival, the macumba séance, the nightclub revelry, the football crowds, the street gang shootings, the Caravaggio tableaux, the Grand Masters' palace - with all these, the production calls for crowd scenes and lavish costumes, and light and sound and colour to make a feast.

Director Zep Camilleri made a success of his stadium scene by using the audience as his spectators. And he

cleverly used a vintage car entry to establish the power of Senhor Carlos. But, working with limited resources, he could not give us the whole works. He could only hint at the hedonism, the superstition, the exploitation. Still, in small doses, he ably offered all the ingredients and communicated the spirit of each scene, so that the action flowed easily to its denouement.

Ray Abdilla and Mario Micallef, on whose shoulders mostly lay the burden of making the action credible, gave worthy performances, the first as the foolhardy Miguel, who, like Faust, sold his soul to a demon, and the second as the callous Senhor Carlos, who could snap his fingers and buy the world.

Maira Muscat as Juanita was more calculating than fickle when leaving Josè for Miguel and Miguel for Carlos. Renato Dimech kept his transvestite Josè within bounds and expressed a balance between loyalty and self-preservation in his relationship with Miguel.

In the role of Caravaggio, Michael Tabone appeared undercast. His angry intonation matched that of Miguel, but there was no other evidence to confirm that one was the reincarnation of the other.

Psychological drama seems to be the favourite genre of modern Maltese playwrights. The organisers of the *Premju Francis Ebejer* should consider awards for different classes of play. They could thus achieve a wider variety of output from the contest.

George Cassola

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