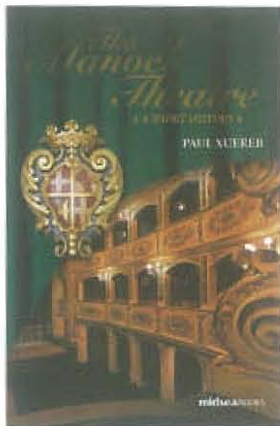


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The Manoel Theatre A Short History

reviewed by Simon Mercieca

Paul Xuereb
Midsea Books, 2012, 164 pages
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A new book about the Manoel Theatre has just been published. I am using the term 'new' intentionally, even though this work is a revised and expanded edition of a previous one which bore the same title. Despite the fact that I read the first edition just a few months ago, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this new publication. It is a renewed account of one of Europe's oldest theatres which is still standing today.

The author starts by giving a very brief introduction on the history of theatre-making in Malta and discusses drama performance prior to the inauguration of the Manoel Theatre in 1732. The architect of the Manoel Theatre is still to be identified. In view of the lack of historical data, attributions and educated guesses are made and the probable candidates are either the Italian architect Romano Carapicchia or the French architect François de Mondion. Without any doubt, at this period, the theatre not only served for theatrical and operatic productions, but also hosted other social functions such as carnival balls, its spaciousness being used for other extravagant endeavours. I have personally discovered that the *trompe-l'œil* which now adorns the false cupola of the Gozo Cathedral, was executed and painted inside this same theatre.

The early decades of the eighteenth century were a foremost period for artistic production in Malta. Leading local artists such as Emanuele Nani, Nicolò Isouard and foreign artists such as Vincenzo Fossi are found to have performed at the Manoel.

The Manoel Theatre features again during the short period of French occupation. The French military regime used the theatre to raise the spirits of its demoralized soldiers who were subjected to an arduous blockade. It was after one such performance that officers accidentally uncovered the plot of the Corsican Guglielmo Lorenzi and the local patriot Dun Mikiel Xerri.

Xuereb explains how the baroque structure of the Manoel was put to the rest by the British when they took over Malta in 1800. Architect George Whitmore

was commissioned to remodel its interior according to the emerging Neoclassical idiom. If during the period of the Knights of Malta it was simply known as *Il Teatro*, or The Theatre (being the only theatre in Valletta) after Whitmore's alterations it was given a new identity and began to be known as *Teatru Rjal* or Theatre Royal.

The policies of the period would slowly infiltrate into the theatre world. If during the time of the Knights the theatre served merely the policy of fun, be it of a secular or religious derivation, during British rule it became a chosen rendez-vous for zealous Protestant pastors and Anglican priests to hold their religious conferences. This brought about the fury of the Maltese. Such a reaction should not be judged on the principles of religious tolerance or freedom, but through the canon proposed by Edward Said for the study of colonial histories. This local reaction was the way the Maltese elite (clergy included) began to express their passive resistance to foreign rule.

The theatre slowly began to help in the formation of a national consciousness, a point that emerges beautifully in Paul Xuereb's writing. Riots were not rare at this time. It was not rare for British officers to come into direct confrontation with a Maltese audience. These incidents expose the political tensions of the period.

The introduction of Italian opera at the theatre brought about the Romantic spirit in Malta but at the same time caused a political dilemma. The local elite viewed the Romantic age in a diametrically opposite manner to Italy's perspective, especially when it came to professing the Roman Catholic faith. In Malta, Italian opera helped incense nationalistic principles that were in direct opposition to the Catholic Church. In the local context, the Church looked upon opera from a moral perspective and was less worried about any possible political message. Xuereb highlights a number of instances where opera performances were censured on moral grounds since some of the topics treated in the librettos contravened the

accepted moral principles of marital fidelity. Ironically, the Church was being influenced by the Victorian Age, an age which viewed Catholicism in the most deleterious manner. However, opera gave voice to politics and perhaps, the best person to have expressed this was Giuseppe Verdi, whose music gave a voice to political uprisings in Italy and spurred the *Risorgimento*.

Prior to the appearance of Verdi's music in Malta, the local music scene had been dominated by Gioachino Rossini and Vincenzo Bellini's music. Two other names which today mean nothing to the opera world, but who were extremely popular at the time, were Giovanni Pacini and Saverio Mercadante. Verdi eclipsed all other contemporary composers in terms of popularity, and the Manoel Theatre expressed, in minuscule, what was happening in the rest of mainland Europe.

Xuereb brings another important feature to the fore, which will distinguish this theatre from all other theatres in Italy and the rest of the continent. The presence of the British in Malta created a niche for English music and drama. Thus, while the impresarios supported the production of Italian music, since it was the most popular and money-making enterprise, at the same time, they did not close their eyes to the market needs and staged, on a regular basis, productions in English, in particular plays. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, plays in Maltese began to be staged at the Manoel.

As is to be expected, the British authorities ran the Manoel theatre on a *laissez-faire* principle. They hired it out to impresarios, and it was up to them to run it at a profit.

Book review continues on the next page...