

## Arts

## Unique 18th-century organ restored

Simon Mercieca

On the occasion of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the parish church of Cospicua inaugurated its historic *ottavino* organ, which has been restored and reinstalled in the organ loft of the Oratory of the Holy Cross, adjacent to the parish church.

Eighteenth-century *positivo* organs are rare; 18th-century *ottavino* organs are even rarer, and Cospicua is one of the few parishes in Malta (and the world) to possess such an organ. It is the only *ottavino* organ in playable condition on the island.

*Positivo* means the organ can be moved without the need for it to be completely dismantled, while *ottavino* refers to the mechanics of the organ; this instrument has its fundamental stop an octave higher than the norm. Another particular feature is the organ's keyboard. It is known as an *ottava corta* because the lowest octave lacks the first four chromatic notes.

**"It can deliver textures which still cannot be achieved on a modern pipe-organ"**

Originally, the word *positivo* meant it was a portable organ. The organ was intended to be used during religious processions that took place in Cospicua in the 18th century, especially that of the Immaculate Conception, when it was played accompanied by Marian songs written by Cospicua's Maestro di Cappella, Don Michelangelo Vella.

The word *ottavino* meant that as an instrument, it was intended for a woman's voice or male *castrati* singers. Its relatively small size is adequately compensated by the quality, character and intimacy of its sound that can deliver particular textures which still cannot be achieved on a modern pipe-organ.

Unfortunately, the organ fell into disuse with the result that it sustained extensive damage and ceased to be playable. Nevertheless, this historic organ remained



The organ before and after restoration.



almost complete, retaining all its main parts, albeit in a bad state of conservation.

More than half of the original pipes survived and these formed the basis upon which the measurements of the missing pipes could be identified and reconstructed. The organ has 225 pipes, most of which are of lead. The façade pipes contain a high percentage of tin while the bass pipes are wooden.

The missing pipes were reconstructed and voiced to produce the same quality of timbre as the original pipes. Wherever the original parts were found to be beyond repair, they were rebuilt according to the original parts.

The history of this organ has been traced in notarial archives. It is the work of organ builder Pietro Santucci, who completed it in 1777 at a cost of 91 scudi.

Since this organ was mainly intended for soprano voices, it gradually went out of fashion in the 19th century because church music began to be more oriented towards male bass voices.

The confraternity sought to musically update the organ in 1851. It was enlarged and a new bass register was introduced, which functioned through a separate 'stop control'. For all lovers of organ playing, this feature continues to enhance the uniqueness of the instrument; indeed, it is a very rare feature to find in any portable organ.

Even the historic organ case needed extensive restoration. The organ is housed in a wooden frame that has the structure of an old Maltese bureau. It has two doors that are painted on the inside with the sacred images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Virgin Mary. Such images were rare for those times, but are contemporary to the period when this new devotion began to reach our shores.

The restoration of the organ was entrusted to Robert Buhagiar, who is now a household name in organ restoration in Malta. The organ's wooden case was restored by Joseph Buhagiar and the door paintings by Recoop.



Organ restorer Robert Buhagiar.

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