

Baroque Theatre

A Symposium

As part of the Manoel Baroque Festival (May 4-12 2001), a symposium was held on May 10 by the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the Manoel Theatre's Sala Isouard. The symposium was entitled 'The Baroque Theatre', but the subjects covered were much more far-reaching than the title would suggest.

In his opening address, Professor Denis de Lucca, Head of Architecture and Director of the IIBS at the University of Malta, set the tone for the whole proceedings. He stated that the aim of the symposium was to provoke much needed thinking and discussion about the Baroque theatre, about its history, its design, its contents, and its message to people living in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

He then quoted from Corrado Rizza's description of the Baroque theatre, highlighting how from a Medieval and Renaissance open air show, it developed into an indoor performance. 'Instead of by day, in the sunlight, it was now held at night, illuminated by numerous candles which were reflected by a myriad of crystals'.

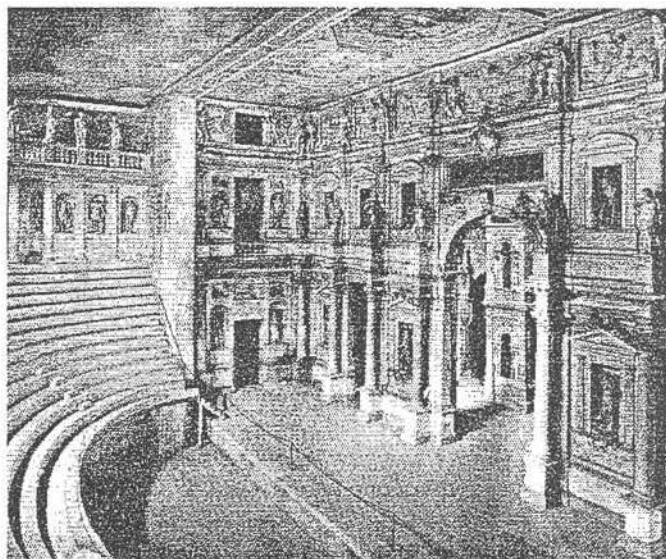
It was then pointed out how the spirit of Baroque Europe was powerfully evoked in the allegorical drama entitled *El Gran Teatro del Mundo*, where Calderon de la Barca reinterpreted the classical idea of life as a play and applied it to his own times. 'This metaphor of the world stage, of the universal theatre of mankind, remains dominant throughout the Baroque age'. A close relationship was established between the theatre and architecture.

Among the highlights that occurred in the development of the Baroque theatre, Denis de Lucca mentioned the following dates and events: 1545, when the publication of Sebastiano Serlio's *Secondo Libro di Architettura* was followed by the establishment of the first group of professional actors in Padua; 1556, when Leone de Sommi's *Quattro dialoghi in material di rappresentazione sceniche* was published; 1585, when Andrea Palladio's celebrated Teatro Olimpico was inaugurated in Venezia; 1598, which saw Angelo Ingegneri's publication of *Pratica di fabricar scene e machine nei teatri*, which was followed by the building of several famous Baroque theatres.

After the destruction inflicted by the earthquake of 1693, Noto in Sicily rose up again as 'a dream city conceived as a vast theatre, full of splendid churches and palaces'.

Towards the end of his wide-ranging introductory talk, Denis de Lucca referred to a matter of special interest for us Maltese. He recorded the extraordinary success registered by Scipione Maffei's *Merope* when it was performed in Rome in 1713. This success later moved the Italian Knights of St John to suggest to Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena that it should be chosen to inaugurate the Manoel Theatre in Valletta when it was completed by Carapacchia and Mondion in 1731.

The different speakers in the symposium then proceeded to elaborate on the various themes that had been introduced. They also drove home their points by means of illustrations in sight and sound, through slides and cds.



**Interior of the Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza.
Palladio (1580)**

They included Professor Clelia Falletti, who spoke on *Drammaturgia dell'Opera Barocca*, Dr Vicki Ann Cremona, on 'Colour and Transformation on the Baroque Stage'; Professor Elena Tamburini on *Lorenzo Bernini, Carlo Fontana, Romano Carapacchia: tre artisti del teatro Romano del 600*; Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott on 'Aspects of Liturgy and Theatre'; Annabel Vassallo on 'Liturgy as Ritual – Borrowings from the Theatre'; Mrs John Galea on 'Bizzarrie, Irregularity, Extravagance: Common Denominators in Baroque Music', and Canon John Azzopardi on 'The Musical Capella of the Mdina Cathedral and its Protagonists in the 17th and 18th Centuries'.

Bernini, who designed the huge bronze baldachin over the high-altar within St Peter's Basilica in Rome and the colonnades outside it, was personally also an author and actor of plays. As a stage designer, he devised grandiose sets aimed at '*suscitare meraviglia*', awakening wonder in the audience.

The tradition he created was carried on and further strengthened by his successor as the leading architect in Rome, Carlo Fontana, as well as Fontana's own successor Romano Carapacchia, who later came to Malta to undertake the building of the Manoel Theatre in Valletta.

To do justice to the elaborate sets that were constructed, often involving three tiers to represent sky, land, and sea, one had to find correspondingly spectacular stories and appropriate personages. Mythological subjects were resorted to, so that gods and goddesses could appear in the sky, dragons come from the sea to seek their victims on land and finally meet the fate they deserved at the hands

continued ➔

Baroque Theatre

⇒ *continued*

of their human or divine victors. The story of Andromeda was one of the first subjects elaborately staged in Rome. This led to the development of melodrama, where the dramatic was wed to song and dance and every form of art was involved.

The typical Italian theatrical performance became known as 'the opera'. It was felt to be the best medium to hold the spectators spellbound.

At first, in imitation of Greek drama, recitative predominated. Then it was realised that the relationship between music and language could be better exploited to the advantage of both. More opportunities were to be given to choir and soloists to display their talents to the full.

In 1637, an important development took place in Padua, when five persons got together and hired a theatre for the carnival season. This ultimately led to making the opera more accessible to the general public, and freed it from its dependence on rich patrons. The members of the audience were asked to buy a ticket for each performance.

The creators of the Baroque style, such as the great Bernini himself, worked both on churches and theatres. The liturgy itself is not

divorced from spectacle. In a way, it presupposes that participants are actors as well as spectators. There are even more Baroque churches than there are theatres. This is certainly the case in Malta. The liturgical reforms introduced by Vatican II were certainly all well-intentioned and many were long overdue. However, some people who undertook to implement the reforms were mistaken in their interpretation and over-zealous in their application of the reforms, so that much that was of great artistic value was destroyed. The insensitive removal of side altars from a number of Baroque churches was cited as a notorious example.

There is room for different styles in church art, architecture, and liturgical performance. Drama should not be excluded from divine service. Man as searcher and questioner, not only as believer, should feel perfectly at home in church as a participant in the liturgy. It is the function of religion to reveal, rather than to preach. It is not to be forgotten that St Thomas Aquinas described artistic performance as a 'natural sacrament', an outward sign of inward grace. The iconic element of the liturgy should not be underestimated. The Baroque treasures that form a substantial part of the art and architecture of Maltese churches should be better preserved and appreciated by all concerned.