

FRANCESCO AZOPARDI – A MALTESE MUSICIAN AND THEORIST : NEW EVIDENCE ABOUT HIS CAREER AND DIDACTIC WRITINGS

DION BUHAGIAR

Abstract - Francesco Azopardi (1748–1809) lived in Malta during the second half of the eighteenth century. He was professionally trained in Naples for four years and remained in this city working as a composer, teacher and conductor until 1774. The Cathedral authorities subsequently employed Azopardi in Malta as an organist. His duties included composition, playing the organ and teaching singers. Azopardi's workload increased significantly following the retirement of his predecessor Benigno Zerafa. Azopardi was a prolific composer and he composed new music regularly for the liturgical services of the Cathedral Church. In addition, he taught many students including Nicolò Isouard and produced two important composition treatises for his students.

Introduction

Giovanni Battista Agostino Francesco Giuseppe Azopardi¹ was born in Rabat (Malta) on 5 May 1748 and died there on 6 February 1809. His baptismal record reads as follows :

5 May 1748. The Most Reverend Fr. Peter Attard, assistant parish priest baptized in the parish church of St Paul Outside The Walls, the child born today of Salvatore Azopardi and his wife Anna, from the suburb of Notabile², and was named Giovanni Battista, Agostino, Francesco, Giuseppe. His godparents were the most excellent Don Franciscus Mamo and Anna Graziulla Chetcuti.³

This document tells much about the Catholic environment into which Azopardi was born and eventually brought up. He became a devout be-

¹ The composer's family name was pronounced with a single 'z'. Its modern counterpart carries a double 'z', thus, Azzopardi.

² During the eighteenth century, Rabat was known only as a suburb of Notabile.

³ LB IV folio 390

liever who dedicated himself to the service of the Cathedral Church in Malta. All four names, of which it was then customary to adopt the third, manifest the rigid religious fervour prevalent in Rabat during that time. Each of the last three names represents a saint associated with a particular religious order : St Augustine and St Francis, for example, are venerated as the founders of the Augustinian and the Franciscan (Conventual) orders respectively. These orders still exist, and the church of St Francis is situated almost in front of Azopardi's house. Interestingly so, over the main entrance of the Azopardi house itself there remain the crossed arms and cross which form the coat of arms of the Franciscan Order.

Francesco Azopardi was the second born in a family of six children; he had three brothers and two sisters. Little is known about his life in general, as is made clear by Pullicino (1876 : 23)

Meanwhile, the life of Francesco Azopardi, which does not offer numerous and varied events to talk about, can only be found if summarized, (so to speak) in the continuous production of his compositions.

But if Pullicino is reticent regarding Azopardi's early life, Tanti (1809 : 1) provides more information in his *Elogio* :

In studying and in the exercise of piety did our Francesco pass his early years. An intellect thirsty for knowledge, a quickness of mind, a natural genius for music.

From this one can surmise that at an early age Azopardi must have applied himself to the disciplined study of his art, and his strict and religious upbringing helped him to become acquainted with the liturgy and the essential part that music plays therein.

Azopardi's musical scholarship

Azopardi began his musical training under the guidance of Mikiel Ang Vella who had established his own private school as was and still is customary in Malta. Eventually, Azopardi pleaded with his parents to send him to study abroad. According to Tanti (1809 : 1)

The strong and persistent requests that he made to his parents were successful, and he was sent to the famous Royal Conservatory of

Sant'Onofrio in Naples. Thus, here, he was launched upon his career (and from among a considerable number of students, our Maltese was considered the best.

According to the enrollment register (*rollo dei figliuoli*), Francesco Azopardi, a Maltese, entered as a resident fee-paying student in 1763 and left four years later in 1767.⁴ Azopardi's acceptance in this conservatory at the somewhat mature age of fifteen, attests to his strong musical background. According to the conservatory's charter, as summarized by Charles Burney (Glover 1927 : 63), the boys were admitted :

Between the ages of eight and twenty, and the younger pupils were bound for the space of eight years : the older boys could only obtain admission if they showed exceptional talent ...some were taken as paying students, and these were not subject to the eight year agreement.

Thus, in view of the conservatory's charter, Azopardi was deemed to be well prepared to be accepted as a full-time, fee-paying student at Sant'Onofrio.

Some biographers disagree on the duration of Azopardi's stay at the conservatory. Pullicino (1876), Caruana Gatto (1910) and Mifsud Bonnici (1950) claim that he was there for eight years, while Muscat Azopardi (1949) mentions ten years, from 1760-1770. However, Azopardi's 'mature' application did not require him to spend eight years as was demanded of all younger students : in fact, the records show that Azopardi entered in 1763 and left in 1767 and that he stayed at the conservatory only for four years, after which he emerged as a qualified 'Maestro di Capella'. According to the Cathedral music deputies :

*He accomplished his musical studies in the above-mentioned city to such a degree of advancement, that he has become a Maestro di Capella of great ability.*⁵

⁴ "Francesco Azopardi Maltese. Entrato a convittore nel 1763, 15 Ottobre, esce nel 1767." Salvatore Di Giacomi, Il Conservatorio di Sant'Onofrio a Capuana e quello di Santa Maria della Pietà dei Turchini, edited by Remo Sandron (n.p.); (n.publ.), 1824.

⁵ CEM-AO folio 620 v.

It is hardly surprising that Azopardi, although barely 20 years of age, had achieved so much in four years when one considers the commendable learning environment at the conservatory which included eminent teachers and a Spartan-like schedule. Burney (Glover 1927 : 63) describes the routine as follows :

The only vacation in these schools, in the whole year, is in autumn, and only for a few days : during the winter, the boys rise two hours before it is light, from which time they continue their exercises, an hour and a half at dinner excepted, till eight o'clock at night : and this constant perseverance for a number of years, with genius and good teaching, must produce musicians.

Although Azopardi left Sant'Onofrio after four years, he remained in Naples for another eight years until 1774, thereby staying for a period of almost twelve years in that city.

There are also differences of opinion regarding the identities of Azopardi's teachers at Sant'Onofrio, but most biographers, including Pullicino (1876) and Rolandi (1932), claim that they included Niccolò Piccinni. Pullicino (1876 : 8) refers to :

The esteem that Piccinni often harboured for and bestowed on him (Azopardi) while conversing with those who were familiar to him in Naples, and it was from several of these persons that I (Pullicino) had the opportunity to obtain this specific information directly.

When taking into account both Azopardi's stay in Naples between 1763-1774 and the above statement, we may safely assume that Azopardi did come in contact with Piccinni. Tanti (1809 : 2) mentions letters from Piccinni to Azopardi which reveal a great respect for the musician from Malta :

It suffices to mention that the famous Picini (sic), his master, this man (Piccinni), a very great person in music, testifies by means of letters to our Francesco the high esteem he had of him.

Conservatory records reproduced by Salvatore di Giacomo (1824 : 159) indicate Carlo Cotumacci and Giuseppe Dol as among Azopardi's teachers :

From 1755-1785 we find him (Cotumacci), with Dol, teaching at the Conservatory of Sant'Onofrio.

Azopardi as a composer

Pullicino (1876 : 17) gives an indication as to Azopardi's activities after he left the conservatory :

Azopardi remained in Naples for four years after he left the conservatory : during those four years he found himself being introduced as a teacher giving music lessons, not only to a great number of distinguished families, but also in various monasteries of the closed orders...In addition to the lessons that he used to give, he also made frequent public appearances for the performance of his own compositions and to conduct orchestras in various places and on different occasions of great solemnity.

By 1768, Azopardi had embarked upon his career as a composer with his first liturgical composition, the Mass in F (Mus Ms 339). A second Mass in G (Mus Ms 369) appeared two years later (1770), and a third, also in G (Mus Ms 340), was composed in 1772. In addition to Masses, Azopardi composed Psalms and a Magnificat, which he himself conducted in various places and on different occasions. Tanti (1809 : 2) confirms that Azopardi was establishing himself as Maestro di Capella in a city where music was greatly appreciated :

He was already asked to become first Maestro di Capella at the above-mentioned royal conservatory (Sant'Onofrio) and also in the other two conservatories of Loreto and Pietà where highly-renowned people were employed, (for) the young man was already inclined to occupy the honourable position.

While Azopardi was living in Naples, he occasionally visited Malta and gave his musical services both to the Cathedral and to other churches of the diocese. The following report by the Cathedral music deputies to the Archbishop Mgr. Gwann Carmine Pellerano, testifies to such activity :

Being charged with referring to the request of Francesco Azopardi who lives in Naples, we feel obliged to assure you, Illustrious and Most Reverend Father, that he completed his studies in the above-mentioned

*city to such a degree of advancement that nowadays he has become a fine Maestro di Cappella and an excellent contrapuntist. He also performs on the organ with total perfection, and, moreover, we can assure you not only of the reputation that he enjoys, but also of the experience that we had of him on more than one occasion, not only in this Cathedral Church but also in other churches in your diocese, two years ago when he returned to this Island.*⁶

This document also suggests that Azopardi had already tried to re-settle in Malta two years prior to December 16, 1773, yet for some unknown reason was obliged to return to Naples. It is likely that the date of that visit to Malta was early 1772, and the evidence for this is found in the dedication, in Azopardi's own handwriting, on the title page of the Mass in G :

*Kyrie and Gloria of Signor and Maestro di Cappella Francesco Azopardi, performed by the same, on the solemn day of the Commemoration of Saint Paul at the Cathedral in 1772, and donated by the same to the Reverend Chapter of the Holy Cathedral Church.*⁷

The above dedication and conducting of the Mass in G major of 1772 must have influenced the Cathedral authorities very positively. They accepted Azopardi's application and recommended him for the position of organist with the right of future succession as Maestro di Cappella :

*Therefore, we are aware of his skill and ability, we are of the opinion that he deserves to serve in this Cathedral church of Yours, for the time being as an organist with the right of future succession as Maestro di Cappella.*⁸

Azopardi's installation as an organist with the right of future promotion came on the 12th of April 1774 :⁹

⁶ CEM-AO, folio 620v.

⁷ Azopardi, Mass in G (Mdina: Cathedral Archives, 1772, Ms. 320), title page v.

⁸ CEM-AO, folio 620v.

⁹ CEM-AO, folio 620v.

This is on behalf of Maestro Azopardi who is the organist of the Holy Cathedral Church of Malta. By the strength of the signed transcript of the Illustrious and Most Reverend Father John Pellerano, Archbishop of Malta, written in reply to Francesco Azopardi's letter of application, dated December 20, 1773, after the written relation of the Most Reverend music deputies, Canon and Dean Don Paolo Mompalao Apap Depiro and Canon Don Pietro Platamone, inaugurate and instate as organist of the same Cathedral Church, the same Francesco Azopardi, with the usual annual salary of 120 scudi, and other remunerations, privileges and usual responsibilities that we are used to, and with future promotion either through the death or resignation of the Prefect of Music.¹⁰

Later in the document, one reads that the Cathedral Chapter granted Azopardi an additional sum of 80 *scudi* to his annual salary, which was paid throughout his lifetime. This substantial remuneration was offered because his responsibilities included playing the organ, giving music lessons to the singers at the cathedral school, composing new music and conducting the liturgical services at the cathedral church. Azopardi accepted these terms, and in the summer of 1774, he left Naples permanently for Malta to become the organist of St Paul's Cathedral, Mdina.

Azopardi as 'Maestro di Capella'

The position of Maestro di Cappella was retained by Don Benigno Zerafa who, at the time of Azopardi's appointment, had already given 30 years of service at the cathedral. Azopardi gradually assumed all the responsibilities of Maestro di Cappella and on the 8th December 1783, when he had already been employed for almost ten years, the church deputies for Music proposed an increase in his salary and the retirement with full pension of Zerafa; however, no decision was made.¹¹ The salary increase of 60 *scudi* annually was granted only after Azopardi submitted his case again in January 1785 :

To Francesco Azopardi, Organist and Prefect of Music with future promotion. The Illustrious and Most Reverend Lord, Don Vincent Labini,

¹⁰ RPI: folio 96v.

¹¹ LDC II: folio 205

*Bishop of Malta, while ratifying the Chapter's deliberation that took place on the second day of the month (January 2, 1785), and was approved on the eleventh day of the month (January 11, 1785), orders an increase of 60 scudi in the salary for Francesco Azopardi.*¹²

To the title of organist, that of Prefect of Music was added, albeit with the restriction 'with future promotion' attached; Zerafa retained the title until his self-requested retirement in January 1787, and not, as Pullicino and Rolandi state, until his death on March 20, 1804. No document could be found that shows Azopardi's official designation as Maestro di Cappella. The only relevant information appears in a letter of Azopardi requesting, from the Bishop of Malta, an increase in salary to the amount of half of the pension that Zerafa had been receiving, that is, half of 100 scudi.¹³ There is also nothing to suggest that Azopardi requested the elimination of the restrictive 'future succession' to the title of Maestro di Cappella at the Cathedral in Mdina. Azopardi continued his normal duties as Maestro di Cappella, however, after Zerafa's retirement in 1787.

Azopardi as a composer and teacher

Azopardi's oeuvre includes Masses - around thirty-two, including, three for eight voices, two Requiem Masses (one of which was written for the death of the Austrian Emperor Leopold II), Psalms, Antiphons, Hymns, Graduals, Sequences (*Dies Irae* and *Lauda Sion*, for example)¹⁴, a *Te Deum*, and an oratorio, *La Passione di Cristo* (a setting of the *Metastasio* text). He also wrote two secular cantatas, arias, duets, trios and sonatas for pianoforte, Christmas organ pieces which he calls *Pastorali* and instrumental *Sinfonie*. One of these *Sinfonie*, known as *The Terra Santa* manuscript, shows the work to be in a three-movement 'classical' style. Tanti (1809 : 4) notes that Azopardi's music was also commissioned in Madrid and Munich :

¹² RP I: folio 104r

¹³ This letter is dated 23 April 1804, that is, a month after Zerafa's death. MC XIX: folio 731r.

¹⁴ The sequences *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), and *Lauda Sion* are sung during the celebration of the Mass. The former, during the Mass for the Dead, the latter for the Mass of "Corpus Christi" (Eucharist).

What can I say about the production of his Music? The least that could be said is that in Madrid they have requested his scores and that in Monaco (Munich) they have accumulated a good collection, while in other regions, his music is sung and applauded.

According to Pullicino (1876 : 42), “Azopardi had many students, several of whom became very distinguished”. Amongst these students, Nicolò Isouard (1775-1818) was one of the most prestigious figures in the history of music in Malta. Grandmaster De Rohan appointed him organist at St John’s Co-Cathedral, and in 1796, he was appointed Maestro di Cappella. He retained this position until he settled in Paris on 5 February 1800 when Malta was still under French occupation.

Azopardi as a theorist

To Azopardi’s importance as a composer and teacher we should add his significance as a theorist. Tanti (1809 : 3) observes that :

Since he believed that there was a shortage of useful books that deal with music, (he also believed that) it would be advantageous to society at large to produce new ones. (Also) knowing that he must preserve and cultivate what he studied by means of musical productions he dedicated himself to composition. Concerning his first great achievement, there is the production of the famous treatise on the theory and practice of music, a work which since then has been translated into the French language and also given for publication; moreover, this treatise is studied in the various colleges and conservatories of music.

In the above citation the writer is referring to Azopardi’s *Il Musico Pratico* which he wrote in Italian, the lingua franca of the day. The treatise was subsequently translated into French by Nicholas Etienne Framery and carries a recommendation by André Gretry (dated 25 October 1786). It was published in Paris by Le Duc on 1786 and was later re-edited and published by Alexandre Choron in 1824.

Azopardi’s purpose was to present the beginner student with a *Gradus ad Parnassum* - a step by step composition manual presented in a practical and clear manner. Evidently, the success of the first *Il Musico Pratico* encouraged Azopardi to write an expanded version in which he included not only the traditional approach of harmonising note patterns (character-

istic of the thorough bass system) but also the new concept and principle of chord inversion (*rivolti*). The *Il Pratico* (II) is in four books (*quattro libri*) and it concludes with two discourses (*dissertazioni*).

Azopardi died on 6 February 1809 after having served at the Cathedral under three bishops, namely : Gwann Carmine Pellerano (1770-780) who was instrumental in securing the position at the Cathedral for him; Vincenzo Labini (1780-1807) who greatly admired and protected Azopardi and Ferdinando Mattei (1807-1820) who respected Azopardi so much as to honour him by a visit a few days before he died. According to Pullicino (1876 : 51), the Cathedral Chapter, in gratitude for his great services, ordered that the occasion be honoured with grandeur :

He was entombed in the Cathedral Church (Mdina) where he received solemn obsequies. He was lamented not only by the Cathedral Chapter, whom he had served for almost 40 years, but by all the people of Malta where he was extremely respected as a great Maestro, the like of whom the island had never seen before.

Rolandi (1932 : 57) states that Azopardi died in Malta on 6 February 1809 and that his tomb, although no longer distinguishable, is located at St John's. The death certificate, however, contains the following specific information :

*Mr Franciscus Azopardi Maestro di Cappella of the Holy Catholic Church, son of Master Salvatoris from the suburb of Notabile, aged 62, died at his home in communion with the Holy Mother Church, and whose body is buried in the above-mentioned Cathedral Church. Reverend Father Andrea Tanti heard his confession, and Reverend Don Wincelaus Debono Archpriest gave him Holy Communion and Extreme Unction.*¹⁵

Early in the year 1870, the members of the Cathedral Chapter erected a marble memorial tablet among those of the Archbishops and Canons as a memorial to Francesco Azopardi, Maestro di Cappella. Pullicino (1876 : 1) notes that the Cathedral Chapter decreed this first privilege to Azopardi in recognition of his own "*Singular musical ability and for the extraordinary services rendered by him to the church of Malta.*"

¹⁵ LD V: folio 85

Dion Buhagiar is a senior lecturer and co-ordinator of the Music Studies Programme of the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta. Mro. Buhagiar has several diplomas in music from various Music Colleges in England: LRSM, ALCM, FTCLand ARCM. The latter was earned after a resident course at the Royal College of Music in London. He has also followed undergraduate and postgraduate studies in music in two Canadian universities: Mus Bac (Toronto), B.Ed (Toronto), and MMus (London, Ont.). Recently, Mro. Buhagiar has completed and submitted his Ph.D. project on Maltese classical music with special reference to F. Azopardi (1748-1809). This research was carried under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Floyd Grave, Head of Graduate Studies in Music at Rutgers State University in New Jersey, USA. He is the organist at St. John's Co-Cathedral and musical director of the Collegium Aureum.

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- LB** Liber Baptizatorum, (Mdina : Cathedral Archives, May 5, 1748).
- LD** Liber Defunctorum (Mdina : Cathedral Archives, 6 February 1809).
- LDC** Liber Deliberationum Capitolarium (Mdina : Cathedral Archives, 8 December 1783).
- MC** Minutae Capitolarium (Mdina : Cathedral Archives, 23 April 1804).
- RP** Registrum Personarum (Mdina : Cathedral Archives, April 12, 1774).