

THE MALTESE MUSICAL PATRIMONY

Mro JOSEPH VELLA

Professor Joseph Vella was born in Victoria Gozo in 1942. He is one of Malta's leading contemporary composers. He has written for a wide spectrum of musical combinations including solo, chamber, choral and symphonic works. Compositions of his have been performed all over Europe, the USA, and Japan. He has also commercially recorded three Compact Discs of his works with the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra. His activities as a conductor have taken him to Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Sofia, Tokyo and Canada. His pioneering work in the revival of old Maltese music has led to a wider knowledge and appreciation of an important part of our national heritage which, up to the late 60s, was almost completely neglected. In this field he has researched, edited and performed previously unknown masterpieces by both Maltese and Italian composers, which, over the years, he has presented in concerts not only in Malta, but also in Germany, France, and Spain. He has contributed articles to several local and foreign publications, and he has participated and read papers at music conferences in Malta, Italy, France, England, Turkey and Greece.

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The following is the text of a speech given at the Lowenbrau Symposium.

The deep-rooted and rich musical patrimony of these Islands is nowadays an accepted and much appreciated part of our cultural heritage. It is quite gratifying for me, a pioneer as regards research in this field, and as an initiator of revival performances of these old works, to sit in the knowledge that there is now not only a widespread interest in both its historical and artistic aspect but, what is more important, one feels that there seems to be a conscious effort on the part of musicians and authorities alike to make amends for the neglect in which this musical inheritance has been gathering dust on obscure bookshelves for so long. Although much has yet to be done - what has been accomplished so far is but the proverbial tip of our musical iceberg - one can, however, safely say that today there exists a national conscience about our musical past. I feel that, more than anything else, this augurs well for the future.

In the light of all the above, it would seem rather unthinkable, verging on downright disbelief, that the pertaining situation is only of relatively recent occurrence, and, surprising as it may be, it has hardly surpassed its third decade of existence.

Right up to the 1960's, Maltese audiences, besides being quite unaware of the large corpus of musical works by Maltese composers that

had been written over the previous three centuries, also tended to view the performance of a Maltese work not without a tinge of artistic suspicion. As regards concerts, (at that time held mostly at the Manoel Theatre), yes, the odd piece by a Maltese composer was inserted here and there and every so often; but, a whole programme of Maltese works? Well, that was above anything the average Maltese concert-goer could take!

The Nani's, the Diacono's and the Bugeja's could, of course, be regularly heard in the relative parochial seclusion of the local village festa. But what about the concert hall? That was altogether a different matter.

I express all this from my personal experience. When I was 18, I had collaborated with the well-known Gozitan poet, George Pisani, to compose one of my first large-scale works. The result was a secular cantata on Pisani's "Il-Barri" - for baritone solo, mixed chorus and full orchestra. I was lucky enough that, in spite of the situation I have just hinted at, the work eventually found its way on the programme of an orchestral concert at the Manoel. The resulting experience, which more or less launched me in the milieu of local "music-making", was a jolting eye-opener from more than its artistic aspect. Apparently the

musicians seemed to like that music, but, I was told, "in Maltese?" and "Il-Barri" of all subjects? When the actual performance arrived, the situation was more manifestly critical to say the least, and, for a young composer trying to come to grips with the experience of one of his first public performances, it was rather unnerving. When the choir started singing about a snorting, panting and



Concert of Baroque music from Malta. United Nations Headquarters, New York; Spetember, 2001. Maestro Vella with the Laudeate Pueri Choir

struggling bull that was being led to the slaughter house, I could actually hear giggling all around me and the work was being almost summarily dismissed, as if not befitting the "hallowed" boards of the Manoel Theatre. It apparently turned out that most of the people in the audience simply could not take it seriously. I am glad to say that, on the other hand, critical opinion viewed the work quite differently, and subsequent performances more than made up for this initial harrowing experience. "Il-Bari" was last performed in London in 1995 with Mro Colin Attard conducting.

Today I can say that I am very proud of this early work of mine - not only because it is the result of a collaboration between two Gozitans but, more importantly, I believe that apart from hymns written for churches and bands, "Il-Barri" is the first serious choral work by a Maltese composer using his native tongue as a medium. In retrospect, and given the way the course of local music has developed over the past 30 years, this honour gains much more in significance. It is in this context and attendant psychological condition that I first took up in earnest the research of old Maltese music.

On a personal level, the discovery of a native far-stretching musical line has proved to be exciting not only from the factual point of view of the "musical" archaeologist - that of unearthing something which had lain dormant for so many years. As a composer, I think I have

also acquired a certain confidence knowing that I form part of a longstanding tradition. For the creative artist, this deep-rooted patrimony can at times prove to be a steadying psychological prop to lean against; it gives him ground to put his feet on.

If I may deviate slightly and refer to Fr Peter's comment about my music - this is perhaps the reason why my music is European in nature - growing up I had no roots to attach myself to. My interest in the editing and performing of music from yesteryears is intrinsically entwined with the inauguration of the Cathedral Museum in Mdina in 1969. Its hard working curator, Rev. John Azzopardi, straightaway started the time-consuming and laborious process of classifying the music manuscripts in the Archives. Fr. Azzopardi was assisted by Dr. Matteo Sansone, an Italian who at that time was a lecturer at the University of Malta.

In 1976, Fr. Azzopardi had also asked the School of Music to help him in formulating a detailed card index listing works not only by author, title and date, but also including each available separate vocal/instrumental part as well as the number of pages. This was done by Alexander Machat and myself. Mr. Machat was at that time a teacher of wind instruments at the School which his sister Verena and myself had set up about two years earlier.

Alexander Machat and myself visited the

archives several times and it was decided to include one work in a coming concert given by the orchestra of the School of Music. This was the "Sinfonia con Oboe Obbligato" by Francesco Azopardi (composed in 1799) and was performed at the Vilhena Palace in July 1976 with Mr. Machat conducting. Unfortunately, this was Mr. Machat's first and last participation in this field.

As regards myself, the "occasional" approach to this incipient revival movement soon took the shape of a far deeper contribution, and this not only because I was a composer who conducted a considerable number of concerts, but also because as a Maltese musician I was so pleasantly thrilled to discover and to get acquainted with such a wealth of music material whose existence, if factually known, was definitely not artistically evaluated in the least.

With the help and advice of Fr. Azzopardi, I began to delve deeper and wider among the manuscripts, especially those from the early Baroque period. Imagine my surprise and incredulity when I came across the dates of the two oldest extant manuscripts by Maltese composers found in the Archives - the motet "Beatus Vir" by Giuseppe Balzano, scored for two Tenors, a Baritone and continuo, and the motet "Venite Omnes" by his brother Domenico Balzano scored for 2 Canti and continuo. The former dates back to 1652 while the latter is dated 1680. At the time, I remember, I was completely dumbfounded, because in my student days, I had been more or less led to believe that Nicolo Isouard (1773-1818) was considered to be the feeder font of all Maltese music. Now, in the batting of a disbelieving eyelid, my time notion of Maltese music history was thrown back by almost 150 years.

The motets "Beatus Vir" and "Venite Omnes" are among the first manuscripts I edited, and then, with Fr. Azzopardi's encouragement and enthusiastic nudging, I slowly arranged and built up a number of editions by various composers.

However, music is an art that lives only in time and space. You may have the nicest bound edition, the cleanest dust-free score and the most scholarly transcription, but until the music is actually played, it is still as dead as any dodo. My next step was, therefore, to perform the

works I had worked on.

The first opportunity that presented itself in this direction, funnily enough, came from the British forces. In February 1978, under the auspices of the then Services Broadcasting Station in Floriana, I was asked to organise a concert in the auditorium of the University. I suggested a programme devoted solely to Maltese works, an idea they enthusiastically received. The result was a vocal/orchestral programme which I called "Three Hundred Years of Maltese Music". In it, I included works spanning three centuries of musical activity in Malta, starting with the "Venite Omnes" of 1680 and including works by Benigno Zerafa, Francesco Azopardi, Nicolo Isouard, Pietro Paolo Bugeja, Anton Nani, Mons Giuseppe, Carmelo Pace and myself. Needless to say, this concert generated a lot of interest and curiosity among local concert-goers as regards the intrinsic quality of the works and, also, their historical positions. I conducted this first ever "revival concert" in front of a very full house, and I have no doubt that it served to instil in a lot of music lovers' minds a first inkling and awareness of our musical patrimony.

After this concert, a revival of a work or works from the Cathedral Archives became an awaited event in most chamber concerts that I organised and conducted. An especially fruitful collaboration in this respect were the annual concerts of the German Maltese Circle which were, significantly enough, also performed in the halls of the Cathedral Museum. These concerts, more than others, helped to introduce audiences to old Maltese works, and also for the latter to become accepted regular features in musical programmes.

As with anything else, the "newish" idea did not, of course, catch on like bush fire. It was more of a slow, constant evolution. In this respect, it is significant to note that, for more than eight years, I was the only one working in this field, before other conductors took the hint and followed suit. Over the years, I have edited works by the two Balzanos, Abos, Mataron, Azopardi, Zerafa, Bugeja, Nani, Grech, M.A. Vella, Gristi, Magrin, Fenech, Isouard, Curmi and others. From the Mdina archives, I have also edited rare and unique manuscripts of works by famous Italian composers of the 17th and 18th Centuries like Monteverdi, Carissuni,

Mazzocchi, Graziani and Foggia, besides a substantial number of anonymous manuscripts.

I have performed these compositions both locally and abroad (in France, Spain and Germany), always with merited success, and great surprise to the audiences especially as regards the validity and historical significance of the Maltese examples.

The richness and variety of musical works found in the Cathedral Archives in Mdina can easily be gauged when one remembers that it comprises well over 4000 original scores and rare printed works. Fr. John Azzopardi, writing in the book *Maltese Baroque* classifies the original collection as follows: (a) a collection of 159 engraved works by Italian and French composers, (b) bundles of scores in manuscript form by Italian composers from the 17th Century, (c) manuscripts by anonymous Maltese composers, (d) bundles of anonymous works by various local and foreign 17th and 18th Century composers, (e) the complete musical oeuvre of Benigno Zerafa, (f) the almost complete musical oeuvre of Francesco Azopardi, (g) a few manuscript scores by later Maltese composers.

Over the last few years, the archives have grown vastly in the number of available works, mostly through donations of several music collections by private individuals or families. Worthy of mention are the Nani, Caruana, Vella and Pace collections.

The interest and professional approach shown by the curator and his staff in the care and promulgation of the Maltese musical patrimony proved to have a salutary effect not only on an internal basis. This interest slowly spread out to other collections found in churches or church-related institutions. These started to turn to the staff of the Cathedral Museum for help in having their collections classified and evaluated. A few private individuals did the same. Some of these are the following:

1. The Carmelite Priory in Mdina 746 compositions
2. The Carmelite Priory in Valletta 236 compositions
3. The Commissariat of the Holy Land 381 compositions
4. San Filippo Senglea 101 compositions

5. Cospicua Collegiate Church 136 compositions

6. B'Kara Collegiate Church 219 compositions

7. Rabat Collegiate Church 53 compositions

8. Cathedral Church Gozo 684 compositions

9. Private Collection Gozo 314 compositions

I would have liked to dwell in detail on the exchanges between the two major cappellas in Malta, namely, that of St John's in Valletta and the one at the Cathedral in Mdina, and their counterparts in Italy, notably those of Palermo and Naples during the 17th and 18th Centuries. The Church authorities of the period sent many promising young Maltese musicians to study in Italy. They also "imported" Italian musicians (both singers and instrumentalists) to give their services during church functions in the local cappellas. This regular exchange between Malta and Italy could not but result in the complete Italianization of the local music scene. As a result, it is quite safe to say that Malta, in the 17th, 18th and most of the 19th Centuries, can be regarded as just another centre of musical excellence in the same way that Palermo, Naples and Bologna were. This is attested by the fact that the Archives in Mdina house many important compositions by leading Italian composers of the period, like Monteverdi, Carissimi, Graziani and others. The fact that these are in manuscript form and extant as separate parts for voices or instruments, as the



Maestro Vella discussing details relating to recording of a CD of his music

case may be, would seem to confirm that this music did not find its way to Mdina Cathedral solely to enrich some connoisseur's library. It was specifically copied for the practical reason of it being played during the services. The artistic level of any centre of music-making can be gauged by the music it plays and/or

promulgates. Therefore, considering the works being performed in the Maltese cappellas of the 16th, 17th & 19th Centuries, one must conclude that the standard of music making was of an excellent level indeed.

Given the nature of this paper, I have naturally dwelt mostly on the musical patrimony of the 16th, 17th & 18th Centuries. One should not forget the contribution of Maltese composers in the 19th Century, although I personally think that the level of excellence which I considered to have been on a par with that of the Continent during the previous Centuries, fell somewhat during the 1800's. Composers did not keep up

the pace with what was happening abroad. Composers in the 20th Century have been at an advantage as regards their colleagues from the last Century. The media have obviously broken all remaining vestiges of an insular mentality from which, perhaps, composers of the previous two or three generations could not escape completely. Horizons have now become universal and there is absolutely no difficulty to gauge levels of local musical production with whatever is happening beyond our shores.



LIST OF THE MORE IMPORTANT COMPOSITIONS OF PROFESSOR JOSEPH VELLA:

Concertos:

Concerto for piano and orchestra	op 41
Concerto for violin and orchestra	op 65
Concerto for violoncello and orchestra	op 75
Concerto for flute and orchestra	op 76
Concerto for violoncello and orchestra	op 77
Concerto "Barocco" for bassoon and strings	op 92
Concerto for 2 pianos solo	op 99

Symphonies:

Sinfonia "De Profundis"	op 11
Sinfonietta for strings	op 36
Sinfonia "con voce femminile"	op 48
Sinfonietta for 13 wind players	op 100

Song cycles (in Maltese)

Seher (words Daniel Massa)	op 39
Poeziji tal-Bahrija (words Joe Friggieri)	op 53
Nisġet l-Imħabba (words Achille Mizzi)	op 64
Askesis (words Mario Azzopardi)	op 72

Other Song cycles

The Seasons (madrigal cycle)	op 31
"Passeggero" cycle (words Antonio Porta)	op 63

Oratorios

Madonna ts-Sacro Cuor (text Marjanu Vella)	op 44
Demm fuq il-Verna (text Marjanu Vella)	op 49
Il-Belt Rebbieha (text Oliver Friggieri)	op 50
Rewwixta (text Oliver Friggieri)	op 54