

MGR GIUSEPPE FARRUGIA

Dr Maria Frendo

Giuseppe Farrugia was born on the 2nd of June 1852 to Pawlu and Maria nee Borg in an alley in Strada Pieta in Victoria. He was baptized as Georgius, Josef, Johannes Farrugia. He was the eldest and only son of a family of seven. The Basilica of St George in the very heart of Victoria is the church which welcomed the new-born child into its arms. It is the same church which today boasts of his designs, decorations, and musical treasures.

Giuseppe, as he became to be known, started his studies at the Government Primary School in Victoria and was accepted at the Gozo Seminary in November 1866. Incidentally, and indeed providentially, the year 1866 coincided with the coming to Gozo of the Jesuit fathers who, in November of the same year, were entrusted with the running of the Seminary by the Bishop Fra Pauli Micallef. A note in the *Registro dei Nomi, Cognomi, Direzione, Nascita, Ingresso in Seminario of May 1866* attests to Giuseppe's intellectual abilities and achievements, which are summed up in the simple telling phrase *ottimo in tutto e sempre il primo*.

Giuseppe was ordained priest by the second Bishop of Gozo, Mgr Anton Grech Delicata on 20th June 1875. He was known and respected as an exemplary priest, an erudite scholar, a gifted orator, and a man of outstanding musical artistic talents. Mgr Farrugia was a man whose literary, artistic, and musical output have turned out to be of an inestimable value to our Maltese culture; a man whose personality contributed to culture for he was, both in essence and in substance, a cultured man.

One particular characteristic which stands out in Mgr Farrugia is his professionalism, a professionalism not only of method but of mentality. He was equally at home as an artist as well as a scientist. Among his musical compositions one comes by Motets, Masses, Hymns (both sacred and secular), Antiphons, Litanies, Vespers, Responsorial Psalms, an Oratorio entitled *Mose*, and a Sinfonia 'La Patria' written specifically for La Stella Band of Victoria. Characteristic of his chromatic writing are the intricacy of the choral parts, his penchant for



Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia (1852-1925)
Portrait by Joseph Saguna, hanging at the
Aula Mons Giuseppe Farrugia, St George's
Basilica, Victoria.

sweeping melodic phrases and his mastery of orchestration. Mgr Farrugia shows the greatest capacity for what Stravinsky called "refitting old ships". In his music, the diversions, the descents, have a significance of feeling which sophisticates and complicates, without destroying the original impulse. Among his major compositions one finds his *Hymnus Georgi Miles Uncle* (1878) and the *Vespers* (1900). Here, the discerning listener realizes that for Mgr Farrugia, the purpose of art was beauty and beauty was style. Style must have been a supremely difficult achievement which could only have been won by knowledge, calculation and scrupulous toil against the resistance of language. In this context, by language one understands melody, harmonic structures contrapuntal forms etc. The harmonic intricacies, the superb counter-melodies, the complex interweaving of a four-part male chorus, the supporting orchestral accompaniment and, above all, the subtle innuendoes suggested by the text and so brilliantly expressed by the music, are the hallmarks of these inimitable works.

The literary output of Mgr Farrugia is various and varied. As a poet he wrote the lyrics for two splendid hymns, namely, *Su Garzoni* and *Spento e_ il Drago*. In these texts, there is a refinement and subdivision of a simple emotion by infusing it into a turn of thought of some difficulty. Here, one gets an extension, and not a vague one, beyond

the bound of thought. In these two poems, sensibility is never replaced by sentiment, and so poetry never degenerates into a diversity of noises. Mgr Farrugia possesses a capacity for assimilation with the consequent extent of range. The function of the poetry here is both to fix and make more conscious and precise emotions and feelings in which most people participate in their own experience, and to draw within the orbit of feeling and sense what had existed only in thought. It creates a unity of feeling out of various parts. Here one does not have unity of action which is epic or dramatic, but a unity of sound and sense which is pure lyric. There is, certainly, an immense technical skill which is necessary to make such discourse fly, but there is also that great emotional intensity necessary to make it soar.

One finds it hard to think that Gozo has, before or since, produced a person of the outstanding calibre of Mgr Farrugia. Few, perhaps, shall ever take the pains, as it were, to study the consummate art of his style, the fine philosophical depth in his

language, the gift of rhetoric in his sermons, the controlled abundance of his music, the complex simplicity of his designs in which intellect and passionate feeling preserve a classic, balance. However, upon those few, both living and as yet unborn, the works of Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia perform that mysterious and complete operation which transmutes not one department of thought but the whole intellectual and emotional tone of their being. His is a work of inestimable value to Maltese culture.

Years of heavy responsibility, years of facing great opposition in his aspirations, futile arguments with those who did not, or could not, see eye to eye with his ideas, hard work coupled with sheer inspiration the results of which can still be seen, heard, and felt today, all this took its toll on Mgr Farrugia. In 1915 he retired his post as Librarian and two years later he terminated his teaching career and resigned his Rectorship from the Seminary. In 1918 he relinquished his post as Vicar General. He died on the 17th of March 1925.