

Lifestyle & Culture

75 years since the establishment of the St Mary Orchestra in Mqabba

2020 is a historic year for the Society of St Mary and King George V Band of Mqabba where it will celebrate its 75th anniversary since the formation of the St Mary Orchestra, today known as the King George V Band. This Society has been on the forefront of cultural advancements on the Maltese islands, with innovations in the fireworks industry in the early 1900s, thereafter, post the end of the Second World War, it developed the musical culture in Mqabba.

The art of music within the village and the Society of St Mary had its origins way before the official formation. It was Guzeppi Galea, a local musician, who in 1939 took the initiative and started teaching music at the King George V Club. The club was established back in 1910 with the principle aim being the celebrations of the St Mary feast. Less than a year after starting this project, WWII hit our islands and music teaching was forced to stop due to heavy bombardments. It wasn't until early 1944 when Galea commenced teaching music once again. Soon after Galea, together with Profs Pawlu Carabott, Charles Schembri, Antonio Mamo, Espedito Deguara and Francesco Azzopardi, established the St Mary Orchestra in June 1944 as publicised in the Maltese newspaper *Il-Berqa* dated 16 February 1944, showing the official photo of the orchestra. The St Mary Orchestra made its debut in public on Sunday, 12 August 1945 on the second day of the Triduum of the feast of St Mary of Mqabba. During this debut, set in the parish square, various music themes, pro-



'Il-Berqa' photo: The newspaper 'Il-Berqa' of 16 February 1945, depicting the inception of the St Mary Orchestra back in 1944

duced by Ketèlbey and Von Suppé were displayed. This was the first ever concert by a local music formation in the village.

The transformation from orchestra to a band took place shortly after, in October 1946, bearing the name of the club, that of King George V Band led by Mro Joseph M. Barbara. This band kept on progressing, as invites from other village feasts started to pour in, with the band establishing performances also in events held on a national level. During the 1990s international relations were established with bands from the United Kingdom,

Italy, Israel and Greece, among others. A notable performance was delivered during 1998, where the association with the Corpo Bandistico Santa Vittoria di Matenano bore fruit, with this twinning awarded the highly regarded honour *Les Etoiles d'or du Jumelage* by the European Commission. During 2007, the band also played live performances in Rome and the Vatican City enhancing its relationship with other Italian bands.

Nowadays the school of music, within the King George V Band, has more than 33



The newspaper 'Il-Berqa' of 16 February 1945

students, developing their studies in music and instrumental techniques utilizing modern technologies made available to them through investments by the band club. Through the progress and milestones achieved throughout the years, the band has evolved, thereby keeping the aim of promoting music in the local community and the organisation of the feast of St Mary at heart.

Gaulitanus Choir sings round the Festive Season

As always, the festive season was a very busy one for Gozo's Gaulitanus Choir, with various events held in the sister island.

The run-up to Christmas started with an informal concert at the Christmas Market held at the Munxar Parish Centre on 14 December. Two informal carol singing sessions at the Arkadia Shopping Complex followed. However, the climax was reached with a formal Christmas Eve carol-singing event at the Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz. A sizeable audience was present for this event, held in collaboration with the Kempinski, which also offered a welcome drink to the guests.

These commitments served as a preview for the choir's two post-Christmas major commitments. The first was the annual Christmas concert organised by the Xaghra Local Council at the Xaghra Basilica, with the Gaulitanus Choir returning to the Xaghra Basilica after an absence of quite a few years. Held on Saturday, 28 December, under the artistic and musical direction of Gaulitanus Choir founder-director, Mro Colin Attard, this grand concert also featured the Gaulitanus Orchestral Ensemble led by Philip Orlov, who replaced an indisposed Marcelline Agius at the eleventh hour. The choir's soloists were sopranos Anna Bonello, Patricia Buttigieg, Stephanie Portelli and Annabelle Zammit, mezzo-soprano Joanna Pullicino, tenor Joseph Calleja, baritone Robert Xerri and bass Paul Scicluna. The concert was compered by well-known personality Keith Demicoli, with the Xaghra mayor Dr Christian Zammit and Xaghra Archpriest Mgr Carmelo Refalo both making addresses.

The programme was highly interesting and varied. A cappella choral numbers, such as Colin Attard's arrangement of the famous hymn *Veni, veni, Emmanuel*, alternated with celebrated orchestral interludes which included the Intermezzo from Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Greensleeves* and Malta's own *Sinfonia Pastorale* by Emanuele Galea. Choir, soloists and orchestra then teamed up for various numbers. These included two other Mal-



Photo: Xaghra Local Council

tese Christmas compositions, namely an *Alma Redemptoris Mater* by Gozitan composer Antonio Buhagiar and Colin Attard's own Choral variations on the traditional tune *Ninni ... ninni*, as well as two medleys made up of some of the most loved Christmas tunes arranged by Colin Attard. The concert ended with Tom Fettke's *Alleluia! Gloria!*, which was specifically orchestrated for the occasion by Attard. This received a standing ovation from the big audience present, who had also responded enthusiastically to all the excerpts performed.

The choir's Festive Season programme then reached a climax on New Year's Day, with the eighth edition of *A New Year's Toast*. Held at the Kempinski Hotel San Lawrenz, the very well-patronised event was supported by the Kempinski Hotel, Bank of Valletta and Playpen. Artistically and musically directed by the choir's founder-director Colin Attard, with guest pianist Milica Lawrence accompanying, the chosen programme consisted of five varied sections.

The first was devoted to a cappella choral works including Malcolm Sargent's arrangement of the famous Negro Spiritual *Mary had a baby*, Theofodore Perkins's *Carol*,

sweetly carol (featuring soprano Anna Bonello), and Attard's arrangement of the traditional British seasonal tune *Hey, ho, nobody home* (opened by a solo featuring debutant soloist Antonella Portelli). The second section was a reminiscence of the choir's three concert tours abroad in 2019, namely in Italy, Latvia and France, with three works performed in each of the tours and in the different relative languages re-presented. These were Riz Ortolani's *Dolce sentire* (with Annabelle Zammit as soloist) which the choir had performed at Assisi's Basilica di San Francesco, the Latvian traditional tune *Riga dimd* performed at Riga's St Peter's Church and Nicolo Isouard's *Pour votre fête* from his opera *Joconde* performed at Paris's *L'Eglise de la Madeleine*.

The third section featured four of Ivor Novello's best-loved songs from his musicals, performed by sopranos Anna Bonello and Annabelle Zammit and mezzo-soprano Joanna Pullicino. The fourth section was a foretaste of the choir's upcoming operatic production *Otello*, with seven contrasting choruses from operas by Giuseppe Verdi, including *Dove Guardì splendono raggi* from *Otello*, *Va, pensiero* from *La Traviata* and *Chi mai fra gl'inni e lausi* from *Aida*. These again featured mezzo-soprano Joanna Pullicino. The last section of the programme was reserved to bouncy polka-style Christmas numbers, arranged by Attard. These were Sonny Burke's *The merry Christmas polka*, R. Alex Anderson's *Mele Kalikimaka* (The Hawaiian Christmas Song), and Jerry Herman's *We need a little Christmas* from *Mame*. These brought the concert to a grand ending.

While this edition of *A New Year's Toast* rounded up the first phase of the Gaulitanus Choir's 2019-2020 season, significantly it also ushered in the choir's 30th anniversary celebrations. Indeed, may the Gaulitanus Choir keep filling the air with its versatile sounds, through which it transmits peace, serenity, positivity and hope during 2020 and for many more decades to come!

For more information visit www.gaulitanus.com