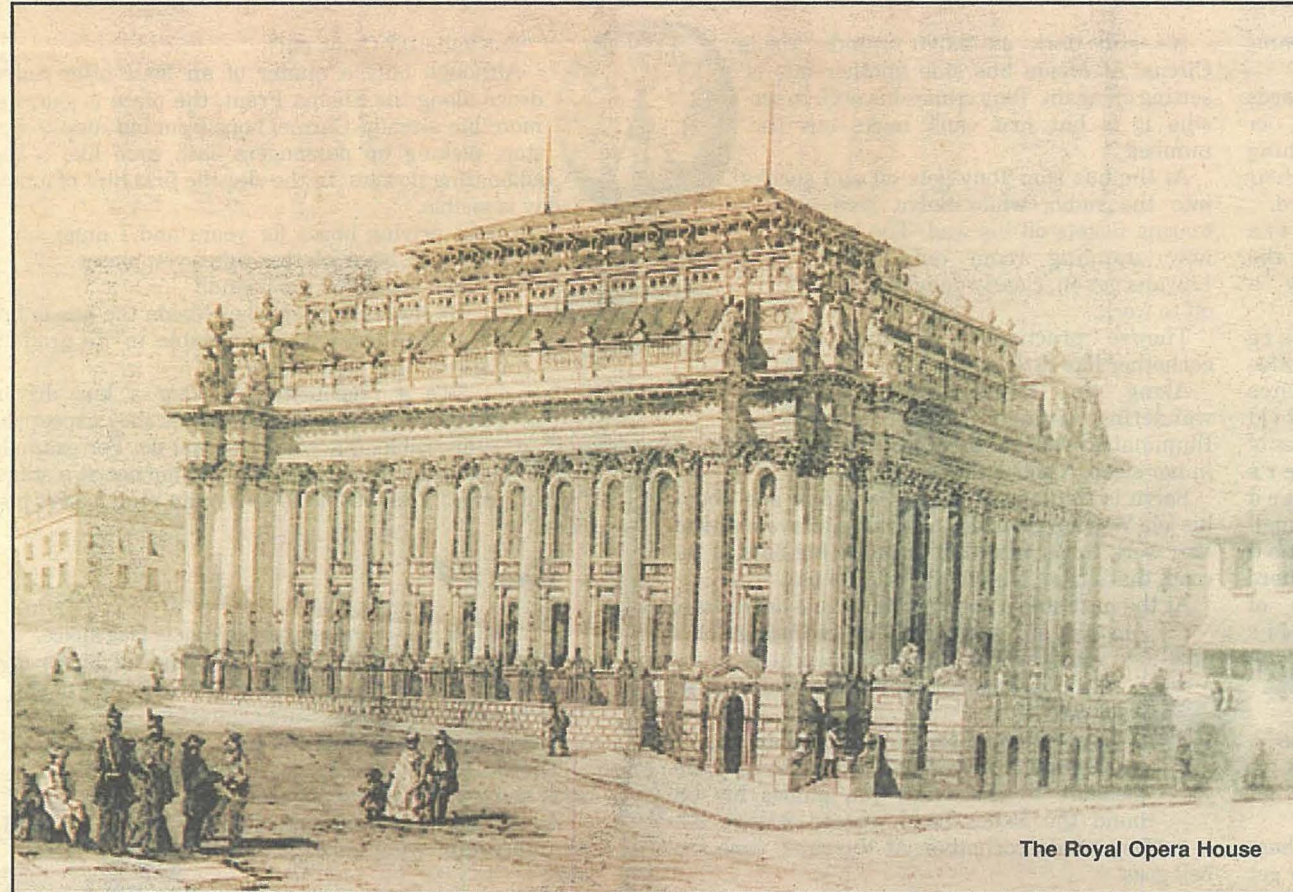


THE THEATRE MUSEUM



The Royal Opera House

MALTA'S ARTISTIC tradition goes back to the very beginnings of civilisation. Our temples and hypogea have regaled us with a wealth of sculpture and a small number of frescoes which are important for the light they shed on the culture prevalent in this part of the Middle Sea millennia ago.

Our tradition in the performing arts, the Theatre in particular, does not seem to be so venerable. The tombstone of a young comedian and musician dating back to Roman times which was discovered in Rabat in 1951 is apparently the first indication we have of theatre activity in Malta. The fact that Malta, unlike other Roman

possessions does not have the remains of a Roman theatre could be precisely because of the lack of such a theatre here. An understandable occurrence given the size of the island's population then.

The theatre, as we know it today, is definitely known to have come to Malta, as much else, with the arrival of the Order in 1530. Young knights are known to have staged performances in the great halls of the auberges. Three early Maltese playwrights seem to have been Enzo Magi, Giacomo Farrugia and Carlo Magri. They wrote late in the 17th century. The first Maltese drama company we know of is that which in 1697 performed a comedy specially written to celebrate the Treaty of Ryswick.

Grand Master Vilhena opened his theatre in January 1732. This has been the principal home of the theatre in Malta since then, albeit with varying fortunes. Throughout the 19th century theatres were opened in many of the larger villages and opera had its Opera House between 1866 and 1942.

is on record that at the various Auberges, and in the open, pageants, operas and dramatic offerings were put on by amateurs and professionals and a love for the theatre had spread throughout the population.

In ten months the theatre was built. The original interior, constructed entirely of wood, was similar in design to the Palermo theatre of that time. There have been many alterations through the years, bringing the auditorium to its present effective oval shape.

Originally called "Public Theatre", later it bore the title "Theatre Royal" and in 1866 was named after its founder.

The first night of all first nights was on 9th January 1732 with a presentation of "Merope", a grand tragedy in the classic style. The setting was designed by Francois Moudion, who was the architect of the Order of St John, and it was played by the Knights.

Maltese playwrights and opera composers gradually earned their place alongside foreign authors and it was a Maltese, Nicolo Isouard, who eventually took over the running of the theatre during the French occupation.

With the arrival of the British, the theatre saw nights of splendour and various members of royalty patronised it. Strangely, it was the very prosperity of these years that brought the eclipse of the Manoel theatre. The large garrison, the fleet, and an increasing number of tourists rendered the theatre inadequate. In 1861 it became private property.

With the proceeds, an Opera House was built and the Manoel fell into disuse. It was even a doss house for beggars. And then, suddenly, in 1873, the Opera House was destroyed by fire and the beggars were evicted. Grand opera once again resounded in the theatre until the Opera House was reconstructed.

Until the demise of the Opera House in 1942, the Manoel Theatre served as a dance hall and a cinema. After the war the building was acquired by the Maltese Government and the theatre was revived with a grand opening performance of the ballet "Coppelia" in December 1960.

This new and shining jewel in Malta's heritage has seen such celebrities grace its stage as Yehudi Menuhin, Rostropovitch, the Berlin State Opera Ballet, Kiri Te Kanawa and host of others.

Recently a fine old house adjoining the theatre has been transformed to create a Foyer.



Antonio Manoel De Vilhena

Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena, a Portuguese, was elected Grand Master in 1722. A man of great intellectual qualities, he was popular with all, and his "savoir faire" earned him everyone's love.

At the beginning of his reign, fearing a second Turkish invasion of Malta, he promptly took steps against such an eventuality, and the enemy, seeing his preparedness, sailed away without even attempting a landing.

Having fortified the Island, he began to find ways and means of encouraging civil enterprise, and in the political field he managed to negotiate a treaty of peace with the Sultan of Constantinople.

As a fitting gesture towards the Maltese, he built in 1732 the Manoel Theatre which is a loving monument to his achievements. It keeps his memory fresh and glorious in all those who cultivate the Arts and all those who seek an honest recreation, as is implied by the Theatre's motto: As honestatem populi oblectationem.

The Manoel Theatre... "for the honest recreation of the people"

It is claimed that the Manoel Theatre is "the third oldest theatre in Europe" and "the oldest theatre in the Commonwealth".

It is said that Grand Master de Vilhena decided one March day in 1731 to build a public theatre, mostly out of his own pocket, "for the honest recreation of the people."

The vows of charity and chastity to which the Knights were committed did not prevent them from indulging in theatrical activities and it



MUSEUM

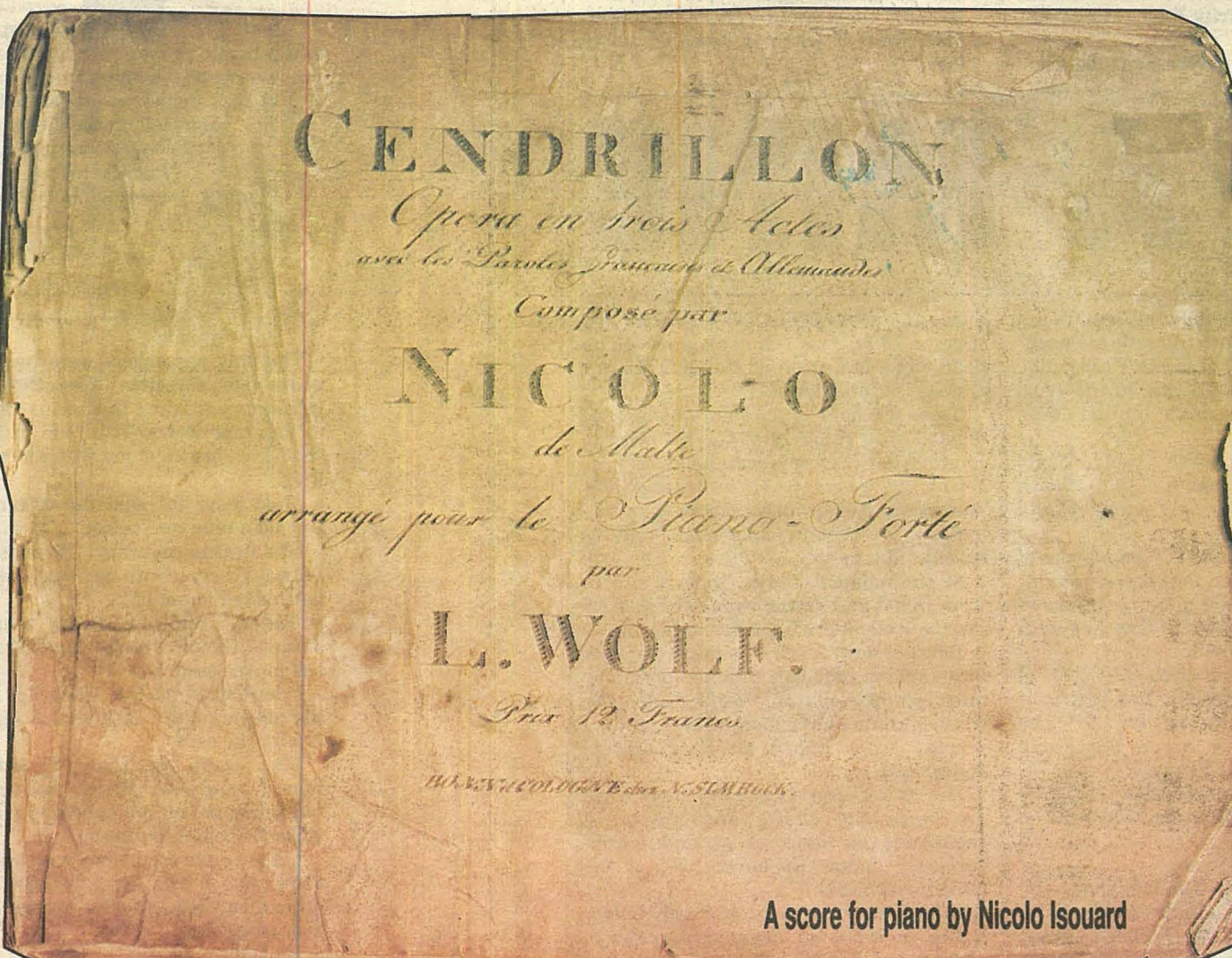
The Theatre Museum is divided into three broad sections. The first displays a collection of designs of opera costumes for local productions. This collection should prove interesting to students of the history of art in Malta, because most of the designs, if not all, are to date of unknown authorship. It would be exciting to discover a Brockdorff, a Bellanti or a Cali among the designs exhibited.

The second section comprises theatre costumes used in the operas Rigoletto, Lucia di Lamermur, Otello, Cosi Fan Tutte, Aida, Fedora, Tosca, Nabucco, Il Trovatore, Lohengrin, Manon Lescaut, La Bohemme, La Vedova Allegra and from the ballet Romeo e Julietta there is also a costume from the pantomime Alice in Wonderland. There are high boots worn by Joseph Satariano together with other parts of costumes donned by Malta's leading baritone.

The third section is dominated by a model of the Royal Opera House as it was between 1866 and 1942. This magnificent model gives today's generations the opportunity to visualise what a splendid and impressive edifice occupied the sad site in Valletta today used as a car park.

Also in this section is a collection of designs of stage scenes for the operas Norma, Othello, I Vespri Siciliani, I Pagliacci, Il Trovatore, Fedora, Adriana Lecourver. These also are mostly of unknown authorship. Intriguing are portraits of theatre personalities, composers, musicians, singers, impresarios, directors of the theatre companies, etc. This section of the Museum could be considerably expanded.

Highly interesting are original architectural drawings of the Manoel Theatre and the Royal Opera House.



A score for piano by Nicolo Isouard

ings of the Manoel Theatre and the Royal Opera House dating back to 1811, 1861 and 1876 which have been loaned by the Department of Public Works and Construction.

The Theatre Museum also houses a collection of rare handbills, librettos and programmes of the Theatre Royal, the Royal Opera House and the Manoel Theatre. There is also a small collection of caricatures of personalities connected with the theatre.

Many of the items in the Theatre Museum have come from the archives and resources of the Manoel Theatre. Many more were donated by private individuals.

"The Theatre Museum now intends to establish a database on the Theatre in Malta", says Mr. John Lowell, Chairman of the Manoel Theatre Management Committee. "I therefore appeal to individuals who have in their possession items connected with the theatre, be they costumes, photographs, scripts, librettos, etc. to come forward and let us know about them. We may include them in special exhibitions we plan to hold in the future."

Mr. Lowell thanked Parliamentary Secretary Dr. Joe Cilia for his support. He also thanked Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti for setting up the museum to a high standard of display. "Had it not been for Patrimonju, it would have been very difficult for us to complete this project by our date line", he concluded.

"The Theatre Museum is well worth a visit. It is open daily from 10.00am to 1.00pm and from 3.00pm to 6.00pm. Admission to the Museum only is Lm1. Should one wish to visit the theatre also, the cost would be Lm1.50.



Early 19th Century Real Teatro entrance ticket



A 19th Century Wind Machine



A 19th Century Stage Make-up box