

A SIREN'S SONG

Maria Frendo

*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming, The clouds methought would open and show riches Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.*

Act III. Sc. ii

Caliban's words in Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, refer to a magical island replete with musical sound, not only through Ariel's songs that charm Ferdinand to walk onto the "yellow sands", but the very air sings the most ravishing music. It is an island that welcomes the shipwrecked Prospero and, at the end of the play, brings about the reconciliation to the conflict between him and his long-standing enemy, Alonso. It is an island where differences are dissolved rather than resolved; where time stands still; where, as Tennyson puts it in 'The Lotos-Eaters', "it seemed always afternoon" and where you expect the "poppy [to] hang in sleep".

97

This reminds me of Gozo, perhaps more the Gozo of my idyllic childhood than of my adulthood, but it is there in the memory, continually reinventing itself, continually nourishing my life. Arguably, Odysseus himself was enticed by Calypso's song in Homer's *Odyssey* (and later in Joyce's *Ulysses*) to while away a few utopian years on our little rock, so much so that he spent seven years living in leisure and pleasure with Calypso on the island of Ogygia, arguably Gozo. I like to think that Odysseus (Ulysses) was the first immigrant – our island's hospitality made him welcome, our island's music made him happy. Since Odysseus was charmed by the siren's song in the *Odyssey*, there has been no turning back; our island sings, it charms, it makes people want to stay and never leave, it makes those who are forced to leave to come back again and again. There's something about the island's music that is quite simply irresistible. Like little Oliver, it makes you beg for more. As we read in the *Odyssey*:

No man rows past this isle in his dark ship without hearing the honeysweet sound from our lips. He delights in it and goes his way a wiser man (Book XII).

To the mortal Odysseus, the bewitching song of the Sirens is a passageway through which he can attain, however imperfectly, a sense of union with the divine.

Music for Gozo, more specifically for Victoria, is a social and cultural condition, and what had been perceived as a mystical aura in Homer's time has become neutralised against a canvas of social expression. Through the variety of music we have created and practised for centuries, the listener has access to the heard and the unheard, to the powers of interpretation such as we see in our culture, and to the multiple displacements that occur with the hearing and interpreting of fragments that shadow the cultural codes of the communal ear.

Apart from the island music that resists both description and analysis, Victoria, Gozo's capital city, boasts a rich and varied heritage of music-making that particularly flourished prominently in the twentieth century. From the popularity of the city's two main bands, the *La Stella Philharmonic* and the *Leone* bands, which are largely but not exclusively involved in making merry during the feasts of St George, Patron Saint of Gozo, and Santa Marija respectively; to the two main theatres co-existing harmoniously on the main street of the city – *Teatru Astra* and *Teatru Aurora* – which are responsible for regaling enthusiastic audiences with opera productions each year; to the ever-growing popularity of the yearly musical put on by *Teatru Astra*; to the handful of choirs associated with their respective parishes, and others who are independent of such connections; to the flourishing of Festivals, one, the *Victoria International Arts Festival*, is as old and consolidated as the hills that frame the island; and the list goes on. For a city that has a population of just under seven thousand residents, this is nothing short of remarkable, and for those who see us from the outside of our confines it is not less than a miracle.

98

However, I am not writing this short tribute to state the obvious. No-one can reminisce more about our city's biography than the man in the café, the elderly person sitting patiently on a bench in the town square, the old woman saying her rosary in one of our glorious churches, or, indeed, anyone who has imbibed the spirit of our location. What I wish to stress is that a city's greatness is not measured by its size but by a handful of individuals who help raise it above a mediocre level, who help infuse the parochial with a strong yet gentle dose of the cosmopolitan, who help put it on a world map, and who consolidate for it a legacy and a memory that make it the envy of much larger cities. Surely, in the field of classical music, very few have emulated or reached the standards that the late Mro Joseph Vella has done for Victoria, the city where he was born and bred, and to whom he dedicated his energies, time, and genius. His work and his vision have branded Victoria a city of musical and cultural excellence. He was a man who never followed trends; he simply set them for others to follow suit. With regard to our musical heritage, Victoria owes him a debt of gratitude that cannot be quantified.

So, whether one wishes to dwell in the land of Homeric/Shakespearean/Tennysonian idylls, or whether one chooses to root his/her stance in a historically-bound territory, certainly, Victoria offers the best of both worlds. At the end of the day, we could borrow Aeneas' words:

Forsan et haec olim meminisse juvabit
(Perhaps it will please us one day to remember these things)
(*Aeneid*, Book I, v. 203.)