

Layers

As from the 1960s onwards, music-making in Maltese pre-history has been a source of inspiration to several local composers. Archaeological sites like Magar Qim, the Hypogeum, Ġgantija and Għar Dalam have been evoked by these composers as sites in which some form of 'humanly organised sound,' to resonate John Blacking's definition of music, was created to serve the various needs of the inhabitants. For these composers, the past transpires as central to the exploration of who we are as Maltese and what made us the way we are. Such compositions delve deeply, even if imaginatively, into the archaeology of our national identity; they depict possible modes of mediation between 'music' and the spaces in which this was created, transmitted, and made meaningful when merged to function and purpose. Cassar-Cordina's *Tmiem* is another attempt in this direction. Together with the lyrics of Immanuel Mifsud and the visual effects of Victor Agius, Cassar-Cordina evokes, represents, and interprets the sacredness of the St Agatha Catacombs as well as the mysteries that enshroud this place.

The language used in Cassar-Cordina's work translates sounds, derived from possible languages that might have been used throughout the period of when these catacombs were in use, into music. For her, the in-built musicality of each word becomes a source of inspiration for the creation of further melodies. In this sense, *Tmiem* leans heavily on the logogenic (word-inspired) theories for the origin of music. The composer makes use of a male choir to create a deep and obscure sound which it could have been difficult to create if she had chosen to work, for instance, with a female-male, or an all-female choir. Here, Cassar-Cordina builds on the established association between the male voice and its iconic representation in Western sacred music, such as in Gregorian and Armenian chanting. For Cassar-Cordina,

the sacredness of the catacombs could effectively be represented to contemporary audiences through the use of the male voice even if the female figure might have had stronger or equal degree of sacredness to that of man. This composition builds and manipulates layers of electro-acoustic sounds that merge the voice with the sound of percussion in an attempt to represent primitiveness and, therefore, the equivocal.

The composition can be said to be divided into three parts (though this not so evident). Its multi-layered sounds become more stretched and give a sense of timelessness the more the music unfolds. The texture relies heavily on block chord structures rather than on melodic and rhythmic flow. Block chords have the tendency to create a sense of temporal stillness reminiscent, amongst others, of Mussorgsky's 'Catacombs' in *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874). They may also imply a sense of architectural grandeur as in Satie's reference to the architectural greatness of the Notre Dame Cathedral in his *Ogives*. Both perspectives match well Cassar-Cordina's depictions of the catacombs. Even if within a contemporary idiom, the composer builds on musical structures quite familiar to us, as if for Cassar-Cordina, the familiar is more valued than the unfamiliar and, by implication, less risky in terms of communication with her listeners. Sound clusters in this work direct the listener into an almost exasperating sensation in which the listener is trapped in the tension between the past and the present. This composition is all about layers of sounds which she manipulates and brings together into a cohesive multi-layered musical structure that, like the catacombs, is structurally solid though composed of diverse layers of sentiments, episodes, and mysteries.

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