

Music

A musical meditation

Silvio John Camilleri reviews a concert of spiritual music in Gozo.



Pianist Franca Moschini

One of the recitals comprising this year's edition of the Gaullitana, A Music Festival, was *Crucifixus Est* – a concert focusing on spiritual music. Mezzo soprano Agata Bienkowska and pianist Franca Moschini entertained the audience at the Gozo Ministry hall in Victoria. The baroque paintings hanging in the hall offered an interesting complement to the selection of 18th-century works.

The performers sounded at their peak when interpreting music by Handel and Rossini. The programme included two arias from Handel's lesser known oratorio *Il Trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* which concerns the short-lived nature of human life. The initial version of this work dates to the late 1700s, and the composer added further choruses for the London premiere around 30 years later.

One of the arias of this oratorio is *Lascia la Spina* – an appeal to overlook misery and appreciate joyful moments instead. This aria discloses how the composer remoulded his prior melodies to be used in conjunction with different texts.

In this case the *Sarabande* from *Almira*, was modified to *Lascia la Spina*, and subsequently to *Lascia ch'io Pianga*, included in *Rinaldo*. The other rendition from Handel's oratorio was *Tu del Ciel Ministro Eletto*, where the allegory of beauty repents from her lack of trust in God.

Bienkowska's voice and her approach to execution particularly suited these pieces, and their haunting characteristics were clearly brought out. The mezzo's modulating voice ranging from bold high notes to soft utterings, at times bordering on the whispers, resulted in a moving interpretation.

The pleading qualities inherent in *Lascia la Spina* were brought to the fore while *Tu del Ciel Ministro Eletto* was rendered in a dramatic vein. The latter aria was also re-interpreted as an *encore*, together with a lyrical interpretation of Giulio Caccini's *Ave Maria*.

Another commendable performance was the *Agnus Dei* from *Petite Messe Solennelle* by Gioacchino Rossini. The composer penned this Mass during a stay in France, and it was premiered in Paris. The work illustrates how Rossini's sacred composition, still retain the exuberant element which one encounters in his secular works.

“The performers sounded at their peak when interpreting music by Handel”

Moschini played the instrumental *Prélude Religieux* from this work, where the solemn atmosphere of the piece was particularly evident at the opening and at the closing. Despite this, I felt that at particular central sections the execution should have been more confident, rather than a mere rendition of the written score.

The performers also interpreted the *Agnus Dei* from this work. Both the vocalist and the pianist offered an excellent performance, and the pleading qualities of the text when uttering *miserere* were particularly moving. The audience also enjoyed the whimsical crescendo which conveys the impression of a conclusion, when some more music bars actually follow.

The concert also featured two pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach, including an aria from where St Peter utters his suffering after denying Christ. Entitled *Erbarne Dich, Mein Gott, um Meiner Zähren Willen!* (Have Mercy Lord, My God, because of my weeping), this is one example of the sad instances encountered in the Passion.

The execution seemed very neat overall and the atmosphere of pathos was evoked throughout the piano part. I would have expected the vocalist to sound a bit more emotional throughout this aria.

The recital also included two movements from Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. The aria *Quae Moerbat* features an interesting contrast, given that the exuberant melody does not actually mirror the sorrow conveyed in the text. The interpretation of the vocal part was commendable, including the rendition of the musical tremolos which suggest the trembling of the Virgin. Perhaps a less speedy approach would have imbued the work with

a more solemn atmosphere, although quite a lot performers opt for a brisk tempo.

The other aria from Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* was *Fac ut Portem*. Written in a more restrained manner, it offers more scope for contemplation. The performers evoked the sombre vein of the piece and rendered a very fine interpretation.

The music of Neapolitan composer Francesco Durante (1684-1755) also featured in the recital. The performers selected *Vergin Tutto Amor* from his oeuvre which mainly comprises sacred music. The interpretation of this piece, such as the rendition of high notes, was acceptable, however I think that its expressive qualities could have been better emphasised.

Moschini adorned the concert with some instrumental interludes. The first one was the *Allemande in C Minor* from Bach's *French Suite No. 2*. The French suites showcase Bach writing in a variety of manners.

Moschini's interpretation seemed to emphasise the stern

approach associated with German baroque music, without discarding the liveliness which one would expect in a work by the great composer.

Another instrumental piece was the *Gavotta in D Minor* by Domenico Scarlatti. Having spent periods in Naples, Rome, London, Lisbon and Madrid, Scarlatti's music features various characteristics such as references to Spanish rhythms.

Moschini's rendition of the gavotte emphasised the rhythms reminiscent of Iberian music, almost bordering on the percussive qualities, which I consider as an appealing approach.

While the repertoire focused on baroque compositions, there was still a diversity of styles emanating from different European regions. Bach was nurtured in German tradition but also composed in French and Italian styles, Rossini settled in France for some time, and Scarlatti's compositions reveal references to Spanish music. It all suggests that globalisation took off a long time ago.

Free concert in Valletta by national and youth orchestra

For the third year running, St George's Square in Valletta will be transformed into a space for popular entertainment as the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra teams up with the Malta Youth Orchestra for an evening of popular classics.

American conductor Kelly Kuo will be directing the 100-strong orchestra in an eclectic programme made up of works known by everyone. Although not necessarily known in their classical context, they will definitely ring a bell and link to some popular commercial, a film soundtrack or even mobile ring tones.

This year's programme features a toe tapping *Overture to Girl Crazy* by Gershwin, the exhilarating *L'Arlesienne Suite No 1* by Bizet, *Superman's* film score by Williams, Loewe's *My Fair Lady* and others.

The concert is being held on June 26 at 8.30pm. Entrance to St George's Square is free on a first-come, first-served basis.

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Kelly Kuo