



Il-Madonna tal-Mellieħa

The creation of an oratorio

Geoffrey Thomas

Last year, a meeting was held at the Imperial Band Club, bringing together representatives of the Imperial Band and Ladies Choir, the Sanctuary Choir, and the family of the late Jimmy Muscat. When he died, Jimmy left – almost complete – a history of the importance and divine influence of Our Lady of Mellieħa over the years, told through a series of events beginning with the shipwreck of St. Paul and St. Luke and concluding with the more accurate dating and restoration of the Icon in the Sanctuary. The outcome of the meeting was that Carl Borg and I were asked to compose a full-length oratorio to the text of this religious history. Why now? Well, as most of you know, 2024 marks the 125th anniversary of the Crowning of the Icon (L-Inkurunazzjoni tal-Ikona).

A year later and rehearsals are in full swing. We have an oratorio, composed in 18 continuous movements, with a total of 34 sections. It is written for tenor, baritone, and bass-baritone soloists, with a soprano narrator, choir, concert band, and continuo (consisting of piano and cello). In all, almost 100 performers will be taking part in the performance on 21st September this year, in the Parish Church, just three days before the actual anniversary.

So, what were the main challenges? Firstly, Carl and I had to share out the movements so that we could compose at a distance, me in Mellieħa, Carl in Brussels. We then planned to share the music as we wrote it so that themes and musical motifs would tie the work together.

Secondly, the Maltese language is not easy to set unless it has been written specifically for music. Even if the metre is regular, it is often the case that the stresses and emphases will be irregular, mixing the poetic feet, or the rhythm of the syllables. For example:

*Aħna konna kollha lsiera
Naqdfu, naqdfu bla waqfien
Fil-Korona Ottomana
L-ikbar ġifen fost l-iġfien.*

This is so easy to set as it comprises regular trochees (an accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable) whereas in the same poem:

*Wara jiem ta' hafna biża'
Dehret quddiemna artna
U fil-port għaziż minn tagħha
Dħalna kburin, setgħana.*

combines trochees and dactyls (an accented syllable followed by **two** unaccented syllables). However, this verse eventually provided the stimulus for our 'rescue' motif. Earlier in the work, one of the attacks on Malta is signalled by '*Raettiwr, Raettiwr! Aejjae malajr għax hawn dahlu l-furbuni u qigħdin jistahbaw taeħt il-luġoġ.*' Congratulations if you understand this at first sight.

Other challenges? Well, we wanted this work to be a true oratorio. An oratorio is, put simply, an opera with a religious text without the staging. The piece needs to flow, even if it's made up of various 'chapters'. To help with this, we decided to use recitatives. In an oratorio, the story is told by a narrator (sometimes an evangelist, or one or more of the characters) through recitative where the music is, mostly, secondary to the text and the accompaniment is very simple: chords played by a keyboard often doubled by a bass instrument. The role of the soloists and chorus is to comment on and/or to demonstrate the action which has been described or introduced. The result in this case is a musical story told by a female narrator, with three male soloists playing the historical characters, and a mixed chorus acting out or commenting on the action.

Finally, we needed to edit and add to the original text. Step forward Eleanor Vella, Jimmy's daughter. As a published author, Eleanor was more than up to the task. She managed to reduce the number of verses to avoid duplication between the narrator and chorus, she added another chapter to bring the story right up-to-date, added a lovely għeluq (or closing

section), and wrote a wonderful hymn in three verses dedicated to Il-Madonna bil-Bambin.

What to listen out for? The oratorio begins with an instrumental description of the shipwreck of St. Luke and St. Paul in 60 A.D. and moves through the ages: 409 A.D. and the consecration by the bishops, the painting of the icon, attacks by pirates and Turks (listen out for the whip!), the building of the Pilgrims Arch following the drought of 1719, the building of Mellieħa as a parish, the coronation

of the icon in 1899, the Pope's visit in 1990, right up to the restoration of the icon and of the pilgrims' chambers. Musically, there are mock medieval sections for atmosphere, real French tunes from the area near Lourdes, moments of tragedy matched by moments of relief, thanksgiving and praise, and the oratorio ends on a high with the soloists singing an Ave Maria whilst the chorus are gathered together, witnesses to all that has been done in the name of Our Lady. L-istorja tieħdok lura.

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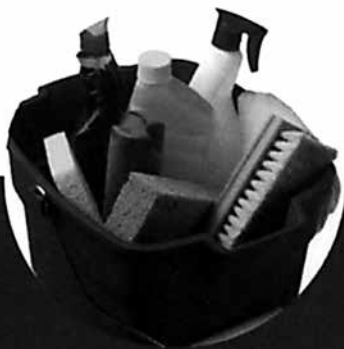
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ORATORIO

IL-MADONNA TAL-MELLIEĦA

Knisja Arcipretali tal-Mellieħa
21 ta' Settembru 2024, 8 PM

Jimmy Muscat
Kliem

Geoffrey Thomas u Carl Borg
Mużika

Solisti: Alan Sciberras, Ken Scicluna, Louis Andrew Cassar
Narratriċi: Mariette Borg

Bis-sehem tal-Banda u l-Kor tal-Għaqda Mużikali Imperial
u l-Kor tas-Santwarju Nazzjonali tal-Madonna tal-Mellieħa

Taħt id-direzzjoni tas-Surmast Anthony Borg



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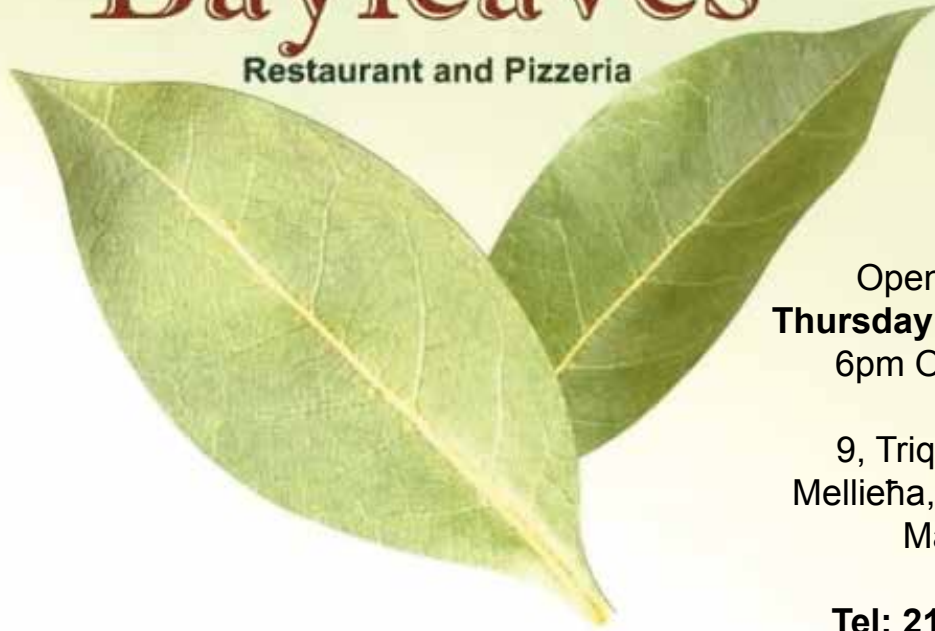
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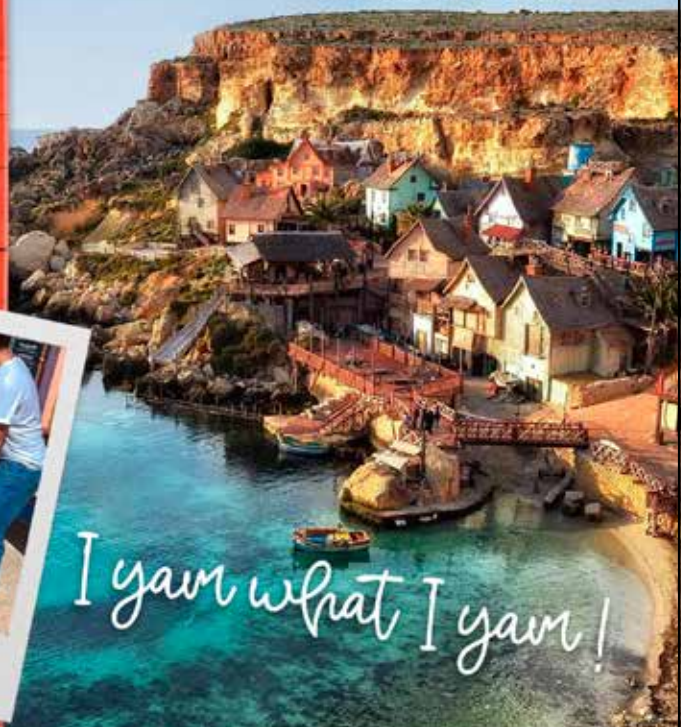


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