

## ***Eighteenth-Century Music and its Political Configurations: a largely unknown Chapter in Maltese History***

**Simon MERCIECA  
University of Malta**

The period of the rule of the Knights of Saint John (1530–1798) is currently remembered and celebrated as Malta's golden age. The Knights are typically perceived as benign Christian and Catholic rulers, and the Grand Masters considered among Malta's most famous historical characters. The Order is rightly credited with having brought a cultural Renaissance to the Island. During its rule, a number of far-reaching historical events took place. Conveniently, only the victory of the Knights of Saint John at the Great Siege of 1565, when a large Ottoman force was repelled following fierce fighting, is commemorated on a national scale. The arrival of Napoleon's forces in 1798, by contrast, does not receive the same acknowledgement or coverage in popular history.

Yet the Order's rule was not necessarily as golden as it is sometimes made out to be, and the Knights' administration is tarnished by various miscarriages of justice. They were despotic rulers following *ancien regime* principles. The artistic and architectural grandeur of the time and the cultural renaissance fostered by the Order interested the few. It has been suggested that only two per cent of a country's population was really concerned with cultural issues during the early modern period.<sup>1</sup> The arrival in Malta of Michelangelo Merisi di Caravaggio (the year 2007 marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that event) and the engagement of other important artists, such as Mattia Preti together with the employment of important military engineers, provide proof of the Order's contribution to Malta's cultural history. This fact cannot be denied. There is no doubt that the Knights had cultural acumen, a rare quality amongst contemporary politicians, and had a firm discernment when it came to engaging leading artists and promising military engineers. The artistic output produced during the 268 years of Hospitaller rule brought about the misconception that this period qualified as Malta's baroque age, when in reality between 1530 and 1798, that is the period of the Hospitallers' rule on the island, Europe experienced many different movements of artistic expressions, varying from Mannerism, to Baroque, High Baroque, Rococo, and the Classical expression. Then, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment began to leave its marks on Malta. However, despite the causative effects of all these movements, the artistic golden age has been pinned down to the Baroque period, that period which the age of reason, the Enlightenment, violently struggled to eliminate and obliterate.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a general overview about the Renaissance and its social relevance George Holmes, *Europe: Hierarchy and Revolt 1320–1450* (Fontana, 1978); J.R. Hale, *Renaissance Europe 1480–1520* (Fontana, 1971).

Dissatisfaction among *philosophes* and the Enlightenment scholars with the kind of government exemplified by the Order is not without point. The rule of the Order of Saint John has some black episodes. The most famous personality among the Grand Masters was Jean de La Valette, considered the hero of the victorious siege over the Turks. Yet he hanged a Maltese notable, the medical doctor Joseph Falzon, for daring to report his political despotism towards the locals to Emperor Charles V. What is of interest is the fact that the Knights of Saint John sought to annihilate all historical evidence of this. The character of Falzon has remained alive in the popular tradition of an unsung Maltese history. He was rediscovered in the Romantic period but his historical persona was so confused in the midst of history that even his proper name was forgotten, as he began to be called Matteo Callus. It was only recently, and after laborious research, that the true historical identity of this man was re-established.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, the first feelings of a national Maltese sentiment were expressed in history by writers who were also accomplished poets and literary writers. Their literary expression followed the mainstream views of their era. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tendency was to write historical sagas, full of praise of the ruling elite, where events were analysed from a theological perspective. The Romantic spirit that pervaded nineteenth-century Malta led a number of Maltese scholars to view the political events that had taken place during the Knights of Saint John's period from a different perspective. They continued to castigate the Knights for their political, social and moral behaviour. Even today, there is some risk of distortion in the popular historical record. There is a harping on the idea that the Hospitaller Order, as a Catholic Church institution, was the natural ally and supporter of the local Church. This can render it tempting to exact their actions, whilst their wrongdoings are labelled as venial.

In fact, the local members of the clergy were the most critical exponents of the Hospitallers' rule. There existed an urge in the nineteenth century to remind contemporaries of the grievances suffered under the Knights. Today, the one to be primarily remembered is the protest organised in 1775 against the Order by a group of priests with the aim of unseating the Order from power. Don Gaetano Mannarino led this protest, but the revolt failed and he was imprisoned. In all probability the fact that he was a priest spared him his life. Other priests involved in this event were also imprisoned, whilst lay conspirators were beheaded. Today, the figure of this Catholic priest, Mannarino, is almost forgotten, and there are amateur historians who castigate him for daring to stage a plot against a brotherhood of Catholic monks dressed in military armour. This is in stark contrast with what happened at the turn of the nineteenth century: his action was strongly lauded by one of the most important local Romantic poets, Gio Anton Vassallo, who wrote the first complete history of Malta in Italian.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Vassallo was not alone in looking at the Knights' period with a different political eye. The priest and historian, Leopoldo Fiteni, was another. A parish priest in one of the Maltese harbour cities, he was politically and culturally very active. After the British granted Freedom of the Press to the Maltese in 1839, he was one of the first to issue a journal in Malta. In it, he published all sorts of historical information, including accounts of uprisings by the Maltese against the Knights that had been totally

---

<sup>2</sup> S. Fiorini, 'X'Nafu Dwar Callus', *Min Kien Callus?* E. Bartolo (ed.), (KKM, 2003), pp. 15-33.

forgotten. He recounts that in 1645, the Knights' government decided to disarm the city of Mdina and also to abolish the old University. In Fiteni's words, this irritated the people, prompting a women's protest at Valletta. The women protested, armed with wooden sticks and swords. The Hospitaller Knights' ministers were so frightened that they escaped from Mdina and the local bishop was asked to intervene to calm the situation.<sup>3</sup> Another contemporary of Fiteni, Ignazio Francesco Panzavecchia, who was also a priest and had written a history, *Gli Ultimi Giorni dei Cavalieri a Malta*, records another violent demonstration by women from the villages of Zebbug and Żurrieq that took place on the island in 1797 in connection with a fraudulent scheme involving the production of cotton.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the time of the Knights in Malta was not entirely serene, and the local population was not necessarily experiencing peace, justice, or prosperity.

### Music as a political weapon

When speaking about important historical events, historians are often forced to focus on the tangible heritage and the written record. However, there is also the intangible heritage, which sometimes is overlooked. Unfortunately, interpretation of the intangible record is far more difficult.

In 1798, the Knights of Saint John folded before the French Republican Forces. Yet, the new French period was a brief one. The Maltese had to come to terms with the new ordinances and new form of hardships. The Maltese became so infuriated that the whole island rose up in arms and besieged the French troops in the fortified harbour cities for eighteen months, at the end forcing their capitulation and definite expulsion from Malta. The aid of foreign powers was also sought, in particular that of the British and Portuguese navies as well as the support of the King of the Two Sicilies. Under Lord Nelson's command, the British and Portuguese ships blockaded the harbour entrance whilst the King of the Two Sicilies supplied troops, weapons and victuals to help the Maltese insurgents.

In this paper, I will not be focusing on the question of why the Maltese failed to stand up for the Knights and support them against the Republican French Forces. This so-called failure has been amply debated and discussed in our history. Various reasons have been advanced, including the possibility that the Knights failed to put up a resistance against the French as the Maltese soldiers employed in their service had betrayed them. Another reason given was that the Maltese representatives made it clear to the Grand Master of the day, Ferdinand von Hompesch zu Bolheim (1797–1798), that they were not ready to stand up and fight the French forces. Others take a more defensive stand towards the Maltese. There are arguments that the Maltese soldiers went to their posts to fight the French invaders. However, there was internal betrayal within the Hospitaller ranks, who ruled the Maltese military personnel. The Maltese nobility was not even admitted into the ranks of the Order,

---

<sup>3</sup> L. Fiteni, *Giornale Cattolico*, 23 August, vol. XV, No. ii, 1841, p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> D. Agius Muscat, 'Panzavecchia u Vassalli (I) L-Istorja ta' l-'Ultimo Periodo' (1835)', *Il-Mument*, 20 June 2004, p. 16.

they could not assume positions of command and it has been said that some Maltese soldiers found that their gunpowder, for example, had been sabotaged.<sup>5</sup>

However, an aspect that in my opinion is important, but which has not yet been properly studied, is, unexpected as it may appear, the political role played by music. Music is an aspect of the intangible heritage that is easy to lose track of in historical documents. At the same time, it is a form of expression that touches peoples' feelings with the result that it can be easily converted into an effective political weapon.<sup>6</sup>

This reality was well understood in the eighteenth century. Composers and aspiring students could move around Europe studying and playing music even if they were not fluent in or had no basic knowledge of the language of the country they were visiting. The fact that music had already developed a set of written notes recognised and studied by any one studying music helped in the mobility of musicians and composers. On their part, rulers sought to have music as a form of court entertainment but were also conscious of the fact of providing to their subjects good compositions that created a form of internal conversation between the different notes. Music appeared so beautiful but at the same time abstract, that it appealed to both the rulers of the ancien regime as well as to the populace. Eventually the music lexical stock would be borrowed by those movements, including musicians and composers who joined the opposition in the fight against the monarchic powers.

It should be pointed that only a tiny minority of composers joined the opposition movements. In general, they supported their paymasters and patrons. They were rarely anti-establishment but once the latter became part of the new establishment, they had no problems in writing for them after being well-remunerated and promised good pensions.

The emergence of the city of Naples in the eighteenth century as a centre of Mediterranean and culture power was of direct importance to Malta. Geographically, a new European power was sitting in proximity to the island and it was conceived to be of political and cultural advantage to Malta. As should be expected, the local ruling elite sought to copy the Neapolitan model, and literally encouraged promising students to go to Naples to study music, with the hope that at the end of their studies, they would return back to laud the glories of their masters.

## Naples at the turn of the Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century, an event occurred which led to a number of Maltese being afforded the opportunity to be at the forefront of the European cultural scene. During that century, Naples became a modern Mediterranean megapolis. It was the melting pot for all Southern Italy, the cultural capital of the South. Its port was the biggest and the most

---

<sup>5</sup> According to one of the most influential French Knights, Bosredon Ransijat, who was first at the service of the Grand Masters but then, sided with the French once the latter took Malta, the Maltese could not mount a proper resistance as a number of French knights had sabotaged the military defences of the island.

<sup>6</sup> "Why is Music so Ideological, Why Do Totalitarian States Take It So Seriously: A Personal View from History, and the Social Sciences", *Journal of Musicological Research*, XXVI (2007), no. 2-3, pp. 91-122.

important harbour of the entire Mezzogiorno. All the most important incoming and outgoing business of the Regno passed through this harbour.<sup>7</sup>

More importantly, Naples followed the emergent trend in Europe, in particular after Joseph II became Emperor, to present culture as a sort of political paradigm. While all the other European capitals claimed their leadership on economic principles, together with the advancement of cultural pretensions to serve their imperial aspirations and feelings, Naples failed to become an economic centre. Instead, it clung to the status of a political megapolis which justified its European existence, by heightening its cultural angle, and becoming a centre for performance. Music had a privileged place. It was not a coincidence that the accession of the Bourbons to the throne of Naples was accompanied by a musical explosion, which reached its apex after 1740, with the construction and opening of the San Carlo Opera house. Young virtuosi were enrolled at the different Neapolitan academies of music with open arms.

The development of an important cultural capital, not so distant from Malta, had a positive effect on Malta. The number of young Maltese virtuosi, who travelled to Naples to finish their music studies, increased. Here it ought to be remarked that composers are often unsung heroes. Their importance is understood in terms of the immediate but ephemeral impact that their compositions had on their contemporary audience. It was a time when there existed no recording facilities, with the result that the memory of musical performances risked fading away, leaving behind a nostalgic taste amongst the succeeding generations of the composer's listeners. Thus, a number of compositions lost their ascribed values among succeeding generations, with the result that they were discarded, stored away in archives, awaiting the time for their rediscovery, which often takes place decades, if not centuries, afterwards.

The political rulers of Naples invested heavily in music. In general, the dominant class was not much interested in distinguishing the universal values ascribed to music but rather in the immediate impact that a piece of music had on their ears first and on the city afterwards. One cannot doubt the rulers' intrinsic and personal interest in this form of culture, but it is also a fact that the widespread diffusion in the local theatres and churches offered a form of free and popular amusement to the public. The subjects of the operas were often directly or indirectly in praise of the ruling elite. Such a social trajectory of music is one of Pierre Bourdieu's topics of analysis in his critique of the judgement of taste, where cultural production was discussed in terms of class struggle.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, it is not by sheer coincidence, considering the geographical proximity between Malta and Naples, that the eighteenth century is one of those periods which yielded an impressive number of Maltese composers. Some of these composers were of good international standard. Furthermore, most of these composers went to study in Naples, at one of the most promising music academies: the *Colleggio dei Poveri di Cristo*. The Maltese musicians Pietro Griscti (1696–1738), Giuseppe Arena (1709–84), Benigno Zerafa (1727–1804) and Girolamo Abos (1715–1760) all studied at this important academy.

---

<sup>7</sup> G. Delille, B. Marin, G. Muto and P. Ventura, 'Naples: capitale et microcosme', *Mégapoles Méditerranéennes: Géographie urbaine rétrospective*, Robert Ilbert, Jean-Charles Depaule (Paris, 2000), pp. 576–594.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge, 2004), pp. 11–18.

Other Maltese musicians studied in one of the other academies of this city. Both Francesco Azopardi (1748–1809) and Filippo Pizzuto (1704–?) studied at the *Conservatorio di San Onofrio a Capuana*. The latter had Nicola Porpora as one of his tutors.<sup>9</sup> Michele Angelo Vella (1710–1792) studied at *Conservatorio di S. Maria della Pietà dei Turchini*.<sup>10</sup> Azopardi's pupils Nicoló Isouard (1775–1818) and Salvatore Magrin (1762–1848) furthered their studies in Naples. On his part, Isouard, besides studying under Vella and Azopardi, furthered his studies in Paris and Palermo.<sup>11</sup> Vella was the first Maltese composer to have his music published. In 1768, he published in Paris *Sei Sonate per Tre Violini col Basso*.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the best-known Maltese composers on the international scene at the time were Arena, Abos, Vella and Isouard and their music can be found in various European libraries and archives. Only Arena and Abos remained in Italy, working there after finishing their studies. The rest returned to Malta and with the exception of Isouard, who eventually left the island with the French Forces in 1800, they all died here.

Abos had a brilliant career in Naples, becoming *maestro di cappella* of the Cathedral when music composition was at its height, and a music lecturer at important academies in this city. He is considered one of the best lecturers to have worked at the Neapolitan music academies.<sup>13</sup> He was music professor at the *Poveri di Gesu Cristo* between 1742 and 1743 and at the same time was also lecturer at the *S. Onofrio a Capuana* between 1742 and 1760 and at *S. Maria della Pietà dei Turchini* between 1754 and 1759.<sup>14</sup> He had under his tuition the most important eighteenth-century Neapolitan composers, Giovanni Paisiello and Domenico Cimarosa.<sup>15</sup> He composed the music for the opera librettos written by Pietro Metastasio and Apostolo Zeno. One particular opera, *Tito Manlio*, was performed not only in a number of Italian theatres but also in London.<sup>16</sup>

With the exception of Isouard, these composers expressed a passive, even if still circumscribed, support to political ideologies. Their political preferences are not known, even if, as one would expect, their interest in music intersected that of their aristocratic and in some cases royal patrons. Different was the case of Isouard, whose allegiances to the ideals of the enlightenment came into the open with the arrival of the French in Malta. At first he composed music for the Knights of Saint John both for sacred and so-called profane occasions but after the arrival of the Republican French forces in Malta, he could express his political ideals much more freely which permeated those of the French Republic. He gave the French occupation forces his full allegiance and, after the latter were expelled from the island, he left Malta with the French contingents and settled in Paris where his compositions, in particular those known as opera comique, were performed in the major theatres of Paris.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>9</sup> J. Vella Bondin, *Il-Mużika ta' Malta, sa l-Aħħar tas-Seklu Tmintax* (Malta, 2000), p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo\\_Vella](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michelangelo_Vella)

<sup>11</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolas\\_Isouard](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolas_Isouard)

<sup>12</sup> Vella Bondin (2000), 107.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 116-129.

In this paper, I would like to focus on three of these composers. The first one, Giuseppe Arena, deserves to be better known. Together with Abos, he can be defined as one of the local musicians who put his talents to the services of the newly installed Bourbon monarchy in Naples and the latter's aristocratic entourage. The other two are Michele Angelo Vella and his student Salvatore Magrin. Vella was greatly appreciated for his compositions, however, his works and endeavours are less known today and they deserve to be studied so that this valid composer will be recognised and better appreciated. Magrin is less important in terms of music composition but he is an example of how the efforts of a musician can become part of a bigger movement of political protest.

### Giuseppe Arena (1709-1784)

The biographical study of Giuseppe Arena was the subject of an important paper by the Maltese music historian Joseph Vella Bondin. In his seminal essay entitled 'Giuseppe Arena (1709-84)', he discusses the composer's musical career. Until 2002, Arena was practically unknown in Malta. However, he had better fortune abroad.

His name appears in the prestigious 1980 and 2001 editions of the *New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, whilst further information about him can be downloaded nowadays from the Internet. The Internet is being used more and more as a depository of 'sites of memory,' giving all types of historical information. The expert search and use of these sites can help the historian in reviving the past. This is what I did, in trying to trace the musical heritage of a number of Maltese composers, even if the material I found about Arena reproduces essentially the same information found in the Grove. A number of sites give information about the production of CDs including the music of this Maltese composer.

Gordana Lazarevich, who wrote the biography of this composer for the above mentioned editions of *Grove*, only states that Giuseppe Arena was born in Malta<sup>18</sup> in the year 1713. But then when it comes to describing his nationality, Lazarevich describes him as an Italian organist and composer. The fact that Arena was for long considered to have been of Italian nationality can explain why such an important composer of Italian opera is little known in Malta. As he was not associated with Malta, the attention of local scholars was diverted from his works giving preference to other compositions, even if inferior in quality, of Maltese origin.

Arena's works were very popular all through the eighteenth century. They were well received amongst German and Italian music critics, whilst copies of his work are to be found in various Italian and European cities, Brussels amongst the latter. His name was included in major European encyclopaedic dictionaries of music, in particular those published in the 19th century. Information about him can also be found in R. Eitner

---

<sup>18</sup> Gordana Lazarevich gives Arena's day of birth as 1713. After research in the local archives, Vella Bondin gives the exact year of his birth as 1709. G. Lazarevich, 'Arena Giuseppe', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie, Vol. 1. 2001, p. 868. J. Vella Bondin, 'Giuseppe Arena (1709-84)' in *Melitensium Amor, festschrift in honour of Dun Gwann Azzopardi*, ed. T. Cortis. T. Freller, L. Bugeja (Malta, 2002), p. 390.

*Bibliographie der Musik-Sammelwerke des XVI and XVII, Jahrhunderts*, published in Berlin in 1877. The French *Biographie Universelle des Musiciens* (2/1860-65) gave an entry about this composer by F. J. Fétis. A similar entry was published in Italy in *La Musica: Dizionario*. His name continued to be included in music encyclopaedias of the twentieth century in Europe, including the *Enciclopedia della Musica*, published in Milan by Ricordi, 1963-4 and in another Italian work, *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, 1954. E. Zannetti wrote the biographical note in the latter encyclopaedia, and gave Arena as born in Naples.<sup>19</sup> The German work, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* also published a biographical note about by A. Mondolfi. The main source of information about Giuseppe Arena's life and work is taken from an old *libretto* on his life.

Arena arrived in Naples at the time when this city was crowning its success as an important European city by hosting the palatial residence of the new kingdom. He received his music training between 1725 and 1735. One of his tutors at the *Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo* was Gaetano Greco and afterwards, Francesco Durante supervised his musical studies. Vella Bondin points out that among his classmates at the conservatory was the famous Neapolitan composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi.<sup>20</sup> After ten years of study, he left the Conservatory to enter the labour market, which at Arena's time was provided either by the Church or the secular ambiance of the baroque theatre.

Thus, Arena finished his studies exactly a year after Naples experienced an important change in its status in 1734 through the installation of the Bourbon monarchs as heads of the city. The creation of a king and queen for Naples dovetailed neatly in the dynamics of international recognition that this city sought to achieve throughout the early modern period. The Bourbon monarchs introduced a new court with all its regalia. To achieve recognition and supremacy, the new monarchy needed the services of artists, in particular architects, painters and sculptors. Arena was in Naples at the right time and at the right moment, when it became one of the cultural capitals of Europe. His services were on offer to any status-seeking aristocrat at the royal court. Refined etiquette and cultured manners were a *sine qua non* requirements for any eighteenth-century court aiming at international prestige and recognition.

Thus, whilst Abos found employment as *maestro di cappella* at Naples Cathedral, Arena followed much more the secular line, focusing his services on the emerging nobility in this city. In fact, during this period, holding a position at a Church institution was not the most important job for a prolific composer. It should be remembered that the slow progression of secularisation would reach its apex in Naples under the political activity of Bernardo Tenucci. The concepts of *Giuseppinismo* and the Enlightenment theories that had developed in the previous decades were translated into a strong movement against the Jesuits and their influence on the state. This movement would reach its peak with the expulsion of the Jesuits from all the realms of Naples in 1767, including Malta. Thus, working in the secular sphere he secured the most highly paid commissions for a musician. Slowly, music in Europe was distancing itself from the ecclesiastical sphere and composers who wanted to make headway began to seek out secular patrons.

<sup>19</sup> E. Zannetti, 'Arena, Giuseppe', *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, vol. 1 (G. C. Sansoni, Firenze-Roma, 1954), p. 802.

<sup>20</sup> Vella Bondin (2002), p. 393.



Giuseppe Arena is primarily known as a composer of operas, but he also wrote also music for orchestra, chamber and voice. This genre of music fell under the title of sacred or secular, though at the time the division between the two was practically non-existent as both forms of music were considered suitable for playing in Church. What changed in these two forms was simply the language and subject. Church music was sung in Latin and had a religious theme. The secular was in Italian and the subject was mundane. Yet, it should be pointed out that songs in the Italian language carrying a moral message were also played in Churches at the time. The studies of Arena's music focus mainly on opera, for the music that has survived is made up mainly of operas with a few scores of Church music. One hopes there will be further research carried out in Italian and European archives with a view to discovering new musical works of this Maltese composer. What follows is an account of the known works and operas of Arena which affirms that his compositions began to receive an ascribed value amongst eighteenth-century Italian society. He began to write music set to the texts of the most important opera librettists and for the major singers of his time.

### Arena's Opera Scores

Arena's first known and most famous composition to be staged was the opera *Achille in Sciro*. It was performed in Rome at the Teatro alle Dame on 7 January 1738. Incidentally, this theatre had a close relationship with the Order of the Knights of St. John. It was followed by representations in other Italian theatres, among which one finds other works at Turin, Venice and Naples.

Like most of his musical contemporaries, Arena was attracted to the poetic and dramatic felicities of the great Imperial poet, Abbate Pietro Metastasio. The libretto of *Achille in Sciro* was written by Metastasio. Arena composed music for another two of his *libretti*, that is, *La Clemenza di Tito* and *Artaserse*. Both were opera seria in three acts and both were performed at Turin at the *Teatro Regio*. *La Clemenza di Tito* was first performed on 26 December 1738 whilst *Artaserse* took the stage three years later and was performed during carnival time. A copy of the first aria of *La Clemenza di Tito* survives at the *Conservatorio di Musica S. Pietro a Majella* of Naples. In the meantime, in 1740, Arena composed the music for an *opera drammatica*, whose libretto was written by Dionisio Fiorilli and entitled *Il Vello d'Oro*. It was performed in Rome on 1 May 1740.

Arena caught the attention of a leading composer and impresario of the time by the name of Baldassare Galuppi who agreed to perform Arena's music, a pasticcio entitled *Alessandro in Persia* in London on 31 October 1741.

Arena came to the attention of another Venetian, the famous dramatist Carlo Goldoni. The *libretto* of the opera *Tigrane* by Francesco Silvani was revised by Goldoni. Arena composed the music for this dramatic opera in three acts and it was performed in Venice at San Giovanni Crisostomo on 18 November 1741. Other musical compositions by Arena are *Farnace* and *Il Vecchio Deluso*. The *libretto* of the former was written by Antonio Maria Lucchini and had its premier in Rome at the *Capranica* on 23 January 1742. *Farnace* was a work in three acts written in the genre of the opera seria but unlike the others, it was completed by G. Sellitto. On the other hand, *Il Vecchio Deluso* was a comedy, though still written in three acts. Giuseppe Palomba wrote the text and the opera was performed during

carnival in Naples in 1746 at the *Teatro Nuovo*. During this time, Arena was in the service of the Prince of Bisignano.

Arena managed to have the best singers of the time at his disposal. Thus, when the opera *Tigrane* was performed at the *San Giovanni Crisostomo* in Venice, the main part was sung by one of the most prominent castrati of the time, Lorenzo Girardi.<sup>21</sup> The second important singer who sung in Arena's work was the famous soprano Maria Broli, known as *La Parmeggiana*. Her presence on the theatrical scene of the eighteenth century confirms that women did take the stage to sing at a time when soprano singing in Papal Italy was normally associated with the voice of the castrati.<sup>22</sup> In fact, sopranos were banned from the opera stage in the Papal States and possibly in the Romagna, in particular at the city of Bologna but this was only a temporary injunction. Everywhere else, female singers shared the state with the Castrati and other male voices. In terms of religious trends, the Maltese local scene was under the Roman shadow.

On the religious plane, Giuseppe Arena was active as an organist at the church of *San Filippo Neri* (known also as the *Chiesa dei Filippini*) in Naples. Amongst his most important religious compositions there is a work for the feast of *Corpus Domini*, performed in Naples in 1765. Information about it can be found at the *Conservatorio di Musica S. Cecilia* in Rome. He produced another work, entitled *Christus*, for two sopranos and *basso continuo*. This work is preserved at the *Civico Museo Bibliografico Musicale* of Bologna. An autographed copy of the latter work is preserved at *Conservatorio di Musica S. Pietro a Majella* of Naples. Finally an *Ave Maria* for soprano and organ is kept at the *Archivio Storico della Cappella Lauretana* of Loreto.

Giuseppe Arena also ventured into teaching music and his treatise *Principij di musica con intavolature di cembolo e partimenti* was described by Fétis as 'un ouvrage élémentaire'. He was not the sole Maltese composer to write works for music students.

---

<sup>21</sup> As often happened at the time with surnames, there is some variation in the reporting of his name, which is also written as Ghirardi, Gherardi and Gerardi. In the libretto of *Tigrane*, he is described as «virtuoso di S(ua) A(ltezza) El. di Baviera». He is also described as «virtuoso di S. M. C.» Lorenzo Girardi had sung in the Carnival of 1737 at S. Angelo di Venezia in the role of *Ciro* in *Ciro Riconosciuto*, a poem by Metastasio, to the musical accompaniment of B. Galuppi and also as *Artaserse* in *Artaserse Longimano*, another poem by Metastasio (but with an arrangement of G. Boldini). The music was by Gaetano Antonio Pampino. Girardi also sung in Venice at the S. Samuele on the day of the Ascension of 1741 in the opera *Gustavo Primo Re di Svezia*, a poem by Goldoni with music by B. Galuppi. His name is encountered also in the libretto of '*Ipermestra*'. This is another work by Metastasio, whilst this time the music is by Gluck. It was staged at S. Giovanni Crisostomo in the autumn of 1744.

<sup>22</sup> Maria Broli was active mainly in Naples and died a year after taking part in Arena's work. She is found singing in Naples for the first time on 24 July 1740, when she sang in the opera *Giardino di Corte* in front of the Queen and King of Naples. She sang in other operas such as Davide Perez's *L'Amor Pittor*. As was the case with important performances in Naples, this event was staged at the *Teatro Nuovo*. Also at the *Teatro Nuovo* of Naples musical comedies were staged, amongst which were *L'Origille* of Antonio Palella (1740), *I Travestimenti Amorosi* of David Perez (1740), and *Il Vecchio Deluso* of Giuseppe Arena (1746). In the spring of 1746, the same soprano performed in the opera buffa *La Finta Cameriera* by Gaetano Latilla, whilst in the winter of that same year she sung in *I Due Fratelli Beffati* by Gioacchino Cocchi. The following year, she sang *Il governadore* of Niccolò Croscino. It was her last appearance and she died soon afterwards.

Francesco Azopardi wrote and published a book of musical theory, entitled *Il Musico Pratico*.<sup>23</sup> Another Maltese composer, Emanuele Muscat, who like Arena and Azopardi, studied in Naples but at the turn of the nineteenth century, wrote music texts. Muscat's work was intended for the teaching of sopranos. However, Muscat was not as lucky as Azopardi, as the former work remained in manuscript form, and today is in the parish archives of Bormla, (or Cospicua, as this latter locality is also known).

It does not appear that Giuseppe Arena ever returned to Malta. He remained in Italy, moving through the most important cities, composing operas that were in demand by many of the major theatres of the day. He died in Naples on 6th November 1784 at the age of 71 and was buried there.

### Michele Angelo Vella (1710–1792) and Salvatore Magrin (1762–1848)

Whilst Arena was reaching the end of his career, another young Maltese composer was making headway in Naples. This was the Cospicua-born musician Salvatore Magrin. His music is not remembered much today, but his musical talents are being discovered abroad, and his name and music are available on the Internet. His genre of composition follows the style of the early Romantics.<sup>24</sup> He studied in Malta under Vella,<sup>25</sup> Azzopardi and Isouard,<sup>26</sup> but also followed specialized courses in Naples. At this time, his home parish Cospicua was one of the most important places for music production. In 1695 Gaetano Turriglio finished the construction of a nine-register organ for this parish church<sup>27</sup> and there are early eighteenth-century descriptions confirming the presence of an organ loft, described by the Latin word of *podio* with an organ situated over the main door,<sup>28</sup> overlooking the main aisle of the parish church.<sup>29</sup> It was of a considerable size, well maintained, with ample registers and served the needs of the church<sup>30</sup> as well as attracting proficient and aspiring musicians. Furthermore, the church also had a small organ, or *organetto* (also known as *regaletto*) to better cater for the music needs during services.<sup>31</sup>

The pastoral visits clearly attest that the church also had a resident organist whilst the parish procurators took the necessary actions to have it tuned and serviced at least once a

<sup>23</sup> Vella Bondin (2000), p. 77. This musical treatise, published in 1786, and was published again in France in 1816. This latter initiative came from Framery. Framery did not only translate Azopardi's work but also re-edited it. Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.requiemsurvey.org/composers.php?id=1737>

<sup>25</sup> A(rchivum) A(rcivescovilis) M(elitensis) *Suppliche* 1776-1785, Vol. 10, f. 386r-v.

<sup>26</sup> Vella Bondin (2000), p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> J. Debono, *Art and Artisans in St. John's and other Churches in the Maltese Islands ca. 1650–1800, stone carving, marble, bells, clocks and organs* (Malta, 2005), pp. 387-388.

<sup>28</sup> A.A.M., *Visita Pastoralis*, Vol. 32, f. 166v. 'Visitavit organum collocatum in podio supra portam maiorem et illud reperit bene consonum prout retulit organista'.

<sup>29</sup> A.A.M., *Visita Pastoralis*, Vol. 33, p. 1105. 'visitavit organum collocatum in podio supra ianuam majorum illudque invenit competentis magnitudinis bene consonum et scriore vocis'.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Debono, p. 395.

year.<sup>32</sup> In most other parishes, the organ loft was situated in the choir area, behind the main altar but Bormla was one of the first churches in Malta, if not the first, to have the innovation of constructing its organ loft over the main door. The ecclesiastical records show that the post of organist was a sought after position at this church. These records also mention the presence of a resident organist at the turn of the eighteenth century. In 1707, this post became vacant and the priest Don Antonio Schembri was appointed to commence his duties as organist.<sup>33</sup> The post of organist was subsequently occupied by Don Fortonato De Marco, who was the brother of a famous Maltese physician,<sup>34</sup> Giuseppe De Marco. The latter was the medical doctor of the reigning Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca (1741–1773). De Marco studied music ‘under the direction of good maestri, in particular under the late maestro of the cathedral’.<sup>35</sup> He began to exercise the role of organist of Bormla’s church in 1739.<sup>36</sup> He was succeeded by Don Feliciano Farrugia in 1757.<sup>37</sup> It was a temporary measure as in less than ten years he would be replaced by one of the most important eighteenth-century local composers, Michele Angelo Vella.<sup>38</sup> Before becoming organist, Farrugia was responsible for choir singing and Gregorian chant and was described in the records as *magistrum cantus*<sup>39</sup> *et chori*.<sup>40</sup>

The promising Don Michele Angelo Vella appears on the scene at the beginning of the 1760s. He seems to have had problems with Bormla’s parish priest and the local church authorities when it came to being appointed as resident organist. The church system at the time, as it is still today, gave parish appointments only after receiving a favourable

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp. 388, 391-392.

<sup>33</sup> A.A.M., *Suppliche 1686–1706*, Vol. 2, p. 526.

<sup>34</sup> He was the first born of Paolo and Maria De Marco. He was born on 16 December 1711 and died at Bormla on 6 March 1762.

<sup>35</sup> A.A.M., *Visita Pastoralis*, Vol. 33, pp. 1105-1106. In this pastoral visit effected by Bishop Alpheran in Bormla in 1739, Don Fortonato De Marco, who was from Bormla, showed the bishop copies of the letters or references which he had sent to become the organist at this church. He informed the bishop that he had studied ‘sotto la direzione e disciplina di buonissimi maestri ed ultimamente sotto la instruzione predefonto maestro di cappella della sua chiesa cattedrale con essersi reso capacissimo in detta professione’. He made the request to become the church organist as the incumbent was sick and therefore asked the bishop to be appointed in his stead. He also informed the bishop that if the latter conceded to his request, he was ready to give half the salary earned from playing the organ to the incumbent *vita durante*. The bishop accepted his request. In fact, in the same visit, he began to be referred to as the church organist. p. 1133.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> There is no reference in the *Suppliche* to his surname. However, his surname can be found in the list of priests serving at this parish. In fact, in Bormla during this period there was only one priest by the name of Feliciano and according to the pastoral visit of 1728 his surname was Farrugia A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis* Alpheran 1728–1729, Vol. 32, f. 169v. His full name was Martinus Celestinus Feliciano Farrugia. Ibid. f. 171v.

<sup>38</sup> Don Feliciano was appointed organist between 1751 and 1757. In 1751, Don Fortonato Demarco was still the organist but in 1759 there is the first reference of Feliciano Farrugia as organist. From the information given in the Pastoral Visit, it is known that Don Fortonato Demarco became the new church sexton whilst D. Vincenzo Ciumi was put responsible for the cloister singing. A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis*, Vol. 37, f.87v.

<sup>39</sup> A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis*, Vol. 33, p. 1139.

<sup>40</sup> A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis 1728–29*, Vol. 32, f. 175v.

recommendation from the parish priest. Matters got more complicated, for when the vacancy occurred in December 1762 with the death of Demarco, Feliciano Farrugia was still alive.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, strictly speaking, he had the automatic right to become the new organist. For unknown reasons, he declined the post.

On his part, the parish priest of the time favoured another candidate, a certain Penza or Penun, who was in turn a student of Vella and was, at the time, studying music in Naples. The development of a national awareness that was taking place in Malta at the time also began to foster deep-rooted parochial sentiments, a phenomenon which had been extensively missing amongst the clergy of the previous century. It was not only important that the priest was Maltese but also that he belonged to the parish community of his home town. In itself, this was form of protection to keep vacant posts for brethren. The fact that the number of priests serving Bormla could run to over fifty explains in part why such a strong sense of parochialism was gaining root: this decreased the number the number of potential competitors.

On his part, Vella had friends in higher church circles and through the direct intervention of the local Inquisitor, who seems to have appreciated his music, Vella was appointed as church organist in 1762,<sup>42</sup> after the death of Demarco.<sup>43</sup> Still, the parish priest sought to stop Vella from playing in Bormla by literally impeding him from "acceding to the organ loft and sit on the organ's stool to favour a student belonging to his inner group,"<sup>44</sup> (Giuseppe Penza) but Vella had the full support of the church procurators<sup>45</sup> and the latter scored an important victory over the parish priest's favourite.

The cleric Giuseppe Penza defended his qualities with the Curia authorities. He stressed that he was from Cittá Cospicua and had travelled to Naples and had been living in this city for a number of years 'to study counterpoint and that his parents were financially supporting his studies and sojourn in Naples with the hope that one day, they will see him established as *maestro di cappella* at his hometown of Cospicua'.<sup>46</sup> From this petition, it clearly appears that six years after his appointment, Vella suffered from a physical infirmity with the result that 'many foreigners (that is non parishioners) had submitted an application for this job and it was not right that in case of a vacancy, his candidacy would be discarded because he was abroad'.<sup>47</sup> At this point, Penza's name reappears in the Curia's records trying his luck for Vella's post. He asked the bishop for the right of succession as organist in case of Vella's death. Penza declared himself more than once in his letter against the idea

<sup>41</sup> Feliciano Antonio Francesco Farrugia died at Bormla on 31 July 1772. *A(rchivum) P(aroecialis) Cospicua, Liber Defunctorum, Vol. 6, f. 85v.*

<sup>42</sup> A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis*, Vol. 38, f.363r.

<sup>43</sup> He died on 6th March 1762, A. P., Cospicua, *Liber Defunctorum*, Vol. 5, f. 75v.

<sup>44</sup> The words in Italian are '*inserirsi piu dell'organo per favorire uno scolare del succennato*'.

<sup>45</sup> A.A.M., *Suppliche 1762-1776*, Vol. 8, p. 112.

<sup>46</sup> The exact Italian words are '*per lo studio del contrapunto con gran dispendio de suoi parenti che tuttavia lo mantengono in quel paese colla speranza di vederlo un giorno stabilito da maestro di cappella in detta usa patria*'.

<sup>47</sup> The exact words are '*moltissimi forastieri avevano concorso per detto impiego e non essendo giusto che in caso di vacanza venga egli perche lontano posposto*'.

that organ players from outside the city of Bormla would be chosen. He insisted that the person to replace Vella had to be from Bormla.<sup>48</sup>

There is no doubt that this request and plea for Bormla-born composers was a covert and subtle attack against the personality of Vella, as he was not born in Bormla but hailed from the neighbouring town of Senglea. As already noted, Penza was one of the candidates who wanted the post after it had been vacated by Don Feliciano, but the church procurators, supported by the local Inquisitor, used criteria of merit in their choice of an organist rather than petty parochial considerations.

It should be pointed out that Vella had inherited a disastrous situation where the quality of music in Bormla was concerned. The church had a good organ but had ended up with poor musicians and weak conductors. Even the small *regaletto*, by the middle of the eighteenth century, was in a bad state and unserviceable.<sup>49</sup> The choice of musicians from a pool of local priests had lowered the standard of music and the choice of Vella came, most probably, as a reaction to this situation. For example, the choice of Farrugia as the church organist could not have been an ideal one. When he was responsible for church singing, the bishop had only negative words to say about his duties. In the pastoral visit of 1737, Bishop Alpheran described the choir books as being in a miserable state. He even noticed that the books were torn<sup>50</sup> and that the wooden lectern situated in the middle of the choir lacked choir books. In practical terms, this was the sole negative remark that the bishop had to make with regard to Bormla's parish church when it came to its interior decorations for the first half of the eighteenth century.

Furthermore, Vella had to face another problem, conditioning the quality of the music that he was supposed to play in church. From the early eighteenth century, if not before, the bishops of Malta dictated the genre of music that had to be sung during church services. Bishop Alpheran, for example, insisted that it had to be Gregorian chant. The organ was to be used solely as an accompaniment to this music.<sup>51</sup> As I will show later on in this paper, this brought Vella into conflict with the Bishop.

Thus, with the support of the procurators of the church, Vella worked to transform the church of Bormla into a centre of music production par excellence. In 1758, the small organetto or *regaletto* was rebuilt anew by the local organ builders of the Santucci family.<sup>52</sup> Then, in 1777, the Santucci family sold to the Bormla parish church a new portable five-register organ.<sup>53</sup> This *ottavino* organ, having four mixture registers known also as *ripieno* and one for the flute, underwent further alterations in the following three months with the addition of eight bass pipes and a pedal board. These additions made it an ideal instrument to be played in contained places or as an accompaniment to small orchestras. Its particular register shows that its commission came from the need of having another instrument in the

<sup>48</sup> A.A.M., *Suppliche 1762–1776*, Vol 8, p. 565.

<sup>49</sup> Debono, p. 394.

<sup>50</sup> A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis*, Vol. 33, p. 1105. The exact Latin words used to describe the choir books were *miseros et laceros*.

<sup>51</sup> A.A.M., *Visitatio Pastoralis 1728–1729*, Vol. 32, f.179v.

<sup>52</sup> Debono, p. 394.

<sup>53</sup> Debono, p. 397. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this organ was extensively damaged. Thanks to generous sponsorship from one of Malta's leading banks, APS, this organ is now being restored to its former glory.

church suitable to accompany the soprano voices provided at the time, by the castrati, female voices or a good choir of cloister boys.<sup>54</sup>

On his part, Vella resisted as much as he could the idea of relinquishing the post, but at the same time the pretentious request of Penza, that whoever was chosen as organist of Bormla had to be from this home city, continued to condition the choice of his successor. For the next twenty years, Vella could not find a worthy successor until the young Salvatore Magrin appeared on Bormla's music scene. Magrin turned out to be one of Vella's most promising students. Following the religious customs existing in Malta at the time, Magrin joined the ecclesiastical establishment at the very young age of 9, as in 1771, he qualified to become a tonsured cleric.<sup>55</sup> An ecclesiastical career opened in front of him but he had to wait for another nine years to become a full fledged cleric and became eligible to the priesthood.<sup>56</sup> On the same year when Magrin's request to become priest was processed at the Curia, that is 1781,<sup>57</sup> Vella had no objection to supporting Salvatore Magrin's claim to the Curia to replace him as organist after his death.<sup>58</sup> At this time, the system used for the resident organist encouraged one of his students to make a petition to the church authorities to be given the right of appointment after his master's death, whilst obliging himself to act as the resident organist's delegate, playing for free when the latter was indisposed.<sup>59</sup> On his part, Magrin sought to get a written reconfirmation for his automatic succession during his master's lifetime, and at least twice wrote to the Curia, in 1784<sup>60</sup> and 1789,<sup>61</sup> seeking confirmation that in the case of his master's death, he had the automatic entitlement to take over.

There is no doubt that Penza's parochial pettiness brought about a certain amount of insecurity in Magrin, who continuously sought to ensure his right of succession by having periodical reassurances from the Church's Curia. Magrin also felt the need to travel to Naples to enhance his skills *nelle regole di musica*, which would permit him not only to undertake successfully his duties as organist, but also to become *maestro di cappella*. He left Bormla for Naples to study composition in 1784.<sup>62</sup> His efforts had the desired result. The death of Michele Angelo Vella<sup>63</sup> on Christmas Day 1792<sup>64</sup> opened the way for him to become Cospicua's next parish church *maestro di cappella*. On 2 January 1793, Magrin submitted his formal request to become Bormla's next *maestro di cappella*, with the official confirmation being issued by the Curia three days later.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> A.A.M., *Patrimonio Sacro* 1771, Vol. 31C(3), no. 34 a – Salvatore Magrin.

<sup>56</sup> A.A.M., *Dimissoriae*, Miscellanea, Vol. 19. no. 38, Salvatore Magrin.

<sup>57</sup> A.A.M., *Patrimonio Sacro* 1771, Vol. 31C(3), no. 34 a – Salvatore Magrin.

<sup>58</sup> A.A.M., *Suppliche 1776-1785*, Vol. 10, f. 442v-443r.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. ff. 659, 676.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. f. 386r-v.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. f. 659.

<sup>63</sup> *A(rchivum) P(aroecialis) Senglea, Liber Baptizatorum 1679-1724*, vol. 3, 07-11-1710.

<sup>64</sup> A.P. Cospicua, *Liber Defunctorum*, vol. 8, p. 51. He died on Christmas day, 25 December 1792 at the age of 84.

<sup>65</sup> A.A.M., *Suppliche 1776-1794*, Vol. 11, p. 361.

Thanks to the efforts of the Music Division of the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta, some of Magrin's old music scores are being edited and also performed in public for the first time since his days. In fact, it was during one of my searches for old music in the local Maltese archives that I came across an important discovery. Some of Magrin's music ended up being deposited at his hometown parish church archives. During a search of these archives carried out in 2002, I came across a rich, late eighteenth-century piece. It is the music score of Act Two, Scene One of Giovanni Paisiello's opera, entitled *La Molinarina*. The archives of Bormla contain an original section of this opera. This part is dated the same year in which this great Neapolitan virtuoso composed his well-known opera. The score was part of the music collection of Don Salvatore Magrin and must have been part of his music library.

The score is dated 24 September 1790 and its owner (or *padrone*) was Salvatore Magrin. The exact title of the section of score found at Bormla is *La Rachelina Molinarina*, whilst the name of the composer is given as *Del Sig. (n)or D. Giovanni Paejsielo*. It is part of an aria that speaks about the miller, who makes advances to his young miller girl, the fragile *Rachelina*. What follows is the text of Paisiello's section of *La Rachelina Molinarina*:

La Rachelina Molinarina  
 Il suo signore viene a inchinar  
 Pui vi direi  
 Ma no' ma no' conviene  
 che so che so vorrei  
 no no no no sta bene  
 Son schietta schietta vergognosetta  
 E la modestia tacer mi fa'  
 Pui vi direi ma no conviene  
 Che so vorrei  
 Ma non sta bene

La Rachelina Molinarina  
 Il suo signore viene a inchinar  
 Son schietta schietta vergognosetta  
 E la modestia tacer mi fa'  
 Pui vi direi ma no conviene  
 Che so vorrei  
 no no no sta bene  
 La Rachelina Molinarina  
 Il suo signore viene a inchinar  
 Il suo signore viene a inchinar

The master of Rachelina the Molinarina  
 Gives her a harassing bow  
 I will say more since it is useless  
 I know what he wants



But this is not good  
 I am an honest maiden girl  
 and modesty silences me  
 I will also add more since it is useless I know what he wants  
 But what he wants is not good

The master of Rachelina the Molinarina  
 Gives her a harassing bow  
 I am an honest maiden girl  
 And modesty silences me  
 I will also add that this is not good  
 I know what he wants  
 But it is not good  
 To the Rachelina Molinarina  
 Her master gives her a harassing bow Her master gives her a harassing bow.

Most probably Magrin obtained this score on one of his trips to Naples.<sup>66</sup> He either got to know Paisiello, who at the time was considered one of the most important composers of Italian opera, and Giuseppe Arena's successor in Naples, or he had just heard and obtained the music. At the same time, Paisiello was not without his contacts in Malta. One of his tutors, whilst he was studying music at the *Conservatorio della Pietà de' Turchini*, was the Maltese-born composer Girolamo Abos.<sup>67</sup>

There is no doubt that this particular section was obtained in the same year that Paisiello composed his opera *La Molinara*, 1790. The date is indicated on the Maltese score and a study of the paper, in particular the texture of the paper and watermarks, show that it was contemporary to Paisiello. However, the aria, as it is presented in this score, is a self-contained and complete composition.<sup>68</sup> What is most important for the claim that I am making here is that this particular aria carries a strong moral message that may explain why this operatic piece found itself in an ecclesiastical archive.

There is no doubt that it used to be played at the Bormla parish church, as the score could be performed by a consort formation. It requires very few musicians (first and second violins, viola, cello, double-bass and first and second oboe) and a soprano voice which at the time was very easily obtained in Malta as the island, together with the rest of Italy, made use of the castrati.

In retrospect, this opera was composed when Vella was still alive. Thus, it was either performed during his lifetime or else immediately after Magrin took over his new office of *maestro di cappella* at Bormla. On his part, Vella sought to leave behind him a well organised cappella. Despite the limited resources existing in Malta in the eighteenth century, when printing was not an easy endeavour, Vella succeeded in having some of his

<sup>66</sup> From surviving documentation and publications, it clearly appears that Salvatore Magrin had travelled more than once to Naples, including for studying.

<sup>67</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girolamo\\_Abos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girolamo_Abos)

<sup>68</sup> The edition of this section was undertaken by one of the students, Rosabelle Bianchi under the direction of her tutor Maestro John Galea. Ms. Bianchi was also studying voice and accepted to sing it again at Bormla's parish Church as it was originally sung.

compositions sent to the press. In fact, he printed six sonatas for three lines of violins, bassi and continuo.<sup>69</sup> Richard Divall, an Australian musicologist of baroque and nineteenth-century music, described these particular sonatas as 'first rate editions and sublime works. They work as terrific music'. However, Divall continues to say that they are tricky to perform and one needs not only good technically proficient violinists, but also a sympathetic continuo player. Such a critical analysis by Divall indirectly confirms that the person chosen by Vella to assist him on the organ in Bormla, that is Salvatore Magrin, was more than competent for the job. Moreover, it also confirms that Vella had created around him a pool of good violin players whom he used during church functions at this parish church. Therefore, from a technical point of view, Magrin's attempt to bring sections from important contemporary compositions of leading world composers, such as Paisiello, and having them played in Bormla, does not seem an impossibility. From a logistical point of view, he had definitely good string players capable of performing such work.<sup>70</sup>

Circumstantial evidence is provided by the Curia records, which attest to the presence of a pool of string players at Bormla during this period. One such player was the priest Salvatore Paias, who played the double bass at this church. Indeed playing a string instrument at Bormla during Vella's time became such an important and coveted position that when a vacancy occurred, requests were made to the Curia by competent players to have their candidature considered to fill such a post. Thus, when Paias died, another priest, Giuseppe Falzon, made a formal request to take his place after seeking and obtaining the approval of Michele Angelo Vella, who was described at the time not only as *maestro di cappella* but more importantly as *musiche prefectus*. In other words, Vella had succeeded in transforming the parish church of Bormla into the leading school in Malta for the teaching of music in the second half of the eighteenth century. A pool of good musicians had been created in Bormla and this would also entail a natural consequence, that this area began to have an audience receptive to good music. In the background of such a situation, it is easy to imagine the use of music as a sort of political weapon. The existence of such a document points in my idea to this direction.

This was the background in Bormla when Paisiello's name was becoming popular. A number of representations of his works are recorded being performed in Malta during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, a tradition existed in Bormla for transgressing rules where music was concerned. Magrin's predecessor and mentor, Michele Angelo Vella, had clashes with his ecclesiastical superiors, in particular the bishop, regarding music. In fact, it appears that the music that has survived from this composer in Malta does not really represent his style, but rather it was that section of Vella's music that was loved by the authorities. There is the risk that that section of his music which was deemed unacceptable was either destroyed or was deliberately mislaid. Thus, this can lead to misleading critical judgement about the style of this composer. One of the compositions of Vella that has survived at Bormla's archives is the antiphon *Salve Sancta Paren* written for a choir. Its choral section was written for Gregorian chant alternating with the accompaniment of string instruments. The latter part was written in accordance with the

<sup>69</sup> Michele Angelo Vella, *Sei Sonate a tre Violini col Basso* (Paris, no date).

<sup>70</sup> A.A.M., *Suppliche*, Vol 8, f. 200.

<sup>71</sup> Vella Bondin (2000), pp. 89, 94.

norms of sixteenth-century composition techniques. There is no doubt that such a genre of compositions was put forward by the Church authorities who were trying to revive Gregorian chant and early music.<sup>72</sup>

However, Vella was not always complacent with the ecclesiastical rules regarding music. Records at the local Curia show that Vella insisted on playing the music that pleased his ear and that of his audience and this included, if necessary, music that was not necessarily acceptable to the local authorities.

On his part, he was arguably unwise to defy ecclesiastical rules and orders. Against the bishop's advice, he accepted and conducted music at the National Theatre in Valletta. Priests were not supposed to go to the theatre. Imagine then, having a priest conducting music intended to accompany opera representations.<sup>73</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the question of good moral behaviour became strongly equated in theological discourse with correct sexual practice. Sexual relations became an important feature of moral theology and what was then termed as a proper sexual relationship, was interpreted to mean, that sex could only be lawfully practised within a conjugal life. Such a moral precept was emphasized throughout this century more than ever before. Social decadence at the time began to be equated with increased promiscuity, in particular, in the urban areas. In Malta, the harbour towns were considered to be more prone and receptive to sexual deviances and immorality than the secluded villages. Public conferences were organised in the local towns, known at the time either as *La Piccola* or *La Grande Missione*, literally the big or the small mission,<sup>74</sup> where members of the clergy, in particular members of religious orders, propounded in public from a set up rostrum, the issues that constituted correct sexual behaviour to a Catholic.<sup>75</sup> A number of church sermons at the time also dealt with this topic. Sexuality outside marriage was described in destructive terms. Even in marriage, sex had to be performed within a prescribed way. Women were considered to be more sexually weak and vulnerable than men, even if, society at the time acknowledged that both were capable of seduction or turning themselves into seducers. The advocated moral solution was that irreprehensible or overweening desires had to be controlled or better still suppressed. Therefore, playing a Paisiello score in a church which contained moral attributes related to what should constitute proper sexual behaviour can be interpreted as a different way to have this message reaching the general audience. Considering the lexical contents of this text, its performance at Bormla's parish church could be rightly interpreted as a form of direct criticism of the ruling authorities.

---

<sup>72</sup> This composition has been recorded on a CD produced by Fondazzjoni Memorja Kulturali Nazzjonali, Vol. 3 and entitled *High Baroque Composer from Malta*.

<sup>73</sup> I owe this information to Canon Joseph Bonello.

<sup>74</sup> Vide for example Saverio Ignazio Mifsud's diary of his trip to Rome in 1746. Mifsud makes reference to have attend to these type of sermons in Rome. NLM Libr. 1, *Relazione del Viaggio fatto da Malta li 26 Aprile del 1746*, p. 425.

<sup>75</sup> A number of eighteenth and early nineteenth sermons have survived both in Malta and abroad about the destructive dynamisms of sexual copulation outside marriage.

## Sexual Abuse

The argument here does not focus on the fact that Paisiello was being played in Malta. This does not represent any novelty in itself. A number of local archives have works by Giovanni Paisiello, including *La Molinara* opera. Local and foreign impresarios continued to stage this work, even after the Order of Saint John left Malta. Thus, one can argue that Magrin simply had this copy to accompany a singer in a concert. The argument that I am putting forward does not exclude the fact that Magrin may have played this aria in a secular concert, however, this is the sole secular aria to be preserved at the parish church of Bormla in its collection of sacred music played at this church. This fact is a collateral evidence that it was played at this church. However, if Magrin had played it for political reasons, most probably, this took place after 1796, but not before 1794, which is the year when he joined the Hospitaller Order as a chaplain of obedience. On that year, he had showed great affectionate and interest in the Order to the extent that he sought to join this institution and brought testimonials to attest for his good moral character. On this evidence, the Hospitaller Commission accepted Magrin's request to become a member of the Order.<sup>76</sup> Any use of music by Magrin for political motives against the Order must have happened after 1796, when he requested and was granted permission to depart from the Convent.<sup>77</sup>

There are other works by Paisiello in Malta preserved in ecclesiastical museums but it should be pointed out that these operas never made part of the church music but were acquired by the ecclesiastical institution concerned through different bequests. Perhaps, it may appear as though I am overemphasizing this fact, but the Bormla case is totally different. It is a small early music archive built up during Vella's and Magrin's time. It is through these considerations that one can arrive at the right conclusion that this piece was played in the church. Even if, one has to argue that this was never played in church but in a secular ambience, this claim does not change the principle of this argument. Played on its own, or with other music, this score transmitted a moral message. On the basis of these assumptions, one has to conclude that this parish and its *maestro di cappella*, Magrin, were rather avant-garde for their time.

This scene evokes the problem of the sexual harassment that poor, powerless female workers had to endure in the past from their masters - in this particular case a miller. In this section, the singer portraying *La Rachelina* evokes the problem of sexual harassment. The miller was a symbol *par excellence* of the strong and powerful capitalist in a traditional society. Despite the miller's continuous pressure, the poor girl, the *Molinara*, needed strong spiritual and psychological strength to say 'no' to his indecent advances.

Now, during this period, the accusations of sexual abuse against the knights were rather frequent and judging from contemporary comments, these were mostly committed in Valletta and the adjacent harbour cities. The town of Bormla was not an exception, sex was available to all for a price, even to the knights of Saint John. What made this fact scandalous in the eyes of nineteenth-century writers was not the sexual act itself, as illicit relations and prostitution continued in Malta after the Order left the island, but that these

<sup>76</sup> N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta- Valletta) A(rchives) O(rder of St. John) M(alta) 5250, ff. 234r-249v.

<sup>77</sup> NLM AOM 621, f. 74v.

licitious relationships were being undertaken by religious people who had vowed to live a life of chastity. Whilst their authenticity and widespread occurrence still needs to be verified, what is of interest at this stage is that there was an outcry in certain quarters concerning the misbehaviour of members of the Order. The French writer Voltaire makes reference to the morally incorrect behaviour of knights and corsairs towards the female sex in his book *Candide*.<sup>78</sup> Voltaire recounts how the knights of Saint John used to denude the captured slaves and check their intimate parts to verify whether they were hiding diamonds or other precious stones.

It goes without saying that the laments of the Maltese remained hidden, but exploded after the Knights' expulsion from the island and became the subject of an extensive discussion in the first years of the British rule in Malta. In his book *A History of Malta During the Period of the French and British Occupations 1798–1815*, William Hardman speaks about these facts in his discussion of the social conditions of the Maltese during the last decades of the Knights' rule. Hardman's references were picked up and reproduced in a B.A. Gen. dissertation submitted to the History Department at the University of Malta in 1973.<sup>79</sup> The following quotations from published sources are based on Hardman's work.

'The secretary of the deposed Grand Master Hompesch, Doublet, made no secret about the knights' behaviour and wrote that 'they (the Knights) made no secret of keeping mistresses, generally married women and mothers of a family, a practice which came so general, that neither age nor ministers of the Gospel, dissolute like the rest, blushed at the fact. Instances were known to have happened, when a Maltese married to an attractive wife was exiled, owing to the influence of the rich and immoral Knights, and if the banishments of husbands on account of their wives, or of fathers on account of daughters was not more frequent, it was not because these crimes of seduction were few, but from dread of the consequences, which would surely follow any resistance, owing to the protection which the government would afford the Knights.'<sup>80</sup>

Of the same persuasion was another French Knight, Bosredon Ransijat, who like Doublet, defected from the Order. 'The Maltese', Bosredon Ransijat wrote, 'shut their eyes to the seduction of their wives and daughters, but this applied only to the citizens, not to the country people who kept themselves free from this corruption'.<sup>81</sup> By such a statement,

<sup>78</sup> 'Immediately they were stripped as naked as monkeys, my mother too, our maids of honor and I. It's a remarkable thing, the diligence with which those gentlemen undress people. But what surprised me more was that with all of us they stuck their fingers in a place where we women usually allow only cannulas to be put. This ceremony seemed very strange to me: that's how one judges everything when one hasn't hidden some diamonds up there: it's a custom established since time immemorial among civilized seafaring nations. I learned that those religious Knights of Malta never fail to do it when they capture Turkish men and women; it's an international law that's never been departed from.' Voltaire, *Candide*. Translated and edited by Shane Weller. p. 45.

[http://books.google.com/books?id=FjLWju3FBrAC&pg=PA44&dq=voltaire+candide+malte+subject:%22+Literature+%22&lr=&num=30&as\\_br=3&rview=1&sig=p\\_6BgGE9SwvcHkywwFzNmWilM0g#PPA45,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=FjLWju3FBrAC&pg=PA44&dq=voltaire+candide+malte+subject:%22+Literature+%22&lr=&num=30&as_br=3&rview=1&sig=p_6BgGE9SwvcHkywwFzNmWilM0g#PPA45,M1)

<sup>79</sup> A. Micallef and J. Vella Bondin, *A Social Study of the Death Records of the Parish of St. Dominic, Porto Salvo*, Unpublished Dissertation, University of Malta, 1973. pp. 21-27.

<sup>80</sup> P. Doublet, *Memoires Historiques de Malte* (Paris, 1883).

<sup>81</sup> W. Hardman, *A History of Malta during the Period of the French and British Occupations 1798-1815* (Longmans, Green and Co. – 1909), p. 3.

Bosredon Ransijat was clearly indicating that cases of sexual abuse were occurring in the harbour towns, of which Bormla was one of the most important.

Once the British took over the Island in 1800, a number of important figures had harsh words to say against the Knights' sexual behaviour at the end of the century. One of the first to voice his opinion about this situation was Thomas Graham (Lord Lyndoch), who was responsible for the takeover of Malta from the French. On 19 September 1800, 15 days after the capitulation of the French garrison, Graham wrote to London:

“There can be no doubt in the minds of anyone who has had the opportunity or the inclination of inquiry, that a very considerable part of the richer Maltese favoured the French invasion. The same reason, which all over Europe inclined that middling class to destroy the galling distinctions, which the arrogance of a tyrannical nobility had created, operated in a much stronger degree in Malta than elsewhere. Every knight was a sovereign and tyrant, their oppressions were mutually supported for the honour of the Order, and the idleness and the luxury in which so many young men were destined to spend their days by this monastic institution, naturally led to the severest outrages against the feeling and honour of every family in a country where the climate and character seem to have made jealousy an universal characteristic. No man's wife or daughter could be defended against the attacks of these privileged despoilers. Those of independent spirit and circumstances were found to bow to the strong hand of power, while an universal depravity of morals pervaded the remainder, who sought their own advancement in the prostitution of their nearest relations.”

This is noticed as one and the strongest among many causes of discontent, which that separation of classes occasioned in Malta, and is more than sufficient to account for a numerous party in favour of the French, or of any change.<sup>82</sup>

There are no doubts that these words by Graham reflect a historical reality already experienced by the British authorities over the island of Minorca, which as was the case for the government of Malta by the French, was lost because in both cases, the new rulers failed to respect the culture and customs of the indigenous population. In a recent paper, Miquel Àngel Casanovas Camps explains that one of the reasons why the British lost the ownership and rule over Minorca was the fact that they failed to respect the sentiments of the local population.<sup>83</sup> The islanders received the British as their liberators following the War of the Spanish Succession in 1712. The way of life of the inhabitants changed completely as the British authorities failed to respect the islanders' rights, and applied a rather autocratic rule towards the native population. This resulted in the loss of Minorca during the Seven Years' War 1756–1763, reoccupation at the end of hostilities but its loss once more between 1798 and 1804. Graham, meanwhile, is using this case of sexual abuse not only to record a historical fact but also to warn the authorities in London against repeating the mistake in Minorca. The message seems to have gone through as the British rule in Malta differed enormously from the one used towards Minorca. The rights of the citizens and in particular the Catholic faith were not only respected but reached the point of having Anglican rulers protecting the local Church. In other words, the British

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> M.A. Casanovas Camps, 'The British Presence in Minorca during the Eighteenth Century', *Anglo-Saxons in the Mediterranean Commerce, Politics and Ideas (XVII-XX Centuries)*, ed. C. Vassallo and M. D'Angelo (Malta University Press, 2007), pp.42-62.

Governments sought that by their actions, they did not offend the local ecclesiastical institution.

Hardman gives more references from writings of the period to emphasize abuse. He had a vested interest in stressing this point, to remind the Maltese of the despotism of their previous rulers, the Knights, and indirectly promote the rule of Britain in Malta.

The next explicit reference given by Hardman is that of a certain Lieutenant Anderson, stationed in Malta between November 1800 and November 1801, who lamented about widespread prostitution in Malta committed by both married and single women. The criticism of the Knights of Saint John again comes to the fore through the writings of the famous English poet S.T. Coleridge, who lived for some time in Malta in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when he worked as secretary to the British Civil Commissioner Ball. In 1806 Coleridge wrote that:

‘Every Knight attached himself to some family as their patron and friend, and to him the honour of a sister, or a daughter, was sacrificed as a matter of course. But why would I disguise the truth? Alas! In nine instances out of ten, this patron was the common paramour of every female in the family.’<sup>84</sup>

There were also some early nineteenth-century historians who made direct reference to this situation, amongst them the French Dominique Miège,<sup>85</sup> Dr. John Davy<sup>86</sup> and Dr. Gauci. Dr. Gauci reiterates Coleridge’s thoughts that abuse was rampant in the harbour cities to the extent of describing Valletta during that period as a brothel.<sup>87</sup> Others in Malta added their voices against what they considered as sexual permissiveness that was pervasive in the Island. The Civil Governor Ball himself criticised the Knights’ sexual behaviour.<sup>88</sup> Sir Charles Stuart, who was Lieutenant General and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, hinted at it.<sup>89</sup> The Maltese representatives themselves alluded to this situation in a petition sent to the British throne, dated 22 October 1801, in which they pleaded against the return of the Order of the Knights so ‘that their families might be saved from dishonour or ruin, whenever the caprice of a Knight had selected his victim’.<sup>90</sup>

The nineteenth-century Arabic intellectual, Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq, joined the chorus of moral protesters and accused the Knights of sexual abuse. He did not mince words and affirmed that the old rulers of Malta ‘dishonoured’ Maltese girls to the point of filling the local orphanages with their illegitimate offspring. According to al-Shidyaq, Malta of the 1830s had around one thousand orphans of impious knights.<sup>91</sup> In my opinion, Magrin joined this chorus of protest. He could not directly articulate his complaints except by reminding

<sup>84</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *The Friend* (W. Pickering, London, 1844), p. 152. and quoted by Hardman, pp. 2-3.

<sup>85</sup> D. Miège, *Histoire de Malte*, (Paris, Paulin, 1840), Vol. iii, p. 172 and quoted by Hardman p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> J. Davy, *Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta* (Smith Elder and Co, 1842), Vol. I, p. 40; Quoted by Hardman, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Hardman, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2-3.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> A. Micallef and J. Vella Bondin, *A Social Study of the Death Records of the Parish of St. Dominic - Porto Salvo - 1790-1815*. Unpublished Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta, 1973, p. 24.

<sup>91</sup> A. Effendi Fares al-Shidyaq, *El-Wasita Taghrif dwar Malta tas-Seklu 19*, trans. Francis Xavier Cassar (Malta, 1985), p. 63.

his audience, through his music, of their moral obligations and of the importance of resisting the temptation and harassment of despotic rulers.

### **The Imprint of the French Revolution**

This position is defensible because of the following considerations. When Paisiello was writing this opera *La Molinara*, and Vella or Magrin was playing it at Bormla, Europe was passing from one of its most important revolutions, which began in Paris in 1789. Ironically enough, at the initial stages of the revolution, the music mores common during the ancient regime's period, including church music, remained within the norm. Slowly, music would assume an important role in this revolution to the extent that the revolutionaries would create posts for the organisation of music on behalf of the National Guard, or conductors to hold public concerts. Recent studies reveal that the concept of the big orchestra – later on called philharmonic orchestras – received a boost during the French Revolution. Before the revolution, music was generally conceived of as a chamber organisation, with a handful of music players, although instances of a middle size formation or orchestra are encountered before.

The big orchestra formation required big halls but these were rare in Europe at the time. By its nature, the baroque theatre had a small, contained space. Very few were the places in Europe which could house such orchestras. *La Scala* of Milan was one of the exceptions. Malta of the knights did not have big halls but still there were attempts in the eighteenth century to increase the size of the orchestra. In fact, there are references in Malta of orchestral formations of forty to fifty players<sup>92</sup>. Performances in public began to become popular even on the small island of Malta.<sup>93</sup> The Revolution brought orchestra music nearer to the people. What was considered as the high music of the aristocracy began to be played in the streets, and concerts were organised in open spaces accompanied by the fire of cannon shots and merry making. A new timbre and the combination of new instruments appeared on the scene. In fact, the revolutionaries needed to overcome the problem of the number of music players. If the music was going to be played in the open, the number of the musicians needed to be increased. It could not remain the same size as for chamber music, otherwise it could not be enjoyed by the masses. The sound produced by the old musical set up easily got lost in open spaces. Thus, more string and wind musicians were required whilst the brass players and percussionists began to have a privileged role as they emitted tougher, more robust sounds in comparison to the rest of the musical instruments. New soundscapes were created. Composers began to be inspired by new realities where music was played whilst cannons were being fired. Fighting for the revolutionary cause became an ideal and the revolutionaries had no scruples in playing 'high' music during battle. François-Joseph Gossec (1734–1829) was one of the virtuoso composers who offered their services to the new revolutionary establishment, to the extent that his new compositions would soon enter the mainstream politics and end up influencing fellow composers such as Berlioz.

---

<sup>92</sup> Vella Bondin (2000), pp. 90, 92-93.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.



Within this scenario, I do not consider that it was a mere coincidence that the Francophile composer Isouard was introduced to this genre. In the years after the revolution, he sought to emulate this format in his compositions, and tuned his music composition to the revolutionary style as expressed by the above-mentioned Gossec, Etienne Nicholas Mehul and Jean-Francois La Sueur. In fact, a few weeks after returning from Marseilles in 1795, he wrote a Mass to commemorate the death of his patron, Grand Master De Rohan, for a big orchestra including instruments such as the harp and percussion.<sup>94</sup>

On both sides of the new spectrum emerging in Europe after the revolution, music affirmed itself as a political expression. Perhaps the two most known examples are Beethoven's Third Symphony *Eroica* and Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, written at different epochs, both resulting from the revolutionary spirit of 1789. The former was originally written to laud Napoleon's endeavours but Beethoven changed his mind after the former declared himself Emperor. The Tchaikovsky oeuvre acclaims his defeat.

## Conclusion

The quick conquest by the French of Malta in 1798 had a different impact on the local music scene. Nicolo Isouard joined the French forces, migrating to Paris where he became extensively active in writing French operas amongst other genre. Michele Angelo Vella's music ended up all over Europe. He died before the arrival of the French. However, one suspects that as he was practically one of the last conductors of the Knights' National Theatre, the latter's expulsion brought the dispersal of Vella's music to different European capitals. Copies of his music have been found in Dresden and Paris and one cannot exclude the existence of some unfound pieces in Naples. His death in 1792, gave space to Salvatore Magrin to take over the baton as *maestro di cappella* of his home town. Two years, later Magrin was accepted in the Order of Saint John as a chaplain of obedience, with the obligation of giving ecclesiastical services at the chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph.<sup>95</sup> Something must have happened in the following two years, as in 1796, he requested and obtained permission from the Grand Master to be exempted from living a community life.<sup>96</sup> The reasons could be various. Such a request could have been just a simple leave of absence to travel abroad. It could also be due to the fact that his position as a Chaplain of Obedience in the Order of Saint John came in direct competition with his pastoral engagements in Bormla and therefore he asked permission to relinquish his Hospitaller duties to better perform his duties as *maestro di cappella*. But if one has to look at Magrin's request in the light of the argument made in this paper, then one is tempted to think that his plea was politically and morally motivated; in other words, he was not feeling at ease in this institution. On a personal note, if Magrin has used his musical talents to criticise the Hospitaller's establishment, the one which replaced it left much to be desired.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>95</sup> N(ational) L(ibrary of) M(alta- Valletta) A(rchives) O(rder of St. John) M(alta) 5250, ff. 234r-249v; Vella Bondin (2000), p. 138.

<sup>96</sup> NLM. AOM 621, f. 74v.

Once the French conquered the Island, the Maltese felt betrayed by their new masters to the extent that they rose in general revolt. Magrin returned to the fold of the pro-Hospitallers' party, and when the Order's presence became, for some, a form of nostalgia for a bygone age, Magrin paraded his past connections with this institution. He carried before his name the title of '*Fra*', which was a nomenclature synonymous with the Order of Saint John and it was a title also used by members of this Order, who held the rank of Chaplain of Obedience.<sup>97</sup>

One can state that the argument put forward has one fault and this is the overemphasis on the Paisiello aria. There are no written attestations to confirm whether Magrin played *La Rachelina* because he had genuinely wanted to give voice to a Christian reform or just to follow contemporary trends and he may have simply had a copy because he accompanied a singer in a concert. Whatever the case, the fact that after the expulsion of the Knights, he insisted more than ever on using the 'Fra' title in front of his name is a clear indication that he wanted to express his attachment to the Hospitaller Order. Whether this was an expression of the continuation of his vow of obedience towards the Order or an act of repentance for his past actions, will be left to the judgement of the reader of this paper. For sure, Magrin decided to lead a restful and productive life in music for the benefit of his parish church of Cospicua.

In conclusion, in this paper I have built the story behind a document that I came across by chance in one of the local archives. For many decades, this archive was overlooked for its importance in the study of the history of Maltese music. On its part, music is an intangible inheritance, which, due to its ephemeral nature, often fails to leave traces in history. Its relation to politics is much more difficult to unknot. The interpretation that I have tried to provide, based on this musical score, is very hard to justify given the paucity of the historical records. However, the fact that an innocuous score found itself preserved with a series of documentation, which strictly speaking, is not of the same genre as the music preserved in it, provides the axle joint for my argumentation developed in this paper.

Perhaps, the words of Étienne Saint-Hilaire, a product of the Enlightenment and contemporaneous to the events recounted in this paper, (he was a member of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt and was part of the French invading forces of the island) elucidate the textual parameters of this paper:

'Study an object in isolation and you will only be able to bring it back to itself: consequently you can never have perfect knowledge of it. But see it in the midst of beings which are connected to each other in many different ways, and which are isolated from each other in different ways, and you will discover for this object a wider scope of relationships.'<sup>98</sup>

Indeed, the epistemological aim of this paper was to open a debate on this topic, looking at the relationship between politics and music in the troubled period of the eighteenth century, debating their social implications whilst using Malta as a case study.

<sup>97</sup> A.P. Cospicua, *Liber Defunctorum 1847-1861*, Vol. 11, f. 19v., He died on 19-01-1848 and in his act of death was addressed by the title of 'Frater'.

<sup>98</sup> This quotation is from É. Saint Hilaire, *Philosophie anatomique* as quoted by E. Said, *Orientalism*, (Penguin Books, 2003), p. 144.