

Three cheers for a Maltese sound architect

CHRISTOPHER MUSCAT composer and conductor taught music at the University of Malta for many years. He also taught sacred music at the Archbishop’s seminary. He talks to **Marie Benoit** about his latest composition, an Oratorio

How do you place your latest Oratorio within the spectrum of your compositional output?

It is no secret that sacred music occupies a very important part of my life, both as a conductor as well as a composer. Over the course of my career, I have composed numerous masses, psalms, hymns and other short liturgical works but my most important sacred work to date remains my *Stabat Mater* (written in 2013 and awarded first prize in the APS Composition Competition). This Oratorio, written ten years later, is on a similar scale and dimension as the *Stabat Mater* – in terms of duration and choral/orchestral forces – but it is written with a completely different approach and, thus, musical idiom. While a setting of the popular *Stabat Mater sequenza* allowed me to focus my attention on creating a palette of emotions with my music, the text of this oratorio – loaded as it is with the theological teachings of the Apostle Paul – forced me to create a work that would allow the text to come to the fore.

I am acquainted with the *Messiah* and *Elgar’s Dream of Gerontius* from my schooldays. I remember our singing teacher explaining that Elgar used Cardinal Newman’s original poem with annotations by General Gordon of Khartoum. Newman was a convert to Catholicism and is now a saint. This oratorio is considered a masterpiece even in England

it was only grudgingly accepted because of its Roman Catholic themes and even banned in some cathedrals. On the contrary your latest composition, performed recently in Rabat was very well received. Your oratorio *Hawn f’Nofs l-Ghar Musbieh qed jixghel* may be regarded as the sequel to your *Cantata L-X ta’ Frar 1928*, composed in 2016 and premiered during the 2017 edition of the Agape Festival. Comment?

I remember making it very clear from the outset that I was not interested in a ‘traditional’ Pauline oratorio that would be yet another account of Paul’s shipwreck on Malta. This also stems from the fact that I had already done this some years back with my *Cantata L-X ta’ Frar 1928* and I wanted this oratorio to give a theological meaning to the historical context. Idiomatically, the oratorio consciously picks up where the cantata left off. The oratorio abounds in tuneful melodies that make it easier for the audience to understand and appreciate the profound meaning of the text.

Since I was unable to come to the performance in Rabat I am looking forward to watching it on TVM News Plus on the 23rd of this month. You opted for a simple composition “devoid of unnecessary flourishes and experiments” to allow the text to come to the fore. You were determined while composing, that the audience could easily



From left: Dr Mark Fenech Vella (President of Fondazzjoni Paulus), Mgr Michael Bugeja and Mro Christopher Muscat

follow and especially understand the text which Mgr Bugeja based on excerpts from the letters of St Paul and further elucidated by his own verses. After the performance do you both feel that you have achieved your aims? That the audience was touched by the music and lyrics?

In my student days, Professor Oliver Friggieri had once told me that he is the least qualified person to comment on his own writings. As a composer, I can totally relate to Friggieri’s position. From the outside, I can maybe judge a work’s success from the applause,

from the fact that some were moved to tears, and from the tons of positive feedback received from the audience present for the premiere. But I can never know exactly how my music and Fr Michael’s text touched a person’s inner soul. The way I as the composer, or Fr Michael as the librettist, or one of the performers, or a member in the audience was affected by this oratorio is not for us to decide. Fr Michael and I simply hope that our humble offering to the Almighty Lord serves to help the listeners on their own spiritual voyage inspired by the profound teachings of St Paul.



In its most basic form we can say that an oratorio is an opera without the acting. Performances of oratorios take place in a church or the concert hall rather than the theatre. Although you still get the orchestra, the soloists, the libretto and the choir, you don’t get the costumes. Can you please give our readers some details about your oratorio regarding singers, narrator, choir, orchestra... How did you structure your oratorio? How long is it?

Hawn f’Nofs l-Ghar Musbieh qed jixghel is composed for narrator (Mgr Michael Bugeja), tenor (Alan Sciberras), baritone (Louis Andrew Cassar), The Cathedral Choir, Jubilate Deo, and the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra under my direction. The narrator reads excerpts from the letters of St Paul, the tenor and the baritone represent St Paul and Christ respectively, while the choir acts as a cronista, a chronicler or commentator. The hour-long oratorio is divided into nine, clearly delineated movements and opens with a mysterious prelude for orchestra that serves to set the mood for the rest of the work rather than to act as a musical menu of the oratorio’s tunes. Unlike traditional practices, this musical résumé takes place at the very end of the work where the prayer (Talba) - inspired, as it were, from the letters of St Paul - is also a musical reflection of music from the previous movements. This oratorio is a journey full of emotions, where Saul’s drastic spiritual transformation is represented by the sharp contrast of dramatic and subdued moments, until it finally ends on a bright and positive note as is typical of most of my large-scale sacred works.

What would you consider your most challenging aspect of composing music?

For me, the most challenging aspect of composing music remains the ability to communicate with my audience. Contemporary composers are constantly faced with the need to create something innovative



with every composition. This may sometimes force composers into uncharted territory and, while this is very often a most welcome artistic necessity, it may also lead to unnecessary experimentation at the cost of losing the line of communication with the audience. Thus, being firm and honest to my own artistic beliefs (that of communicating with the listener through my music) remains my top priority.



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Mgr Michael Bugeja comments

I have never considered myself a poet even as lines put together and ending in rhyme do not necessarily constitute poetry. It is also true that I have written some lines of verse mainly associated with Liturgy, something which is very close to my heart. My other scribbblings express my thoughts and feelings during a particular time and situation. Translation is another form of writing that I particularly love as I am fascinated by the richness of the Maltese language when I am translating language for liturgical use. When Maestro Christopher Muscat invited me to write an oratorio for *Fondazzjoni Paulus*, I thought a lot about such a task since I had never embarked on a similar endeavour, and it caused quite a lot of trepidation. On the other hand, the fact that this oratorio was going to deal with the figure of St Paul and since an oratorio is made up of a series of liturgical hymns helped me to gladly accept this task. The brief was not simple, and the task did not seem to be easy. I was asked to include or at least refer to, among other subjects, St Paul’s Grotto adjoining St Paul’s Basilica in Rabat and *Fondazzjoni Paulus* itself. After much pondering, I decided to think outside the box. So much has already been written about St Paul and his fortunate shipwreck on our island’s shores. Many of these opuses are the work of great Maltese and even foreign writers and composers and in my work, I had to try and avoid any childish or simplistic representations. Finally, I decided to try and reflect about what the Apostle Paul himself thought and felt as he was alone in the grotto, which is believed to have been his residence on our island. I tried to analyse his hyperactive life and ministry and his stay on this barren island inhabited by barbaroi. He knew that his end was near or at least approaching swiftly when he was shipwrecked on our island, and all of this would have instilled in him troubled thoughts and confused feelings as he tried to realise God’s mission for him and his own wishes of an ordinary human being. This line of thought inspired me, and this oratorio started to take shape. I had to re-read his letters for the umpteenth time and pray upon his writings for long periods of time. His writings demonstrate his intimate relationship with God who called him while on the way to Damascus, his conflict with the apostles, his missionary zeal, and his love for the Word he preached with so much enthusiasm. All this gave me a plethora of thoughts but most of all, as a human being, so many emotions. I attempted to make all this mine as I embarked on a personal journey of self-discovery. I was very fortunate to be accompanied on this iter by my very talented friend composer Christopher Muscat, who not only set the music but enriched my writing with his interventions and guidance. When writing this oratorio, I mostly used simple quatrains alternating between seven and eight syllables and rhyming the ending of verse two and four. This is the verse of the Maltese *ghana* (traditional Maltese folk singing), easy to remember and appropriate to express all kinds of thoughts and emotions. Moreover, in some parts I used free verse to express and highlight the complexity of the character. St Paul is not the only speaker in this work. He dialogues with Christ and the choir, who acts as a chronicler. I wanted the role of the chronicler to be an actualisation of St Paul and his role in today’s Maltese moral conscience. This represents the symbolic flame he lit from the grotto, and which enlightens those who are still inspired by St Paul’s presence on the island and his indestructible faith. Finally, I am grateful to *Fondazzjoni Paulus* for giving me such a wonderful opportunity and to Maestro Christopher Muscat for providing the music which gives impetus to my words. Words are music from the heart and when woven with the composer’s talent they can speak to today’s contemporary hearts.

