

## Business as usual

**Julie Thomas**

Director of the Imperial Choir



Business as usual? Well. Yes in a way, as the Imperial Ladies Choir have now done most of their usual concerts and masses, as well as a few other new engagements. We even managed to sing our Hymn to Our Lady of Victories last year with the band and soloists, albeit on the roof of our band club on the 7th of September and then an actual proper concert for the Feast of Our Lady of Mellieħa in the Misraħ iż-Żjara tal-Papa Ġwanni Pawlu II later in the same month.

In October we sang two concerts with the band, one at Mġarr and the other in the Parish Square, as part of the “Festival tal-Baned u Nar” organised by Reġjun Tramuntana. Members of the band and choir took part in the Service of Remembrance in November, and we also returned, later the same month, to one of our favourite venues in Valletta, the Monastery of St. Catherine to sing the mass for their festa there. December found us celebrating ‘The Season to be Jolly’ both at the Solana and Maritim hotels and also on the stage of the “Milied Mellieħi” in the Parish Square. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 numbers began to creep up and things were again put on hold. However, we did manage to keep rehearsing. Luckily, we were able to sing again at the opening of the Easter exhibition at the Imperial Band Club and at the beautiful Palm Sunday concert at the Parish Church, despite being down one or two members due to quarantine or COVID-19.

We kept going, and things started to become busy again. We sang with the band in June at the “San Gwann tal-Ħġejjeġ” concert in the Parish Square to a very appreciative audience. This was also the debut for a new alto, Gail Borg, who is managing to continue attending despite recently becoming a new mother. Our July 6th performance was at a new venue, singing with the Imperial Band at the Festa in Tarxien and then came our own concert on the 30th at the Sanctuary Church as part of the “Iljieli Melleħin” weekend. We are now cramming in rehearsals for our main festa concert on the 2nd of

September. It is lovely to be back doing what we enjoy as a choir. I hope you enjoy the choir’s choice of music for this concert as much as they enjoy singing it.

One song, *Requiem for a Soldier*, has become a favourite of the ladies. The melody is taken from the music for *Band of Brothers*, an American war drama, composed by Michael Kamen. Lyrics were added by Frank Musker. Although *Band of Brothers* is based during the Second World War, the lyrics are suitable for any war that has been or is being waged at the moment.

You never lived to see what you gave to me,  
one shining dream of hope and love, Life and Liberty.

With a host of brave unknown soldiers for your company  
you will live forever deep in our memory.

In fields of sacrifice heroes paid the price,  
young men who died for old men’s wars, gone to Paradise.

We are all one great band of brothers and one day you’ll see  
we will live forever when all the world is free.

I wish you’d lived to see what you gave to me,  
your shining dream of hope and love, life and liberty.

We are all one great band of brothers and one day you’ll see  
we will live forever when all the world is free.

Whilst ‘We few, we happy few, we **band of brothers**’ is one of the well-known lines from the rousing St Crispin’s Day speech given by the eponymous king in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, these verses remind me so much of some poetry I studied



at school, written by a young Welsh farming boy turned poet who was tragically killed on the first day of the Battle of Passchendaele. The story has stayed with me ever since then and my family were inspired to visit his grave a few years ago

were called up to join the armies. Although providing food for the nation was of huge importance during wartime, Ellis's family had to send one son to fight. Despite being a Christian pacifist, in 1916, the 29 year old Hedd Wyn volunteered to go to war in order to spare his younger brother Robert. The war inspired much of Hedd Wyn's work and includes some of his most notable and quoted poetry.



to pay our respects.

His name was Ellis Humphrey Evans, born on the 13th of January 1887 in the village of Trawsfynydd in Wales to a farming family. The eldest of eleven children, he left school when he was fourteen to become a shepherd and continued writing his poetry. From the age of eleven he had been competing in local Eisteddfodau (Welsh cultural competitions for music and literature) and had won his first prize when he was aged 12. He was inspired by both the Welsh and English 'Romantic' styles of poetry (such as the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley) and his work featured themes of nature and religion. He had won several bardic chairs for his poems, his first in 1907. In 1910 he was given his bardic name 'Hedd Wyn' by the very respected and accomplished bard 'Bryfdir'. Hedd is Welsh for peace and Wyn can mean white or pure. Although Hedd Wyn was successful as a poet, he had not yet achieved his goal of being awarded the highest prize a Welsh poet could be given, the chair at the National Eisteddfod. The charring of a bard is an important event in the Welsh Eisteddfod tradition and the most prestigious charring takes place at the National Eisteddfod of Wales each year.

He had started work on his Eisteddfod entry, 'Yr Arwr' (The Hero), in March 1917, when he was allowed home on leave to help with the ploughing after a particularly wet start to the year. Unfortunately, he left his manuscript behind when he had to leave in a hurry and had to begin rewriting it on his journey to Belgium.

In June 1917, Hedd Wyn joined the 15th Battalion of The Royal Welch Fusiliers at Flechin, France. His arrival depressed him but, nevertheless, it was here that he finished his National Eisteddfod entry and signed it with the nom de plume 'Fleur de Lys'. It was sent back to Wales at the end of the month.

On July 31st, the battalion marched towards Pilckem Ridge, for the major offensive which would become known as the Third Battle of Ypres and later, the Battle of Passchendaele. Hedd Wyn

When the First World War broke out, young men

**Rhyfel**

Gwae fi fy myw mewn oes mor ddreng,  
 A Duw ar drai ar orwel pell;  
 O'i ôl mae dyn, yn deyrn a gwreng,  
 Yn codi ei awdurdod hell.

Pan deimlodd fyned ymaith Dduw  
 Cyfododd gledd i ladd ei frawd;  
 Mae sŵn yr ymladd ar ein clyw,  
 A'i gysgod ar fythynnod tlawd.

Mae'r hen delynau genid gynt,  
 Ynghrog ar gangau'r helyg draw,  
 A gwaedd y bechgyn lond y gwynt,  
 A'u gwaed yn gymysg efo'r glaw.

**War**

Woe that I live in times so dreadful  
 that God disappears over the distant horizon;  
 In his place comes man, as lord and tyrant,  
 Raising forth his hideous authority.

When he felt that God had gone away,  
 He raised his sword and slew his brother;  
 The sound of fighting fills our ears,  
 And its shadow hangs over the cottages of the  
 poor.

The old harps (played) long ago  
 Are now strung up on the branches of far-off  
 willows,  
 And the cries of the young boys fill the wind,  
 While their blood mingles with the rain.



was fatally wounded within the first few hours of the battle which had begun at 3:50am. He was carried to a dressing station where he died from his wounds at about 11am.

The National Eisteddfod was held at Birkenhead on 6th of September later that year. The adjudicators announced that the winner of the chair was the poet 'Fleur de Lys'. The trumpets were sounded for the author to identify himself. After three summons by the trumpets, nobody had come forward and the chief druid announced that the poet had been killed in action six weeks earlier. The empty chair was then draped with a black cloth and that year's event became known as 'Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu' (The Eisteddfod of the Black Chair).

Private Ellis H. Evans was buried at Artillery Wood Cemetery near Boezinge, Belgium. After a petition was submitted to the Imperial War



Graves Commission, his headstone was given the additional words 'Y Prifardd Hedd Wyn' (The Chief Bard, Hedd Wyn). By coincidence, the Irish poet, Francis Ledwidge also died at this battle on the same day as Hedd Wyn and was also buried in the same cemetery. The chair was delivered to Hedd Wyn's family at their farm in Trawsfynydd, where it can still be seen today at the poet's home (Yr Ysgwrn), now a museum in his memory.

In 1924 a renowned Welsh poet, R. Williams Parry, wrote a tribute poem entitled Hedd Wyn. Its last verse goes as follows:

In 1924 a renowned Welsh poet, R. Williams Parry, wrote a tribute poem entitled Hedd Wyn. Its last verse goes as follows:

Gadair unig ei drig draw! Ei dwyfraich  
Fel pe'n difrif wrandaw,  
Heddiw estyn yn ddistaw  
Mewn hedd hir am un ni ddaw.

Lonely chair, its occupant far away! The two  
arms,  
As if listening intently,  
Today reach out silently  
In long peace for one who will not come.

I hope you enjoy our performance at this year's festa. I thank all my lovely ladies for their commitment, hard work, and enthusiasm over the last year, and I wish you all a happy and peaceful festa.

**Excerpt from Yr Arwr (The Hero)**

Un Hwyr, pan heliodd niwl i'r panylau

Rwydi o wead dieithr y duwiau,  
Mi wybum weld y mab mau - yn troi'n rhydd  
O hen fagwrydd dedwydd ei dadau.  
Y llanc a welwn trwy'r gwyll yn cilio  
I ddeildre hudol werdd Eldorado,  
O'i ôl bu'r coed yn wylo, - a nentydd  
Yn nhawch annedwydd yn ucheneidio.  
Y macwy heulog, paham y ciliodd?  
Ba ryw hud anwel o'm bro a'i denodd?  
Ei oed a'i eiriau dorrodd, - ac o'i drig  
Diofal unig efe ddiflannodd.

**The Hero**

One evening, when the mist collected into the  
panels  
Of the nets, strangely woven by the gods,  
I know I saw my own young man – turning  
freely  
From the happy old home of his fathers.  
I saw the youth, through the dusk, retreat  
Into a magical, leafy, green Eldorado.  
Behind him the trees wept – the streams  
With an air of unhappiness, sighed.  
The sunny youth, why did he leave?  
What unseen magic drew him from my  
homeland?  
His trust and his word broken – and from his  
dwelling  
Carefree and lonely, he vanished.



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