

## Reviving Malta's Musical Heritage

Geoff Thomas



A few years ago, I wrote an article about how, in my opinion, Malta needs to look after its heritage of band marches; that we should edit, publish, and then promote the best ones throughout the world. This year I want to write about a success story, not in the field of band marches (yet!) but in the preservation and transcription of works from an earlier period in Maltese musical history.

The years bridging the periods of late baroque and classical music saw the development of a *galant* style, a lighter, more modern style with an emphasis on melody and simpler harmony. Composers such as Telemann, Vivaldi, Handel, J.C. Bach, C.P.E. Bach, and Pergolesi are associated with this style, particularly through opera and sacred works which were predominantly vocal. Nowhere was more associated with this style than Naples ... and this is where Malta comes in.

In 2016, two important books were published: *Benigno Zerafa (1726-1804) and the Neapolitan Galant Style* by Frederick Aquilina, and *The Great Maltese Composers* by Joseph Vella Bondin. Both of these books show in great detail how important the 18<sup>th</sup> century was in the development of Maltese music and how strong the link with Naples was. Neither of these books could have been written without the wealth of resource material now available, especially with the digitisation of Mдина's archives, and online digital access to the scores housed in, for example, the conservatories of Naples and Milan, and the National Library of France. Many Maltese composers were sent or were drawn to Naples to study and to teach. Some, like Zerafa, returned home whilst others, like Girolamo Abos, never returned.

Due to Malta's strong Baroque connections with its wonderful Teatru Manoel, the Baroque Festival, the Valletta International Baroque Ensemble (VIBE), and the Monteverdi Project, the performance of baroque music has never been healthier in Malta. This has led to performances of some musical gems

by forgotten or little-known Maltese composers.

*'Among the hundreds of musical manuscripts discovered locked away in one of the cupboards of the sacristy of the Cathedral of Mдина in 1969 was the entire collection of sacred works by Benigno Zerafa ... who served as **maestro di cappella** at the Cathedral of St Paul at Mдина from 1744 to 1786.'* (Frederick Aquilina)



*Excerpt from Missa in Pastorale by Benigno Zerafa (filters applied for clarity)*

Even a brief glance at this score will reveal some of the challenges involved in transcribing this music and making it available for contemporary performance. I have been extremely fortunate to have been asked to transcribe and edit a number of works so that they can be performed. So far, I have completed two short pieces by Handel, a song by Steffani, Zerafa's *Messa in Pastorale*, two chamber operas by Gluck, and a number of pieces by Girolamo Abos, including his *Dixit Dominus*, *Stabat Mater*, an aria from *Erifile*, and the complete opera *Pelopida*. I am now starting on two of his masses, one written for Milan, one for Naples, then, hopefully, his cantata *Le Glorie d'Ibero*.

There is nothing more rewarding than hearing



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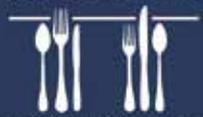
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these pieces come to life in authentic performances. So what are the challenges in transforming a manuscript such as the Zerafa mass above into something that can be read and performed easily? So that it looks something like this:



**Part of the same excerpt from *Missa in Pastorale* by Benigno Zerafa, now transcribed.**

As you can imagine, the condition of the scores can vary enormously depending on where they have been stored, the quality of the paper and ink used, and so on. Many scores are yellow or brown with foxing, whilst some are very well preserved. Quite often, the scores will have been written out by pupils and I have come across quite a few different handwriting styles, sometimes even in the same score. If a performance were to be imminent, many shortcuts might be made. Look at the examples which follow, from Abos's opera *Pelopida*.

For those of you who can read music, you will notice that there is no indication of instrumentation, clef, or key signature. Compare the original with what is actually played. It turns out that the top two lines are horns written in bass clef (sounding an octave higher), the next two lines are oboes, then violins and violas.

Where the oboes play the same as violins, a simple *unis* is written; where 2<sup>nd</sup> violins play the same as 1<sup>st</sup> violins, the same. Where the viola plays

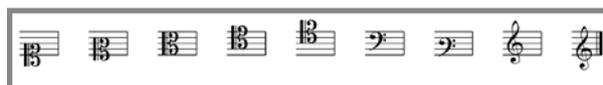


[I]

the same as the basso continuo (sounding an octave higher), there is a blank space preceded by a bass clef. To avoid writing out lots of semiquavers, stemless notes are written (see bars 2-5 [i] and 116-118 [ii]). For comparison, bar 3 of example [i] is the same as bar 114 in example [ii].

There are many other issues, not all found in these examples, such as a lack of figured bass (which signifies to the keyboard or theorbo player which chords to play), incorrect or inconsistent ornaments, and so on. Not to be forgotten is the poor copyist who, after a hard night, returns to the manuscript a day later and forgets the order of instruments or singers on the page. Imagine the confusion when trying to work it out!

If we return to the missing clefs, these are usually given at the beginning of each movement or aria. In nearly all pitched music (discounting TAB etc.), we only come across three clefs, C, F, and G. They are only ever placed on the lines of the staff, C clef on all five, F and G clefs on two (yes, I know about the D clef and sub-bass clef, but they are very rare):



Once you realise that there are only three basic clefs to worry about, reading the music becomes quite simple. You just have to hope that the copyist remembers which ones they are using, which isn't always the case. The pitch of horns is sometimes a problem as some horns can be in the high or low octave, and the choice of clef can be confusing in the middle of a movement – for the copyist and editor!

Key signatures are generally very straightforward, especially in major keys, and it is only when modulations occur that problems arise (see accidentals, below). I just have to know whether the composer has written for transposing instruments (trumpets and horns) at pitch or transposed.

Fortunately, today, music software allows one



[II]

**Excerpts from the opening aria of *Pelopida* by Gerolamo Abos.**

to be quite flexible in the use of older instruments and older clefs. I have even created new instruments in order to provide today's players with a better, more consistent, performing experience. I have bought an Italian keyboard for the computer which has saved me hours when using letters with accents. Sometimes there are differences between the original libretto and the lyrics provided in the score (often a confusion between modern and older versions of words) but the only system text I have to look out for is the tempo marking, which is often hidden by the bottom staff (continuo part).

So, the transcribing and editing of scores becomes quite logical and relatively simple once one becomes familiar with the handwriting, shorthand, and common errors. However, there are still some nasty surprises. There are three things which I don't particularly enjoy coming across when going through the scores. The first of these is missing accidentals. It is quite common for an accidental to apply to notes for long passages, or to be omitted entirely, so it is important to understand the key and harmonic context of what has been written. Less common are the bars of unusual length in recitatives (the sung dialogue between arias and choruses). I often cheat and trick the software into accepting e.g. five beats in a four beat bar.

My least favourite surprise? Missing pages. This is quite rare, but I recently had to 'compose' or, more accurately, reconstruct two pages of a Gluck aria as the source material had been scanned incorrectly. I'm sure the two pages are in the Naples Conservatory, but they were not easily accessible. So far, no one has spotted which pages they are, so fingers crossed!

As I said near the beginning of this article, there is nothing more rewarding than hearing these pieces come to life in authentic performances. Abos's *Messa di Napoli* is due to be performed early next year in Valletta. His *Stabat Mater* is a wonderful

work, even better than Pergolesi's setting in my opinion. I revised an earlier transcription by the late Joseph Vella who recorded his version with Miriam Cauchi, Claire Debono, and Claire Massa in St. George's Basilica, Gozo in 2002. My edition was performed at St. Paul's Co-Cathedral in Valletta in 2018 and, in July this year, as part of the opening concert at the Intra Muros Festival held at the 16th century Alden Biesen Castle in Rijkhoven, Belgium, with Gillian Zammit, Francesca Aquilina, Raisa Marie Micallef and VIBE.

It certainly was worth turning this ...



... into this:



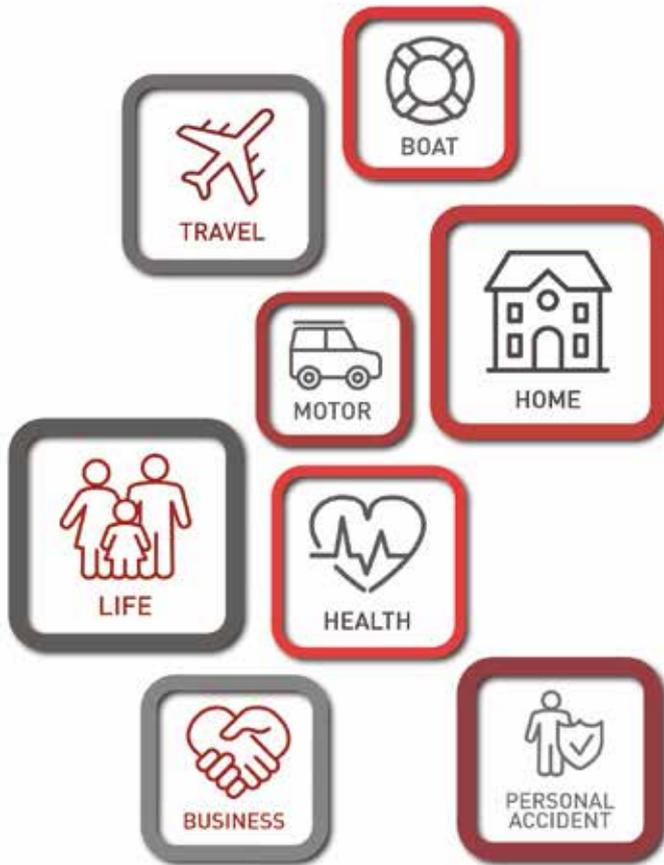
Happy feast and I hope to see some of you at performances of some of these works in the future, so that you too can appreciate the wealth of Malta's musical heritage.

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