



Celebrating Malta's Musical Heritage: Francesco Schira

Geoff Thomas



Last year, I wrote about the wealth of Malta's musical heritage and how it is being rediscovered. Before that, during the enforced lockdown, I shared with you how I made use of that time to delve further into my family tree. This year, I am going to combine those two interests to bring to life one of Malta's oft-forgotten musical sons.

During the spring of this year, I was involved in a wonderful celebration of Maltese operatic music spanning over two hundred years. Organised by Dr Reuben Pace, this musical banquet featured: **Giuseppe Arena** (1709-84); **Girolamo Abos** (1715-60); **Nicolò Isouard** (1773-1818); **Francesco Schira** (1809-83); **Anton Nani** (1842-1929); **Giuseppe Camilleri** (1903-76), and **Carmelo Pace** (1906-93). While I was rehearsing and playing this delightful music, I thought I recognised the style of Francesco Schira. It sounded very much like Balfe (especially *Bohemian Girl*) and Sullivan. I needed to find out more. Fortunately, the Maltese mezzo-soprano Clare Ghigo had researched quite a bit in order to stage this event and she was able to point me in the right direction.

As it turns out, Signor Schira is a classic example of don't believe everything you read on the internet. When was he born? Where was he born? Was he an average jobbing composer and teacher or was

he up there with Verdi as one of the giants of the late 19th century? There is conflicting contemporary evidence in each case. Some things are certain, however, so let's look at the evidence.

First, two reputable sources, Grove's dictionary and Ricordi publishers, give his date of birth as 21 August 1809 in Malta. Wiki (and others) give his birth date as Sept. 19, 1815, or even October 19th, 1809. However, when he died in London on 15 October 1883, his age was given as 74, confirming the earlier date.

He was one of four children born to a father who was a singer and a mother who was a ballerina. There seems to be some confusion between Francesco and his brother Vincenzo, not least because there was another Vincenzo Schira (also on the books of Ricordi) who was born in 1802 – but in Spain – and who died of cholera in Portugal in 1857. Some of Francesco's compositions were erroneously attributed to this man as Francesco also lived in Lisbon for about 10 years.

The Schira family moved to Milan, where Francesco studied (at the Conservatorio) and had his first opera, *Elena e Malvina* performed at La Scala on November 17th, 1832. He was head-hunted by a Portuguese impresario and soon moved to Lisbon as *Maestro Direttore, Compositore e Conduttore della Musica* at the Santo Carlos. He remained for eight years in Lisbon where he was also appointed Professor of Harmony and Counterpoint at the Conservatory, composing *I Cavalieri di Valenza* and *Il Fanatico per la Musica*, besides ballets, cantatas, etc. He also conducted operatic performances at the Teatro della Città di Oporto. Although I have found no concrete evidence to support my theory, it is likely that he married here. He certainly had a daughter (who had married a Portuguese) who was named in his will.

SCHIRA Francesco.

Personal Estate £2,102 15s. 10d.

28 May. Administration of the Personal Estate of Francesco Schira late of 60 Welbeck-street Cavendish-square in the County of **Middlesex** Musician who died 15 October 1883 at 60 Welbeck-street was granted at the **Principal Registry** under the usual Limitations to George Frederick Jefferys of 67 Berners-street in the said County Music Publisher the lawful Attorney of Angelica Josepha Schira (Wife of F. de Miranda) the Daughter and only Next of Kin now residing in Portugal.

His personal estate of over £2000 is worth about £215,000 today. The fact that he lived in some of the best parts of London is also testament to the fact that he was doing very well. He moved to London following another offer, this time from a Mr Maddox. Schira was visiting Paris in search of a good book or libretto for a new piece and was tempted to London (a city he had visited three years earlier) as director of music at the newly opened Princess's Theatre. The theatre, previously the Oxford Street Theatre, opened on Monday, December 26, 1842. Despite some less than favourable press reviews, Schira was popular with the public and conducted at Drury Lane and Covent Garden.

From the mid-sixties until his unexpected death in 1883, Schira was busy as a singing teacher, although he continued to compose until 1876. He continued to travel, particularly back to Italy, and maintained correspondence with his publisher, Ricordi, in Milan. For the Carnival at Naples, in 1865, he wrote another grand opera, entitled *Selvaggia*, which was given with brilliant success, and was performed at Milan, Barcelona and elsewhere. The reception accorded to *Selvaggia* led to his being asked to write another opera, *Lia*, for Venice. This was also first performed during the Carnival but was apparently not so much to the taste of the Venetians as its precursor. Nevertheless, there are those who

The Drury Lane band requires decided amelioration. There is a want of quality and of tone in the leading instruments. The violins are much too weak for the bass strength. We have no great confidence in the abilities of Signor Schera as musical director. We wish the lessee could be impressed with the importance, in the present advanced state of musical knowledge, of making a grand orchestral improvement, and let us no longer be under the reproach that the Drury Lane band is inferior to a tenth-rate Parisian one. We write under the impressions of last and previous seasons. We are unaware that there has been any alterations of note, but if we find them we shall be most happy to signalise them.

Illustrated London news, 27th September 1845

Schira's opera *Kenilworth*, after Scott, was rehearsed at Covent Garden but not produced, but the Princess's Theatre gave well-received productions of his operas *Mina* in 1849 and *Thérèse*, or *The Orphan of Geneva* in 1850. He conducted the 1852 season at Drury Lane, but thereafter he devoted himself to teaching singing, while continuing to compose. His opera *Nicolò de' Lapi* was produced at Her Majesty's Theatre in May 1863.

Francesco Schira appears on the 1861 UK census living at 48 Queen Anne Street in Marylebone. He gave Italy as his place of birth, and his profession as 'Musical Composer and Professor of Singing.' At the time of the census, he was apparently 46, which would mean he was born in or about 1815. More confusion.

regard 'Lia' as Schira's *capo di lavoro*. He was totally opposed to any style other than the Italian, yet 'despite his narrow musical tastes, Schira was, after Verdi, one of the outstanding Italian opera composers of his generation.'

The managers of the Birmingham Triennial Festival commissioned Schira to write a cantata for the meeting of 1873. This was one of the most prestigious festivals of the 19th century. It began in September 1768, and was started to help raise funds to complete the new General Hospital on Summer Lane. It proved to be very popular and successful, but it took another event in 1778 to achieve the funds required. The hospital opened September 1779. The festival ran until 1912, never restarting after the First World War. It saw the premieres of

48 Queen Anne St	1	Francesco Schira	Head	Mr	46	Musical Composer and Prof of Singing	Italy
		Brady Eve	Servant	Miss	27		Middlesex London
		Robert Westwell	Servant		15		do do



Signor Schira on 29th October 1861



An extract from Nicolò de Lapi in Schira's own hand, dated 1st December 1865

Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Dvořák's *Requiem*, and Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. Schira's cantata *The Lord of Burleigh* was performed on August 26th, 1873, the opening day of the festival, under the composer's baton. The story is based on Tennyson's poem of the same name, although it is a complete re-write! Here are some extracts from the review in *The Musical Times* of 1st October 1873:

The first novelty of the Festival, Signor Schira's Pastoral Cantata, "The Lord of Burleigh," was produced at the concert on Tuesday evening, before a large audience, the Duke of Edinburgh again being present. The story of Tennyson's poem on the subject is perhaps scarcely well adapted for musical treatment, as two characters only are the actors in it; but Mr Desmond L. Ryan, the author of the libretto, has remedied this difficulty by adding two more, Constance and Trueman.

In the setting of this Cantata, Signor Schira has shown but little appreciation of the character of the story, but simply using his experience of orchestral and choral resources, to the best advantage, and throwing in a few highly melodious vocal solos, which belong rather to an Italian Opera than an English Pastoral, has succeeded in producing a composition which,

regarded only as abstract music, has many points worthy of commendation, but tested by that higher artistic standard by which the work of so mature a composer must inevitably be judged, can scarcely take that high rank which the indiscriminate applause bestowed upon it would seem to warrant. (The Victorians loved long sentences!)

The instrumentation throughout is so crushing to the voices as to render obscure many parts which might with more judicious treatment have been highly effective, for there is much good vocal writing in the concerted portions of the work ... if it were necessary to show that our impression of the excessive weight of the orchestration was shared by the general audience, we might allude to the fact that the only two pieces encored - the Trio "O'er seas of life," and the Quartet and Chorus, "How changed her state" were unaccompanied ... The Overture and Pastoral Processional March are favourable examples of the composer's orchestral writing, and both were much and deservedly applauded. At the conclusion of the work, Signor Schira, who conducted, received a perfect ovation, being recalled for renewed congratulations after he had left the orchestra.

Birmingham
Agosto 28/73

Carissimo amico

Ti mando uno dei più belli articoli che parla della mia nuova produzione stata eseguita martedì scorso 26. corrente al gran Festival - Ebbi una vera ovazione, pezzi ripetuti, ed un'esecuzione magnifica. Non aggiungo parola, poiché tutto ciò che si può dire, lo troverete nell'articolo - Solo permettetemi di dire, che

My dearest friend,

I am sending you one of the most beautiful articles which talks about my new production which was performed last Tuesday 26th at the Grand Festival. I had a standing ovation, encores, and it was a magnificent performance. I won't say another word as everything I can say will be found in the article.

avergli pagato per intere il libretto
dippiù, ebbe da me in settembre
scorso, cento lire che gli regalai,
che fanno 300, e ora dopo
la domanda fatta sono 15. giorni
appena chiedere ancora l'altre
cento?....

Quando saprò da te che gli
hai dato le Italiane lire
duecento a mio conto, allora
le renderò al Sign. Lisci -
Attendo un tuo riscontro -
Ti abbraccio di cuore
L'amico
F. Schira

Feb. 11/80

40, WELBECK STREET,
CAYENDISH SQUARE, W.

Londra

Caro Tornaghi

Ti ho scritto la nuova della mia
nomina a Commendatore e spero
che Giulio amerà questa onorifica
data ad un' Italiano, e suo
compagno d'arte; e che vorrà
gentilmente farmi un bel
articolo nella "Gazzetta musicale"
salutandolo cordialmente, e
ringraziarlo -
Ora vengo a chiederti

enough to write a short article in the 'Gazzetta Musicale'. Then, in 1883, came the unexpected news of his death:

Signor Schira. The death of this esteemed composer and professor of the vocal art, which occurred last Monday morning at his residence in Welbeck Street, will be generally regretted. He had but recently come back from a visit to his relations at Milan and died soon after his return. For upwards of forty years Francesco Schira ... has been a prominent figure in the musical world of this city, where he enjoyed high consideration, and moved in the best circles. ... His death was quite unanticipated and, if simply on that account, will be the more deeply lamented. Schira was the recipient of several distinguished

honours from the Italian Government, the most prized of which is that of 'Commendatore della Corona d'Italia' - prized the more because it was conferred by King Humbert, motu proprio.

Had you heard of Schira before today? He was certainly a new name to me, but he has left a legacy which, despite his claims to be Italian, should be cherished and remembered by the land of his birth.