

A MUSICAL OFFERING

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...we are a Baroque nation! We're very much steeped in baroque, perhaps without even knowing it. It's in our architecture, our art, festas... all of these things derive from the 300-odd years we spent basking in the baroque aesthetic introduced to us by the Order of St John.

After months of preparation the baroque festival in Valletta, from the 8th to the 26th January 2013, resounded to the wonderful musical creations of Bach, Vivaldi and Handel, whose names, in the baroque firmament burn brightly like comets in a galaxy of twinkling stars. Bach, Vivaldi and Handel dominated a world which was called The Age of Elegance; an age during which the so called 'enlightened despots' like Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great read the works of the encyclopaedists and idolised Voltaire while he was exiled from France by Louis XV. This was an age when Frederick in his jewel like palace of Sans Souci held concerts in which he, an accomplished flautist, participated and in connivance with one of Johann Sebastian's sons, Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach, set the *thema regium* with which old Bach, then considered, quite wrongly, to be terribly old fashioned, created the fabled Musical Offering which still astounds the listener with its innovativeness, stateliness and grandeur.

In Malta, always a microcosm of Europe, we can safely say that, of the grandmasters of the 18th century, the two Portuguese, Manoel de Vilhena and Pinto de Fonseca definitely qualify as enlightened despots and patrons of the arts. Crescent moons, winged hands holding swords and rampant lions are heraldic evidence all over Valletta that these princes availed themselves of the politics of art to create a lasting memorial to themselves and the Order that they epitomised. The greatest monument to this glorious period is undoubtedly the Manoel Theatre which although extensively remodelled since its inauguration in 1732 still retains that inimitable 18th century courtly feel. The Manoel embodies the spirit of an age where the Michael Jacksons of the day, the Farinelli brothers; castrato and composer, caused people to swoon with the sheer audacity of their high Fs. It was of course, with V18 looming on the horizon, a mere matter of time before the realisation that we would be missing out that caused the Valletta International Baroque Festival to materialise and to do that we had to persuade the authorities that not only was it viable but also sustainable. I am delighted and grateful that it was not hard to persuade them to share my vision and that I have had

unstinting support all the way from the ministries and entities concerned not to mention private sponsors who have seen the efficaciousness and the business opportunities a festival like this can generate.

January is what is called a shoulder month where tourism needs to be boosted and where the post festivities blues need to be blown away in a splendid event which celebrates our capital city as never before. From the 8th to the 26th top local and international ensembles and orchestras, many specially flown over, were perform in Valletta, in the Manoel Theatre, in the Jesuit Church, the All Souls Church, the President's Palace and last and not least St John's Co Cathedral, wherein the star concert on the 17th took place with two of the greatest baroque works, Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Bach's *Magnificat* performed by the fabled and world famous Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Schola Cantorum of Oxford directed by James Burton and filmed by Mezzo for posterity. Moreover the artists enchanted the audience with an extraordinary gift as the encore with introduction by Burton was the *Cum Sancto Spiritu* from *Messa a Due Cori* by Maltese baroque composer Benigno Zerafa, recently compiled by Maltese researcher musicologist Frederick Aquilina. Other wonderful performances like the exquisite Johann Christian Bach opera *Zanaida* produced by Paris based Opera Fuoco and Handel's Ballet *Terpsichore* produced by Versailles habitués Les Talens Lyriques under the baton of the renowned Christophe Rousset not to mention our own Malta Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Michael Laus with the participation of violinist Carmine Lauri performing the entire *Quattro Stagioni* while The King's Consort and Combattimento Ensemble put on top Handel and Bach programmes. New Century Baroque is an ensemble set up from one of the European Baroque Orchestras in which our own Nadia Debono takes part regularly while connections with contemporary Maltese composer Ruben Zahra created a lovely programme from the Jeune Orchestre Atlantique in which a number of works by Maltese composers were performed. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Moliere's *Don Juan* in Maltese with English subtitles and a pyrotechnical recital by countertenor David Hansen with the MPO and other smaller recitals by chamber ensembles took place crowned with an all Bach organ recital by our own Wayne Marshall at St John's Co Cathedral.

Irrespective of the recession, irrespective of post Christmas blues a pensioner could listen to the King's Consort perform for as little as 5 euro. Where else in the world could one do that? This festival would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of a tiny but enthusiastic workforce based at the Manoel Theatre itself which had pledged itself to finance fully this gift to Maltese culture established by the government for the 'honest recreation of the people' as decreed by grandmaster Vilhena. The spinoffs from the festival are endless. Already we have established the Valletta International Baroque Festival Ensemble which performed with honours at St Paul's

Anglican Cathedral on the 5th of December with celebrated soprano Emma Kirkby and which, throughout the coming year, till January 2014 that is, can perform anywhere in Malta or abroad under the festival's name. I am very very proud of this ensemble made up as it is of Maltese and foreign musicians on a 50/50 basis. From ensembles to special academies and workshops and centres for the restoration of harpsichords and other specialised instruments to exhibitions of baroque art and artefacts like reliquaries or ostensories, the activities that could be possible should we all pull the same rope and realise how natural the baroque idiom is within the Valletta ambience.

I look to you all dear readers to establish this festival as a yearly event that will go from strength to strength and not just a damp January squib by supporting as many events as you can by attending and showing Europe and the world that, in as far as Capital of Culture is concerned, we Maltese mean business.