OPERA IN MALTA FROM 1850 ONWARDS:

TOWARDS A NEW RENAISSANCE OF THE ART-FORM IN GOZO.

by

MARIELLA SPITERI CEFAI

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ABSTRACT

Gozo is Malta's sister island, with a population of 39,000 in an area of 67km². Hundreds of tourists cross the Gozo channel everyday to visit its' crystal-clear beaches, museums and archaeological sites that recount its' long history.

Gozo also hosts many cultural activities, amongst the grandest of which are the operas held at the two opera theatres located in the main street of Victoria. These two theatres, the Astra and Aurora are owned by two band clubs, the La Stella and the Leone respectively. Their long history and rivalry dates back to their inception in the 1860s, which in turn is based on religious divisions: the La Stella band support the feast of St. George while the Leone band supports the feast of the Virgin Mary. The two theatres are unique on the Maltese islands. There is no other theatre that can host over a thousand spectators and what makes them especially unique is that they are managed by club members rather than a professional organisation.

This thesis presents a summary of the history of opera in Malta, mostly focused on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but its primary focus is the efforts made by opera enthusiasts to maintain performances after World War II, the role of the Astra and Aurora Theatres in Gozo in the process, and how these two theatres took over this art-form from mainland Malta.

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PERSONALIA

As part of my research I conducted various interviews, between November 2021 and May 2023, with members of both band clubs. I met the interviewees in their homes, particularly if they were elderly, while others in their respective theatre.

The interviewees from the Leone Philharmonic Society management include:

Peter Paul Borg born on 13 November 1934. He was a member of the Leone committee and played the tenor saxophone with the Leone band for 66 years. He was employed with the Rediffusion and later with TeleMalta, the local telephone company.

Joseph Debrincat Junior, born 15 November 1976 started studying music at age twelve with the Leone Band. He persued his studies in Malta and graduated with BA Hons in Music (1998) and M.Phil (2005) from the University of Malta. From 1995 till 2019 he was a member of the Opera Committee of the Aurora and backstage music co-ordinator. In 1998 he was appointed assistant director of the Leone Band.

Joseph Debrincat Senior, born 11 November 1951 occupied various roles at the Aurora Theatre from 1968 to 2015. Amongst the various roles, Joseph was the theatre's director, assistant secretary then secretary, vice president and administrative secretary. Joseph worked as head of costumer services as the TeleMalta then GO (telecommunication companies) and is presently a person of trust appointed by the Ministry for Gozo within the Cultural Heritage Directorate.

Vincent Grech, born 11 June 1936 started as a band member, playing the trumpet, with the Leone band in 1955. From 1971 till 1976 he was chairman of the committee in charge of the building of the Aurora Theatre and the Leone band. From 1976 till 1990 he served as secretary and director of the band club and of the Aurora Theatre. Vincent was a physical education teacher.

Matthew Sultana born 12 June 1986. His roles at the Aurora Theatre include Arts and Events Executive (2007-present), Executive Secretary of Leone Philharmonic Society (2016-17), Aurora Theatre Manager and Producer (2008-2016), Customer Care and Press Officer (2007-present), Webmaster editor (2005-2017) and head of productions (2015-present). He presently works as Senior Manager at the Policy Development and Programme Implementation Directorate within the Ministry for National Heritage, the Arts and Local Government and at the Permanent Delegation of Malta to UNESCO.

Louis Xuereb born 12 March 1931. He formed part of the Leone committee since 1964. In 1980 he had the role of treasurer while in 1981 he became president of the society till 1988. He was appointed honorary president of the Leone Philharmonic Society, for life. Louis was a clerk at the Gozo Hospital.

The interviewees from the La Stella Philharmonic Society include:

George Borg born 1 September 1938. Joined the La Stella Band General Committee in 1963 and spent over fifty years in various roles amongst which vice-president and acting-President. George also served as the General Secretary of the Astra Theatre committee where he was entrusted with the logistics and stage design for various productions at the Astra Theatre. He was also the treasurer of the La Stella Band and a member of the Band Administrative Commission. He is a retired public service officer and has served in many departments until his retirement in 1999.

Dolindo Cassar born 16 April 1943. Along the years he served in various ranks within the Astra Theatres up to being active in the theatre's management even though he does not occupy any role. He worked as an executive secretary in various offices amongst which was the Għajnsielem Local Council.

George Grech born November 15, 1927. Became a member of the La Stella committee in 1948. In 1968, with the opening of the new Astra Theatre he was the middleman between the theatre and the companies who organised concerts and productions on stage. He was also the contact person for Fasano, the Italian company who produced the first operas at the Astra Theatre. He was a Physical Education teacher in Malta and had photography as a hobby. George passed away on 12 August 2023, just a few days before I submitted by thesis, aged 95.

George Frans Vella born 25 February 1982 is graduated in classics and has a solid background and knowledge about the history of Gozo's churches. He presently is a teacher of classical studies.

Carmel Zammit born 29 September 1945. Graduated as a teacher. At the Astra Theatre he was a volunteer in charge of the Booking Office and chief stage prompter since the theatre's opening in 1968. He has been in charge of the backstage since the early 70s while appointed committee member from 1971 till the late 90s. He's still active backstage during major productions.

INTRODUCTION

Opera is the ultimate art form. It has singing and music and drama and dance and emotion and story. Diane Paulus (Opera director)[1]

This dissertation is principally about two musical societies, found in Victoria, the capital city of Gozo, which have succeeded in building, managing and maintaining opera productions for over four decades, since the 1970s. The La Stella band, after a long history of rivalry and disagreements with the other musical Society, opened the Astra Theatre in 1968 while the Leone band followed in 1976 when the Aurora Theatre was inaugurated. One must consider the size of the place in which all this is happening, to be able to appreciate and understand the ambitions and occasional folly that previous generations initiated. Towards the end of the 1960's, Gozo's population was 26,000 and it was a time when cinema was booming. People from all the villages around Gozo came to Victoria to watch films. However, the only cinema on the island, which was also the headquarters of the Leone band, was way too small and there was a clear need for bigger venues. Rather than waiting for a commercial company to provide these, the two musical societies embarked on their own colossal developments of building not one, but two large headquarters. An essential requirement for any band club is a rehearsal space, and the theatres effectively developed out of these as each band used its original hall also for other social and cultural activities as well as for rehearsals. The theatres were not just a place of entertainment but a showcase of what each band club could do and maintained the sense of competition between the two groups. All the more striking is the fact that both theatres were built solely with money donated by the supporters and from the band

[1] http://operafresh.blogspot.com/2011/01/diane-paulus-thinks-mother-knows-best.html

club’s funds, so committee members were always on the lookout for how to have a constant and consistent revenue.

The La Stella committee members realised that a larger cinema would generate a lot of income and so they were on the look out to find large premises in the main street of Victoria where they would build a theatre that could hold twice as many people as the one owned by the Leone band club, which had a capacity of 600. When the property was acquired and plans to create a large auditorium started, designs were expanded and besides a cinema, it was decided that the new theatre would host plays, concerts and even operas on its new, larger stage. The Leone band followed suit and built their new, bigger headquarters a few years later. Superficially, this seems strange. Gozo was basically a rural island where most of the inhabitants were farmers, fishermen and masons. Only a minority attended school after the age of twelve since the priority of the family was to help the father with his job or the mother at home. Who would be interested in spending a weekly wage to go and watch an opera in Gozo?

The motive behind the building of two large theatres in the main street of Victoria, just 200 metres away from each other goes back to the 1860 when two wind bands were formed and rivalry between them was the order of the day. The contention was always a religious one, since both bands used to play during the feast of St. George, but each wanted it for his own. Ultimately the two bands ended up siding with two different saints and year after year each band club and its supporters became more antagonistic towards each other, with intense competition as to which was the best. Each band club sought to improve itself not just in band playing but also in organising the best feast for the saint with which they were associated. This meant having better street decorations, more firework displays and better street marches which attracted people

from all over the island. Insults were mutual, fights were routine, and vandalism was customary. In the 1960's growing up in a household in Victoria meant that you sided with one band club or the other, depending on your parents' views. Children were brought up supporting one band club while loathing the opposing one. Conversation around the dinner table was frequently about what the 'others' did to 'them' and how they are going to pay back and beat them. The 'love' or 'hate' for a particular band club was ingrained from an early age.

At first, operas in Gozo might have been on an amateurish level but each managing committee learnt from its mistakes and improved year after year. Today, despite its small size, Gozo dominates the operatic realm in Malta, all thanks to these musical societies which over the years managed to attain an operatic standard that can be compared with that of many other theatres in Europe.

Of course, opera in Gozo did not appear from nowhere; there is a long history of operatic performances in Malta, but these have above all occurred in the capital Valletta which was the place where all social and political activities of the Knights, and then the English, took place. With the opening of the Manoel Theatre in 1732, and later the Royal Opera House, in 1866, opera in Malta flourished until the latter's destruction in 1942 by enemy bombs.

Consequently, in order to contextualise the situation in Gozo, this dissertation also examines operatic activities in Malta in the last 200 years, considering the importance of the Manoel Theatre and the Royal Opera House in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the nature of the operatic seasons at the time. When Malta lost the Royal Opera House in World War II, the opera arena seemed doomed, but the Maltese managed to bring it back to life. The creation of new theatres outside the capital city

made opera in Malta popular again. At this time, opera in Malta depended on funding from the Italian government and when this subsidy stopped, opera came to a sudden halt. Fortunately, and after a hiatus, the two opera theatres in Gozo totally changed this art form's standpoint on the island. Opera in Gozo became a must-have especially for Maltese operagoers. Although we do not find the glamour that once existed in Malta at the time of the Royal Opera House, operas in Gozo are part of the social life, a meeting place for audiences of all ages and from all social strata and provide a feast for the senses while filling the heart with emotions.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the evolution of opera in Malta from its start up till the present day with primary emphasis on the operas produced in Gozo since 1977. The 200-year operatic history in Malta and the status that opera held, influenced the leaders of the two band clubs to build two large opera theatres on a small island. Yet, these two theatres knocked down all possible obstacles they found in their way and persisted in achieving what other theatres in Malta did not. What elevates these theatres is the fact that they are not managed by a government entity or by a powerful magnate but by a group of people, principally amateurs and volunteers, who hold at heart the musical Society and went through thick and thin to accomplish their vision.

No other theatre in Malta has gone to such lengths as to have an opera theatre as part of their band club headquarters. With this thesis I want to honour and remember all those who, in spite of living in times of poverty, built two opulent theatres which are the pride of our island.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Opera in Malta has been examined to only a limited extent by previous scholars. Alfred Miceli published two volumes of *L-Istorja ta' l-Opra f'Malta,* one about operas from 1631 to 1866 and the second from 1866 till 2000 but these basically list the operas performed and the principal singers, while saying little about their organisation and the historical implications during that period of time: the books are useful for gathering statistical information about repertory and performers but say little about the cultural context in which opera existed . Numerous books, papers and newspapers have been consulted to be able to list the venues in which operas were performed from after World War II to the present day and to be able to fill in any historic gaps.

For my research I also made extensive use of published sources, found online and in libraries, on more general aspects of Maltese history and culture. Most of these books, such as *Rajt Malta Tinbidel* by Herbert Ganado, recounted lifestyle aspects of times gone by in Malta. These sources were very useful since they helped me immerse myself in the lifestyle of the Maltese society. Other documents focused on the historical and musical side including the political currents during the British occupation and listings of the operas held in Malta: these include Joseph Zammit's dissertation *Politics and the Opera Scene in Malta (1922-1960)*.

Other useful sources were old manuscripts, journals, and newspapers which I found in libraries and from private collections. Newspapers, such as *Il Portafoglio Maltese* and *Il Mediterraneo* contained information about early opera while *Il-Mument* and *It-Torċa* included adverts and reviews from which much useful information about opera performances can be obtained especially the *Times of Malta,* which has been the

principal national newspaper from its establishment in 1935. Despite its being primarily an English-language publication, some parts were published in Italian, reflecting the long-standing links between Malta, Sicily, and Italy.

Alongside this academic work, I made use of non-scholarly sources written by amateur local historians such as *Teatru Astra, Proġett għal Dejjem* by Paul M. Cassar, *It-Teatru Astra mal-Medda tas-Snin* by Carmel Zammit and *Ġrajjiet is-Soċjeta' Mużikali u Filamonika Leone, Għawdex* by Grazio A. Grech. The first two books recount how the Astra Theatre was built and which activities were held there while the latter is about the history of the Leone band. These books, written by La Stella and Leone supporters respectively, recount history from their own point of view, which is, as expected, subjective. In putting down information taken from these books, I kept an objective perspective and elicited documented facts which I crosschecked with other sources.

In addition to prose-based sources, I also interview a number of people, some of whom were present when the two theatres were being built while others were, or still are, part of the theatre's management (see below). The interviewees shared with me various local journals which included interesting elements for my research. One interviewee had a collection of old photos he used to take during shows held in one of the theatres, some of which are reproduced here.

The thesis examines operas in Malta from the first performances at the Auberge d'Italie to the present day. Besides listing all opera from 1942 to present, detailed information is included about the highlights of opera performances in history. For the first time, particular emphasis is given to commenting on and comparing operas held in the two opera theatres in Gozo. This thesis complements numerous books, papers

and documents written on opera in Malta, the building and destruction of the Royal Opera House, the various venues where opera was held in Malta after World War II and opera in Gozo. In relation to the latter, details are given about what happens backstage and in all the departments that collectively organise an opera production. The thesis extends our understanding of what lies behind the production of an opera by a private organisation, and also shows that the present environment has a long and rough history behind it.

METHODOLOGY

For this dissertation I used two main sources of information: printed sources and interviews. As described in the literature review, printed sources included books, journals, and newspapers. However, for the chapters devoted to opera in post-war Gozo, published material only gives the most basic outline of events and motivations.

Consequently, interviews form a substantial source of information for this part of the thesis. I interviewed eleven people in total: six from the Leone Society and five from the La Stella Society. Interviewees vary in age and the great majority of these are now in their late 70s, 80s and even 90s and their memories were very clear about the time when the theatre was being built and about the theatrical productions held in their respective theatre. They recounted the struggles, challenges and successes of their respective band club and theatre in a time when the island was going through many economical and social hardships. Other interviewees, younger in age, are opera enthusiasts and scholars who imparted to me their knowledge of opera-making in the two theatres in more recent years and of the history of the two parishes of Victoria. Their recounts about the rivalry between the musical societies, the details about how things happened and why, and vivid descriptions of the turmoil that surrounded the two parishes, the musical societies, and the lifestyle in Victoria, helped me put together oral history with documented history. In spite of my own affiliations with one of the band clubs and its respective theatre of which I presently am the choir director and vocal coach during operatic productions and musicals, I made it a point to keep my research as balanced and fair as possible by asking the same questions to all.

Oral history is precious since it is told by word of mouth and so stories and anecdotes are passed down easily. If this information was not imparted and written down, it would be lost forever. The narrator can embellish or leave certain details out, either because of memory loss or because the person is being selective and chooses to present himself or the person/situation/object that he/she is speaking about, in the best light.

In undertaking this study, I bore in mind the strengths and weaknesses of oral history outlined by Ritchie in *Doing Oral History*. Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved.[2] The interviews were conducted ethically with questions presented to the interviewee in advance and were recorded in audio format. The interviews were semi-structured: a list of questions was preset, then more in-depth questions were asked, subject to the interviewee's answers. Recordings were then transcribed, compared, and summarised before being written down. As Ritchie explains "the more that interviewers studied their practice, the more they realised that no one group had an exclusive understanding of the past. Oral data is as reliable or unreliable as other research sources. No single piece of data... should be trusted completely, and all sources need to be tested against other evidence".[4] In this case, when people from the two rival musical societies were interviewed, the information did not always correspond: for example, when talking about which band was the first one to exist, which has long been a matter of contention between the two groups. Each Society declares that its band was the first but then research was shifted to written documents and based on legal documents.

[2] Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History,* Oxford University Press 2002, 2015
[4] Ibid.

Chapter 1 will give a brief history of Malta and how opera started in 1631 with the Italian Knights of St. John. Then, in 1732 the first public theatre (now known as the Manoel Theatre) was opened in Valletta. In the nineteenth century opera became so popular that this theatre became too small and so another bigger theatre, the Royal Opera House, was opened. Opera flourished there until in 1942 it was hit and destroyed by enemy bombs. Chapter 2 will focus on opera after the destruction of the Royal Opera House including the new venues where opera was held and the reasons behind the sudden decline in opera productions in the 1970s. In Chapter 3 I will give an overview of the history of the two band clubs afrom the 1860s and what led to building two magnificent opera theatres in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Then, in Chapter 4 I will analyse the operas held at the Astra and Aurora theatres from 1977 and evaluate the driving forces that led these two theatres to succeed in opera productions.

Chapter 1. Opera in Malta until World War II

Written evidence about musical activity in Malta dates back to 400 years ago but one can assume that these practices have had their roots in the misty dawn of prehistory.[5] The Mediterranean region has often been referred to as the cradle of civilization and Malta, being right in the centre, could never escape or be immune to the mix of political and cultural upheavals throughout the years.[6] One must look at Malta's long list of conquerors to understand the cultural heritage and its musical traditions. History shows us that cult and music-making were not only complementary but almost inseparable. During the Neolithic period sacrifices were held in temples at the beats of a drum, in the times of the Greeks the lyre was used for entertainment, in Roman times martial fanfares blasted through the streets and in the time of the Byzantines and Arabs mystic chants were very common.

From Count Roger's time (1091) onwards Malta always looked towards mainland Europe for its cultural inspirations and models[7] and Italy was the country to look up to. Whatever happened in Italy, in the realms of art, music, architecture and religion, Malta followed. Promising local composers opted to go to Napes to further their studies, and so even the local music was subjected to Italian influences. Malta prospered in operatic production and Italian companies stayed for the whole duration of the operatic season, first at the Teatro Pubblico, then at the Royal Opera House. The British colonisers also tried to infiltrate the culture of the island since it is a means of political propaganda. Matters turned sour for the Italians when Mussolini took power under fascist rule. When

[5] Joseph Vella (1994), 'Music', in Frendo and Friġġieri (eds.), *Malta: culture and identity*, 159-170, Ministry for Youth and the Arts
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

Italians were banned from Malta, the operatic scene took a great blow which was then followed by the destruction of the Royal Opera House. This could have been the end of opera in Malta but instead, this art form rose like a phoenix from the ashes thanks to the Maltese who worked determinedly for its revival.

1.1 Brief History of Malta

Malta has been an important bridge on the map of Europe due to its prominent place in the middle of the Mediterranean, so close to both Europe (Italy) and Africa (Tunis). Due to this, the small size of the island and its helplessness in its defensive strategies, Malta had a turbulent history with many rulers wanting to conquer this tiny cluster of islands. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1 The Maltese Archipelago

As a result, the Maltese society has been moulded by millennia of foreign rule from the Phoenicians (750 BCE) to the British (1800-1964). Conquerors from all over the Mediterranean ruled over the Maltese with locals having little or no say in the running of the island.

Malta prospered mostly under the rule of the Knights of St. John (1530-1798) and the British (1800-1964). When Malta became independent (1964) it retained the British system of public administration, education, and legislation before becoming a republic in 1974; the British fleet left the island in 1979 and Malta joined the European Union in May 2004.[8]

[8] https://www.visitmalta.com/en/a/history/

1.2 The Start and Development of Opera in Malta

Malta owes the start of opera to a group of Italian knights who in 1631 brought various artists, singers and musicians from Italy to the Auberge d'Italie's Hall in Strada San Giacomo (today's Merchant Street, Valletta).[9] The Italian knights, mostly from Naples, which at the time was a hub of Italian culture, organised a season which started two days after Christmas and lasted until two days before Carnival.[10] Most probably during this season, one opera, or maybe two would have been produced with two or three performances per week. Local merchants, friends of the Italian knights were sometimes invited to these *drammi per musica*[11] but the expenses were usually paid by the Knights themselves.[12]

At that time no newspapers or gazettes were published so there is no accurate historical recount of what used to happen. The earliest documentation about a 'dramma per musica' performed in Malta dates back to 1664 where Ulderico Rolandi mentions the printing of a libretto for the opera *Annibale in Capua*, written by Nicolo Baregani and composed by Pietro Antonio Ziani.[13]

On 19 January 1732, the first public theatre in Valletta opened. The Teatro Pubblico[14] was built with the money of the Portuguese Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena de Conti Villaflor, Prince of Malta and Gozo, who was elected the 66th Grand Master on 19 June

[9] The Knights of Saint John were basically divided into eight "lingue" (national groupings), namely: Auvergne, Provence, France, Aragon, Castile and Portugal, Italy, Germany and England (hence the 8-pointed cross). Each langue had an auberge, a house providing food and shelter to the members of the order and each brought the traditions and current modes of entertainment from their country or region.

[10] Alfred G. Miceli, *L-Istorja ta' l-Opra f'Malta (1631-1866),* 1999, 5

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 11

[13] *It-Torċa*, 31 May 1970

[14] Miceli (1999), 6

1722 and a great admirer of lyric opera. (See Figure 2) Vilhena left his mark practically on all corners of the island: the most famous landmarks are Fort Manoel and Palazzo Vilhena in Mdina, and he is widely regarded as one of the most benevolent Grand Masters Malta had ever had: he died on 12 December 1736, aged 73.[15]



Figure 2: Grandmaster Manuel de Vilhena

Besides the theatre, plans were made to build houses that would serve as living spaces for singers and musicians brought over from Italy to perform at the Teatro Pubblico.[16] The design of the theatre was undertaken by Francesco Zerafa and Antonio Azzopardi, two Maltese architects, and it was built in Strada del Carmine, Valletta (today Theatre Street).[17] (See Figure 3)

[15] Jake Muscat, 'Anton Manoel de Vilhena: 300 years since his election as Grand Master', *The Malta Independent*, 4 September 2022
[16] Miceli (1999), 6
[17] Ibid.

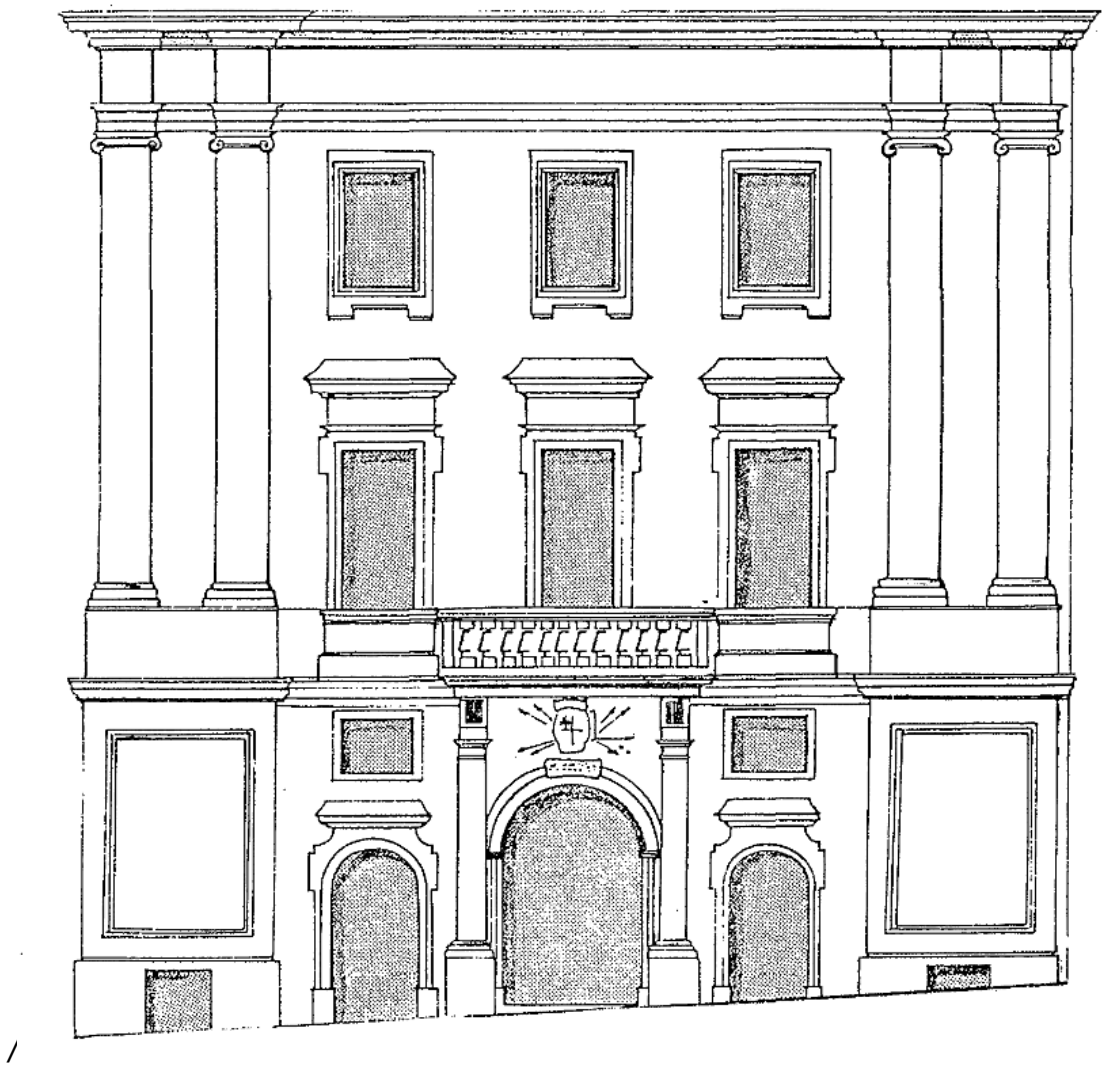


Figure 3: Façade of the Teatro Pubblico

What motivated Grand Master Vilhena to build this elegant theatre in Valletta was the honest recreation of the people which is also found in the inscription above the theatre's entrance.[18] (See Figures 4 and 5) This befitting gesture towards his subjects started the spread of love for the theatre amongst the Maltese population.[19]

[18] Miceli (1999), 6
[19] Michael Galea, *Grandmaster Anton Manoel de Vilhena 1722-1736,* 1992, 32



EM. AC SEREN.
PRINCEPS
F.R.D.ANT. MANOEL DE VILHENA
AD SUÆ FUNDATIONIS AUGMENTUM
HONESTAMQUE POPULI
OBJECTIONEM
EREXIT ANNO
MDCCXXXI

Figure 4 The inscription above the front door of the Teatro Pubblico



Figure 5 The sign on top of the door of the Manoel Theatre today.

It is not clear which was the first opera performed at the Teatro Pubblico. Surviving documents include the word 'opera' but since they are written in Italian, the word 'opera' could mean any piece of work not necessarily a lyric opera.[20] This mentioned 'opera' was *Merope* by Scipione Maffei who was a playwright rather than a composer.[21] Although for the inauguration of the Teatro Pubblico, Grand Master Vilhena chose to have a play, it was opera that dominated the Maltese theatre.[22] Very few contemporary

[20] https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/opera/
[21] Paul Xuereb, 'Theatre and theatre-making in Malta: from the origins down to 1914', in Xuereb (ed.) *The Theatre in Malta*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1997, 1-12
[22] Alfred G. Miceli, 'Opera in Malta during the 18th century', in Xuereb (ed.) *The theatre in Malta*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1997, 29-36

descriptions survive of which performances were being held apart from the 'opera in musica' *Adriana in Siria* held in November 1736.[23]

Within a few years, the Teatro Pubblico became an artistic arena, where knights from different Langues[24] performed operas and plays; the women's parts were taken by (knight) novices from Italy.[25] The auberges joined forces to create an operatic performance: the Italians acted and sang, the Germans constructed the scenes while the French sewed costumes.[26]

When villagers heard about the new venue of entertainment that had just opened for the public, they did not have many words of praise for the Grandmaster who despite being so benevolent, in his old age created a means of entertainment/ that, in their view, was morally wrong. The subjects of the productions were generally based on a libertine lifestyle, murder, and betrayal. Some included dancers that were lightly dressed, while generally, the artists, singers, dancers, musicians, and all those that participated in the productions were considered immoral people.[27]

During the 1735 season, which started in the first week of January there were two new productions for Malta: Artaserse and Il Demetrio both composed by Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783), and most probably were conducted by the composer himself. Hasse was a very well-regarded composer at the time. Having Hasse himself to conduct in Matla suggests that Malta was an attractive and important destination for

[23] Giovanni Bonello, 'Grins and groans at the Manoel Theatre', in Xuereb (ed.) *The theatre in Malta*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1997, 37-46
[24] The Langue was the administrative division of the Knights Hospitallers. It referred to a rough ethno-linguistic division of the geographical distribution of the Order's members and possessions.
[25] Galea (1992), 34
[26] *Campus FM, L-Opra f'Malta*, interview with Tony Cassar Darien
[27] 'L-ewwel opra fit-Teatro Pubblico', *It-Torċa*, 7 June 1970

opera singing and composers alike. The first representation of Artaserse at the Teatro Pubblico in Malta was dedicated to Grand Master de Vilhena. We know about this from souvenir programmes that survive, printed in Catania, Sicily, in 1734.[28] (See Figure 6).


ARTASERSE

DRAMA PE' MUSICA

Da rappresentarsi

NEL TEATRO

Della Città di

MALTA

IN OCCASIONE

DEL CARNOVALE

DELL' ANNO 1735.

IN CATANIA

Nelle Stanze dell' Illust. Senato nella Stamp. del Bisagni 1734. *Con lic. de' Sup.*

Figure 6 Souvenir programme of *Artaserse* by J. Hasse. 1734

The first Maltese composer to be known to have written an opera was Francesco Azzopardi (1748-1809). Azzopardi studied in Italy and was a prolific composer. The majority of his compositions were sacred pieces and he also wrote various treatises about music. Amongst his few secular works, he composed *La Magica Lanterna,* an opera buffa written for the Carnival of 1791.[29] Most of his works still survive today and

[28] National Library of Malta

[29] Joseph Vella Bondin, *The Great Maltese Composers: Historical Context, Lives, and Works*, 2016, 195

are kept in the Cathedral Archives in Mdina but unfortunately the score of this opera buffa is lost.[30]

Operas known to have been performed during the theatre's first decades were either by the leading Neapolitan composers or composers closely associated with the Neapolitan tradition. It is quite possible, however, that production standards may not have been consistently high.[31] In 1801, the Teatro Reale di Malta changed its name to Teatru Rjal and a decade later it underwent its first major refurbishment and extension.[32] (See Figure 7)



Figure 7 The magnificent Teatru Rjal today

Malta was a stopping-off point for ships carrying goods to and from the UK so when the port was busy, the Teatru Rjal was also busy. Its capacity was about 600 and surely was not enough to cater for locals and English officials. Operas were being performed

[30] Miceli (1999), 16
[31] Vella Bondin (2016), 49
[32] David Drago and Konrad Buhagiar, 'A Survey of unpublished drawings relating to the Manoel Theatre', in Xuereb (ed.) *The theatre in Malta*, Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1997, 12-20

in large open air venues like the Circo Britannico in Floriana, Villa Serena in Senglea and the Teatro Formosa in Sliema.[33]

In the mid-1850s many foreigners lived in Valletta. They were the first ones to buy tickets and therefore Maltese families who lived outside Valletta and wished to attend, were often excluded. The small size of the theatre could also adversely affect the productions. When Verdi's opera *Macbeth*[34] was produced on Saturday 31 March 1849, the theatre's small stage hampered the performance and the need for a bigger, more modern theatre started to be perceived.[35]

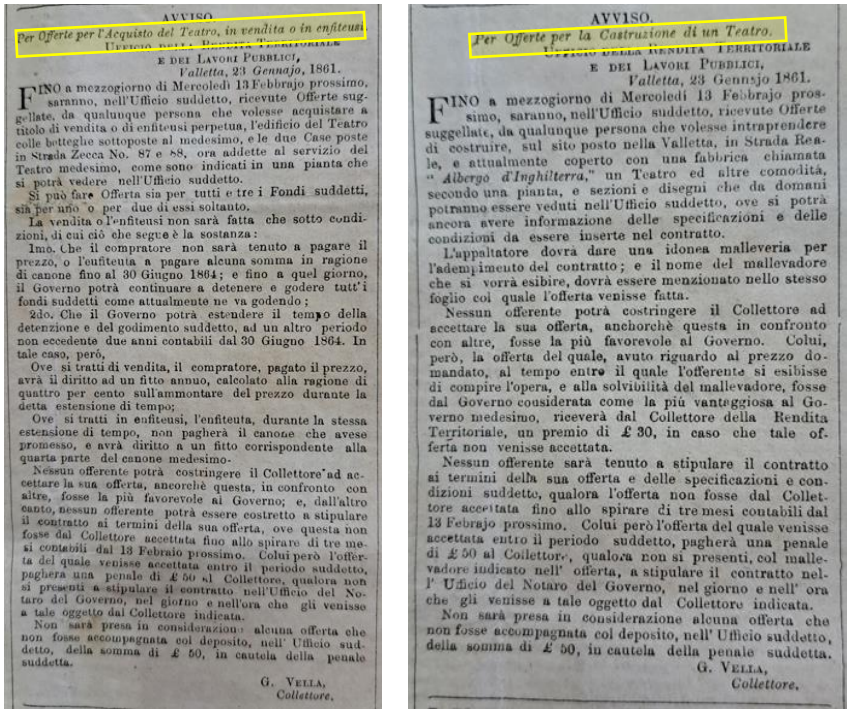
[33] Miceli (1997), 91
[34] Miceli (1999), 97
[35] *The Malta Times*, 3 April 1849, 2



Figure 8 English navy officers in Valletta, 1965

On 23 January 1861, the Lands Tax Collector published two notices, one for the sale or lease of the Teatru Rjal and the other for the construction of a new theatre.[36] (See Figure 9)

[36] *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette*, 24 January 1861



AVVISO.

Per Offerte per l'Acquisto del Teatro, in vendita o in enfiteusi.

E DEI LAVORI PUBBLICI,

Valletta, 23 *Gennajo*, 1861.

FINO a mezzogiorno di Mercoledì 13 Febbrajo prossimo, saranno, nell'Ufficio suddetto, ricevute Offerte suggellate, da qualunque persona che volesse acquistare a titolo di vendita o di enfiteusi perpetua, l'edificio del Teatro colle botteglie sottoposte al medesimo, e le due Case poste in Strada Zecca No. 87 e 88, ora addette al servizio del Teatro medesimo, come sono indicati in una pianta che si potrà vedere nell'Ufficio suddetto.

Si può fare Offerta sia per tutti e tre i Fondi suddetti, sia per uno o per due di essi soltanto.

La vendita o l'enfiteusi non sarà fatta che sotto condizioni, di cui ciò che segue è la sostanza:

Imo. Che il compratore non sarà tenuto a pagare il prezzo, o l'enfiteuta a pagare alcuna somma in ragione di canone fino al 30 Giugno 1864; e fino a quel giorno, il Governo potrà continuare a detenere e godere tutt'i fondi suddetti come attualmente ne va godendo;

2do. Che il Governo potrà estendere il tempo della detenzione e del godimento suddetto, ad un altro periodo non eccedente due anni contabili dal 30 Giugno 1864. In tale caso, però,

Ove si tratti di vendita, il compratore, pagato il prezzo, avrà il diritto ad un fitto annuo, calcolato alla ragione di quattro per cento sull'ammontare del prezzo durante la detta estensione di tempo;

Ove si tratti in enfiteusi, l'enfiteuta, durante la stessa estensione di tempo, non pagherà il canone che avese promesso, e avrà diritto a un fitto corrispondente alla quarta parte del canone medesimo.

Nessun offerente potrà costringere il Collettore ad accettare la sua offerta, ancorchè questa, in confronto con altre, fosse la più favorevole al Governo; e, dall'altro canto, nessun offerente potrà essere costretto a stipulare il contratto ai termini della sua offerta, ove questa non fosse dal Collettore accettata fino allo spirare di tre mesi contabili dal 13 Febraio prossimo. Colui però l'offerta del quale venisse accettata entro il periodo suddetto, pagherà una penale di £ 50 al Collettore, qualora non si presenti a stipulare il contratto nell'Ufficio del Notaro del Governo, nel giorno e nell'ora che gli venisse a tale oggetto dal Collettore indicata.

Non sarà presa in considerazione alcuna offerta che non fosse accompagnata col deposito, nell' Ufficio suddetto, della somma di £ 50, in cautela della penale suddetta.

G. VELLA,
Collettore.

AVVISO.

Per Offerte per la Costruzione di un Teatro.

E DEI LAVORI PUBBLICI,

Valletta, 23 Gennajo 1861.

FINO a mezzogiorno di Mercoledì 13 Febbrajo prossimo, saranno, nell'Ufficio suddetto, ricevute Offerte suggellate, da qualunque persona che volesse intraprendere di costruire, sul sito posto nella Valletta, in Strada Reale, e attualmente coperto con una fabbrica chiamata "*Albergo d'Inghilterra*," un Teatro ed altre comodità, secondo una pianta, e sezioni e disegni che da domani potranno essere veduti nell'Ufficio suddetto, ove si potrà ancora avere informazione delle specificazioni e delle condizioni da essere inserte nel contratto.

L'appaltatore dovrà dare una idonea malleveria per l'adempimento del contratto; e il nome del mallevadore che si vorrà esibire, dovrà essere menzionato nello stesso foglio col quale l'offerta venisse fatta.

Nessun offerente potrà costringere il Collettore ad accettare la sua offerta, ancorchè questa in confronto con altre, fosse la più favorevole al Governo. Colui, però, la offerta del quale, avuto riguardo al prezzo domandato, al tempo entro il quale l'offerente si esibisse di compire l'opera, e alla solvibilità del mallevadore, fosse dal Governo considerata come la più vantaggiosa al Governo medesimo, riceverà dal Collettore della Rendita Territoriale, un premio di £ 30, in caso che tale offerta non venisse accettata.

Nessun offerente sarà tenuto a stipulare il contratto ai termini della sua offerta e delle specificazioni e condizioni suddette, qualora l'offerta non fosse dal Collettore accettata fino allo spirare di tre mesi contabili dal 13 Febrajo prossimo. Colui però l'offerta del quale venisse accettata entro il periodo suddetto, pagherà una penale di £ 50 al Collettore, qualora non si presenti, col mallevadore indicato nell' offerta, a stipulare il contratto nell' Ufficio del Notaro del Governo, nel giorno e nell' ora che gli venisse a tale oggetto dal Collettore indicata.

Non sarà presa in considerazione alcuna offerta che non fosse accompagnata col deposito, nell' Ufficio suddetto, della somma di £ 50, in cautela della penale suddetta.

G. VELLA,
Collettore.

Figure 9 The notices published for the sale of the sale/lease of the Teatru Rjal and the construction of a new theatre.

For the building of the new theatre, the government appointed Edward Middleton Barry (1830-1880), one of the leading English architects at the time, who on 3 March 1861 arrived in Malta on the P&O ship *Vectis.*[37] Amongst Barry's works we find the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, the Floral Hall[38], and the 1868 extension of the National Gallery, all in London. The architectural design showed that the new theatre was to have 97 boxes in tiers, with pit stalls and a gallery, and a capacity of 1,295, double what the existing theatre could seat.[39] (See Figures 10 and 11)

[37] Royal Opera House reconstruction committee (1954), Royal Opera House: exhibition of drawings and models for the reconstruction of the Royal Opera House, 9

[38] Built for the Great Exhibition of 1851

[39] Victor F. Denaro, 'Houses in Kingsway and Old Bakery Street, Valletta Archived', *Journal of the Malta Historical Society,* 1959, 2 (4), 202

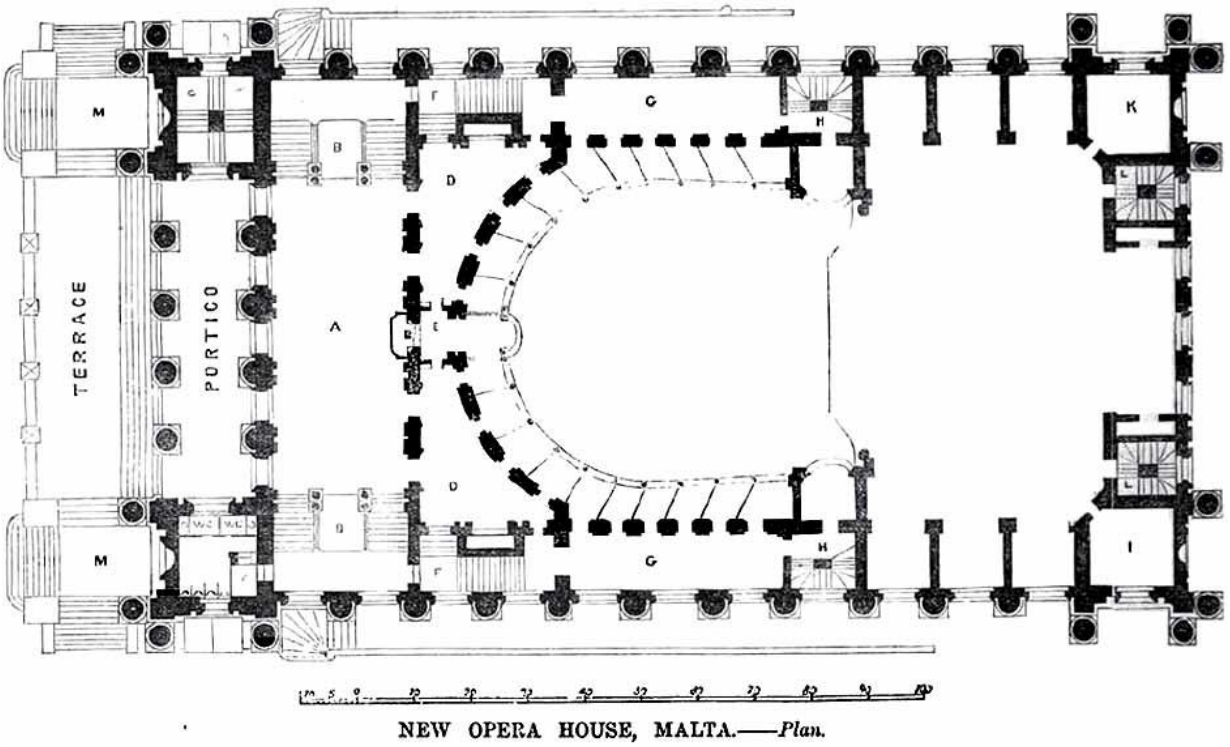


Figure 10 Plan of the New Royal Opera House



Figure 11 Design of the façade of the Royal Opera House

Work on the new theatre started on 7 September 1861.[40] Progress was slow and only reaching completion four years later, at which point the people gathered in front of the Governor's Palace shouting that the theatre was being built with the blood and taxes of the poor as high taxes had just been imposed on the Maltese including one on bread which particularly affected the poor.

Work continued, however, and the theatre was opened on Tuesday 9th October 1866.[41] It was named the Teatru Rjal and was also known as the Royal Opera House.[42] The old Teatru Rjal was named Manoel Theatre after the grandmaster who built it. The new Teatru Rjal was described as the "most beautiful ornament of which Malta can justly boast", both in its interior and exterior designs.[43] The Royal Opera House took over the function of the Manoel Theatre as the principal theatre of Malta. The public loved the new theatre, especially the luxurious chandelier that hung from the centre of the ceiling.[44] It was considered one of the most beautiful theatres in Europe and this ensured that Malta was placed on the limelight as a leading place for opera productions.[45] (See Figures 12, 13 and 14)

[40] Miceli (1999), 134
[41] 'It happened this month: the two inaugurations of the Royal Malta Opera House', *Times of Malta*, 13 October 2019
[42] Albert Galea, Giulia Magri, 'Reconstructing the Royal Opera House? It is not the first time it has been suggested', *The Malta Independent*, 20 October 2019
[43] *Times of Malta*, 13 October 2019
[44] Miceli (2001), 11
[45] *The Malta Observer,* 11 October 1866



Figure 12 The interior of the Royal Opera House



Figure 13 An artistic impression of the Royal Opera House, 1861

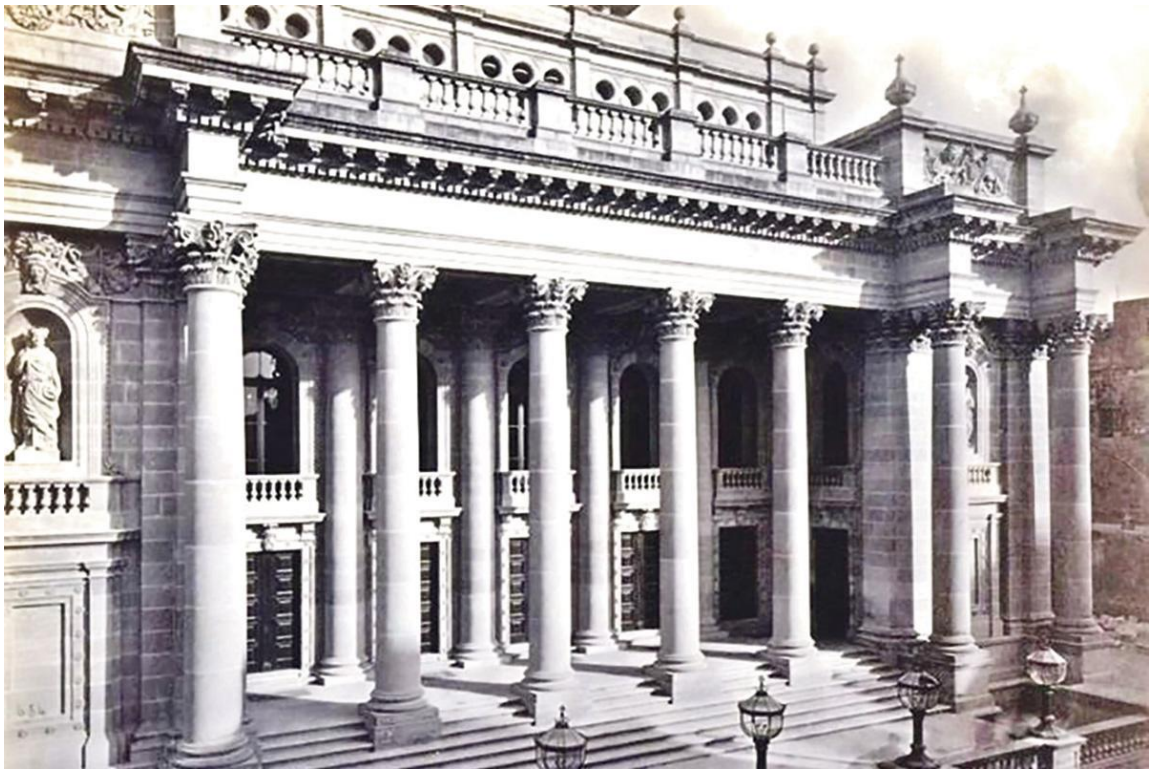


Figure 14 The majestic façade of the Royal Opera House

The opera scene in Malta has for hundreds of years been the accumulation and epicentre of high culture, attended by members of the highest strata of society.[46] The Maltese society, but mostly the bourgeoisie, had always been brought up to appreciate the arts, culture, and music in general. The Royal Opera House was not only an architectural landmark at the entrance of Valletta but also a focal point for the country's cultural activities. For the younger generation it was something to look forward to, almost obligatory, to attend musical performance at the Royal Opera House.[47]

The Manoel Theatre had been in disuse and even became a dormitory for beggars[48] until tragedy struck the Royal Opera House. On Sunday 25 May 1873 during the

[46] Joseph Zammit, *Politics and the Opera Scene in Malta (1922-1960),* University of Malta, May 2010
[47] Anthony Miceli Farrugia, 'Behind the curtains of an impresario', in Xuereb (ed.) *The Theatre in Malta,* Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1997, 81-86
[48] https://www.teatrumanoel.com.mt/?m=content&id=138

general rehearsal of *La Vergine del Castello,* a gust of wind from an open window brought a paper scene into contact with naked gas lamp and caught fire. Within half an hour the roof caved in and all that remained was a mass of twisted girders and calcified masonry. (See Figure 15) Most of Valletta's population was evacuated since next to the theatre, there was the Polvrista, the gunpowder warehouse and if fire reached it, all Valletta would blow up.[49]



Figure 15 The Royal Opera House on fire in 1873

Consequently, operatic performances moved back temporarily to the Manoel Theatre where at least 102 operatic productions are known to have been presented within four years, until the Royal Opera House was rebuilt to its former pristine glory.[50] The

[49] Ibid.
[50] Miceli (1997), 38

inauguration night was set for 11 October 1877, with the Maltese premier of Verdi's *Aïda*.[51] Opera was being performed at both theatres and the Manoel Theatre specialised in the new genre that had taken Europe by storm, the operetta.[52] *Aïda* became one of the most popular operas in Malta and appeared in no fewer than 31 operatic seasons till the outbreak of World War II in 1939.[53]

[51] *Times of Malta*, 13 October 1979
[52] Miceli (1997), 40
[53] *Times of Malta*, 13 October 1979

1.3 Operatic Organisation and Repertory

Since the Teatro Pubblico was built by the Grand Master himself, it was only obvious that he would choose a senior knight, called “Il Protettore” (The Protector) to manage the theatre and censor the performances.[54]

From 1730 onward the Teatro Pubblico started to be known as Teatro Reale di Malta.[55] Operas by the major composers of the time were constantly being performed at the Teatro Pubblico. Amongst such composers were Hasse, Galuppi, Piccinni, Cimarosa, Paisiello and Nicolò Isouard. The latter was an impresario at the Teatro Reale and also an opera composer whose compositions were famous abroad. One of his operas, *L’Avviso Ai Maritati*, was performed in Florence in the spring of 1794. It proved very popular and was thereafter performed in Turin, Bologna, Dresden, Madrid, and Lisbon.[56] Isouard later left with the French troupes to make a successful career in Paris. While in Paris he studied the techniques of *opéra comique* which was being adopted by the major French operatic composers such as Gounod, Bizet and Offenbach.[57] Isuard was considered a traitor for leaving Malta with the French and so the locals boycotted his compositions and none were ever staged in Malta.[58]

Malta always felt safe under the Knights of St. John. They transformed Valletta into a fortified city and so could defend the ports with men, artillery, and high walls. In spite of this in 1798 Napoleon’s army invaded Malta and a series of circumstances, including discontent among the French knights as well as the native Maltese population, led to

[54] An impresario was basically a form of businessperson. In fact, the word ‘impresario’ comes from the Italian ‘impresa’ meaning undertaking. This person was the manager who had to recruit singers, and companies.
[55] Joseph d’Amico, ‘Nostalġija Teatrali’, *Senior Times*, May 2018
[56] Vella Bondin (2016), 212
[57] Ibid. 225
[58] Miceli (1997), 18

a truce which ended with the capitulation of the Order.[59] The French started taking gold and silver from banks, palaces, and churches to pay for the Egyptian expedition of 1798. The Maltese population rebelled, and all the French were driven and barricaded into Valletta. The French had to be kept busy and they needed to be entertained, so Italian companies were brought (by force) to Malta from Sicily to perform mostly comic operas so that the French troops could keep their morale high.[60] Before they left, the Knights of Saint John passed the Teatro Reale di Malt*a* to four notable men on the island:- a few months later the lawyer Pietro Pawl Muscat bought the shares of the other three thus becoming the sole owner of the theatre.[61]

Malta passed through two difficult years under the French. Help from Britain arrived, and the French surrendered to the British on 5 September 1800.[62] The British were to safeguard the interests of the Maltese, to revive the economy and to grant some form of representative rights[63] while recognising that the British king was the sovereign. The English brought in many traditions while also trying to involve themselves in the Maltese lifestyle. One such example was the love for Italian opera. Despite all the affection the Maltese had towards the English, the love for Italian opera remained strong (or even got stronger) and became an integral part of the Maltese culture. The British Army accepted this side of the Maltese culture both to impress and to build a relationship with the locals. After all the British elite were used to Italian opera at Covent Garden.

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[59] Juan Cole (2007), *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 8-9

[60] William Hardman (1994), *A History of Malta During the Period of the French and British Occupations 1798-1815*

[61] Miceli (1999), 16

[62] Anthony Zarb Dimech, 'The Maltese Uprising against the French (1798)', *The Malta Independent,* 21 August 2017

[63] *Dichiarazione dei Diritti degli Abitanti di Malta e Gozo* (Malta 1802)

The Grand Master, and later the owner of the theatre, would nominate an impresario who rented the theatre at a stipulated sum per year. The impresario was the overall manager of the opera house, overseeing and holding responsibility over all aspects of the season, from repertory choices to catering.[64] It was up to the impresario to produce operas and other theatrical performances. His profit depended on the ticket sales therefore he had to make the best choices in repertoire so that all the theatre's tickets were sold. The first recorded impresario of the Teatro Pubblico was Melchiorre Prevvost Laparelli in 1736,[65] and the last was Giovanni Le Brun in 1866:[66] from 1768 to 1770, Natala Farrugia was the impresario and is believed to have been the first woman to hold this post.[67]

As from 1812, when the theatre passed on to the government, a competitive tender was put out and the person or company that made the best offer signed a two-year contract with the government to become the impresario:[68] the contract was later extended to four years, then five after 1906.[69] Nevertheless, the government kept a close watch on the management of the theatre and still imposed certain terms such as when in 1898 the government asked that each operatic season had to include two productions in English.[70] The impresario's most important job was to go to Italy to find and engage good singers for the next operatic season. The arrival of the Maltese impresario in Italy and the list of available singers would be announced in specialised newspapers such as the *Rivista Teatrale Melodrammatica.* (See Figure 16) The

[64] Joseph Bonnici & Michael Cassar 1990, *The Royal Opera House, Malta* (Guttenberg Press), 61
[65] Miceli (1999), 8
[66] Miceli (1999), 148
[67] https://www.teatrumanoel.com.mt/?m=content&id=135
[68] Miceli (1999), 24
[69] *Il Risorgimento* 20 April 1905
[70] Mikielang Borg, *Cronistoria Dell'Opera Lirica in Malta,* Lib. 1401, Vol. 4

impresario visited Italy in April and the first contract was with the Maestro Direttore d'Orchestra who would then plan the next operatic season and make a list of the necessary singers. The impresario would then work with singing agencies in Bologna, Florence, Naples, and Rome: - if he delayed his visit all the good singers would be 'taken' and he would have to settle for the second best. Contracts had to be signed with the musical houses 'Ricordi' and 'Sonzogno' amongst others to acquire the performing rights for the music of the operas scheduled.[71]


RIVISTA TEATRALE MELODRAMMATICA

ABBONAMENTO

(Con annessa Agenzia)

FONDATA IN MILANO NEL 1863

FELICE VIANELLI

Orlando Zeno Viviani e Angelo Chinelli Borgna

PROPRIETARI

Giuditta Alemanni ved. Vianelli

INSERZIONI

Pubblicasi: Nelle stagioni di Autunno, Carnevale e Quaresima, cioè dal primo Novembre a tutto Aprile, SEI volte al mese (1, 6, 11, 16, 21, 26); in Primavera ed Estate, dal Maggio a tutto Ottobre, quattro volte (1, 8, 15, 23)

Anno XXXIX. — N. 1776 — Un numero separato Cent. 50 — 26 Aprile 1901

Figure 16 A copy of the *Rivista Teatrale Melodrammatica*, 1901

The impresario took the greatest financial risk when organising opera seasons as there were several reasons that a performance might fail to attract an audience and thus loose money. One such occasion was when the British navy moved to another port, and another was when a performance occurred on the same day as a popular village feast. During other seasons, as in the cases of seasons 1932-1935, the organisation was so successful that the impresario G. Farrugia organised performances in Tunis and Tripoli where they continued for two weeks.[72] Performing in these northern African

[71] Miceli Farrugia (1997)
[72] Miceli (2000), 210

countries was also a means of extra funding for impresarios that were finding it harder to produces operas due to escalating expenses.

Operatic seasons normally started in October or November and finished in April. Performances were not given on Fridays and Sundays, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week and Christmas Eve.[73] Around Carnival time, the firm used to put on a popular comic opera. The operatic season in Malta was a long one compared to those held in some of the more prestigious opera houses in central Italy, which lasted two months.[74]

Anticipation would accumulate amongst the populace when in October of every year, posters and photos would be distributed showing the operas and celebrities that would adorn the coming operatic season.[75]

The theatre employed many people. Apart from singers, one could find musicians who were employed for eight whole months. Choristers were usually Maltese and at times the most promising ones were asked to sing the minor roles. Any theatrical production cannot be done just with singers, musicians, or performers and so the theatre also employed seamstresses, painters, ticket sellers, carpenters, maids, clerks, hosts, ushers, barmen, janitors, and watchmen.

During the 1827-28 season, for the first time, we find female voices in the choir. Prior to this, the chorus parts were sung by males; usually castrati or boy sopranos.[76] This new practice must have been a result of the new theatre's management: the Amore

[73] Bonello (1997)
[74] Miceli Farrugia (1997)
[75] Ganado (1974), *Rajt Malta Tinbidel,* Vol 1, Chpt XLV, 393
[76] Miceli (1999), 34

family, who brought prosperous times to the theatre from 1828 to 1842.[77] The Amore family had found Malta to their liking, both socially and financially, and as a consequence made it their permanent residence. Apart from being impresarios, they were also conductors and instrumentalists.[78] Salvatore, followed by his sons Domenico and Luigi presented many opera productions and brought famous Italian singers to Malta. One famous singer who was contracted for twelve consecutive years was Camilla Darbois, who studied pianoforte and voice at the Paris Conservatoire.[79] The two Amore siblings were good friends with Pietro Paolo Bugeja who was a well-known conductor and composer in the liturgical realm of the island. The brothers took the risk of putting on the first opera of Bugeja, *Lodoiska,* which was produced as the opening opera of the 1832 spring term. According to contemporary reports, *Lodoiska* was a splendid triumph.[80] This was Bugeja's only opera. He seemed more concerned in reviving and expanding his father's *cappella di musica*, a more attractive economic proposition than writing operas.

In 1834, Giovanni le Brun, a local violinist was appointed as first violinist which also meant that he was the orchestra's director, which was the norm until 1862.[81] In the operatic season of 1837-38 twelve different operas were produced, of which four were new to Malta.[82] Six of the twelve operas were composed by Donizetti who was very popular at the time. *Lucia di Lammermoor* was presented eighteen times during that operatic season.[83] When Domenico took over the opera industry from his father,

[77] *Senior Times*, May 2018
[78] Vella Bondin (2016), 324
[79] Miceli (1999), 37
[80] *Malta Government Gazette,* 21 March 1832, 87
[81] *Senior Times*, May 2018
[82] Miceli (1999), 37
[83] *L-Orizzont*, 31 October 1983

people started to complain about the repertory and the mediocre singers, some of whom had to be sent back 'home'. Domenico was even taken to court to face charges of not doing his job well.[84]

Theatrical representations did not always go smoothly: sailors attending performances were usually drunk and frequently started shouting if the singer or the performance was not up to standard. Quite often there were squabbles between the Maltese and the English sailors, and sometimes opera representations had to stop half-way due to the commotion generated by the audience. Those who caused damage to the theatre were sent to jail.[85] One such instance was at the end of October 1841, when during the production of *La Figlia del Reggimento* by Donizetti, both the prima donna and the bass were not up to standard. The public started shouting in disapproval and threw coins, eggs, and potatoes onto the stage.[86]

Locals were always passionate about opera, not just to watch a performance but also to be part of a performance. Thus, at the start of 1844 the first amateur Maltese lyrical opera company, the *Philharmonic Society of Malta* was established.[87] The artistic and musical directors were Giuseppe Poggiali and Paolo Flamingo respectively. The main aim of this Society was to present operas in various halls to encourage local youths to consider an operatic career. All the profits were given to promising students who could not pay for their tuition. Unfortunately, after only three operatic performances, the Society disbanded.

[84] *Il Mediterraneo,* 29 November 1848
[85] Miceli (1999), 65
[86] *The Malta Times*, 5 November 1841
[87] *Il Figaretto*, 8 February 1844, 12

That same year (1884), *Nabucco,* the first opera by Verdi, was produced at the Royal Opera Theatre.[88] The public loved it but there was strong opposition from the Maltese clergy,[89] who argued that a biblical scene was not to be staged with love affairs and adorned with dances. They requested that the production be abandoned but to no avail. Similar incidents happened in the season of 1849-50 with *Il Nuovo Mosè* [90] by G. Rossini. The clergy, who at the time, held a lot of power over the local population, were disappointed with a representation where the voice of God is heard and is physically seen, which was considered a profanity. Religion was a very delicate matter, and even in the United Kingdom, which was more liberal in this context, any biblical operas had to be completely reconceived: characters renamed, times and places changed. This practice lasted up till the beginning of the twentieth century.

An analysis of the repertory from various seasons shows that it was dominated by operatic standards of the time, although there are examples of less well-known operas being performed. (See Figure 17)

[88] *Il Mediterraneo,* 9 October 1844, 12
[89] *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette,* 22 October 1844
[90] *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette,* 21 May 1850

Operas performed during the operatic season of 1844-45 at the Teatru Rjal

Opera	Composer
Nabucco*	Giuseppe Verdi
Lucrezia Borgia	Gaetano Donizetti
Don Pasquale*	Gaetano Donizetti
Linda di Chamounix*	Gaetano Donizetti
Marino Faliero	Gaetano Donizetti
Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti
Norma	Vincenzo Bellini
La Sonnambula	Vincenzo Bellini
I Puritani	Vincenzo Bellini
La Cenerentola	Gioachino Rossini
Il Barbiere di Siviglia	Gioachino Rossini
La Fidanzata Corsa *	Giovanni Pacini
La Mezza Notte	Paolo Nani

*new operas for Malta

Figure 17: Operas performed during the operatic season of 1844-45

Opera buffa, especially that composed by Rossini, was very popular and so were the operas of Donizetti and Bellini. Due to strong cultural links between Malta and Italy, and the fact that most of the singers came from Italy, it is unsurprising that contemporary Italian operas dominated the repertory.

A shift in operatic preferences can be seen in Figure 18, where in just a decade, Verdi's operas were gaining popularity,[91] Rossini's had disappeared, and Bellini's and Donizetti's operas declined in number. This clearly shows that the repertory was kept up-to-date and that, presumably, audiences wanted to see the most recent operas.

[91] Ganado (1974), 394

Operas performed during the season 1853-54

Il Trovatore*	Giuseppe Verdi
I Masnadieri	Giuseppe Verdi
Luisa Miller	Giuseppe Verdi
Attila	Giuseppe Verdi
Il Corsaro*	Giuseppe Verdi
Nabucco	Giuseppe Verdi
Norma	Vincenzo Bellini
Don Bucefalo*	Antonio Cagnoni
I Due Guides*	Nicola de Giosa
Belisario	Gaetano Donizetti
L'Elisir d'Amore	Gaetano Donizetti
Don Pasquale	Gaetano Donizetti

* new operas for Malta

Figure 18: Operas performed during the operatic season of 1853-54

According to information gathered by Dr. Abraham Borg, the operatic season of 1860 comprised multiple performances of fifteen different operas.[92] Grand operas were being held at the (old) Teatro Reale and its small size did not seem to present any problems to the impresarios of the time.

Around the mid-eighteenth century the impresario would typically engage the following principal singers:[93] (See Figure 19)

[92] From Abraham Borg's personal research
[93] Ibid.

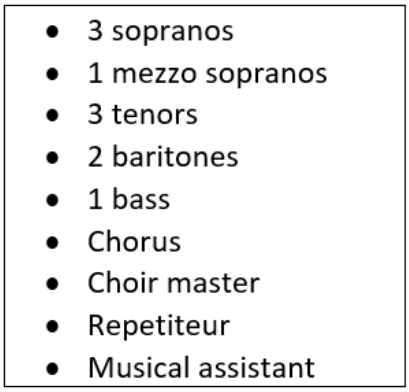


Figure 19 the number of principal singers engaged in the mid-18th century in Malta

The first impresario of the new theatre was G.W. Malfiggiani (See Appendix 1) and the opera chosen for the opening was *I Puritani* by Bellini.[94] Besides *I Puritani,* which was performed eighteen times during that new operatic season, fourteen other operas were held, with a total of 167 performances.[95]

Principal singers would be hired to perform in several operas during the season with a guaranteed salary with the option to give extra benefit performances also known as 'Soirées d'Honneur'. The main singers looked forward to benefit performances since they served as a gauge of their popularity with the audience and provided additional financial security. Such concerts could also be given for the benefit of the conductor,[96] the chorus master, the chorus, theatre employees and to benefit some charitable institutions.[97] (See Figures 20)

[94] *It-Torċa*, 5 February 1967
[95] Francis Zammit Dimech, 'The Opera House – rich in history', *Times of Malta*, 23 June 2009
[96] *Il Mediterraneo*, 7 June 1848; *Ix-Xemx,* 'Teatru Rjal – Madama Butterfly, Serata tad-Direttur Surmast Angelo Ferrari', 16 January 1930
[97] *Il Risorgimento,* 4 December 1905



Real Teatro

Mercoledì 5 Aprile 1905

Serata a beneficio dei

Signori Mro. M. Battista e G. Bondin

si darà

UN BALLO IN MASCHERA

Opera in 4 atti di G. Verdi

Personaggi

Renato	Signor V. Morghen
Amelia	Signorina E. Barbieri
Riccardo	Signor G. Valls
Ulrica	Signorina T. Alosia
Tom	Signor B. Travaglini
Samuel	Signor A. Allegri
Oscar	Signorina G. De Gigli
Silvano	Signor C. Vinco
Un Giudice	Signor E. Bacci

Cavalieri, Pescatori, Popolane ecc.

Direttore d'Orchestra—Mro. M. Battista

Suggeritore Signor C. Valenti

Prezzi Domenicali

Si darà principio alle ore 9 p. m.

REAL TEATRO

Domani alle 9 p.m. il Luog. C. Royds, R.N., terrà nel suddetto teatro una lettura sulla spedizione del Mare Antartico, illustrata colla lanterna magica, sotto il distinto patrocinio di S.E. il Governatore e di S.S. Onorevole l'Ammiraglio Lord Charles Beresford. I ricavi andranno a beneficio dei danneggiati del *Tram* e delle famiglie dei poveri disgraziati pescatori.

I prezzi sono popolari.

Lo scopo è eminentemente umanitario, per cui siamo certi che indurrà il pubblico, tanto Maltese come Inglese, ad accorrere numeroso al Teatro Reale domani all'ora suddetta.

Real Teatro

Mercoledì 1 Feb. ore-8 30 p.m.

Gran SERATA

DI

M. A. Borg

Sotto il distinto patrocinio di S. E. il Governatore

Sir. CHARLES MANSFIELD CLARKE Bart. G. C. B. G. C. V. O.

Prima rappresentazione della grandiosa opera

GUARANY

Figures 20 Adverts for Benefit Concerts, (left) for singers M. Battista and G. Bondin, (middle) for the victims of a Tram and fishing boat victims (right) for impresario M. M. Borg *Il Risorgimento*, 23 January, *3* April and 4 December 1905.

These concerts caused great commotion before, during and after the performance.[98] A popular singer stood to gain from the 'Benefit' system because aficionados and supporters would attend their favourite's soirée, soliciting acquaintances to buy tickets, thereby increasing the evening's takings. On the Benefit Performance/Night admirers of a particular artist would decorate the theatre with flags, banners and various placards extolling his/her abilities, (See Figure 21) throw flowers and silver garlands and sonnets in Italian, English and Maltese onto the stage as a sign of approval[99] (See Figure 22) During the intervals the artist would visit the theatre boxes, expecting to receive lavish gifts from the audience and box holders.[100] The gifts were exhibited in

[98] Matthew Gardner & Alison DeSimone 2019, eds., *Music and the Benefit Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain,* Cambridge University Press,

[99] *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette*, 2 March 1870

[100] *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette,* 23 February 1870

the theatre's foyer for everyone to admire.[101] *Il Portafoglio* Maltese used to publish all the details of the benefit concerts, such as the programme, the report and also the list of valuables that a particular singer received. In the case of soprano Maria Zarlatti, who performed at the Teatro Reale on Monday, 13 February 1882, she received:

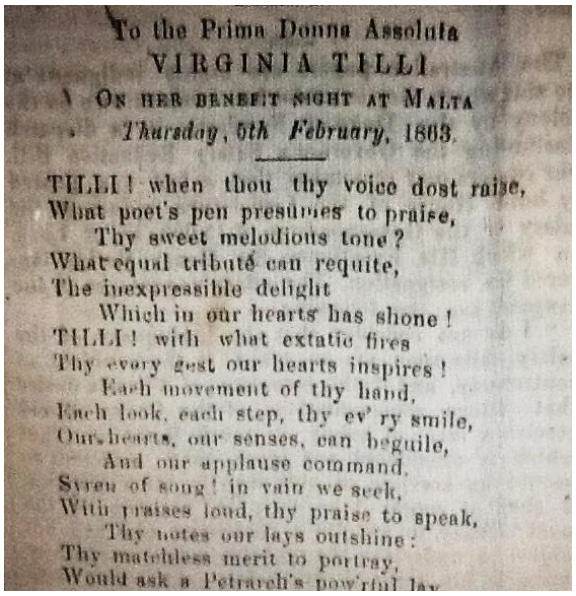
1. a gorgeous pair of gold and diamond earrings
2. a gold ring with precious stones
3. a charm with six pearls
4. Another gold charm with a scarab in mosaic
5. A pair of gold earring with pearls
6. Another pair of gold earring with mosaic
7. A gold ring with rubies and diamonds
8. Another ring with old precious stones
9. A gold bracelet with pearls and turquoise
10. A silver choker made in Malta
11. Another silver bracelet in a shape of a serpent
12. A purse containing four pounds sterling
13. A silver filigree brooch
14. Six beautiful crowns of artificial flowers with valuable ribbons
15. Five bouquets with costly ribbons and a quantity of small flowers
16. A basket of flowers with a beautiful ribbon presented by soprano Roslina Ugolini, a fellow singer.[102]

Benefit performances could be an entire opera, a pot pourri of acts or excerpts from different works, and songs, plays, and farces gin Italian, English or Maltese. The beneficiary would often also learn a song in Maltese, Irish or English to charm the audience.[103] Most practices mentioned above were common around most of Europe's theatres until about the 1880s, while in Malta they lasted up till World War II.[104]

[101] Ganado (1974), 393
[102] Vella Bondin (2016), 302
[103] *The Malta Times and United Service Gazette,* 16 February 1870a
[104] Ganado (1974), 89



Figure 21 The decorated interior of the Royal Opera House.



To the Prima Donna Assoluta
VIRGINIA TILLI
On her benefit night at Malta
Thursday, 5th February, 1863.

TILLI! when thou thy voice dost raise,
What poet's pen presumes to praise,
Thy sweet melodious tone?
What equal tribute can requite,
The inexpressible delight
Which in our hearts has shone!
TILLI! with what extatic fires
Thy every gest our hearts inspires!
Each movement of thy hand,
Each look, each step, thy ev'ry smile,
Our hearts, our senses, can beguile,
And our applause command.
Syren of song! in vain we seek,
With praises loud, thy praise to speak,
Thy notes our lays outshine:
Thy matchless merit to portray,
Would ask a Petrarch's pow'rful lay

Figure 22 Excerpt from a poem dedicated to Virginia Tilli, 1863

On leaving the theatre, female singers might be met by a company of admirers, who with flags and variegated Bengal lights would accompany them to their residence and cheered them until they made their appearance at their residence's balcony.

Another phenomenon brought over from European theatres was the 'claqueurs'. These organised groups, who were most of the time hired by the impresario himself, were present at every operatic production and had specific seats. They were told by the impresario after which aria to start the applause.[105] At times these applauses or boos were overexaggerated and obviously not spontaneous.[106] Besides the *claqueurs* there were the supporters of the singer themselves. At times some sympathizers of one singer booed another and this led to fights in the auditorium itself.[107]

The stage of the Royal Opera House had such great importance within Europe that it was considered and used as a form of testing ground where new artists could determine and stabilise their talent for either future success or failure. This was mainly because Maltese audiences were so ardent and zealous when it came to opera and that they were considered as being expert and meticulous judges with very high expectations, who would settle for nothing less than perfection.[108] Maltese audiences were renowned for giving heartfelt standing ovations to performers who satisfied their demanding auditory requirements, while scathingly hissing and booing anyone off the stage if the said performer was not up to scratch. It was a well-established fact among Europe's leading artistes that if you could make it in Malta, you could make it anywhere

[105] *Supplement to the Malta Times and United Service Gazette No 2199,* 19 January 1870
[106] *Campus FM,* L-Opra f'Malta, Interview with Abraham Borg
[107] *It-Torċa,* 12 February 1967
[108] Ganado (1974), 395

around the globe.[109] One young performer who spent the whole season of 1934 in Malta was Giulietta Simionato who then became one of the most famous mezzo-sopranos in the world.[110]

In the 1880s, there would be around five operatic performances per week, with Thursdays and Saturdays being Gala nights, in formal dress, dinner jacket and long dresses and jewellery for the ladies.[111] An operatic performance was added on Sunday, and it was held at the Manoel Theatre. This practice did not last for long since the locals complained to the bishop about the immorality of having such a production on the Day of the Lord. Each opera was performed around 20 times during a season, depending on its popularity. Opera was so high in demand that both theatres were being used. An average operatic season consisted of about 176 opera performances, 153 at the Royal Opera House and 23 at the Manoel Theatre.[112] The season 1879-80 holds the record for the largest number of different operas, 25 in all.[113]

At the end of the nineteenth century Verdi continued to dominate the repertory while Puccini's operas had yet to be discovered. French composers like Massenet and Gounod were becoming popular too. (See Figure 23)

[109] Ibid.
[110] Miceli Farrugia (1997)
[111] Miceli Farrugia (1997)
[112] Miceli (2001), 67
[113] Miceli (2001), 61-64

Operas performed during the operatic season 1897-98

Manon* & **	Jules Massenet
Norma	Vincenzo Bellini
Rigoletto	Giuseppe Verdi
Aida	Giuseppe Verdi
Il Trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi
I Due Foscari	Giuseppe Verdi
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi
La Boheme*	Giacomo Puccini
Cavalleria Rusticana	Pietro Mascagni
Fra Diavolo	Daniel Auber
Faust	Charles Gounod
Marta	Friedrich von Flotow
I Pagliacci	Ruggero Leoncavallo
Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti

* new operas for Malta
**French operas were sung in Italian

Figure 23 Operas performed during the operatic season of 1897-98

In 1893, there was an attempt to organise a summer operatic season, consisting of twelve productions, at the Formosa Theatre[117] in Sliema but unfortunately the public lacked attendance and the season stopped half-way, with a great monetary loss for the firm. To reduce the costs, impresarios started utilising local musicians and singers. The orchestra now started to include a greater number of excellent Maltese instrumentalists. In the 1930s impresarios also started decreasing the number of new operas on offer and replacing them with potentially less-costly concerts.[118]

[117] *Il Risorgimento,* June 1893
[118] Vella Bondin (2016), 658

It was generally acknowledged that Teatru Rjal's impresarios staged few operas by Maltese composers. It was believed, particularly by composers and the patriotic few, that the Government should find solutions whereby this position could be redressed. A remedy was achieved by adding a clause to the contract of lease awarding the impresa from 1 November 1923 to 20 May 1928 saying that "the lessee shall open a competition, to last from the first to the thirtieth May in each year, between Maltese composers, for a new opera to be given, subject to these Regulations, at least once on each subscription night. Two orchestra conductors of well-known reputation... shall select the opera under competition best worth of representation. The expenses for the staging of such opera shall be borne by the lessee. The Composer shall remain the sole proprietor of the opera and, for that year, he shall be entitled of one-third of the gross proceeds of a performance to be given on a non-subscription night."[119] This clause came to happen in a time filled with political rumblings all across Europe. Maltese workers started to feel the need of organising themselves into units in the hope that this might possibly countervail the absolute power of the ruling classes. This social setting also led to the birth of the *Camera degli Autori e Compositori di Musica Maltese*, which was legally constituted on 16 December 1923.[120] Its main aim was to act as a pressure group to influence the proper organisation of the opera competition and as a watchdog to monitor that the agreements specified were properly fulfilled.

The luminous hopes embraced by the composers and their *Camera* transmuted into profound anger when, one year after another, the operas entered for the competition were all deemed unworthy of staging.

[119] *Malta Government Gazette*, 6 July 1923, 634.
[120] Vella Bondin (2016), 611

Malta was one of the earliest countries in Europe that produced Italian lyric operas. As discussed above, operas from other countries were barely considered. Many singers insisted on coming to sing in Malta since it was a steppingstone to singing in larger and more important opera theatres around Europe.

1.4 Maltese composers of the 18th century up to the mid-20th century

Along the years, throughout Europe, musicians survived financially by having the support, encouragement, privilege, and financial backing of an individual or of an organisation. In the case of Malta, the patronage system was crucial to the shaping of its musical legacy. Throughout the ages, the only sustainable, consistent, and effective patron for Maltese composers was the Catholic Church. Obviously, its demands were for liturgical and other forms of sacred music that could be performed during church services. It was therefore inevitable that most of the works written by Maltese composers were sacred. With a few exceptions, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century (particularly after Independence) that Maltese composers consistently started writing non-sacred music.

During their rule, the Order of St John was itself an important patron. However, contrary to the local Church, it was foreign composers and musicians who mainly benefited from its collective support. The patronage system of the Order resulted in a number of first-class musicians working for the Grand Master's or a senior Knight's private musical ensemble. One such *virtuoso* was the Venetian Angelo Nano who, in 1766, at the age of fifteen, was employed in the Magisterial Palace to Grand Master Fra Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca (ruled 1741-73). Angelo Nani spent the rest of his life in Malta, married locally and founded the Nani dynasty of musicians, which was to dominate Maltese music for over two centuries.[121]

[121] Vella Bondin (2016), 56

From the eighteenth century, various Maltese composers have produced operas, having been inspired by their studies abroad and by the most prolific opera composers of the time. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries local musicians and composers who wanted to further their studies typically went either to Paris or Naples. In the 1700s there were around 10 to 12 conservatories in Napes, which was considered, at the time, a major centre of culture. Two Maltese composers who studied and succeeded in Naples were Girolamo Abos and Antonio Nani.

On the other side of the spectrum, we find composers such as Giuseppe Balzano[122] (1616-1700) and Benigno Zerafa[123] (1726-1804), products of the Maltese Mother Church, to which, after their studies in Naples, they returned to serve the Maltese Catholic Church which fostered local Maltese talent whenever possible. These composers are mostly known for their religious works such as masses, motets, and psalms. Balzano, a priest, was a salaried musician of the *cappella di musica* of St John's Conventual Church in Valletta, where only highly trained and qualified musicians were engaged by the order. Balzano is the composer of the oldest work by a known Maltese composer, namely, a setting of the motet *Beatus vir qui inventus est* dating from 1652. This composition reflects the (Baroque) period's quest for Order, Pattern, and Form in music.[124] On the other hand, the earliest-known Maltese operatic composer was Francesco Azzopardi (1748-1809) who in 1791 composed his only opera buffa *La Magica Lanterna*.[125] Zerafa's compositions are rooted in the late

[122] https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/festival-of-17th-century-maltese-music.105823
[123] Frederick Aquilina 2016, *Benigno Zerafa (1726-1804) and the Neapolitan Galant Style* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press)
[124] Vella Bondin (2016), 36
[125] Joseph F. Grima, 'Francesco Azzopardi (1749-1809)', *Festa Santa Marija Mosta 2018*

Baroque style and the compositional method reflects the fashions and tastes of the eighteenth-century Neapolitan school[126].



Figure 24 Francesco Azzopardi

Two Maltese composers who studied and succeeded in Naples were Girolamo Abos and Antonio Nani. Abos was born in Malta in 1715 and died in Naples in 1760. When he was ten years old, his family left Malta, and he studied in the Conservatorio di Sant' Onofrio in Naples. His first opera was *Le Due Zingare Simili* while some of his other operas, such as *Artaserse* and *Adriano in Siria* were performed not only in Naples but in other cities such as Rome, Venice, Florence, Ancona, and Turin. His most successful opera was *Tito Manilo*, written in 1751. Abos is known to have composed at least 14 operas.[127] His operas were never performed in Malta, however, until, in

[126] Neapolitan influences include the composition of just the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* of the Mass. The *Gloria* is divided into a number of self-contained, independent movements, the style of which usually alternaters between the polyphonic (characterised by contrapuntal choral passages) and the homophonic, the latter usually in the for of a *bel canto* aria for solo voice (a style inherited from the operatic theatre)

[127] Vella Bondin (2016), 130

2019, a concert was held at the Inquisitor's Palace in Birgu with highlights from his operas.[128]

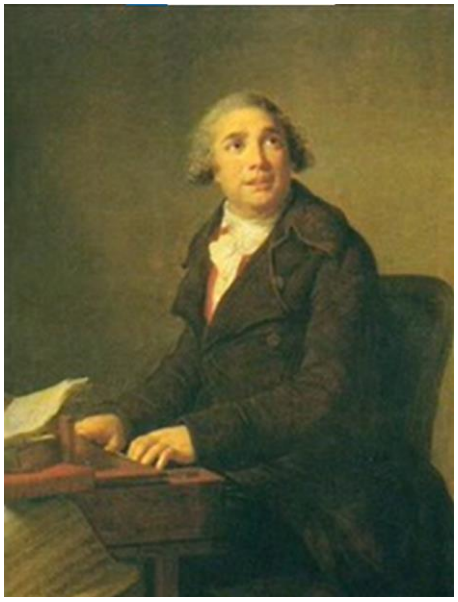


Figure 25 Girolamo Abos

With the new opera house, local composers were confident that their operatic compositions would be performed on the new stage. But after a decade and a half of the Royal Theatre's existence, during which about fifty different operas by foreign composers were stage, none had been by a Maltese composer.[129] On 16 January 1880 the opera *I Cavalieri di Malta* [130] by Antonio Nani, was the first opera by a Maltese composer to be produced in at the Royal Opera House: it was performed nine times that season.[131] The opera's libretto is based on the historical book *Storia di Malta* by Gian Anton Vassallo (1817-1868), a local author, poet and professor who supported

[128] Peter Paul Ciantar, *Girolamo Abos Kompożitur Malti li Miet Napli: Tliet Mitt sena mit-Twelid Tiegħu*, University of Malta, 2015
[129] Vella Bondin (2016), 429
[130] *Il Portafoglio Maltese*, 19 January 1880, 3. *Il Portafoglio Maltese,* 2 February 1880, 3
[131] Marlene Mangion, 'Antonio Nani', *Festa Santa Marija Gudja 2003*, 75

the Maltese language[132] and worked incessantly to show that it could be used in all aspects of life.

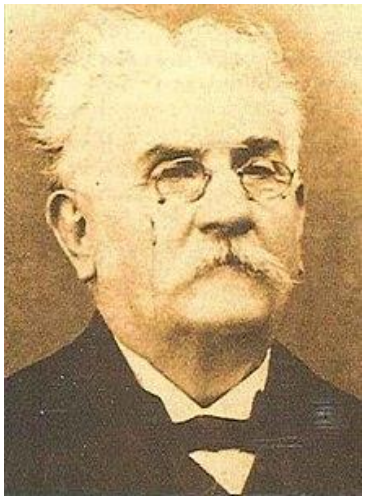


Figure 26 Antonio Nani

Antonio Nani (1842-1929) came from a family of musicians, and he first studied music with his father Giuseppe who was a prolific church music composer. He then continued his studies in Naples where he remained for several years. There, he composed his first opera *Zorilla* (1872) premiered at the Teatro Rossini in Naples. Other operas include *I Cavalieri di Malta* (1877) premiered at the Royal Opera House in Malta in 1880 and *Agnese Visconti* (1876) also premiered in Malta in 1889.[133] His compositions exploited the Romantic matrix of the Italian operatic school, particularly that of Verdi's

[132] In the mid-eighteenth century, a few enlightened minds, such as Gian Francesco Agius de Soldanis and Mikiel Anton Vassalli, wanted to turn their spoken-only language into a literary language. In 1924 Franġisk Saver Caruana took the initiative and created *the Għaqda tal-Kittieba tal-Malt*i (Maltese Writers Association) which led to the creation of a 'new' alphabet, grammar, and spelling. The Maltese upper class, who all practiced Italian, wanted to keep their benefits and hindered the progress of the Maltese language until in 1934, the Maltese language became the official language of Malta, alongside English. As stated in the Maltese constitution, English remained an official language, but the national language of Malta is Maltese. https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/history-of-the-maltese-language/

[133] Mangion, 2003

late period, with its manipulation of sweeping vocal expression, and the orchestra, particularly the brass, used to highlight a framework of drama and emotion.[134]

Other composers, such as like Nicoló Isuard and Paolino Vassallo were influenced by the French. Nicoló was born in Malta in 1775 and died in Paris in 1818. His grandfather was French and so he was happy when the French briefly occupied Malta. He decided to leave the island when the French withdrew, in 1800, and subsequently settled in Paris, where he gained popularity and was known as Nicoló de Malte. His repertoire includes the operas *Cendrillon* (1810), the opera comique *Jeannot et Colin* (1814) and *Michel-Ange* (1802). A bust of the composer was placed on the façades of both the Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique and the world-famous Palais Garnier, while one of the streets in Paris carries his name. In Malta, however, he was boycotted by the intelligentsia because they considered him a deserter who left with the 'enemy'. Whatever music survives was found in Parisian libraries since, unfortunately, the Maltese destroyed all his music.[135]



Figure 27 Nicolò Isuard

[134] Vella Bondin (2016), 617
[135] Frans Said, 'Nicolò Isuard, a great Maltese composer', *Times of Malta,* 25 March 2012

Paolino Vassallo (1856-1923) furthered his studied in France at the height of French Romanticism and amongst his many teachers were Massenet. Vassallo's operas *Francesca da Rimini* (1888), *Amor Fatale* (1898) *Frazir* (1905) and *Edith Cavell* (1923) are all French in style.[136] *Francesca da Rimini* whose only known staging was its première on 1 May 1888, had been submitted into a competition organised by soprano Fanny Moody (1866-1945) and bass Charles Manners (1857-1935), who at the time were very famous opera singers in England. This competition consisted of composing a new opera and it was open to British subjects. This competition was marketed also in countries forming part of the then British Empire. Vassallo's *Francesca da Rimini* could fall under the competition's rules and so, in order to participate in the competition, Vassallo added some material, split the opera in two acts and titled it *Amor Fatale.*[137] Although he did not win, his new opera was highly acclaimed and in Malta it was repeated eight times.[138] *Frazir* was staged eleven times and a benefit concert organised in honour of the composer himself (28 March 1905) was said to be one of the most memorable in the history of the Teatru Rjal.

For his opera *Edith Cavell*, Vassallo was influenced by Wolf-Ferrari's *Il Segreto di Susanni* and *I Gioielli della Madonna,* as well as Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* and Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini*. These operas, like *Edith Cavell*, belonged to the post-Mascagni *verismo*, in which the subjects, uninhibitedly colourful and treated with passionate realism, were mostly contemporary and down-to-earth. Stimuli from contemporary composers helped Vassallo underpin the dramatic continuity and is very evident in passages of passionate tension that alternate with others of emotive languor.

[136] Mario Attard, 'Paolino Vassallo 1856-1923', *Soċjeta' Filarmonika San Ġorġ, Cospicua,* 2006
[137] Mikiel Anġ Gorg: *Cronistoria dell'opera lirica in Malta, op. cit,*
[138] Vella Bondin (2016), 605

Recitatives, solos, and ensembles enjoy equality of status; the mellifluous intermezzo at the beginning of the second act – a normal feature of *verismo*, following the example of *Cavalleria* Rusticana - is a Vassallo masterpiece.[139] Vassallo's compositions oscillate between the diatonic and the chromatic component, which was conductive to a dissonant syntax that led to what is known as Modernism. These chromatic progressions are clearly found in *Edith Cavell*, where he applied rich but perceptive dissonances.



Figure 28 Paolino Vassallo

Another French-influenced composer was Carlo Diacono (1876-1942) who studied under his father and then, between 1892 and 1902, with Paolino Vassallo, from whom he acquired the Gallic elegance that characterised his major compositions. His opera

[139] Vella Bondin (2016), 612

L'Alpino was performed nine times between 16 April and 2 May 1918 at the Royal Opera House. His only other opera, which remained incomplete, was *Villa Azzurra.*[140]

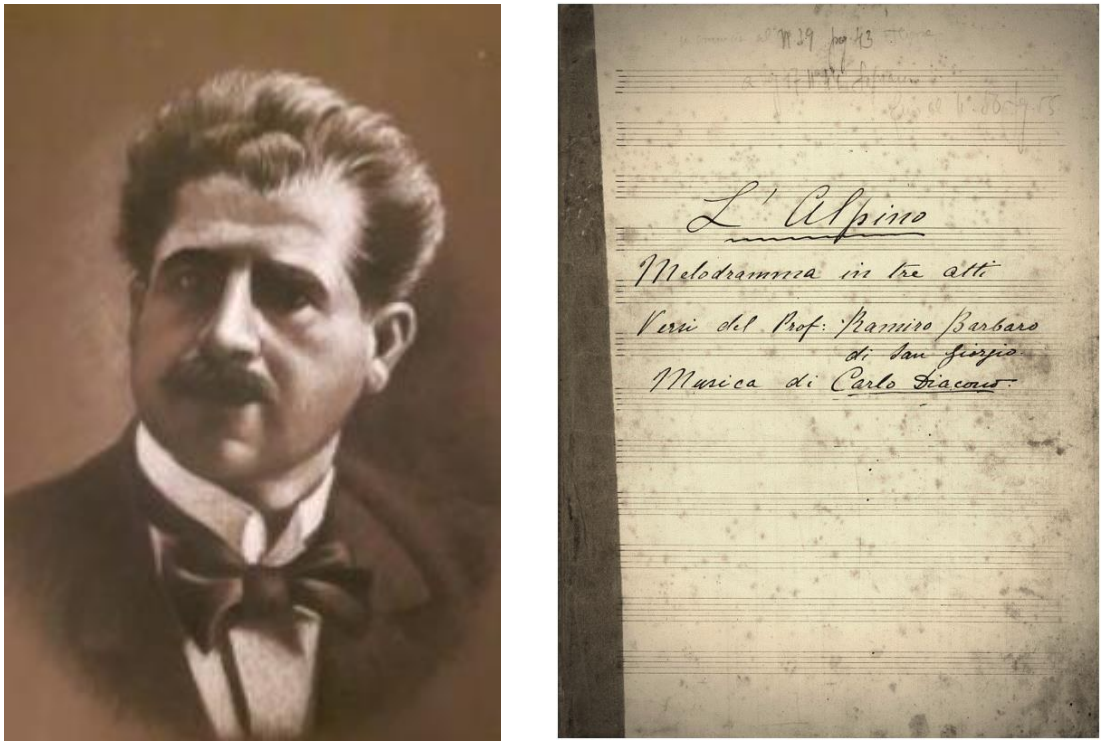


Figure 29 Carlo Diacono and the front page of the manuscript of his opera *L'Alpino*

The Maltese throughout the years have always favoured foreigners over locals. In fact, the opera-loving public did not often support operas by local composers when they were performed. This caused the firms organising operatic seasons, to exclude operas by local composers to avoid losing money. In more recent times, the Maltese composer Carmelo Pace (1906-93) substantially financed his own operas.

Carmelo Pace (1906-1993) wrote four important operas, *Caterina Desguanez* (1965), *I Martiri* (1967), *Angelica* (1973) and *Ipogeana* (1976). All four operas, written in Italian, are set in Malta, and were premiered at the Manoel Theatre. *Caterina Desguanez* is

[140] https://tvmnews.mt/en/news/national-orchestra-preparing-for-concert-of-carlo-diaconos-works/

set during the Great Siege of Malta in 1565, *I Martiri* is about Dun Mikiel Xerri, a local hero who plotted against the French and who was ultimately executed. *Angelica* is based on a local legend (The Bride of Mosta) while *Ipogeana* is set in the neolithic period.[141] One of the influences of Carmelo Pace were the English military band marches that usually performed during funerals. He minor-key solemnity exerted his creative psyche, and this can be heard also the opening scene of the opera *I Martiri* and the elegiac finale of the *Angelica*.[142] The idiom of his 520 compositions ranges from the traditional tonal relationships of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods to an exploration of atonality and chromaticism, particularly that of Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. [143]



Figure 30 Carmelo Pace

[141] Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini, *A Prolific Composer (part two) Carmelo Pace's works*, University of Malta, 1984
[142] Vella Bondin (2016), 729
[143] Ibid, 735

1.5 Politics and Opera

From the 1800s all these operatic seasons were held in an unstable political environment. In Malta, opera influenced political decisions just as much as political decision affected the way opera transformed and mutated throughout the years.[144]

The struggle for supremacy between the Italian and English languages affected the way opera was viewed by the British Governors, as Italian was perceived after all as the language of opera.[145] Moreover, Italian cultural roots were deeply embedded in Malta's upper classes, which can be attributed to longstanding cultural exchanges and transfers rather than political affiliations.[146]

In 1849, the English granted the locals a Government Council to discuss administrative matters. Some of its members were elected by a selected franchise of upper-class local voters. Then in the 1880's political parties were formed: the Partito Anti-Riformista, which was pro-Italy and the Reform Party which was pro-English.[147] One of the main political issues at the time was the Language Question[148] which became a proxy for the matters of identity and culture.

This matter did not solely revolve around the matter of language. It also strongly included the matter of identity; an identity which was strongly backed up by culture. The Italian cultural roots were deeply embedded in Malta's upper classes, which can be attributed to a natural relationship between them as a result of cultural transfers

[144] Zammit (2010)
[145] Miceli (2001), *ix*
[146] Geoffrey Hull 1993, *The Malta Language Question: a Case History in Cultural Imperialism*, 121
[147] Henry Frendo 1978, 'A history of Malta's political parties (1800-1971) – 1', *Heritage: An Encyclopedia of Maltese Culture and Civilization, 1(12)*, 357-360
[148] Hull (1993), 121

rather than as a result of political affiliations.[149] Opera would therefore fit perfectly as a tool for embedding the growth and stability of Italian culture within Malta and, hence, it was seen as instrumental to further solidify the claims put forward by the 'Anti-Riformisti', that Italian culture and language were to remain integrated as a part of the 'cultural identity' of the Maltese. On the other hand, there were several occasions where the pro-British Maltese and the British Government itself tried to gradually decrease, (1927) and then later completely suppress (1939) the Italian opera's influence amongst the Maltese, perceiving a threat that opera could have presented in the changing international political context. The pro-Italians followed these arguments:

- The Italian language pertains to the European continent rather than the Arab[150] world.[151]
- Italian was the language of the Roman Catholic faith, the official religion of Malta.
- Italian was the language of the 'professionals' and the elite.
- It was also the principal language used in Malta's cultural sphere (theatre, literature, music, and art). The sovereign art form within the cultural sphere in which Italian language and culture reigned supreme was opera.

The pro-English claimed that:

[149] Hull (1993), 121
[150] The pro-Italians always favoured the north (European mainland) rather than the south (Africa). Italy was a symbol of high culture.
[151] Ibid., 135

- England was the most powerful political entity in the world and the English language would provide a wider spectrum of working opportunities abroad. Malta was a British fortress and naval station which was a source of employment for many locals.[152]

- The English were the rulers and expected that the locals choose their language rather than another foreign one.

The Maltese were divided between the 'new' English language and the 'old' Italian one. Italian was used predominantly in law courts and as a language of the professionals. It was the principal language used in Malta's cultural sphere (theatre, literature, music, and art). Thus, the opera and theatrical realms would become a form of expression for future politico-cultural events.[153]

The British knew that they should not interfere or change anything that was part of the local culture. On the other hand, there were several occasions when the pro-British Maltese and the British Government itself perceived opera as a threat and tried to suppress it. After all, there was no viable British alternative that could take the place of Italian opera.

Despite the English desire to colonise Maltese culture and to reduce the links with Italy in high culture, in practice, cultural transfers from Italy remained resilient and are nowhere more obvious than in opera.

[152] Frendo (1978), 357-360
[153] Adrian Stivala, *Cultura Italiana e Teatro a Malta nell' Ottocento e nel Novecento*, (PhD 2001), 161

The Language Question was omni-present throughout these years. Opera remained a safe garrison for Italian culture and language and the government recognised that. One way of gaining the support of the locals was by providing them with excellent leisure and entertainment. However, the situation drastically changed when Italy became a Fascist country and this was considered as more of a realistic threat by the British and pro-British community. This would have a direct effect on the opera scene in Malta, as the British Government came to see it as a breeding ground for pro-Italian propaganda.[154]

Up until 1921, the British government administered Malta in an autocratic manner. The Maltese had no say in the running of the country when finally London granted self-government to Malta.[155] In 1929 Strickland's[156] government created a theatre board[157] to takeover the Royal Theatre's management. This pro-British Government move was heavily criticised by the ardent lovers of Italian culture and opera since they thought the English were going to monopolise the performances and no operas would be performed. That same year the Manoel Theatre was turned into a cinema.[158] Strickland

[154] Dominic Fenech 2005, *Responsibility and Power in Inter-War Malta; Book one: Endemic Democracy,* (PEGG Ltd.), 185

[155] Following various days of riots over the excessive price of food, on 7 June 1919, known as Sette Giugno (public holiday), the British troops fired into the crowd, killing four people. This led to increased resistance to the colonial government and support for the pro-Italian irredentists that had challenged the British presence on the island. After Filippo Sciberras had convened a National Assembly, in 1921 self-government was granted under British rule. Malta obtained a bicameral parliament with a Senate (later abolished in 1949) and an elected Legislative Assembly. Joseph Howard (Maltese) was named Prime Minister. www.festivals.mt/sette-giugno

[156] Lord Gerald Strickland (1861-1940), born in Valletta. In 1921 he founded the Anglo-Maltese Party and after a few months it merged with the Maltese Constitutional Party forming the Constitutional Party under his leadership. He was leader of the opposition (1921-27). In 1927 he became Head of the Ministry till 1932. He was an owner and director of Progress Printing Company and The Times of Malta. https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/Government%20of%20Malta/Prime%20Ministers%20of%20Malta/Pages/Sir-Gerald-Strickland.aspx

[157] Ganado (1974), 398

[158] Stivala (2001), 174

was renowned for his hatred for all things Italian. In fact, there were suspicions that the pro-British government wanted to suppress the Italian art form and the British tried to slowly infiltrate the artistic scene with the Malta Amateur Dramatic Club[159] which started to stage musicals and pantomimes at the Royal Opera House. The English knew that Maltese opera-lovers would not be pleased if opera was eliminated, so instead they tried to introduce their own culture and integrate it into that of the island, thus undermining the predominant Italian one already firmly rooted in Maltese everyday life.

Around the 1900s Italian was the more favoured tongue, especially by the cultured class and Maltese aristocracy; in fact Italian was the official language of Malta. The pro-Italians attempted to promote the Italian language and culture by bringing over Italian scholars from every realm to leave a positive influence in Malta. In 1931, one of Italy's foremost musical geniuses of the time: the composer Riccardo Zandonai came to Malta to direct his opera, *Francesca da Rimini*. (See Figure 31) The theatre was extravagantly decorated with garlands to glorify the Italian language. (See Figure 32) Around the 1930s the use of Italian amongst the Maltese had drastically decreased. To boost the Italian culture, the Istituto di Cultura Italiana[160] was founded in 1932.[161] Mussolini considered the British Empire as his natural enemy.[162] The continuing deterioration in relations caused the British government to make harsher decisions in opposition to anything and anyone who was pro-Italian. As a consequence, the British

[159] Stivala (2001), 161. Set up by a group of English soldiers stationed in Malta. Their main aim was to promote English theatre. The actors were English amateurs and performed musicals, pantomimes and operettas in English.
[160] Actually it was called Istituto di Cultura Fascista
[161] Stivala (2001), 178
[162] Denis Mack Smith 1981, *Mussolini,* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. London), 246

suspended the 1921 constitution,[163] making Malta an island under Crown government. The Maltese were in a very agitated state as the government placed surveillance officers in the main cities, closed the Istituto di Cultura Italiana and started expelling Italian residents from the island.[164] The first targets were prominent people who publicly advocated and promoted the Italian lifestyle, including members of the Partito Nazionalista, who were exiled to Uganda.[165] Ultimately, in 1934 English and Maltese[166] became the official languages to be used in Malta.[167] The advocates of the Italian language had to accept the position of the Italian language as a third language.[168]

[163] In 1921, for the first time, as a result of the insistence and strong will of the Maltese people and their leaders the Maltese were given the right to have a senate and a legislative assembly to form a Maltese government for local affairs, together with an imperial government to run the so-called 'reserved matters'. In this system, known as the 'diarchy', the British imperial government still retained the right for the Crown to ultimately overrule decisions taken by members elected to the Legislative Assembly. But at least, this development, no matter how small, was a step towards achieving the right of the Maltese people to participate in the running of their country". president.gov.mt

[164] Hull (1993), 81

[165] Ganado (1974), 154

[166] Maltese is a semitic language, based on the Arab dialect. Through the years it evolved and assimilated words from the Romance languages, mainly Italian. The basic grammar, most nouns and verbs, the numbers and colours are all semitic. Along the years the Maltese language was influenced by the Italian due to Sicilian merchants that visited the island. When the Knights of Malta were in Malta there were many foreign languages which along the years influenced the Maltese language. Maltese has always been written in Latin script. Italian was the language of schools and university, the courts, the Church curia and of commerce.[166] Before that, Italian was the main language used by the Knights of Malta. The rest of the population used Maltese, which was considered a dialect. When the English came, the locals had to learn their language to be able to communicate and make business arrangements especially during the war years. Some English words were imported into the Maltese language.

[167] Stivala (2001), 161

[168] Frendo (1979), 210



FRANCESCA DA RIMINI

OPERA IN QUATTRO ATTI

MUSICA DEL MAESTRO

CAV. VINCENZO MOSCUZZA

DEDICATA PER TUTTA GRATITUDINE
STIMA ED AFFETTO
ALL'EGREGIO AMICO

SIG. CAV. ETTORE ZIMELLI

DA RAPPRESENTARSI

nel Teatro Manoel di Malta

PER TERZO SPARTITO NUOVO
Stagione 1876-77.

MALTA
C. Busuttil Tipografo, Str. Forni No. 133.

6 THE MALTA CHRONICLE AND IMPERIAL SERVICES GAZETTE December 12

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE.

FRANCESCA DA RIMINI.

OVATION FOR MAESTRO ZANDONAI

On Thursday evening a large audience gave enthusiastic welcome to Maestro R. Zandonai on the first of three performances at which he is personally to conduct his opera "Francesca da Rimini." Prolonged applause greeted the appearance of the distinguished maestro, which was repeated at the conclusion of each act when, together with the principal members of the cast, he was compelled to take call after call before the curtain. At the final curtain fall he received an ovation.

In our preliminary announcements concerning the visit to Malta of Mro. Zandonai, we have stressed the artistic importance of the event. It is gratifying to note that this fact is evidently appreciated at its true worth.

"Francesca da Rimini" is an opera that would be interesting under any circumstances. It is strikingly original in a musical sense, powerfully dramatic in theme and has a third act of remarkable beauty. Directed by the composer the interest is naturally increased.

The broad outlines of the tragedy are known to everybody. Paolo and Francesca are of the world's immortal lovers. Maestro

Meccano is real engineer
parts are standardised and
used over and over again to
working models. There is
equal Meccano Model bui
hobby that is so full of in

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anchi (Altichiara) Miss Bianca
nella.)

In Act I the Ostasio of Sigr. Dado, the Jester of Sigr. Checchi and the Ser Toldo Berardengo of Sigr. Emilio Bonatti were all

This leaves
Mine. We expect Le
to win.
Fourth Race.—1st Class B. 1¼ miles. This

Figure 31 Opera poster and newspaper review on *Francesca da Rimini*





Figure 32 The embellished theatre

The final blow to opera and to the Italian culture and propaganda happened at the end of the opera season 1938-39 when Governor Bonham-Carter issued a decree ordering

that no further Italian singers or companies were to be allowed to perform in Malta.[169] This significantly affected the opera production in Malta and the operatic season of 1939-40 was cancelled.[170]

In 1932, the Italian scholar, Ugo Ojetti was invited to Malta to deliver a speech and he depicted the Maltese individual as: someone who wanted the religion of Rome (Roman Catholic), the Language of Dante (Italian), and the British Sterling (currency and economy.[171]

[169] Hull (1993), 81
[170] *Times of Malta*, 23 June 2009
[171] Stivala (2001), 179

1.6 Opera between 1900 and 1942 and the Devastation of War

The operatic scene grew and prospered and by the beginning of the 20th century, the demand for performances also grew, thus allowing the price of tickets to become more affordable. This meant that opera could now be more accessible and therefore enjoyed by more people, especially from the emerging middle class.



Figure 33 A collection of opera souvenir books.

The Royal Theatre was always very busy with grand balls which started in 1911 and in 1929 the management introduced the talking pictures or “talkies” which helped to balance part of the losses sustained from operas. During the mid-20s the Royal Opera House became an arts centre where besides opera, symphonic concerts, choirs, ballets, and dancing performances became regular features.[172]

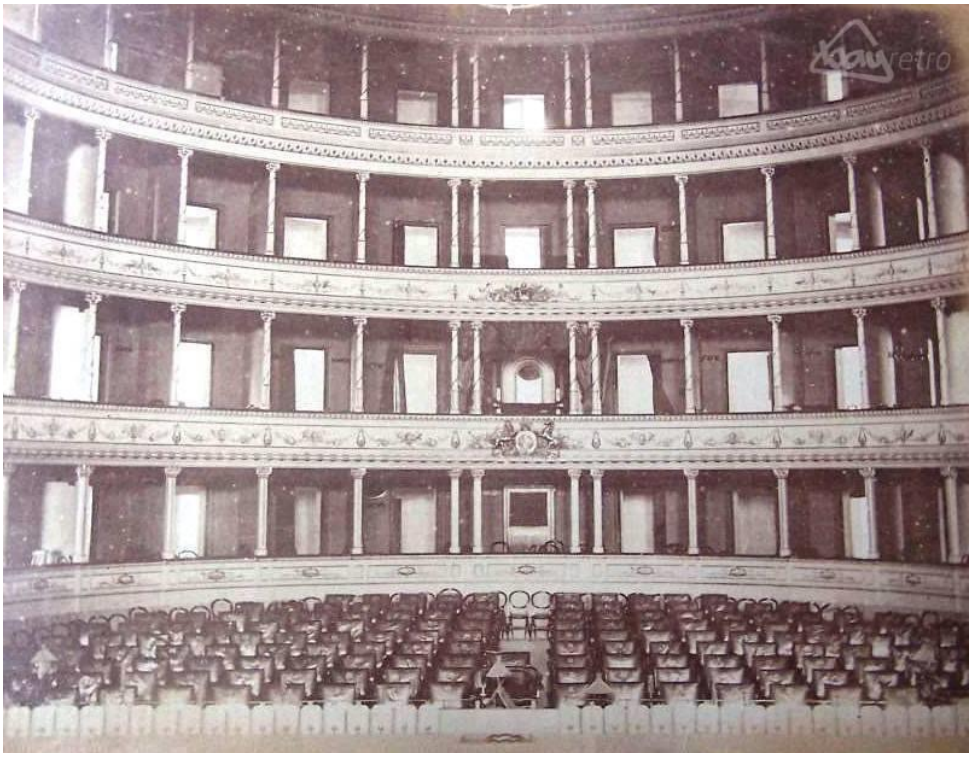


Figure 34 A rare view of the audience seating taken from the stage of the Royal Opera House in Valletta in the 1890s

Although most singers were Italians, local singers also occasionally appeared. In the season of 1918-19, for example, the Maltese basso Giuseppe Satariano (See Figure 35) sang in the operas *Madame Butterfly* and *La Forza del Destino* and, in the season of 1933-34, he performed the role of Rigoletto to great acclaim.[173] In the season 1921-

[172] Bonello (1997)

[173] ‘History of the Maltese Theatre: The Royal Opera House (part II)’, *The Malta Independent*, 23 January 2011

22 the Maltese tenor Nicolò Baldacchino (See Figure 36) made his debut on 13 December 1921 with *Cavalleria Rusticana*.[174]



Figure 35 Giuseppe Satariano (1896-1992)



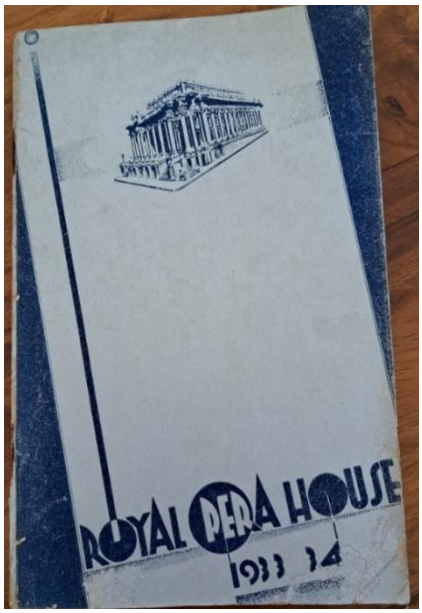
Figure 36 Nicolò Baldacchino (1895-1971)

It was common practice that in an operatic season, one of the operas in the repertoire was to be conducted by the composer himself. During the 1934 season the opera *Maria Egiziaca* and the ballet *Gli Uccelli* were performed and conducted by the composer himself, Ottorino Respighi.[175] The figures below show photos from a souvenir booklet for the opera premiere of *La Gioconda* as part of the operatic season 1933-34.[176] Besides the information about the performers and the operas being performed during the operatic season we find sketches of the scenes from various acts: these give some idea of the opulence of Maltese opera productions between the wars and of the high status they held in Maltese society.

The Royal Theatre, in the condemnable pattern established in previous eras, in the 20th century saw the performance of only four operas by Maltese composers: Paolino

[174] Miceli (2001), 178
[175] Miceli Farrugia (1997)
[176] Ganado (1974), 106

Vassallo's *Frazir* (1905) and *Edith Cavell* (1927), Carlo Fiamingo's *Redenta* (1912), and Carlo Diacono's *L'Alpino* (1918).[177]




LIST OF ARTISTES

(In Alphabetical Order)

LADIES :

GIULIETTA AZEVEDO — MARIA MELONI
INES ALFANI TELLINI — VERA NADIA POGGIOLI
FIDELA CAMPIGNA — ANNA TURKEL
ZARA GEI — EMILICA VERA
LIDIA LODIGIANI

GENTLEMEN :

ERMINIO BENATTI — ALFREDO LATTARO
MARIO CAVAGNIS — DOMENICO MALATESTA
FERNANDO delle FORNACI — ANGELO MINGHETTI
RAFFAELE DE FALCHI — PIERO PASSAROTTI
PIETRO FRIGGI — GIUSEPPE SATARIANO
RENATO GIGLI — ALESSIO SOLEY
ARSENIO GIUNTA — DANTE SCIAQUI

Orchestra Conductor :
Comm. ALFREDO PADOVANI

Assistant Orchestra Conductors :
CARLO BOCCACCINI — GIUSEPPE CAMILLERI
STANISLAO PARISI

Chorus Director – OSCAR LEONE
Stage Manager — ENRICO GIUNTA
Prompter – ARRIGO GUARNIERI
Ballett Mistress — LINA BORRONI
Scenary – FABIO PIERAGNOLI
Principal Danceuse – MARIUCCIA GALLEANI

The Impresa reserves the right of substituting or deleting any Opera and also of changing or substituting any artist.

Synphonic Concerts :
RESPIGHI – PADOVANI – BOTTI

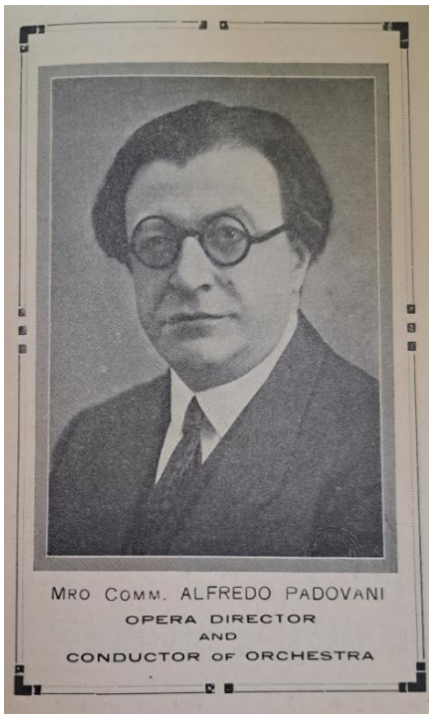




Figure 37 Inside the souvenir booklet; Season 1933-34

[177] Vella Bondin (2016), 659

In 1939, however, enemy bombs started dropping on Malta. Despite this, the Royal Opera House was still holding performances. Now that no foreigners, mostly Italians, could visit Malta, any performances that were being held were done by the Maltese in the Maltese or English language. Various companies were formed, and their main purpose was to produce operas around the islands: three such companies were the Amateur Opera Company, directed by G. Camilleri,[178] the Malta Amateur Theatrical Company directed by V. Bugeja[179] and the Malta Lyric Opera Company directed by M. Cirillo.[180] These amateur societies took off after the Italians were banned from Malta (1939) and operas were held at the Royal Opera House.[181] During the war there were still attempts to perform operas or highlights from famous operas (see Chapter 1). Having three operatic companies gave a sense of variety and competition amongst the singers.

The last opera staged at the Royal Opera House was *L'Elisir d'Amore* on 5 January 1941 as a charity event and it was performed in Maltese.[182]

On Tuesday, 7 April 1942, at 6.30pm, the Royal Theatre was destroyed during an air raid by the German forces.[183] Direct hits on the foyer destroyed the façade and left the auditorium in a shambles.[184] Ironically, the building that housed and protected the culture and love for opera was now destroyed by the allies of those people whose culture it was protecting. (See Figures 38 to 41)

[178] Miceli (2001), 219
[179] Ibid., 225
[180] Ibid., 224
[181] Ganado (1974), *Vol. II*, 111
[182] Miceli, 226
[183] *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 18 October 1942, 8
[184] *Times of Malta*, 13 October 2019



Figure 38: the Royal Opera House after it was bombed during enemy aerial action in 1942.



Figure 39: the interior structure of the opera house after the bombing.



Figure 40 The Royal Opera House cleared from the debris

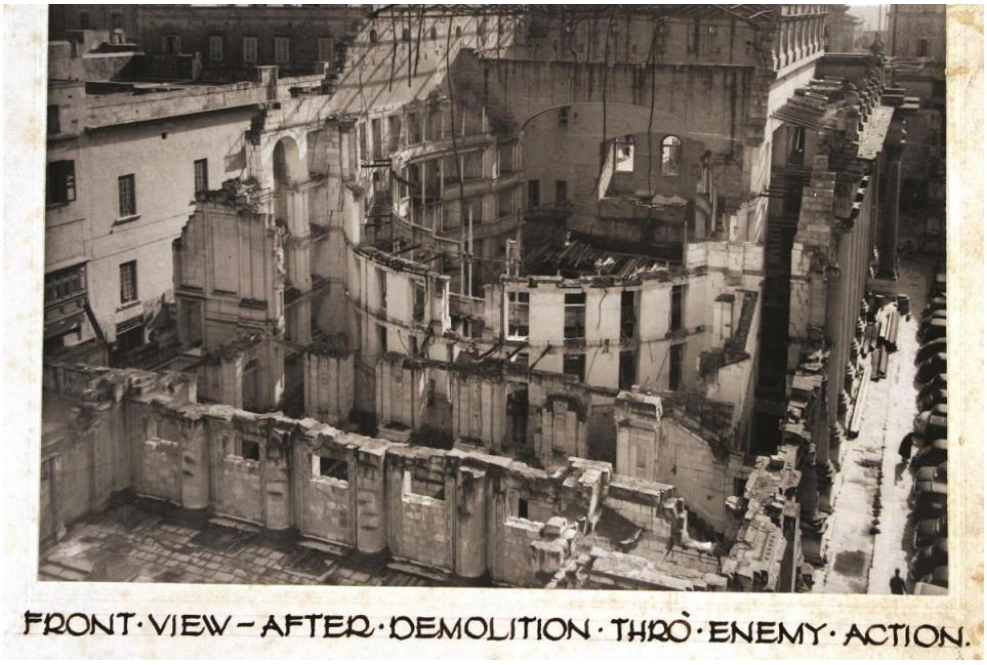


Figure 41: Front view of the bombed Royal Opera House

Chapter 2. Opera after World War II

The loss of the Royal Opera House was a devastating event that led the lovers of opera, the 'Dilettanti',[185] to push opera forward so that it can slowly start to regain the splendour it once had. With the Royal Opera House destroyed and the Manoel Theatre, previously undermined by the British Government, being used as a cinema,[186] the capital city had no place for operas and a new venue was needed where operas could be staged. The opera scene in Malta had now become purely Maltese. Operas were being produced by Maltese, directed by Maltese, performed in Maltese by the Maltese, and watched by a Maltese audience. Various cinemas were converted into theatres while other theatres were built primarily for the production of operas.

This chapter will also examine the opera repertory of the post-war period and the events that led these theatres to become obsolete and leave the Manoel Theatre as the only survivor. The government, together with other foreign entities made various attempts to promote opera but still the opera industry did not regain the status it had in pre-war times.

Malta's Independence led to a wave of local artists to write and perform works that celebrated the Maltese Culture. This chapter will review the works of Charles Camilleri who was the first to write an opera with Maltese text and which contained Maltese idioms while also remark on Joseph Vella's unfinished opera.

[185] amateurs
[186] Stivala (2001), 190

2.1 Opera after World War II (till 1969)

The war in Malta ended on 8 September 1943, after two long years of bombardments, starvation, and death. Malta emerged victorious after the Allies took over Sicily,[207] (from where enemy planes used to take off to attack Malta) but the war left Malta on the brink of poverty and desolation. The areas which were mostly devasted were Valletta and the cities around the Grand Harbour. (See Figure 42)



Figure 42 The Grand Harbour: Valletta on the left side, Ricasoli fortification and the cities of Kalkara, Vittoriosa and Senglea on the right.

The war left a long-lasting physical and physiological scar on the entire population and reconstruction became an urgent national priority.[208] In 1946, German prisoners of war in Malta reportedly offered to rebuild the Opera House for a nominal charge. However,

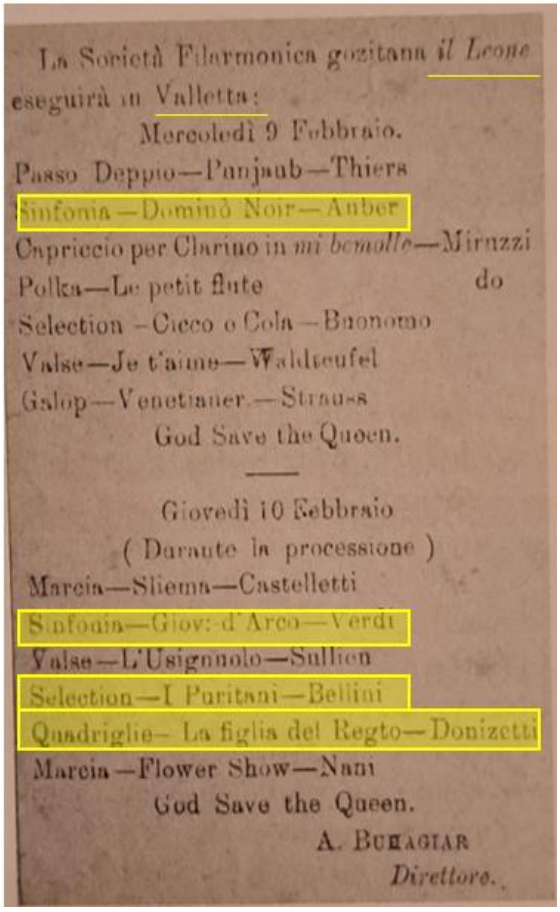
[207] On 29 September 1943, on board of HMS Nelson inside the Grand Harbour of Malta, General Badoglio signed the defeat for Italy.
[208] Jack Pullicino, *Malta's Reconstruction after 1945*. University of Malta, 2017

with rampant unemployment and emigration just after the war, the Government declined the offer.[209]

After World War II, opera lovers longed for operas and sought additional ways of keeping opera alive such as through Rediffusion[210] which used to air concerts weekly.[211] The gramophone gained popularity in Malta immediately after World War II: initially, only wealthy families were able to buy records, but these became more affordable as time passed. Children brought up in the post-war years have fond memories of the family gathering around the gramophone listening to the most famous operas.

Ever since the formation of bands around the villages of Malta and Gozo, various vocal and instrumental concerts, consisting of classical pieces, operatic excerpts and arias were held in village squares with the participation of Maltese singers and local bands. (See Figures 43) This was the only way for people living in rural areas to get acquainted with opera. Popular opera arias also regularly became street music, so it was quite common to hear a farmer humming *La donna e' mobile* or the baker vocalising the brindisi from *La Traviata*.

[209] Edgar Vella, *The Royal Opera House (1866 - 1942) - MALTA.avi.* (video)
[210] The Rediffusion started transmitting in 1935. It was the first form of radio broadcasting on the island. At first, it was only intended to transmit propaganda by the British government to the Maltese as well to rebut other broadcasts arriving from Italy with Fascist propaganda. These broadcasts included news, music, features and a various entertainment programmes. There were two channels with more than 34 hours of broadcasting daily. Eventually, there was the start of news and programmes in Maltese and educational programmes for schools. In 1955, Rediffusion also arrived in Gozo. Adrea Rossitto, *tvmnews.mt*, 11 November 2020.
[211] Miceli (2001), 248



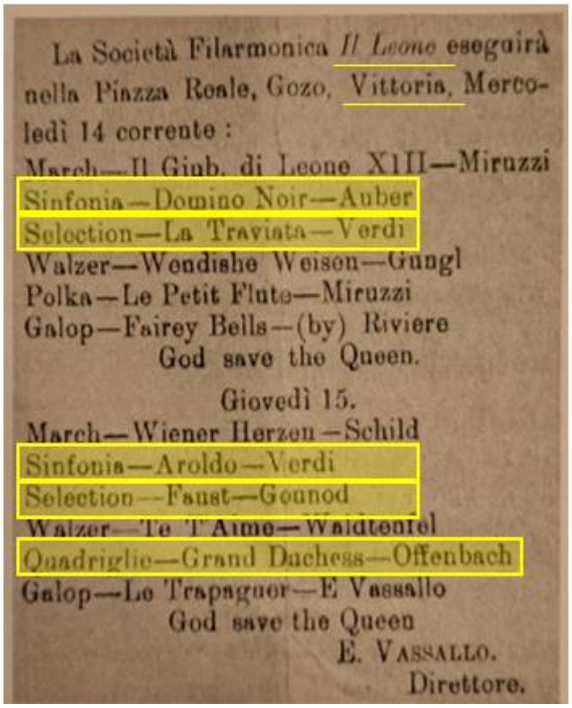
La Società Filarmonica gozitana *il Leone* eseguirà in Valletta:

Mercoledì 9 Febbraio.

Passo Deppio—Panjsub—Thiers
Sinfonia—Dominò Noir—Auber
Capriccio per Clarino in *mi bemolle*—Miruzzi
Polka—Le petit flute do
Selection—Cicco e Cola—Buonomo
Valse—Je t'aime—Waldteufel
Galop—Venetianer.—Strauss
God Save the Queen.

Giovedì 10 Febbraio
(Durante la processione)
Marcia—Sliema—Castelletti
Sinfonia—Giov: d'Arco—Verdi
Valse—L'Usignuolo—Sullien
Selection—I Puritani—Bellini
Quadriglie—La figlia del Regto—Donizetti
Marcia—Flower Show—Nani
God Save the Queen.

A. BUHAGIAR
Direttore.



La Società Filarmonica *Il Leone* eseguirà nella Piazza Reale, Gozo, Vittoria, Mercoledì 14 corrente:

March—Il Giub. di Leone XIII—Miruzzi
Sinfonia—Domino Noir—Auber
Selection—La Traviata—Verdi
Walzer—Wendishe Weisen—Gungl
Polka—Le Petit Flute—Miruzzi
Galop—Fairey Bells—(by) Riviere
God save the Queen.

Giovedì 15.

March—Wiener Herzen—Schild
Sinfonia—Aroldo—Verdi
Selection—Faust—Gounod
Walzer—Te T'Aime—Waldteufel
Quadriglie—Grand Duchess—Offenbach
Galop—Le Trapaguer—E Vassallo
God save the Queen

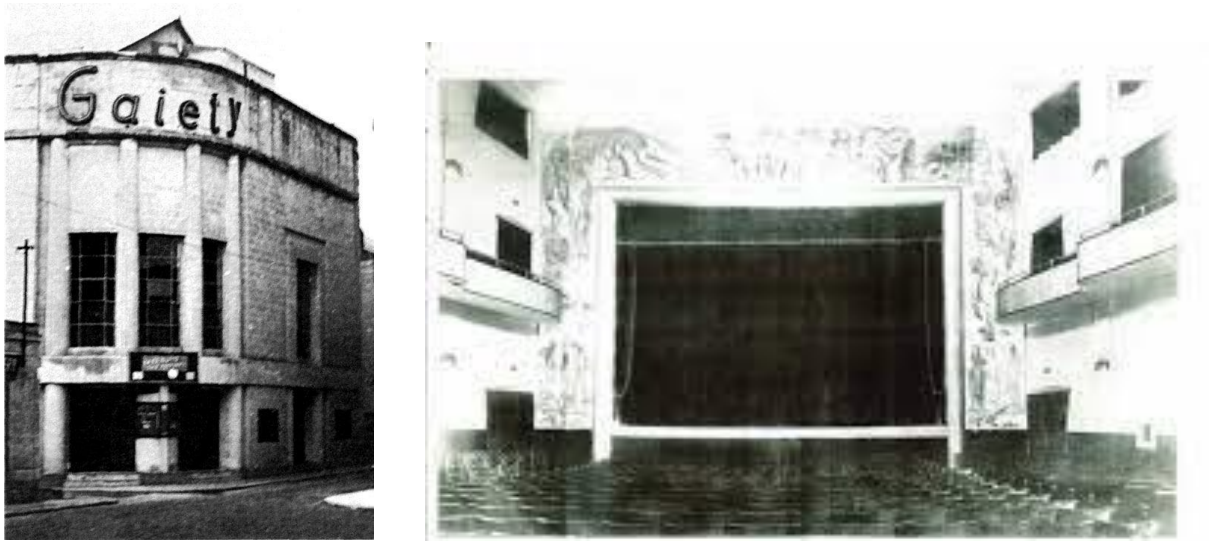
E. VASSALLO.
Direttore.

Figures 43 The Leone Band playing operatic excerpts, 1887,1889

The range of operas performed was impressive, showing a truly extraordinary achievement by the Maltese.[212] (See Appendix 2) The post-war years are an example of an art form being regenerated and evolved in a new shape after experiencing a near death experience. The fact that opera was being totally produced by the Maltese and in the Maltese language generated a new sense of patriotism. Instead of admiration of Italian culture, the opera scene now came to represent a sense of national pride in Maltese 'identity'. Meanwhile, the language dispute, which lasted from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, also led political parties to see the importance of the native language and use Maltese to incite patriotism and use it as a symbol of freedom and the fight against colonialism. Nationalism was at its highest.

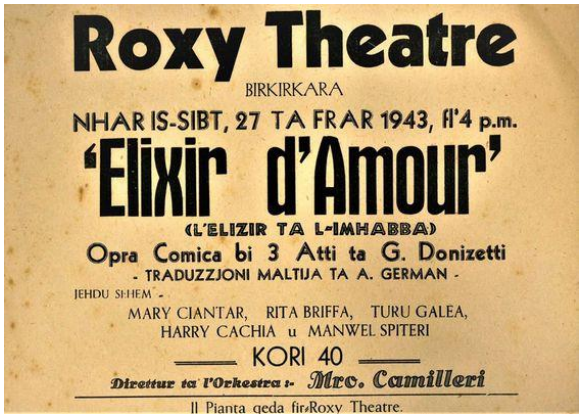
[212] Ganado (1974), *Vol. II*, 283

After the destruction of the Royal Theatre, the local operatic companies considered other venues around Malta: in some cases, cinemas were temporarily transformed into makeshift theatres such as the Gaiety Theatre in Sliema and the Odeon Theatre in Ħamrun, but they were not appropriately equipped and did not last long. The strongest years for the Gaiety were between 1943 and 1949. The Odeon, Toc Headquarters and Command Hall theatres also had very short lifespans as opera venues with just one opera or operatic concert each. (See Appendix 2) Usually, the performances were only on Saturdays and Sundays but when there was high demand, performances also happened on Wednesdays and Thursdays.[213]



Figures 44 (left) the Gaiety Theatre, (right) the Odeon Theatre.

[213] Miceli (2001), 224





Figures 45 (left) opera performed in Maltese, (right) the derelict state of the Roxy Theatre today.

The Orpheum Theatre in Gzira was built in 1932 principally as a cinema, with designs of Art Nouveau and Spanish features.[214] After the destruction of the Royal Theatre in Valletta, the Orpheum was the largest theatre in Malta, with a capacity of 1,200. It started hosting operas and concerts from 1949 up till 1955. The walls are adorned with intricate designs (See Figures 47 and 48) and at the top part of the auditorium there are statues of prominent Maltese writers and composers. (See Figure 49) On the ceiling there is a painting of Orpheus in the Underworld. (See Figure 50)

[214] https://www.kartelluni.com/postershop/p/orpheum



Figure 46 the façade of the Orpheum Theatre





Figures 47 Wall and ceiling decorations at the Orpheum Theatre





Figures 48 the interior decorations at the Orpheum Theatre

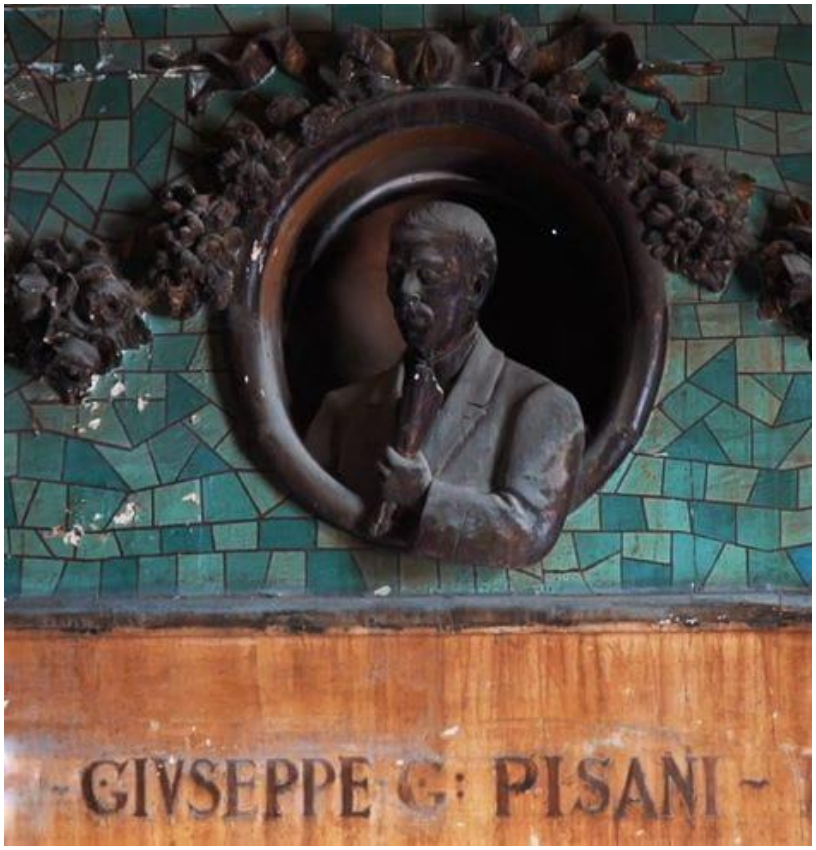


Figure 49 One of the busts inside the Orpheum Theatre



Figure 50 Detail of the painting of 'Orpheus in the Underworld' on the Orpheum Theatre's ceiling.



Figure 51 La Traviata at the Orpheum Theatre, 1950

The Radio City in Ħamrun was built by Charles Schembri to host operas and opened in February 1945 with a grand Carnival ball.[215] (See Figure 52) The first opera performed there was *Cavalleria Rusticana,* produced by the Amateur Theatrical Company (more details below) on 22 February 1945. Three days later, the local tenor Oreste Kirkop (See Figure 53) made his debut in the role of Turiddu. In the same *year La Boheme, I Pagliacci, Lucia di Lammermoor* and *La Traviata* were also produced.[216] On Sunday, 8 December 1946, the Maltese tenor Paul Asciak (See Figure 54) made his debut also with *Cavalleria Rusticana*.[217] The Maltese companies (discussed below) with their vast variety of operas in various venues contributed to discovering and preparing great Maltese voices who later made international names for themselves.[218] Opera in Malta, not only endured but flourished since it became a cultural aspect of society made by the Maltese.

[215] *The Sunday Times*, 29 November 2009
[216] Ivan Bugeja, 'Ir-Radio City Opera House', *In Festa: Immakulata Kunċizzjoni Ħamrun,* 2013
[217] Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini 1987, *The Making of a Maltese Tenor: Paul Asciak's Meteoric Career (part 1)*
[218] Ganado (1975), *Vol III,* 283



Figure 52 The Radio City Carnival Ball



Figure 53 Oreste Kirkop (1923-1998)

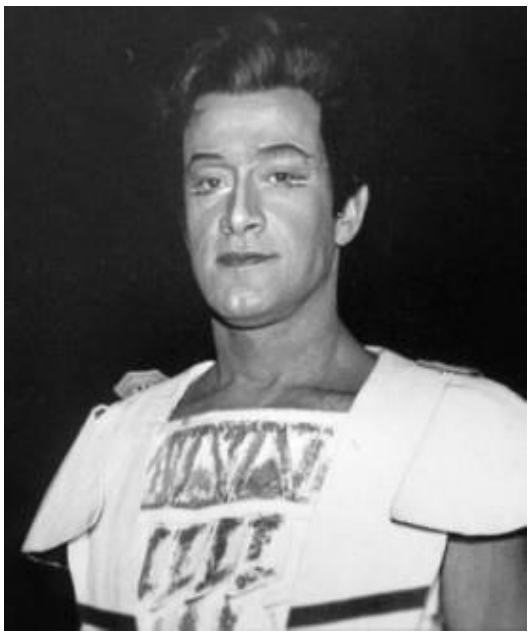


Figure 54 Paul Asciak (1923-2015)



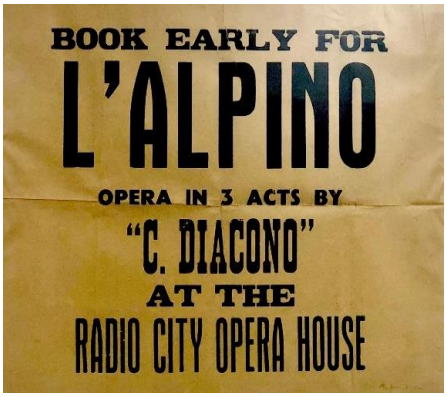
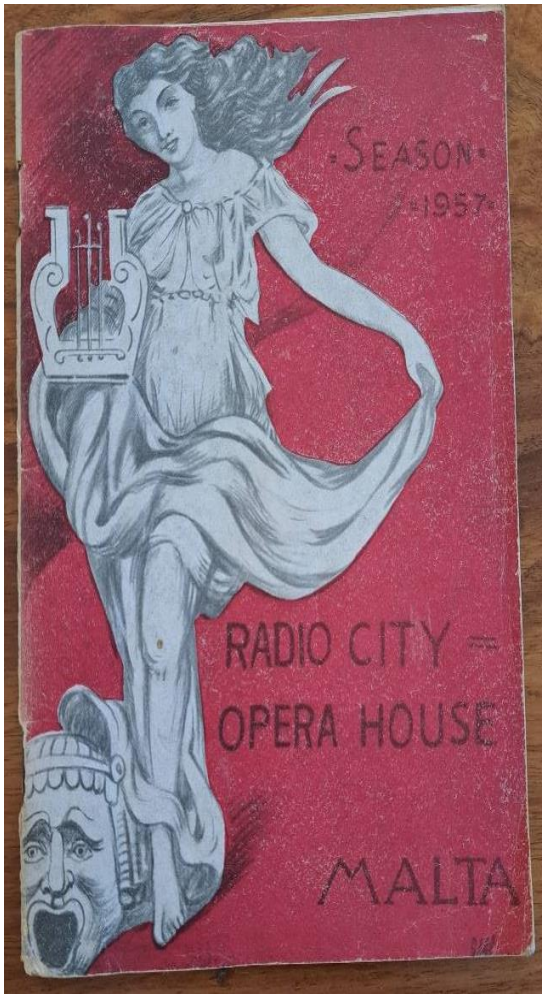
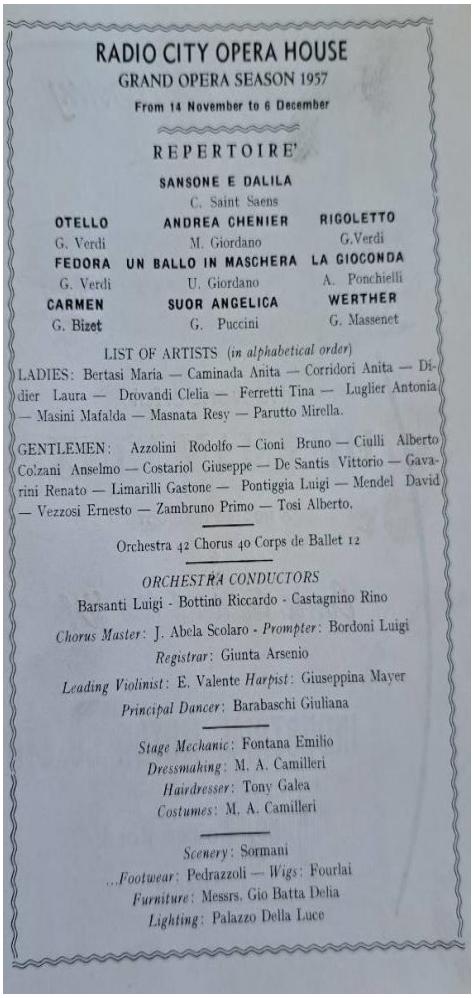


Figure 55 (left) façade of the Radio City (top) advert for the opera *L'Alpino*





RADIO CITY OPERA HOUSE

GRAND OPERA SEASON 1957

From 14 November to 6 December

REPERTOIRE'

	SANSONE E DALILA C. Saint Saens	
OTELLO G. Verdi	ANDREA CHENIER M. Giordano	RIGOLETTO G.Verdi
FEDORA G. Verdi	UN BALLO IN MASCHERA U. Giordano	LA GIOCONDA A. Ponchielli
CARMEN G. Bizet	SUOR ANGELICA G. Puccini	WERTHER G. Massenet

LIST OF ARTISTS (*in alphabetical order*)

LADIES: Bertasi Maria — Caminada Anita — Corridori Anita — Didier Laura — Drovandi Clelia — Ferretti Tina — Luglier Antonia — Masini Mafalda — Masnata Resy — Parutto Mirella.

GENTLEMEN: Azzolini Rodolfo — Cioni Bruno — Ciulli Alberto Colzani Anselmo — Costariol Giuseppe — De Santis Vittorio — Gavarini Renato — Limarilli Gastone — Pontiggia Luigi — Mendel David — Vezzosi Ernesto — Zambruno Primo — Tosi Alberto.

Orchestra 42 Chorus 40 Corps de Ballet 12

ORCHESTRA CONDUCTORS

Barsanti Luigi - Bottino Riccardo - Castagnino Rino

Chorus Master: J. Abela Scolaro - *Prompter*: Bordoni Luigi

Registrar: Giunta Arsenio

Leading Violinist: E. Valente *Harpist*: Giuseppina Mayer

Principal Dancer: Barabaschi Giuliana

Stage Mechanic: Fontana Emilio

Dressmaking: M. A. Camilleri

Hairdresser: Tony Galea

Costumes: M. A. Camilleri

Scenery: Sormani

Footwear: Pedrazzoli — *Wigs*: Fourlai

Furniture: Messrs. Gio Batta Delia

Lighting: Palazzo Della Luce

Figure 56 Radio City Opera House souvenir programme, 1957

When the Radio City opened in 1945 it dominated the operatic scene and whole seasons were held there except for 1951. The popularity of the Radio City ended abruptly with the reopening of the Manoel Theatre in 1960. (See Appendix 2)

Both the Radio City and the Gaiety eventually became Malta Labour Party properties. (See Figure 57)

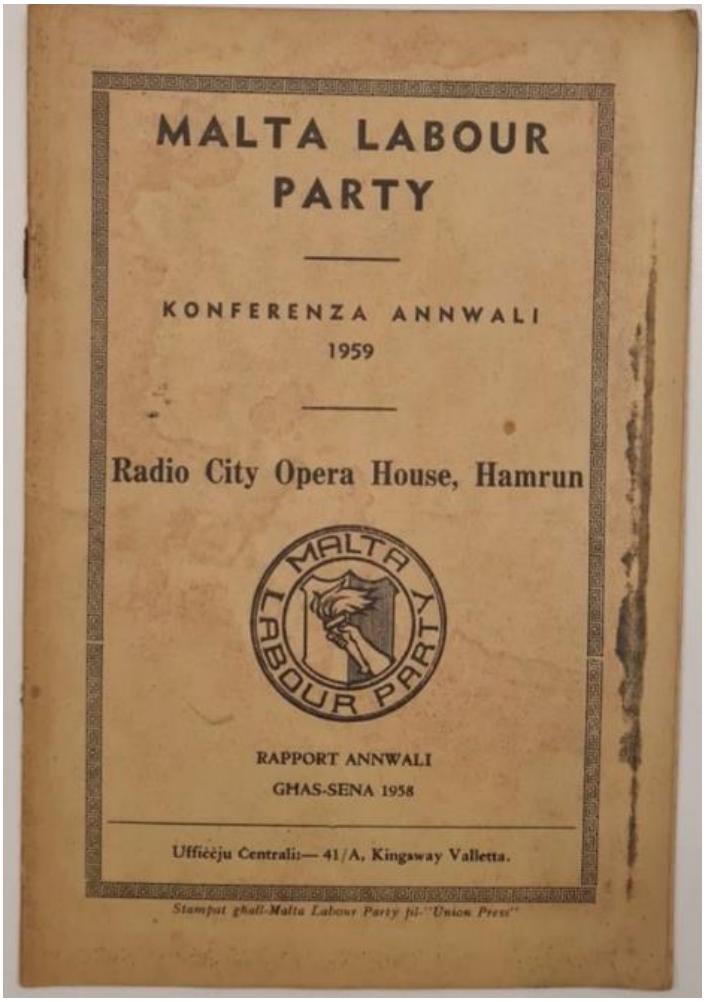
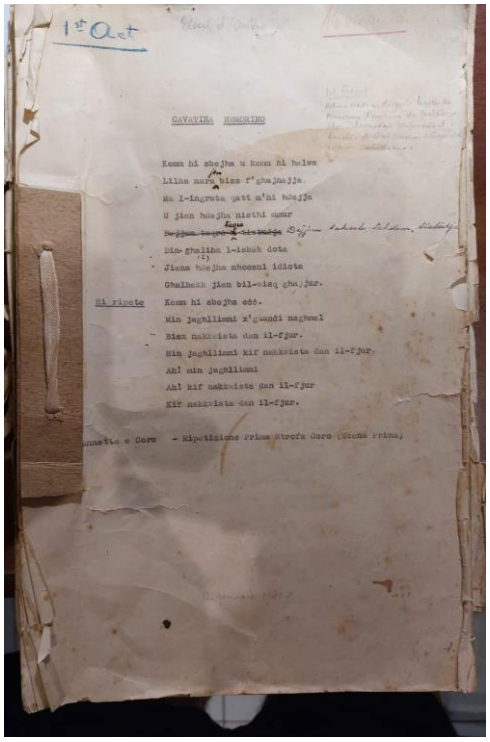
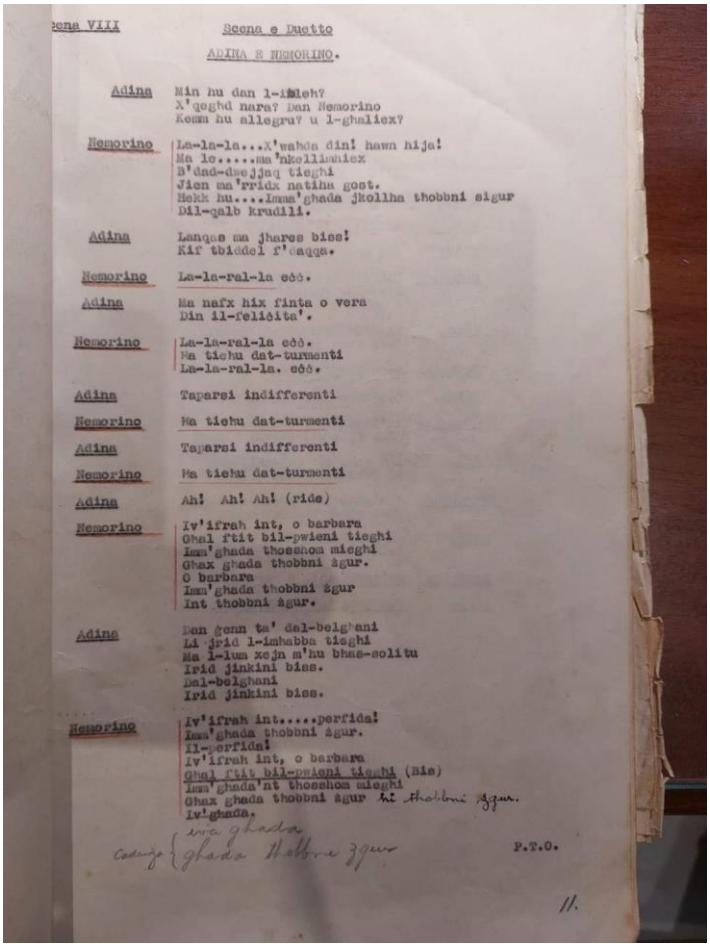


Figure 57 The Annual Conference of the Malta Labour Party held at the Radio City Opera House, 1959

As observed in Appendix 2, operas at the Roxy Theatre lasted for a couple of years (1942-43) until the Gaiety was converted from a cinema to a theatre, and opera started to be performed there. In the early post-war period, operas were translated into English or Maltese. (See Figures 58) This practice lasted for two years as in fact, in 1944 operas were sung in their original language, which was mainly Italian. That same year it was once again possible to hold a full operatic season held at the Gaiety Theatre and it opened with *Rigoletto*.[219]

[219] *Times of Malta*, 8th February 1945





Figures 58 Maltese script of *L'Elisir d'Amore*

The local singers' portfolios could not be compared to those of the Italians who graced the stage of the Royal Opera House, since they were not professionals. These singers often studied voice techniques with local retired singers, most of whom were not professional teachers, and they went to rehearsals after a day's work but at least they were able to perform even though operatic seasons were much shorter and the atmosphere and performances were not up the standards of pre-war operas.[220] Previously, singers who wanted to excel in this discipline went to study abroad or else were taught by foreign operatic singers who came to sing for the operatic seasons at the Royal Theatre.

[220] Ganado (1975), *Vol III,* 283

The operatic seasons between 1945 and 1959 were mostly held at the Radio City except for the operatic season of 1948-1949 and 1951. During the operatic season of 1946-47 the three operatic companies united under one impresario, Giovanni Schembri, and presented seventeen performances at the Radio City Opera House.[221] All three musical directors conducted in turn during this season.

Then, in 1948 the government repealed the law passed in 1939, allowing foreign singers and companies, once again, to perform on the island.[222] The government, however, did help the cultural scene by giving the Maltese a cultural institute of their own and in 1949, the Malta Cultural Institute[223] was created to house cultural activities such as literature, art, theatre, and music and make them accessible to the Maltese audience to enjoy. This institute's main aim was to promote Maltese talents.

One important figure who made a comeback, was the opera producer Luigi Cantoni.[224] He was renowned in this sector and had mounted many successful operatic seasons before the outbreak of World War II. The main attraction of his short or even mini seasons would be some big name in the operatic world which would draw large audiences, while the rest of the cast would often be indifferent.[225] In the operatic season of 1948-49, performances were held at the Gaiety and at the Manoel which seemed to revive just for that operatic season where a total of nine operas were performed. In November of 1949 Cantoni organised three operatic concerts at the Orpheum by the baritone Tito Gobbi while on 24 and 25 March 1950, the Italian tenor

[221] Miceli (2001), 230
[222] Miceli (2001), 233
[223] https://maltacvs.org/voluntary/malta-cultural-institute-foundation/
[224] Ganado (1975), *Vol III,* 410
[225] Miceli (2001), 235

Tito Schipa performed at the Orpheum[226] and a few weeks later, Maria Caniglia gave two recitals.[227]

Cantoni built on and improved the new generation of operatic performances that the Maltese had created in the post-war years and aided them by giving them the professionalism they deserved, by bringing foreign singers and performers back to Malta and by opening a school with the aim of transforming Maltese amateurs into professionals.[228]

From the year 1948 till 1956 the impresa Cantoni, along with other local companies organised the operatic season.[229] In his first operatic season, Cantoni organised 49 operatic representations.[230] Each year one or two theatres were chosen to perform these operas; in 1951 all performances were held at the newly refurbished Knightshall Theatre in Valletta[231] while those of 1952 till 1955 (with the exception of 1954) were held at the Orpheum and at the Radio City. 1955 was one of the most prolific years in opera productions: there were three different operatic seasons, the first by Luigi Cantoni which in January presented nine different operas, the second by Impresa Teatral Z from Milan[232] who in April presented seven other operas and the last one also by Luigi Cantoni[233] who produced ten other operas in November.[234] That year, *La Traviata* was performed in all three seasons since opera enthusiasts were celebrating

[226] Ganado (1975), *Vol III,* 454
[227] Tony Micallef, 'L-Orpheum u l-Gzira', *Programm tal-Festa Madonna tal-Karmnu, Gżira,* 2015, 44-45
[228] Miceli (2001), 453
[229] Ibid. 252
[230] Ibid. 233
[231] Frans Said collection at the Maltese National Archives. File 0912/1951 - Facilities for the use of the Knightshall theatre for the performance of G.B.S's -Arms and the man.
[232] *Times of Malta,* 6 April 1955, 9
[233] *Times of Malta,* 4 November 1955, 9
[234] A. Miceli (2001), 249

the 100 years since it was first performed in Malta.[235] It was noted, however, (see Appendix 2), that there was a gradual reduction in the number of performances as well as in the number of weeks each season lasted. A plausible reason, however, would be financial problems and restrictions: the impresa would spend so much money on Italian artists that it would not have enough financial stability to sustain a three-month long operatic season each year. Focusing on the professional aspect of the performer led to the sacrifice of longevity and variety of the opera season and this led to having no operatic season in 1954 while that of 1955 lasted just two months: from November till December. In 1956, Luigi Cantoni died, and his wife Ines took over the operatic seasons from 1957 to 1965. In the last three years of this period, Ines Cantoni collaborated with the Italian Ministry for Culture.[236] Over the years the British Institute, the Italian Consulate, the colonial government and then local government, donated generous financial aid to keep opera alive.[237]

In 1955 there were plans to rebuild the theatre[238] and the Nationalist government invited the Duke of Edinburgh to lay the foundation stone but, in the same year there was a change of government to one led by the Labour Party under Dom Mintoff, which cancelled the whole project.[239] Instead, the money intended for the new theatre was spent on social services and other projects considered more urgent.

In 1955, the Manoel Theatre passed to the colonial government and underwent a much-needed restoration[240] and reopened on 27 December 1960 with the ballet

[235] *Times of Malta*, 24 January 1955, 23 April 1955, 8 December 1955..
[236] Miceli (2001), 252-267
[237] Ganado (1974), *Vol. II*, 575
[238] Miceli (2001), 235
[239] Henry S. Pace, *The Times of Malta,* 29 October 2004
[240] Ganado (1974), *Vol IV*, 575

Coppelia.[241] This inauguration was immediately followed by the creation of a committee[242] for the running and maintenance of the new Maltese National Theatre.[243] Thus, the third oldest theatre in Europe returned to be the centre of operatic activity in Malta.

From 1960 onwards, the Manoel Theatre became the main theatre of Malta and a place that hosted operas, dramas, comedies, ballets, and musical recitals in English, Italian and Maltese. Opera performances at the Manoel Theatre during the 1960s started strongly, with a total of twelve different operas. Year after year there was, a steady decline in the number of operas produced. As Paul Xuereb commented, "opera was becoming a dead art, a form of leisure which was outdated, and which was slowly being replaced by new forms of entertainment such as American cinema".[244] From 1966 to 1968 the seasons were organised by the Teatro Municipale di Piacenza.[245] Then, in 1969 the Italian government stopped all financial support of Italian singers[246] which brought opera productions to a complete halt since the cost of contracting of Italian singers became too great to be handled by any single individual or enterprise.

Besides the high costs of producing opera, social and cultural changes impacted on the popularity of opera in Malta. The audience preferred other cheaper entertainment such as the cinema and dances.[247] In fact, in 1974 the Radio City itself succumbed to

[241] Stivala (2001), 204
[242] Committee members were chosen by the government and were usually experienced in the theatrical and musical world.
[243] https://www.teatrumanoel.com.mt/?m=content&id=139
[244] Xuereb (1994), 123
[245] Miceli (2001), 268
[246] *The Times of Malta*, 7 October 1969
[247] Ganado (1975), *Vol III,* 411

this form of entertainment and was turned into a cinema.[248] The art of opera became 'seconda mano' – second place.



Figure 59 Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh at the Manoel Theatre, 1967

[248] Bugeja (2013)

2.2 Post-war Composers

Maltese composers, as discussed above, were more inclined to write sacred music, but the wave of Nationalism that swept over Malta in the 1960's, and ultimately resulting in Malta's Independence, made authors, poets, artists and composers to create music with a patriotic vein. Theatre and theatrical events in Malta reflected the developments of the Maltese language in the wider national context.[249]

One of the most important twentieth-century Maltese composer is Charles Camilleri (1931-2009), who composed concertos for piano, clarinet, oboe, and organ. His works were influenced by contemporary composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Zoltan Kodaly, and Olivier Messiaen. His most famous compositions are *The Malta Suite* (1946), *Missa Mundi* (for organ) and the opera *The Maltese Cross* which was performed in Paris in 2003. The opera in two acts *Il-Wegħda* (1984) and *Il-Fidwa tal-Bdiewa,* (1985) in three acts, were the first operas to use a Maltese text. [250] Both had a libretto by Joe Friggieri. Camilleri's local and foreign reputation is based on his interest in Maltese folk music which led to wider scientific research in Mediterranean music which is reflected in a significant part of his opuses.[251]

Il-Wegħda was first performed at the Manoel Theatre on 11 May 1984. It holds a key status in the history of music in Malta, for it was the first work that can be designated as Maltese nationalism in Maltese classical music. The compositional tools which Camilleri utilised were not only the Maltese language and its rhythms and inflexions, but also all the elements of Maltese folk music and of Maltese native life. His main

[249] Vicki Ann Cremona 2014, 'Maltese National Theatre, National Identity and Theatre in Malta'*, Melita Historica*, 16(3), 129
[250] Philip Ciantar, *The Maltese Composer Charles Camilleri: his life and musical style,* University of Malta, 2014
[251] Michael Schiavone, 'Biography: Charles Camilleri', *The Time of Malta,* 7 September 2023

inspiration was the *għana* in which he elicited its exotic features, improvisation, semitic hypertones and the modal system combined with European musical elements.[252] Camilleri's compositions were the first to put Malta in the limelight as a country that could produce composers of a certain calibre.

Throughout the years, under various rulers or colonies but even after gaining the Independence, Maltese was not respected or considered worthy by the ruling elite whose *lingue franca*[253] was Italian, and who considered Maltese as little more than a 'kitchen dialect'. Before Camilleri's opera *Il-Wegħda,* various Maltese composers had composed pieces using Maltese texts, but they will adopt Italian conventions in their settings. Unlike his predecessors, Camilleri's opera is Maltese, from beginning to end.



Figure 60 Charles Camilleri

Opera composition continued to occupy his attention, and the very controversial *Compostella* (1992) and *Maltese Cross* (1994), the former to an Italian libretto while

[252] Joseph Vella Bondin, *Il-Mużika ta' Malta fis-Sekli Dsatax u Għoxrin,* 2000, 185
[253] A language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different.

the latter to an English libretto by Peter Seracino Inglott, have been the subject of a lot of heated debate on account of their unusual atonal sonorities, together with a creativity that seeks to encompass the most permanent of human spiritual involvement. The almost 'primitive' sounds were hard to accept by the Maltese audience who was used to Italian opera.

His last opera, *The Malta Cross*, was unusual in its formation and vision, was premièred in a fully staged version on 3 August 2005 on the Valletta Waterfront.[254] Camilleri's aim of *Il-Wegħda* and *The Malta Cross* was the creation of music with a mystical perspective and with no conflicts; music that can embrace a deep and everlasting human spirituality.[255]

Another important 20th century Maltese composer is Joseph Vella (1942-2018) who was closely related to the Astra Theatre for over 50 years. In his chamber compositions, Vella, unlike Camilleri, put the intellect before the emotions whereas the latter were given a greater importance in his vocal works such as the *Mass in D* (1987). His compositions follow a contrapuntal alignment while also use the traditional methods of the neo-classical compositions like Stravinsky, Hindemith and Bartok.[256]

Joseph Vella composed over 150 chamber, vocal and symphonic works while also composed numerous marches for village bands. It was in 2017, aged 75, that he started composing the opera *Valeriana*, *The Titan's Rock,* with a libretto of Vincent Vella.

[254] Vella Bondin (2016), 649
[255] Vella Bondin (2000), 191
[256] Ibid*,* 192



Figure 61: Joseph Vella

Unfortunately, Vella was not able to complete this opera, so Christopher Muscat took on the work after Vella's death. The Astra Theatre, in collaboration with Festivals Malta plans to produce the opera *Valeriana, The Titan's Rock* in May 2024. This will be the first opera by a Maltese composer produced at either of the Gozitan theatres.[257] Being his last composition, Joseph Vella's *Valeriana, The Titan's Rock* stands as a monumental testament of the composer's legacy. This opera provided the perfect opportunity for him to blend together his various facets as a composer: from the downright traditional (mostly reserved for the more collective singing during the festa, the funeral, the children's scene and the military march), through the lyrical melodic writing of the motherly-figures (Teresa and Filippa), to the more daring and pungent harmonic language that Vella reserves for the fiery, Mediterranean character of Rosario and the 'evil' podestà[258] of the island, Cirillo. It may be effectively regarded as a showcase of Vella's musical idiom and style where the composer pulled out all the stops, as it were, to create his *magnum opus*.

[257] https://gozo.news/81051/works-of-the-late-gozitan-maestro-joseph-vella-to-be-revived/
[258] Highest civil officer.

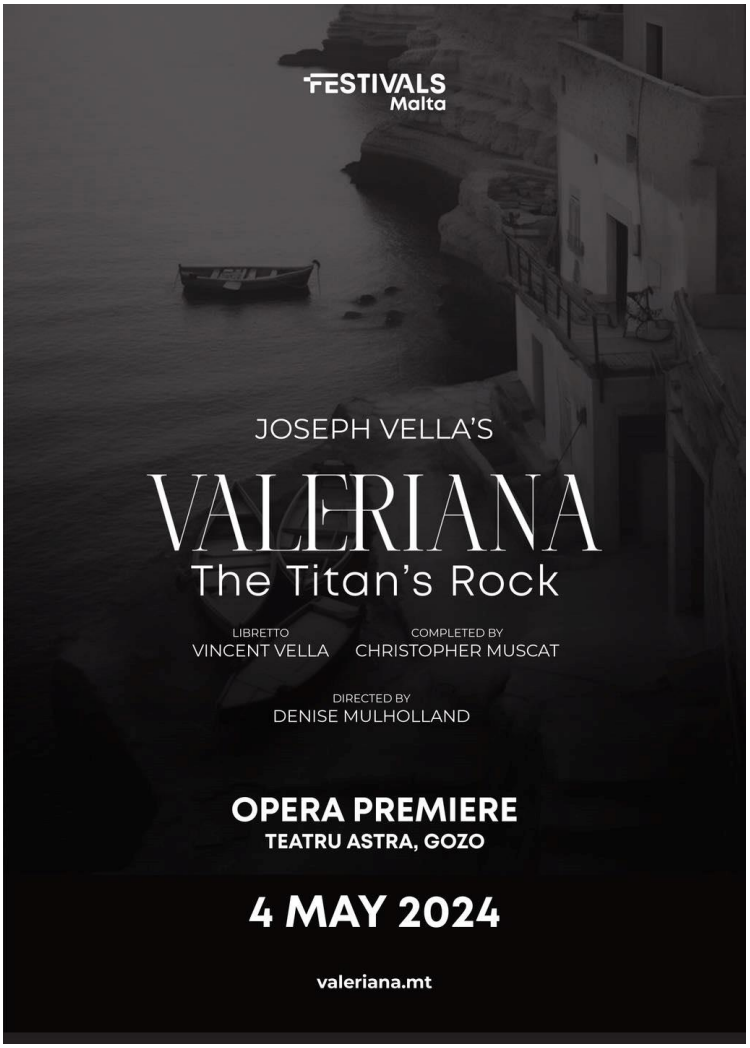


Figure 62 poster for the upcoming opera *Valeriana, the Titan's Rock*

A new generation of local contemporary composers try to counter a perceived lack of interest in contemporary opera and are exploring other ways and means to make opera more accessible to the public. In 2022 the first filmed opera in Maltese, composed by Reuben Pace (b.1974), named *Blat: The Island Fortress* was premiered in June 2022 in Malta and screened in Vienna in January 2023. The film in Maltese with English subtitles involved local professionals as well as students from various music, art, and drama colleges.[259]

[259] https://tvmnews.mt/en/news/students-and-teachers-produce-first-operatic-film-in-maltese-blat/

2.3 Opera after 1970

As overseas travel became cheaper, opera lovers increasingly chose to go to main European cities such as Verona and Vienna.[260] Consequently, people started comparing the quality of Maltese opera with the foreign ones. Some of the amateur companies who were producing opera ignored the criticism and did not try to improve while others evaluated these comments and made the necessary changes to improve the operas they were producing.

In Malta, operas seemed to be becoming obsolete and theatres started prioritising light entertainment such as operettas and comic plays. Herbert Ganado comments that it was not a question of cost of a ticket, but a lack of musical culture or inclination to anything beautiful and artistic.[261] In the post-war years, classical music was not as popular as it was in the years before the war especially among the locals.[262] The English used to fill the concert halls, but their numbers started to diminish after Malta became independent. In the 1960s, Romeo Micallef observed that the piano was the most popular instrument to learn in Malta, while other instruments were totally neglected which augured badly for the future orchestras.[263] The only indoor place that could organise opera was the Manoel Theatre, while various operas were held in the open air which increased the cost of the opera production.

[260] Ganado (1975), *Vol III,* 412
[261] Ganado (1974), *Vol. II,* 583
[262] Ibid.
[263] Romeo Micallef 1956, 'The present state of music in Malta', *Malta Yearbook*, 222-227



Figure 63 Otello performed at Manoel Island, 1989



Figure 64 Don Giovanni performed at St. Paul's Square, Mdina, 1991

The operas in the 1970s were one-off productions that were financially supported by the Italian Cultural Ministry. (See Appendix 3 for a list of operas held from 1970 up till the present day)

During the 1970s and '80s, the Manoel Theatre opted to produce operas by the local composer Carmelo Pace including *Caterina Desguanez,* (1970, 1980) *Angelica,* (1973) *Ipogeana,* (1976) and *I Martiri* (1989).[264] (See Figure 65) It was a well-known fact that Pace paid for all the expenses himself as this was the only way in which his operas would be performed. There were various attempts at performing concert versions of operas or concerts with operatic highlights, but financing was so difficult that the soloists also sang the choral parts.

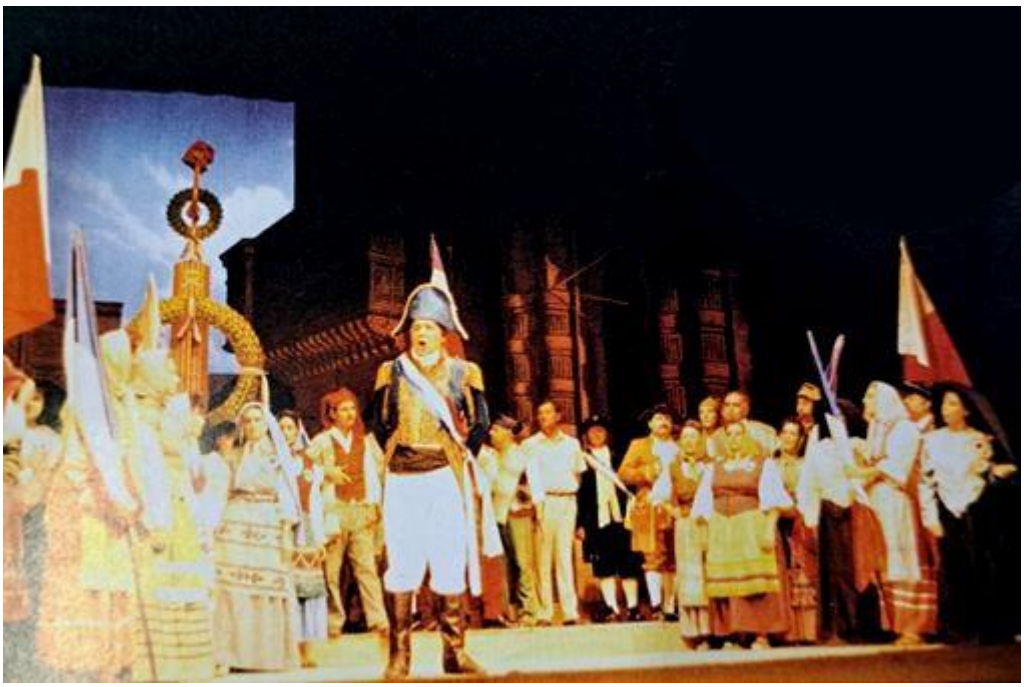


Figure 65 I Martiri (Carmelo Pace) at the Manoel Theatre, 1989

[264] *Il-Poplu,* 3 November 1973

From 1974 no full opera was held, but only highlights or concert versions of opera. Then, the first opera in Gozo was produced in 1977 at the Aurora theatre, followed by the Astra theatre the year after. (See Chapter 4)

The Academy of the Operatic and Ballet National Theatre of Sofia produced opera seasons at the Manoel Theatre in November 1981 and 1982, which lasted three weeks each. In1982, the Bristol Opera Group attempted to produce *Aïda* in English, but it was a fiasco and was described as an operatic parody by the local opera critics.[265] The Manoel Theatre's management opted for one act operas and in 1984 presented the operas *Il-Wegħda* by local composer Charles Camilleri (1931-2009) and *Cavalleria Rusticana*. The latter was performed twice, first at the Manoel Theatre, then at the Aurora Theatre in Gozo.

The Ministry of Culture and Foreign Affairs launched Maltafest in 1985, to promote the arts and amongst the productions, Camilleri's opera *Il-Fidwa tal-Bdiewa* was produced in the open air at San Anton Gardens. Three years later, the Maltafest management produced *Aïda,* which was basically imported from the Astra Theatre where it was produced that same year. The three performances of *Aïda* were held at St. Paul's Square in Mdina. In 1988 and 1989 there was a collaboration between the Manoel theatre and the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, where the Roman company Associazione Mattia Battistini,[266] produced several operas, amongst which were *Rigoletto, Lucia di Lammermoor, Tosca, Don Pasquale, Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*. During certain years one could observe increases in operatic productions as was the case of

[265] Miceli (2001), 281

[266] This company consisted of youths studying to become professional operatic singers. *Il-Mument,* 4 December 1988

the years 1986 and 1987 when the Manoel Theatre ventured into grand opera and produced *La Traviata*, *Madama Butterfly, Tosca, L'Elisir d'Amore, Fedora* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia.* This pattern continued from 1990, where operas produced by the Manoel Theatre company included *L'Amico Fritz, La Boheme* and *Adriana Lecouvreur*. During this period there seems to have been quite a revival of operatic productions.



Figure 66 Aïda, Astra Theatre, 1988

The Johann Strauss School of Music under the musical direction of Joseph Vella[267] mounted various productions with the participation of its students, including *Suor Angelica* (1990) (see Figure 67), *Bo-Peep* a children's opera composed by Vella

[267] Joseph Vella (1942-2018) Maltese composer and conductor. Graduated in music from Durham University and studied composition and conducting in Sienna. In 1972 he set up the Johann Strauss School of Music in Malta and in 1994 he was appointed Associate Professor of Music at the University of Malta. From 1970, until his passing in 2018, Joseph Vella has been the musical director of the Astra Theatre and the La Stella Band in Gozo while he was also appointed the first resident conductor of the National Orchestra of Malta.

himself, *Jeannot et Colin* (see Figure 68) by the local composer Nicolò Isuard, (both in 1991), and *Jaconde* also by Isuard, which was performed in a concert version in 1993. Other sporadic performances include the concert version of *Così Fan Tutte* (1991) and *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* (1992) by the Opera Studio Society,[268] *Don Pasquale* (1997) in collaboration with the Teatro Petrarca (Arezzo) and *Don Giovanni (2003)* and *L'Elisir d'Amore* (2007) in collaboration with Operalaboratorio from Palermo.



Figure 67 Suor Angelica produced by the Johann Strauss School of Music, 1990

[268] a group of local singers under the tuition of Prof.sa Dobrova



Figure 68 Jeannot et Colin at the Manoel Theatre, 1991

While the end of the 1980's seemed prosperous, from 1991, the Manoel Theatre started producing just one opera per year. 2001 saw the birth of the BOV[269] Opera Festival which resumed the production of grand operas such as *Tosca*, *La Traviata* and *Semele.*

Other interesting performances include *Candide* (2005) by Bernstein which was held at the Valletta Waterfront. From 2009, the entities that were giving opera were the Astra and Aurora theatres in Gozo, were the Gaulitana Festival in 2014, the Valletta Baroque Festival and the BOV Opera Festival. The latter started in 2013 and operas featured at the Manoel Theatre were from the Baroque period, such as *Zanaida* (J. C. Bach)

[269] BOV: Bank of Valletta

and *Pimpione* (G. P. Telemann). These operas well suited the Manoel Theatre's stage size.

In 2018, Valletta was European Capital of Cultural[270] and the opera *Aħna Refuġjati* by local composer Mario Sammut was produced at the Granaries in Floriana as part of the programme.[271] Shortly thereafter, in 2020, Covid 19 impacted the music and operatic spheres[272] and all opera productions had to be cancelled or postponed. After the pandemic, the first fully staged opera held at the Manoel Theatre was *Tosca* which was organised in collaboration with the Valletta Cultural Agency. The new production, featuring, designed, and directed by the international opera star, Argentine tenor José Cura, is the first at the Manoel to feature a full symphonic orchestra, through Cura's stage design that makes innovative use of the limited space.[273]

After World War II, the lack of a suitable substitute for the Royal Opera House caused a serious lacuna in the musical upbringing of the rising generation. The youths who grew up at that time had no facilities and so failed to assimilate and appreciate the love for opera and classical music that the older generation treasured so much. The delayed reopening of the Manoel Theatre in 1960 failed to generate the same appeal as its more grandiose predecessor.

The cultural morale of the Maltese since the post-war years has been low. Maltese opera lovers wanted the Royal Opera House to be rebuilt, since the Manoel Theatre was not big and spacious enough to cater for grand opera. However, the Royal Opera

[270] https://www.europanostra.org/valletta-european-capital-of-culture-2018/
[271] https://valletta2018.org/cultural-programme/ahna-refugjati/
[272] *The Impact of Covid 19 on the Future of Performing Arts: a Survey of Top Industry Executives in Europe and the US,* SDA Bocconi School of Management
[273] *The Malta Independent*, 7 March 2023

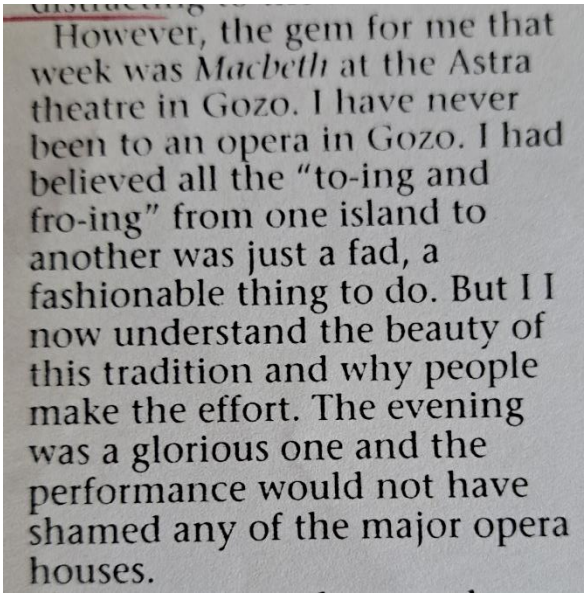
House was never to be rebuilt to its former pristine glory and remained a grim and derelict ruin for over six decades. Nowadays it houses an open-air theatre, opened in 2013 and known as Pjazza Teatru Rjal, (See Figure 69) designed by Renzo Piano, but this in no way compensates for the beautiful building that once graced the entrance into Valletta.



Figure 69 Pjazza Teatru Rjal today

From 1977, Maltese opera-lovers have ended-up having to cross to Gozo to see a fully-fledged opera. Some find it fashionable while others view it as a hassle.[274] But once you attend an opera in Gozo, you remain hooked: by the ambience, the acoustics and the effort put into such a massive production. (See Figure 70) To understand how these two theatres evolved from two distinct musical societies in a tiny island in the Mediterranean, one must comprehend the social and cultural dynamics behind the two band clubs and the history of the on-going rivalry which made each of the two band clubs want to better itself and triumph over the opposing Society; this is the focus on the next chapter.

[274] Mario Tabone Vassallo, 'We Can Make Music', *Gallarija*, *Reviews, [The Malta Independent],* May 1997



However, the gem for me that week was *Macbeth* at the Astra theatre in Gozo. I have never been to an opera in Gozo. I had believed all the "to-ing and fro-ing" from one island to another was just a fad, a fashionable thing to do. But I I now understand the beauty of this tradition and why people make the effort. The evening was a glorious one and the performance would not have shamed any of the major opera houses.

Figure 70 A positive newspaper review about *Macbeth*

Chapter 3. The Evolution of the Two Band Clubs and their Respective Theatres

Theatrical life in Gozo is dominated by the theatres built by two social and musical societies, the La Stella and Leone. Although the two theatres were built in the post-war period, their existence can ultimately be traced back to a rivalry between two parishes, St George[275] and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary,[276] in the centre of Gozo's capital, Victoria, which started in the seventeenth century.

This chapter outlines some seminal events in that rivalry, how it led to the creation of two wind bands, which then developed into social and musical societies, and which, not least, due to the ongoing rivalry, subsequently decided to build their own theatres on a scale more commonly found in substantial cities many times the size of Victoria. A large part of my study consists of oral research (see Personalia) and in this chapter, I combined all the information imparted by interviewees from the two musical societies and besides recounting history I have also analysed what led to two small bands on a tiny island to build two massive theatres which attract thousands of people each year.

[275] The liturgical feast of St. George is celebrated on the 23 April, but the feast is held during the third week of July due to inclement weather in April.
[276] The feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is always celebrated on the 15 August.

3.1 The Two Parishes of Victoria

The capital city of Gozo, Victoria, has a long and turbulent history that dates back to 2,000 BC.[281] A key feature in the city's panorama is the Citadel, a fortress that served as a safe haven whenever the island was invaded by corsairs.



Figure 71 Map of Gozo (1686) showing the Castello (Citadel) and the Borgo, houses built outside the city walls.

The Citadel was considered as an Acropolis[282] and even though most of the population lived inside the Citadel, a Christian community outside the Citadel walls existed as early as 500AD where a temple dedicated to St George was located. Then, as from 1435,[284] the church dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary was considered

[281] Andrew Formosa, *The Georgraphy of Parochial Division in Victoria Gozo,* University of Malta, 2008
[282] Where temples and administrative buildings were situated
[284] Joe Balzan, 'Kont taf li...' *Il-Ħadd Magażin,* 11 April 1999

the ‘Matrice’.[285] Through the years there were other small parishes in Rabat but the two that flourished were those dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and to St George. Along the years other hamlets started to flourish in various parts of Gozo and at first these fell under the *Matrice*’s protection, both in religious matters and also in financial ones. Territory meant wealth, so the parish priest of St George did his best to take as much land as possible under his parish’s wing. This created the first disputes between the two parishes



Figure 72 The Citadel and the surrounding buildings today. The basilica of St George is the one with the red dome.

There was rivalry, backstabbing and big scandals in the relations between the two parish priests. The parish priest of the Virgin Mary tried numerous times to have the parish of St. George brought under his wing but never succeeded, until, in 1688 there was a request by four other villages (Sannat, Nadur, Xagħra and Żebbuġ) to become independent from the ‘Matrice’.[288] This would have been a great blow for the parish priest of the Virgin Mary since he would have lost a lot of territory and income. He only

[285] Mother Church – The church of the Virgin Mary was considered the ‘mother’ of the other three parishes that were situated outside the Citadel walls: Savina, Saint James and Saint George.
[288] Interview with George Frans Vella

agreed to change on condition that he was given the parish of St George in exchange, as the latter was considered the 'golden egg' in terms of richness in property and cash.[289] Coincidentally, the parish priest of St. George at the time was from Bormla, Malta, and wished to be parish priest in his native village. The then-Bishop of Malta Davide Cocco Palmieri therefore had the perfect excuse to send him to Malta and agree to the terms of the parish priest of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the two parishes, St. George and the Virgin Mary were united under one parish priest.[290]

As early as 1755 it was common practice that musical groups, known as 'banda' or 'suonatori di banda'[291] played during feasts and other special occasions happening in the villages.[292] Instruments played included drums, fifes, tambourines, violins, and cellos. The number of players varied depending on the payment the parish could afford and on the availability of the musicians.[293] Other small orchestras were set up to play during the liturgical celebrations inside the church. These same musicians formed groups that went around the villages to play during the feast. Documents were found at the Parochial Archives of Sannat that mention that Adriano (Dirjanu) Lanzon was paid 35 skut[294] for the services of his band during the village feast of 1848. The musical education in Gozo in the 1850s was limited and Maltese musicians were brought over to join the local bands.[295] With the official setup of the Banda tal-Binu and Banda ta' Dirjanu in 1863,[296] the musical education and culture in Gozo started developing. The

[289] Ibid.
[290] Formosa (2008)
[291] Band players
[292] Gozo Cathedral Archive, *Lib. Esito della Festivita' Titolare*, August 1755, 1756
[293] Grazio A. Grech 2012, *Ġrajjiet is-Soċjeta' Mużikali u Filarmonika Leone, Għawdex*, 5
[294] An old monetary coin that originated in the time of the Knights of St. John. Even though it was not in circulation, the locals still used the word 'skut' to refer to their present currency.
[295] Parish Archive, Sannat, *Lib. Dell'Introito ed Esito della Ven. Lampada 1832-1851*.
[296] Personal Archives of Grazio A. Grech

two bands were named after the name/nickname of their respective founders: tal-Binu named after Ġorġ Tabone (1841-1916), known as tal-Binu and ta' Dirjanu named after its founder Dirjanu Lanzon (1820-1894).[297] (See Figure 73)

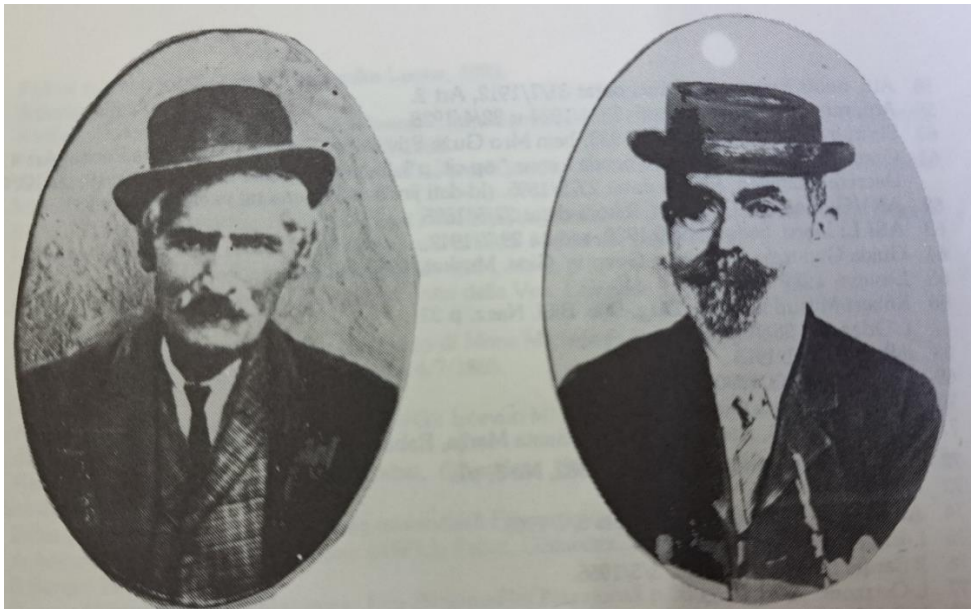


Figure 73 (left) Ġorġ Tabone, (*il-Binu)*, (right) Dirjanu Lanzon

During those years an important milestone happened in the religious situation in Gozo. In 1864 Gozo was separated from the Diocese of Malta[298] and this entailed the nomination of a church which was to function as the figurehead: the church of the Virgin Mary, the so-called 'Matrice',[299] was the obvious choice. On the appointment of the first bishop of Gozo, Mons. Mikiel F. Buttigieg, two bands participated in the various celebrations.[300] The bands always took part in the street celebrations and not in the church ones.

[297] http://www.leone.org.mt/banda-storja
[298] Joseph F. Grima, 'Birth of the Gozo diocese in 1864',*The Sunday Times,* 25 October 2020
[299] Matrice derives from the word 'madre' meaning mother. The church of the Virgin Mary was considered 'mother' to all church in Gozo.
[300] *L-Għid ta' l-Assunta, 1985*

In 1879 the bands of tal-Binu and ta' Dirjanu merged[301] under the name 'Albino-Adriano'.[302] Later that year, there was an argument between the band players and five members left and formed another band.[303] The 'Albino-Adriano' band eventually became the Leone[304] band, while the new group of musicians, led by Pietru Attard, (see Figure 74) formed the La Stella band. Ill-feeling and hostility between the two bands was present from the very start.

Members of a band were to sign a contract which included rules they had to abide by. One such rule was that they were bound for eight years to play with one band. If they were to leave for another band, they had to pay a penalty.[305] The musical societies prioritised musical tuition, in fact, the musical director insisted that each band player had to train for three years.[306]

[301] *Il-Berqa*, 19 July 1933
[302] From affidavit dated 4 July 1933 found in *Programm Festa Sant Marija, 2009,* 58-59. Albino is for 'il-Binu' and Adriano for Lanzon, the two band founders.
[303] Grech (2012), 18
[304] The name 'Leone' was given since the lion symbolises power, strength, and greatness. *Il-Berqa,* 25 May 1945
[305] Notarial deeds of Carmelo Gauci, 6 February 1881
[306] Ibid.

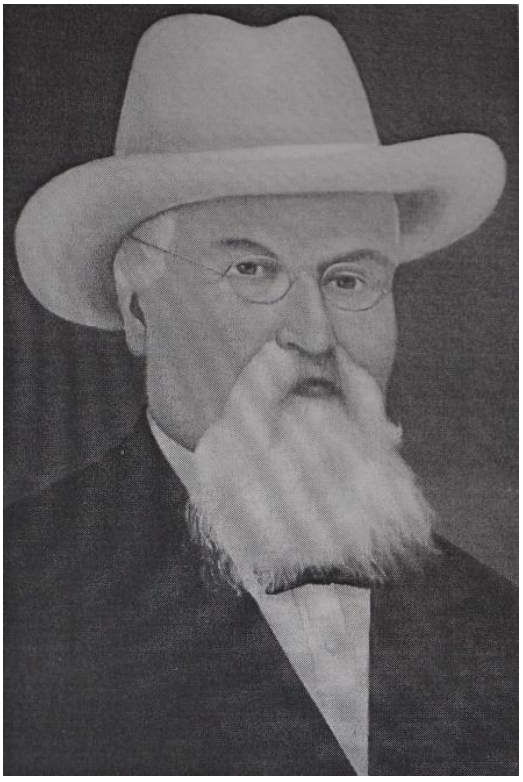


Figure 74 Pietru Attard, founder of the La Stella Band

The Gozitan community's interests were concentrated on religious symbols which became the object of personal and collective pride and satisfaction.[307] Not only was it important to save one's soul through leading a good Christian life but also to contribute to the parish church's physical aspect and its cult of patron saints which are celebrated everywhere with great pomp annually to this day.[308]

La Stella Vincitrice[309] band was legally formed on 11 January 1881 while the *Banda del Leone*[310] was legally formed on 6 February 1881.[311] Il Leone supporters argue that their band was formed as early as 1863 but ther.e is no official document to claim this.

[307] Edward L. Zammit 1981, *Aspects of British Colonial Policies and Maltese Patterns of Behaviour*, 11
[308] Ibid.
[309] The Winning Star
[310] The Lion's Band
[311] Personal archives of Grazio Grech



Figure 8 Figure 75 La Stella band in 1888

On their establishment, neither club was affiliated with any saint. 'Ta' l-Istilla'[312] members and supporters were more concentrated around the centre of Victoria and St. George's parish, while 'tal-Ljun'[313] were more concentrated along the periphery and around the Ta' Savina area. The two band clubs played at various events on the island which included playing during the marches[314] and concerts held during the village feasts. [315]

Since 1839, the church of St. George possessed a titular statue (see Figure 76) which is kept in a niche inside the church, and which is paraded around the streets of Victoria

[312] La Stella Band
[313] Il Leone band
[314] A merry procession or a rally, usually with the statue of a saint, around the street of the locality. The band plays up-tempo marches where people may join in with clapping or singing.
[315] The feast is held in two parts: the religious celebration (sacred) which is held in the church, while the outer, secular celebrations are held in the streets. The sacred celebrations include religious services with long sermons about the saint who is being celebrated. Music includes a small orchestra and a chorus who perform religious hymns. The secular celebrations are more vivid, noisy, colourful and entertaining. Streets are decorated with festoons, pavilions, and Spanish fans with woven images of the patron saint. In later years pyrotechnics were included and year after year the band club that oversees the external feast is in competition with other band clubs to have the best decorations and merrymaking.

in a solemn procession[316] once a year. Up until 1882, the Leone band was the only band which accompanied all the processions (St. George's, Assumption of the Virgin Mary, secondary feasts[317] and Good Friday) which came out of St George's church. The only exception was the procession of Our Lady of Sorrows which came out of the Church of St James which is situated between the Citadel and the church of St George[319]



Figure 76 The La Stella Band (bottom left) playing outside of St George's Church. Note the women wearing the faldetta, the traditional Maltese head dress and shawl. Early 1900s.

[316] Feast day procession consists of a statue of the patron saint, which is kept inside the church, in a niche, throughout the year. The statue goes out of the church once a year. The statue of St. George is paraded on feast day (third Sunday of July) while that of the Virgin Mary is paraded on 15 August. The statue is accompanied by the partisan band and by the clergy. Along through the years the statues have been adorned with gold leaf, jewels and precious stones.

[317] The main feast of Rabat was celebrated in honour of St. George, then later also for the Virgin Mary. The secondary feasts are celebrated in honour of other saints such as St. Michael, St. Joseph, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Lourdes, and St. Ursula.

[319] This procession was penitential and very devotional. People from all over Gozo came to take part. The procession came out from St. James church, halfway between St. George's church and the Cathedral.

A procession consisted of the cathedral's chapter (canon priests) and priests which would be accompanied by the sound of a band or else they would chant religious hymns along the way. A statue (not in the case of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary) would be at the centre of the procession. As from 1882 both bands played during these processions, alternating.

One important role in the church was that of the procurator who was a priest in charge of funds and managing ongoing projects in church or organising a particular celebration. Therefore, the procurator had to book the band and the statue bearers amongst other things. In 1882 the procurator of the feast of St George, Rev. Ġuzepp Mercieca, wanted to divide the musical services of the feast between the two band clubs. Musical services during the external feasts included musical programmes in the main square and various marches from one part of the city centre to another. Organising a feast proved to be a great financial burden on the church's funds and the procurator, with the permission of the archpriest, issued a call for interest to any organisation or individual/s who wanted to be the organisers of the external feast of St George. The Leone band were interested but they disagreed on one clause: the band still had to pay £12 even when, due to inclement weather, the band did not play. Instead, the six-year contract was signed by three local businessmen who were La Stella supporters, so it was obvious that the latter band was asked to play during the external feast of St George. This was the right chance for the La Stella band sympathisers to kick out the Leone band.

After the six years stipulated by the contract, the procurator in charge of the feast of St George kept on asking the La Stella Band to play during the exterior feasts of St

George.[321] Finally, in 1895, the President of the Leone band, Dr Pawlu Sammut sent a recourse to the Gozitan Ecclesiastic Authorities demanding the bishop to be impartial and just with the Leone band and thus permit the Leone band to resume being an active participants in the "festa piu' popolare del paese".[322] They insisted that the sympathisers of the Leone band were devoted to St George as much as those of the La Stella band.[323] During the thirteen years in which the La Stella band was the sole band which played during the external feast of St George, its members got busy and started creating street decorations to be used during these celebrations. With this excuse, the feast procurator suggested that things should remain as they were, or else the feast of St George would lose all the decorations and other projects done by the La Stella members during the years. One of the most important projects made by the La Stella Band was in 1894, when they bought a statue of St George that was to be used for the external feast.

The bishop refused to interfere and instead the police superintendent decided that for the 1896 feast the La Stella band was to accompany the procession and play in the main square of Victoria, while the Leone was to play in another prominent square in Victoria. The police advised that if any of the partisans were to start any trouble, they would have to stop the feast celebrations instantly.[324] The Curia did not agree with the superintendent's decisions and tried to make changes. Amongst the changes made, the La Stella band was not to play during the procession and the Leone band was

[321] Grech (2012), 57
[322] "The most famous feast of the island" This comment was made by Alessandro Tabone, treasurer of the Leone Band in a letter addressed to the local ecclesiastical authorities. At the time official letters were written in Italian. This phrase, in Italian, is still used today by the sympathisers of the La Stella band to pick on the opposing band. Private archives of Grazio Grech.
[323] Ibid, 54
[324] Grech (2012), 61

cancelled the march planned for the feast day. These measures were taken so as to keep the two bands as far away from each other as possible and to give the same importance to either band.



Figure 77 the *Leone* band in 1925

After the 1896 feast, bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri (1843-1924) officially proposed the Leone band to play and organise the external feas of the Virgin Mary while the La Stella band to continue organising the external feast of St George[328] Apart from this, the bishop made another condition: the La Stella committee was to invite the Leone band for the respective feast and vice versa.[329] It is a well known fact that in the following years the Leone band used to accept the invitation of the L Stella band and play during the feast of St George while the La Stella band never accepted the

[328] *Malta Tagħna*, 21 May 1898
[329] Grech (2012), 67

invitation by the Leone band and never showed interest in taking part in the feast of the Virgin Mary.[330]

Each band now had its own feast to concentrate on and the Leone Band commissioned a statue of the Virgin Mary[331] for the external feast of 1897.On 'Demonstration' day (13th August), this statue went around the streets of Victoria (see Figure 78) and at the end of the march the statue was raised onto a large pedestal at It-Tokk (today Independence Square). (See Figure 79)



Figure 78 the 'demonstration' with the statue of the Virgin Mary, 1960s

[330] Interview with Geroge Frans Vella
[331] *Id-Devot ta' Marija,* May 1896, 60





Figure 79 The statues of the Virgin Mary and St George on their respective pedestals at Independence Square during feast time, 1950s

A year later, in 1898, the Leone band accepted to perform a concert during the feast of St George. A hymn, *A San Giorgio Martire,* was composed for the occasion. This clearly shows how much the Leone band kept at heart the feast of St George. Unfortunately, the feast was cancelled since opposing partisans were having repeated arguments. On the other hand, the Leone partisans did their best to adorn the main streets and squares with trophies (type of street decoration) and various illuminations for the upcoming feast of the Virgin Mary.

The sympathisers of the La Stella band wanted to kick the Leone supporters out of St. George's entirely. For decades the elected archpriests, (head of the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary while also in charge of the church of St George) identified themselves as

La Stella supporters so the latter were always at an advantage. A case in point was when the Leone band was not invited to play during the funeral of archpriest Hili in 1943 and not even during the cortege of the newly ordained archpriest, Michael Cefai, the year after.[332] The fact that the two parishes were still officially joined, continually gave rise to tensions which came to a head in the mid 1950's. The feast of St. Michael of September 1954 arrived in a climate of great disputes between these two factions in Victoria. St George's parish and its parishioners did not want Il Leone to take part in any procession coming out of St George's parish.[333] On the eve of the procession, some La Stella fans removed the wings and shield from the statue of St. Michael and thus the procession could not be held.[334] Things got even worse: in January 1955, during the procession with the statue of Jesus and Mary, il Leone were to organise and play during the external feast. The La Stella supporters, to continue emphasising that they did not want them there, turned off all the lights in the square and in church and chaos erupted in the square.[335] As the statue was re-entering the church, it was turned to face the people in the square.[336] However, this gesture of turning the statue was only done with the statue of St. George and consequently all the bells stopped ringing for a whole day as a sign of protest.[337] Following these incidents, Bishop Giuseppe Pace (1890-1972) decided that the only processions to be accompanied by the bands were the titular feasts of St George and the Virgin Mary.[338]

[332] Paul Mizzi, 'Il-Parroċċa t'Għawdex', *Il-Berqa*, 7 January 1954
[333] John Bezzina 1964, *Siltiet mill-Ġrajjiet il-Bażilika ta' San Ġorġ*, 21
[334] Anton Gauci 1981, *Ħwejjeġ li Rajna Vol. 1,* 46
[335] Ibid.
[336] The gesture of turning the statue facing the public was symbolic and was used only with the titular statues. It was a sign of respect and the last salute to the patron saint; until the statue comes out the following year.
[337] Ibid., 467
[338] Gauci (1981), 46



Figure 80 the infamous statue of St. Michael

This incident led Bishop Pace to declare that St George's parish and the Cathedral would once again be separate parishes from 1 August 1955.[339] With this separation

[339] Gauci (1981), 48, 99

also came the inevitable and definitive division of the Leone band from St George's parish. Following the demerger, people started to flock to their respective parish churches; some Il Leone supporters, who were still attending St George's, were expelled by force.[340] Hence the La Stella band would be solely associated with the feast and celebrations of St. George while the Il Leone band would be connected solely with that of the Virgin Mary.

Processions, until then, had always started from St George's church or other churches in the vicinities. Now that an external feast of the Virgin Mary was going to be organised, amendments were to be made to the Citadel's entrance which was inaccessible except for foot and cart passageways. An arch connecting the Citadel's square with the main street of Victoria was opened.[341] (See Figures 81 and 82)



Figure 81 The entrance to the Citadel in the 1950s

[340] Ibid., 474
[341] *Il-Berqa*, 21 & 27 October 1954



Figure 82 Entrance to the Citadel today, with the new archway (marked in red)

Since the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary did not own a titular statue, on 29 April 1956, the Leone Band donated the statue of the Virgin Mary, which was used for the external feast, to the Cathedral, so that it would be used during the feast-day procession.[342]

[342] *Il-Berqa*, 3 May 1956





Figures 83 The statue of the Virgin Mary entering the Cathedral for the first time on April 29, 1956



Figure 84 The statue of the Virgin Mary exiting the walls of the Citadel with the main door still under construction, 1957

In 1958 St. George's church became a basilica and works to enlarge its square started immediately.[343] (See Figure 85) For a decade it seemed that both parishes were busy in reconstructing the area around the basilica and cathedral until in the late 1960s

[343] Jeremy Boissevain 1993, *Saints and Fireworks, Religion and Politics in Rural Malta.* Valletta: Progress Press Co. Ltd.

problems arose in connection with the Good Friday processions (See Figure 86) since Bishop Nikol Cauchi (1929-2010) gave permission to all parishes in Gozo to start organising a procession during Lent.[344] The conflict was so huge that the church of St. George boycotted the Diocese and for eight whole years no masses or sacraments were held, and the church was entirely shut.[345]



Figure 85 the demolition of St. Joseph's chapel as part of the enlargement of St. George's Square, 1958

[344] *Il-Berqa*, 20 May 1964
[345] Formosa, (2008)



Figure 86 The Good Friday procession coming out of the Gozo Cathedral, 1968

In 1975, Bishop Cauchi recognized the primacy of the Good Friday procession that came out of St. George, and the boycott stopped.[346] Despite the bishop's manoeuvres, in the years to come both societies were responsible for some violent incidents arising from continued parochial rivalry. In one such event, in 1976 in front of the Astra Theatre, during the band march organised by Il Leone Band Club, people in the theatre threw bottles in the direction of the Il Leone supporters after being provoked by the latter.[347] In August 1996, paint was thrown at the St George's Basilica main door during one of the marches organised by Il Leone Band Club and in 1999, a day before the feast of the Virgin Mary, a bomb exploded in front of the Cathedral church in the early

[346] Gauci 1986, *Ħwejjeġ li Rajna... It-Tieni Ktieb*, 143
[347] *L-Orizzont*, 17 August 1976

hours of the morning. No one got hurt and no one was accused or arrested.[348] Many other disagreements continued to come up even in recent years, mainly in connection with the Holy Week processions.[349] The bands' societies had, and still have, a great say in the details of how processions and marches are organised during the feast, therefore disputes between the diocese, the two churches and the two theatres was ongoing.

The pique between the two societies was sometimes entertaining, to say the least, even though neither of the groups of supporters would consider it so. During the Carnival of 1999 the Leone band played the hymn of St. George by playing it as a band march during carnival while also having someone dress up as a Roman soldier symbolising St. George who carried horns on his head. The supporters of the La Stella band felt deeply insulted and provoked while the Leone spokesperson clarified that the character was a Viking and not a Roman soldier.[350] Provocations came from both sides as one of the grotesque masks[351] exhibited by the Astra featured a lion surrounded by a burning wreath and playing a harp, basically a parody of the Leone club's emblem.[352] Another grotesque mask featured a monkey holding a conductor's baton and a score with the work 'Otello', which was the opera staged two years earlier.[353]

[348] *The Sunday Times*, 15 August 1999
[349] *Il-Mument*, 13 April 2005
[350] Natalino Fenech, 'Band clubs' pique seen as driving force behind staging of *Aïda* twice', *The Times*, 22 March 1999
[351] A large structure made of papier mâché on a bed of iron and wire. The figure depicts a hilarious scene or character. A person stands on the inside while walking and turning so that the people can admire the bright colours and all the artistic details.
[352] *The Times,* 22 March 1999
[353] Ibid.

In 2007, Bishop Mario Grech (b.1957) took a drastic step and replaced the two parish priests in Victoria who were extreme partisans.[354] The parishioners of St George's and La Stella supporters accepted the change unwillingly. On the other hand, a boycott was ordered by the Leone Society on all the bishop's activities at the cathedral and on the installation of the new parish priest.[355] After some weeks, though, this boycott ended.[356]

Nowadays, the two feasts consist of six days of celebrations both inside the church and outside. Inside the church the respective maestro di cappella directs a small orchestra and a chorus during all liturgical services while around the streets of Victoria, the two bands organise band marches that attract hundreds, if not thousands of revellers. The supporters of the Leone band wear blue while those of the La Stella band wear red. These colours are not to be associated with political parties, so blue is the colour of 'our Lady' while red is the colour of martyrdom.

The external celebrations include the band which plays popular marches,[357] and provides pyrotechnic displays, (see Figure 87) light displays, confetti, balloons and flags amongst other things. The march ends in different squares of Victoria where every single day a different statue is raised onto a pedestal. A disco might follow, either in the square or at the band club.

[354] *L-Orizzont*, 19 September 2007
[355] *L-Orizzont,* 24 September 2007
[356] *L-Orizzont*, 2 November 2007
[357] This has nothing to do with marching. It is basically a song played by the band which usually includes lyrics that praise the saint who is being celebrated or a particular band club. Lyrics could also include insulting phrases towards the opposing saint or band club.



Figure 87 Fireworks during the feast of the Virgin Mary

The two biggest band marches on the island end at St. George's square but for different reasons. The La Stella sympathisers, supporters of St. George, celebrate their saint while the opposing band, Il Leone mock and insult. (See Figures 88 and 89)



Figure 88 Leone revellers mocking the adversary band and supporters in St. George's Square



Figure 89 La Stella revellers celebrating in St. George's Square

The climax of the feast happens on the feast day when the statue exits the church and goes through the streets of Victoria in a solemn procession. The exit and entrance of the titular statue is done in a very theatrical and choreographed atmosphere where palm tree leaves, symbolising martyrdom, are waved at the feet of the statue of St. George. On the other hand, as the statue of the Virgin Mary is about the enter the church, flambeaux are lit up while the lights in the square are dimmed.



Figure 90 the exit of the statue of St. George amongst the waving of palm tree leaves



Figure 91 the Virgin Mary entering back into the Cathedral accompanied by flambeaux

As early as the seventeenth century, the two parishes of Victoria saw each other as rivals. At that time the two bands were contenders playing for the same feast and later the two bands became adversaries playing for the two different parishes. The contention between the two churches and the two band clubs went on for almost 200 years and is still going on today. Nowadays, competition between the two band clubs now means which one organizes the best feast, which club produces the best opera and which club organises the best and most varied activities during the year.

3.2 The Gozitan Social and Political Life in the 1960s and 1970s

Gozo had no purposely built theatres until 1968, when the Astra theatre opened, and so, before this time, access to any kind of entertainment was extremely limited. The elite would go to Valletta occasionally and there they could witness the various clubs, shops, and theatres which they longed for in Gozo.

In the post-war period, however, interest in theatre started to grow. Most of the people I interviewed (see Appendix 6) nurtured a love for theatre in the 1950s and 60s thanks to the Oratory of Don Bosco. This was a meeting place for youth, and it was managed by the Salesians[358] who always promoted sports and theatre. The church used the theatre to attract youth, and so in Gozo we find the building of various parish centres, such as in Għarb and Xewkija, which included a hall for such activities. Besides the parish centres and the Oratory, plays, farces and operettas were also held at the Victoria Primary school and on a stage situated at the hospital which used to be cleared of patients when a theatrical or musical activity was going to be organised.

[358] The Salesians of Don Bosco came to Malta in 1903 and established homes for orphans and needy boys. They opened various oratories and schools in Malta which served to educate and gather youths inspired by the life and teachings of Don Bosco.



Figure 92 Tableau elicited from the final scene of a play about St. George, 1955

In the post-war period emigration was very popular, especially amongst men, due to the lack of jobs on the island. George Borg, a member of the La Stella band in the 1960s, describes how the La Stella Society[359] used to recruit new musicians who after a few months left for Australia, America, or Canada to find a better living. The band invested time and money in these youths, but to no avail. On the other hand, young men who worked with the Government, like George himself, had solid jobs in Gozo and were sought after to become members of the Society.[360] Matthew Sultana observed that those who remained on the island either came from wealthy families or had secure jobs with the government.

[359] Society refers to the whole body that forms the band club. It includes various committees who oversee the theatre, the band, the feast, and other activities.
[360] Interview with George Borg

Band clubs had a lot of power over the ideas and ideals of their sympathisers since these clubs not only became a central part of their social life, but also played a major role in their social and economic advancement. 'Patrons', who were usually well-educated people who worked with the colonial government, were influential people and were considered as a possible way of coping with a generally difficult situation through a personal intervention with power holders.[361] These 'patrons' were usually involved in musical Societies and therefore, politicians regarded them and the Society as a means from where to get votes or even lose votes. Duminku Mintoff, an important political figure in Malta from the 50s to the 80s, used to say that he was not afraid of any army but dreaded the bands. A band club was the perfect place for small talk which then could develop into disputes even against powerful political parties. Therefore, those who managed a band club, or even a football club felt powerful and vied for the control and support of both political parties. This led to questionable practices at the time, as one way to get a job with the government was to become a band (or football) player; in other words, the band club would 'take care' of you. Some men enrolled with the band club, learnt an instrument and when they got the job they wanted (with the Government) they left the band.[362] Politicians and musical societies exploited each other: politicians used the societies to get votes while the societies used that power to acquire more people to play in the band and be part of the organising committee.[363]

Typically, band clubs in the same village often were affiliated with political parties and in fact the two band clubs in Victoria had different political sympathies based on the political inclinations of their founders (1879) and early members: the La Stella band

[361] Zammit (1981), 14
[362] Interview with Matthew Sultana
[363] Ibid.

favoured the Latin/Italian culture while the Leone supported the Imperialist government. Shortly after their origin, political affiliations dissolved because the main aim of the two band clubs was toward the patron saint and not towards a political party.

Today, both societies have supporters from both main political parties which keeps the main political parties on edge and so the latter take neither Society for granted or else risk losing votes.[364] The societies learnt to choose the battle they fight and while the bickering continued, each Society sought to be better than their adversaries.

[364] Interview with Matthew Sultana

3.3 The Bands' Headquarters

Band clubs have evolved from a small group of musicians to larger institutions mainly after World War II. Over the years, various band clubs have established themselves as an institution in many cities and villages around Malta and Gozo.[365] Some villages have two or even three band clubs depending on the number of parishes in the respective village. Their main aims are to spread the Maltese culture mainly during festa time and the teaching of music. To be able to do so, each band club has its headquarters where music practice and fund-raising activities take place. At the inception of the society, the role of President was that of a figure head and usually someone with a tertiary education (doctor, lawyer, etc.) while the Secretary held the figure head. In the 90s, the statute was revised, and the President became the highest authority of the Society. This position is assigned by a secret vote by the band players themselves.[366]

[365] As early as the 19th Century bands were being formed by individuals who wished to gather a group of men and support their musical talents. The main aim was to play during the village feast. Most of these leaders had the backup of local businessmen who contributed to buy musical instruments and acquire premises where they could practice. Today there are 84 band clubs across Malta. Bands Clubs in Malta have a unique role in village pride and Maltese social culture. The band club's premises, known as każin or gażin, is a meeting point for locals who exchange village gossip, play snooker, or engage in activities related to the local village festa. The activities of the band club extend from preparing elaborate hand-made street decorations for the local feast dedicated to the patron saint of the village to managing firework production for the same occasion. The approaching village festa provides the climax of excitement, with rivalry quite the norm when two or more band clubs exist in the same village. Club followers may paint themselves from head to toe in the colour representative of their club to show their allegiance to it, singing (yelling) chants and causing quite a theatrical scene, while the dignified band members are dressed in their finest while flaunting their musical skills on this extra special day dedicated to their patron saint. www.myguidemalta.com/sights/band-clubs

[366] Zammit (2023), 148



Figure 93 A section of the Maltese band

The band marches in rows of six, wearing uniforms and proudly showing off the badge, while at the centre a representative of the band carries the flag of honour that depicts the band's official coat of arms.[368] A band is normally composed of around 60 to 70 bandsmen/women playing a variety of instruments. Instruments include flutes, clarinets, saxophones, trumpets, alt horns, euphoniums, trombones, tubas, snare drums, a bass drum and cymbals.[369]

Each band is associated with a particular feast, but it does not limit itself in playing in that feast only. Various bands are invited to play in different villages. (See Figure 94) The organisers of the two feasts in Victoria also bring over bands from Malta. In an evening, there could be up to three different bands playing in the streets of Victoria and

[368] birzebbugaband.wordpress.com
[369] maltauncovered.com/culture/malta-band-clubs-and-band-marches/?

passing through different routes. Obviously, the la Stella band does not participate in the feast of the Virgin Mary, and hence the Leone band does not participate in the feast of St. George.



Figure 94 the Leone band at Għarb, 1920s

Through the years, both band clubs had various headquarters in multiple locations around Victoria.

	Leone premises		La Stella premises
1.	1881-1885 Mons. Luigi Vella Str.	1.	1881-1884 St. John Str.
2.	1885-1891 St. Ursola Str.	2.	1884-1893 Fountain Str.
3.	1891-1901 Independence Square	3.	1893-1900 Charity Str. (no. 93)
4.	1901-1908 Savina Square	4.	1901-1909 Palm Str.
5.	1908-1976 Arcpriest Saver Cassar Str.	5.	1909-1925 Charity Str. (no. 126)
6.	1976 - Republic Str.	6.	1925-1940 Racecourse Str. (k/a Republic Str.)
		7.	1940-1944 Vajringa Str.
		8.	1944-1951 St. Francis Square
		9.	1951-1966 Charity Str. (no. 126)
		10.	1966 - Republic Str.

Figure 95 List of premises which served as headquarters for the two band clubs along the years.

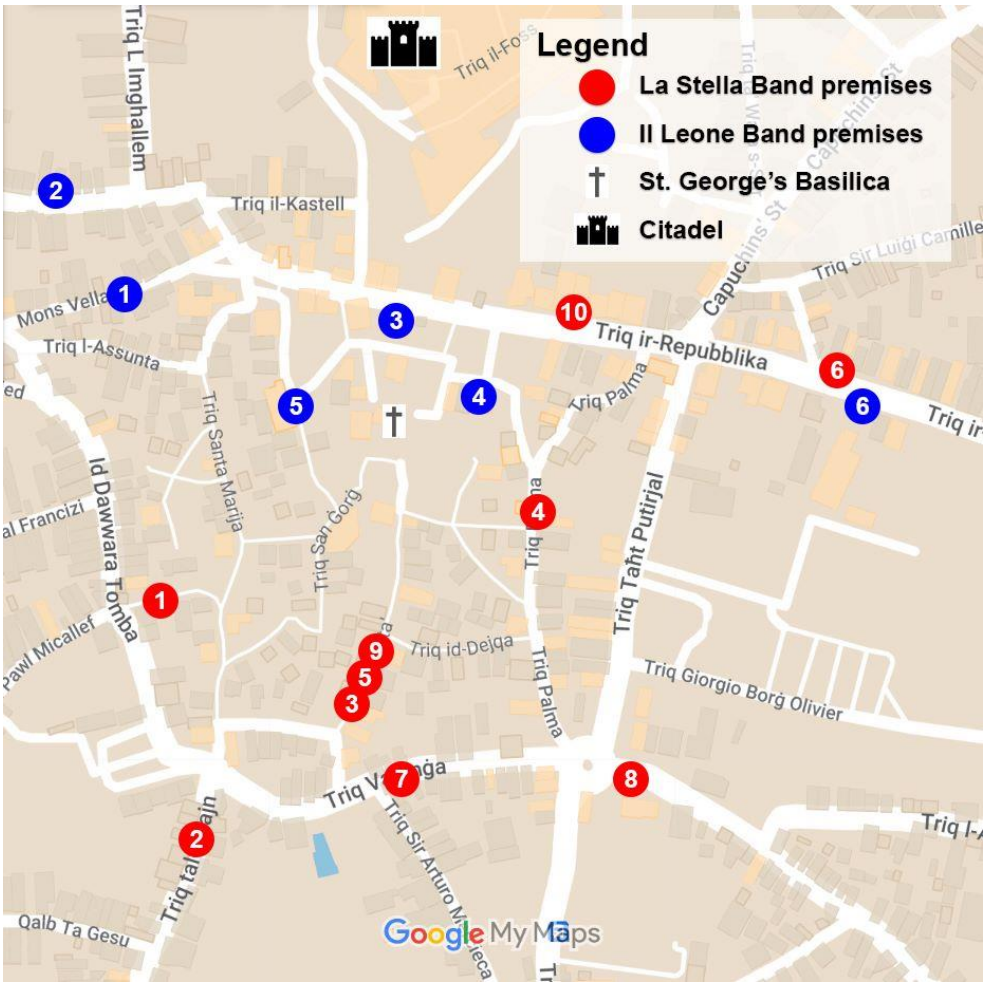


Figure 96 The premises of *La Stella* (marked in red) and of *Leone* (marked in blue) in Victoria

Peter Paul Borg recounts that the Leone Society, in the early 20th century, had two clubhouses in Independence Square, one for the elite and another for the middle- and lower-class male members. Each included a bar, open around noon until 11 o'clock at night. Some members played billiards or cards while others chatted. The billiard room served also as a rehearsal space for the band during the winter months. In the hot summer months, they practiced in the yard. In 1908, the Leone Society bought the house of archpriest Saver Cassar, the leader of the Maltese at the time of the French regime (1798-1800), which was then considered a palace due to its grandeur and nice decorations. They equipped it with two billiard tables: one for everyone and the other, which was kept in a private room, for 'chosen' members only. In 1931 the clubhouses also became the premises of the Royal Talkies,[370] the first cinema in Gozo. In the beginning, the cinema was set in the yard and could sit 146 people, all on benches.[371] This cinema, open to non-members was so popular that even people from the La Stella Society attended. This enterprise brought in the idea of mass entertainment in Gozo. As part of the continuing rivalry between the clubs, La Stella party members urged Society officials to open the second cinema as soon as possible.[372] When I asked George Grech about the Astra Theatre committee's choice of building a new theatre with a capacity of 1,200, which was very large when compared to the 600-seat capacity of the 'Aurora[373] Cinema', he replied that at the time cinema was so popular that at the 'Aurora Cinema' there were long queues, so the Astra management was sure that they would fill the auditorium to the brim. Committee members were more ambitious

[370] Grech (2012), 217
[371] Interview with Peter Paul Borg
[372] Paul M. Cassar 2020, *Teatru Astra: Proġett Għal Dejjem,* 28
[373] The name Aurora (dawn or the rising sun) came from a priest, Fr. Tarcisio Gatt. The Leone management didn't want a name that had religious connotations. The name Aurora is symbolic for St. Mary, the patron saint affiliated with the Leone Band, while still being a non-religious name.

and thought ahead about the next step in the entertainment business, which seemed to be live entertainment, so the idea of building a theatre kicked off.[374]

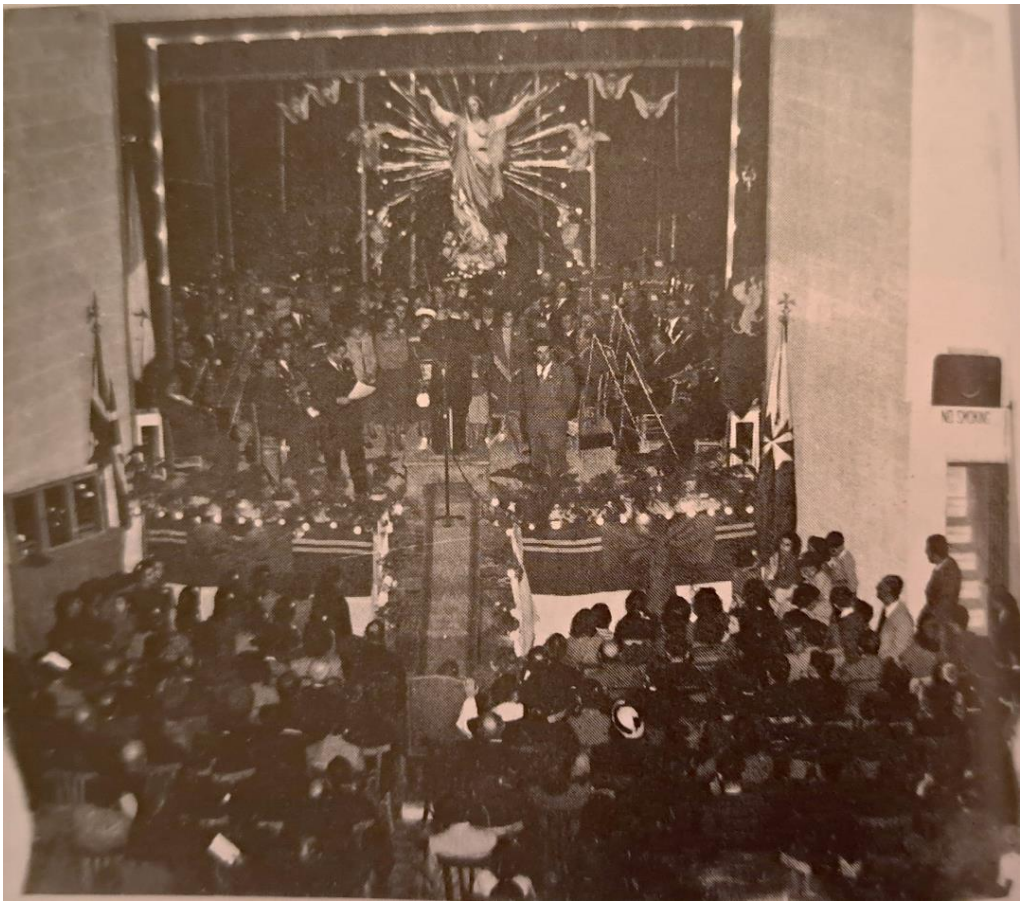


Figure 97 The Leone Band performing at the Oratory Don Bosco, 1950

In the 1950's the La Stella band Society members were on the lookout to find a new building, in a prominent part of Victoria, to serve as the new premises, since the property they had on Charity Street was too small. The La Stella committee held various activities such as bingo nights to raise funds. On such evenings, women were admitted in the headquarters. The Society owned a lotto boot and proceedings from its rental went straight to the Society's moneybox. Generally, if the Society was going to pay for a service, a band player or his relative would be given the job. For example,

[374] Interview with George Grech

the person in charge of the lottery boot was always a band member of the La Stella band.[375]

In 1962, the La Stella Society purchased a property, formerly known as the British Institute, in Independence Square.[376] It was in a central location but still had many drawbacks: there was no lift and it could not be converted into a cinema due to a low ceiling.[377]

While the La Stella were at a halt with their new purchase, the Leone Society moved ahead of them and started making radical changes in their premises in time for the 100th year celebrations of the Leone band. Upgrades included: the building of a new hall on top of the existing building and a stage. The (old) Aurora theatre with a seating capacity of 600, was opened on 28 April 1963.[378]

In 1962, Mr Paul Cassar (1933-2021), a former president of the La Stella Society got wind of a large property in Republic Street (the main street of Victoria) that was going to be put up for sale. Behind this property were some fields that belonged to the government which meant that the Society would have ample space to build their headquarters. The committee members agreed to sell their existing headquarters in Charity Street and the new property in Independence Square to have more cash.

In 1963, the Leone band celebrated 100 years since its setup and as part of the celebrations the Aurora Cinema and band club opened.[379] (See Figure 98) The newly

[375] Zammit (2023), 49
[376] The main square of Victoria
[377]Cassar (2020), 23
[378] Grech (2012), 218
[379] In Archpriest Saver Cassar Street

planned building incorporated a clubhouse and a theatre. Amongst the modern features that the theatre was equipped with were acoustical tiles.[380] To be able to build it the Leone Society took a loan of LM25,000[381] (£51,000) from the local Diocese.[382]

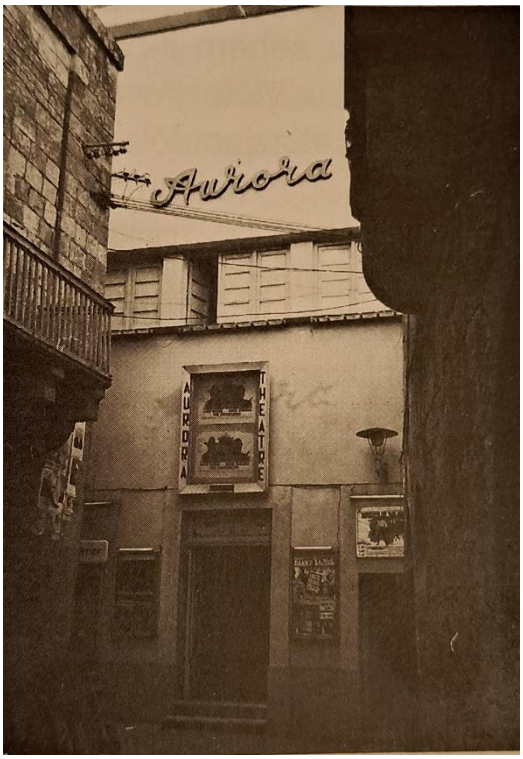


Figure 98 The (old) Aurora Theatre in Arc. Saver Cassar Str.

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After months of secret manoeuvres by the La Stella Society, the property in Republic Street was bought through Manwel Sacco. Only a handful of members knew about the plan of acquisition. This secrecy was because one of the members of the Tabone family, to whom the house belonged, was part of the management of the opposing Society and would never have sold it to the La Stella band. Manwel Sacco, the middleman, bought the property and a month later, on 20 May 1964,[383] the asset

[380] Grech (2012), 19
[381] LM – Lira Maltija, Maltese Lira.
[382] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior
[383] Cassar (2020), 39

became officially the new La Stella Band headquarters. The day after the transfer a meeting was held with all the band players who were informed of the new deal. Finally, the La Stella band club had a centralised place where it could build a big band club and theatre.



Figure 99 photo of Strada Corso (Republic Street) Victoria Gozo. 13 May 1939.

The Tabone house where the Astra Theatre was eventually built is marked with a red arrow.That same year, 1962, Paul Cassar, took the initiative to take the La Stella band on a holiday abroad. The main aim was to give all the profits to the Society, to be used in any future projects. Flying by plane was still unpopular so 22 members travelled to Syracuse (Sicily) by ship. Based on that successful trip, Mr Cassar created ‘Astra

Tours' and over the years organised hundreds of trips thus making large profits that went into the Society's money box.[384] (See Figure 100)



Figure 100 Astra Tours for the year 1972

The two band clubs have evolved throughout the years. From a humble beginning, holding meetings in someone's sitting room or rehearsing in a yard, the bands bought various properties which over the years grew, until in the late 1960s and early 1970s the two societies built two state-of-the-art theatres. One important factor that made the building of the two theatres possible was that in those years Gozo's economy prospered with the opening of new factories and people who emigrated in previous years came back to the island.[385]

[384] Cassar (2020), 27
[385] Ibid.

3.4 The Building and Opening of the Astra Theatre

The architect Joe Mizzi (b.1935)[386] was entrusted with the plans while Frank Portelli (1922-2004) was appointed interior designer. Besides a plan for the theatre that could hold an audience of 1,200, the architect Mizzi also made a design for the foyer which needed a larger area. The La Stella Society needed to buy a large plot of land behind the Tabone's house belonging to the government and part of a garden adjacent to the Tabone's house, property of the Galea family.[387]

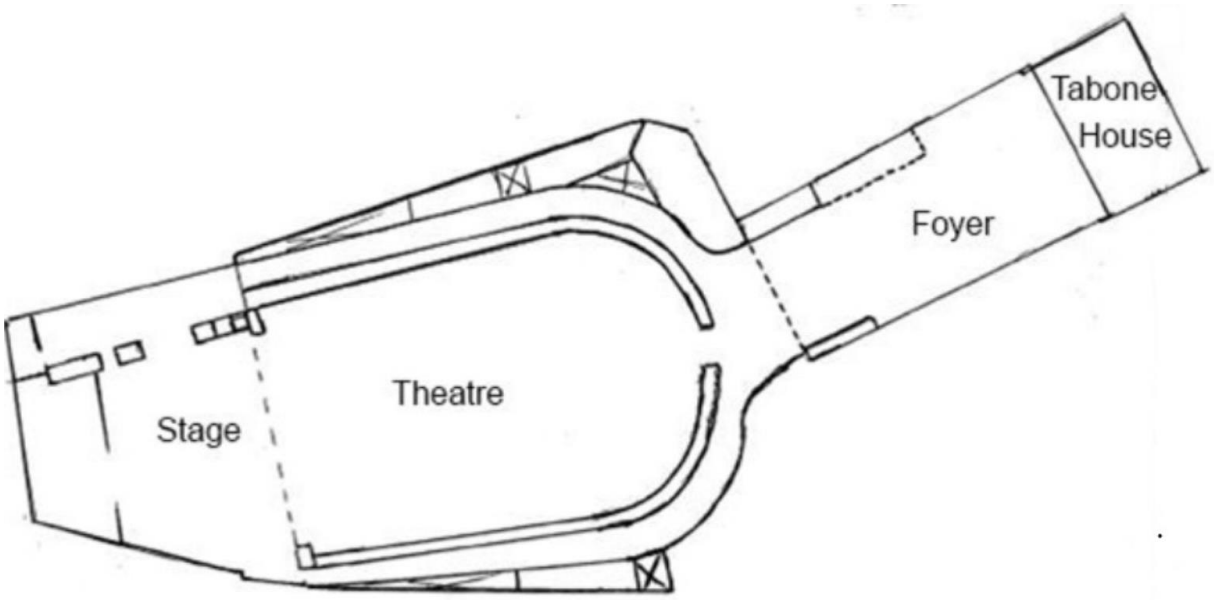


Figure 101 Astra Theatre plan

The Society members started to build the theatre when they had only LM1,000 (£1,991) in their bank account. The project was estimated to cost LM30,000 (£59,686).[388] The building of the theatre would not have been possible without the monetary contributions

[386] *Il-Berqa*, 9 August 1962
[387] Cassar (2020), 61
[388] Ibid., 63

from tal-Istilla[389] sympathisers and voluntary workers. To be able to finalise the works, the Society had to borrow money from various entities and individuals.

Being a member of the Society meant paying a fee which would be paid monthly or yearly.[390] (See Figure 102) Each committee member was assigned a job such as contacting individuals and companies who could sponsor the frequent variety shows that were being held. Others organised bingo nights or collected donations. The largest amount of money was usually collected around the time of the feast of the Virgin Mary (August), just a few weeks after the feast of St. George. Committee members used reverse psychology in a way that they used the feast of the opponents to ask for contributions to support next year's feast and the new theatre. The response, as expected, was very good.

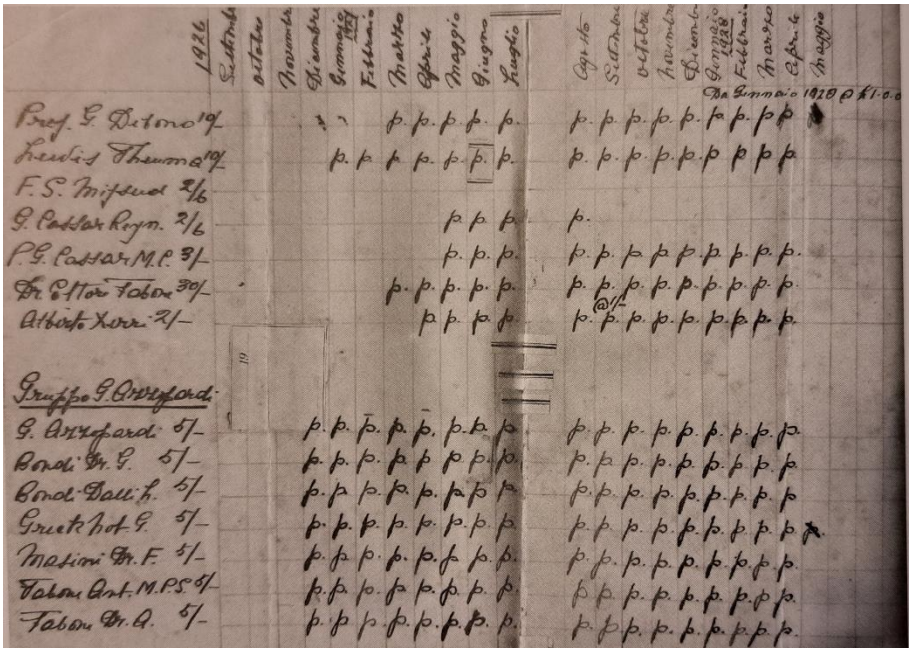


Figure 102 Society members' monthly payments, 1926

[389] The Maltese word 'stilla' means star, a derivative from La Stella.
[390] Cassar (2020), 65

When the digging started, many people came to volunteer. They used to keep working until after midnight and help increased from day to day since enthusiasm was high and the Society's supporters wanted to be part of this massive project. The building of the La Stella Theatre took place at the same time that ongoing arguments[391] between the two band societies were raging, so the La Stella sympathisers were especially adamant to show the Leone supporters which Society had the upper hand. .



Figure 103 Excavation works at the Astra Theatre site, 1964

[391] About which band was to play in the processions coming out of the church of St. George.



Figure 104 Excavation works at the Astra Theatre site, 1964

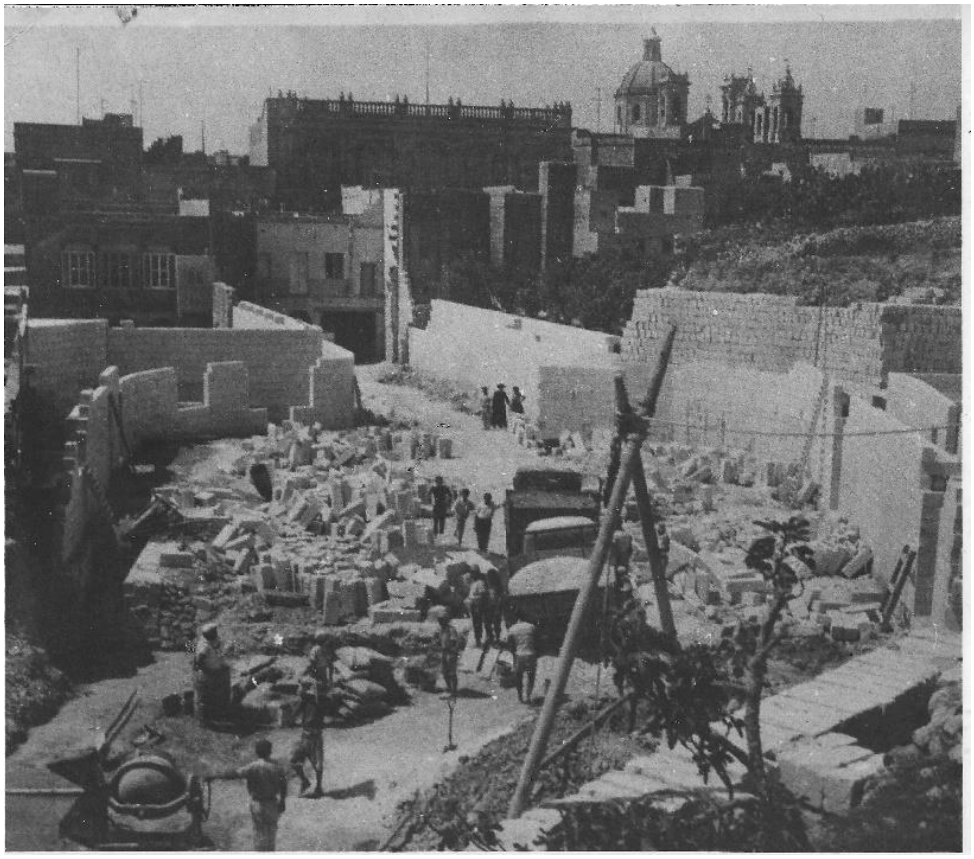


Figure 105 The Astra Theatre being built with St George's church in the background.

As seen in Figure 106 the left side of the stage was securely sealed with an enormous wall that was built to prevent any landslides from the citadel walls which were situated at the back of the theatre. This wall went up to the stage wings and that side had no backstage. This hindrance was amended in later years.[392]

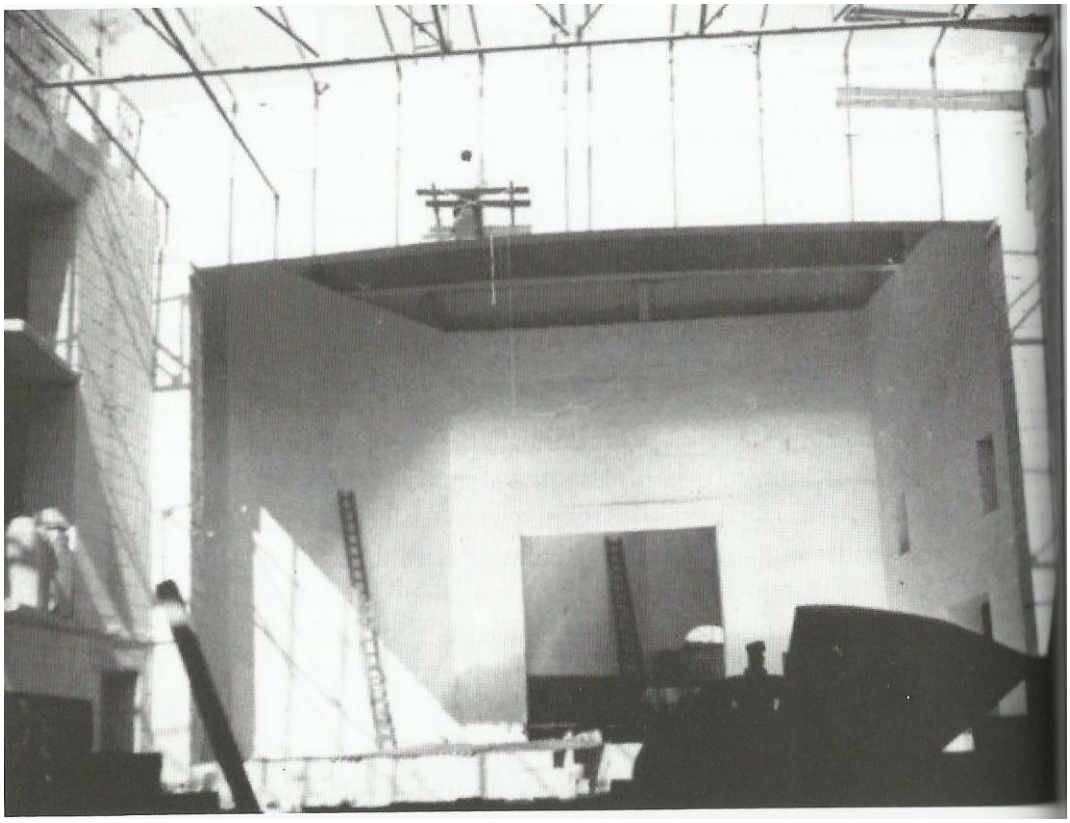


Figure 106 The Astra stage under construction, 1968.

The construction and interior of the theatre would not have been possible without hundreds of volunteers. Many La Stella supporters would spend hours after their day job at the new theatre's site working as plasterers, whitewashers and tile and mosaic layers. The water and electricity systems were installed by a band player and by the Galea brothers respectively who were ardent La Stella supporters. (See Figure 107)

[392] Cassar (2020), 59



Figure 107 The Galea brothers volunteered to work the electrical system at the Astra Theatre.

Volunteers were not enough, however, and the Society had to pay for materials and other services in conjunction with the building and interior decorations. During the various committee meetings, members would come up with ideas on how to raise more funds such as asking people who had a stable, well-paid job with the government to

lend money to the Society, preferably without interest.[393] Others came up with the idea to go door to door and ask the amount of LM3 (£5.969) for the theatre hall's chairs.

Carmel Zammit recounts that when he was studying in Malta in 1967, a group of La Stella members, headed by George Grech, came up with the idea of organising a variety show and so they contacted well-known Maltese TV and radio presenters of the time, who in turn introduced them to the most popular Maltese singers, musicians, and actors. The theatre was constructed but not ready to host shows, but despite this, the response was substantial, and many performers gave their services gratis. The event consisted of a small orchestra that accompanied the singers, while actors created short sketches. The hall was full, and the event a great success.[394]

The interior design was done by Frank Portelli,[395] who was the leading interior designer in Malta at the time. When he first visited the theatre, he suggested the introduction of the boxes. This proposal was forwarded to the architect and the necessary changes were made to the plans.[396]

[393] Cassar (2020), 59
[394] Zammit (2023), 151
[395] Frank Portelli (1922-2004) was a pioneer in the development of Maltese modern and contemporary art. He distinguished himself not only as an artist but also as an interior designer.
Katya Micallef, '100 years: Commemorating Frank Portelli's art and life at MUŻA', *Times of Malta*, 18 December 2022
[396] Cassar (2020), 71



Figure 108: Frank Portelli working on a mural in Rabat, Malta.

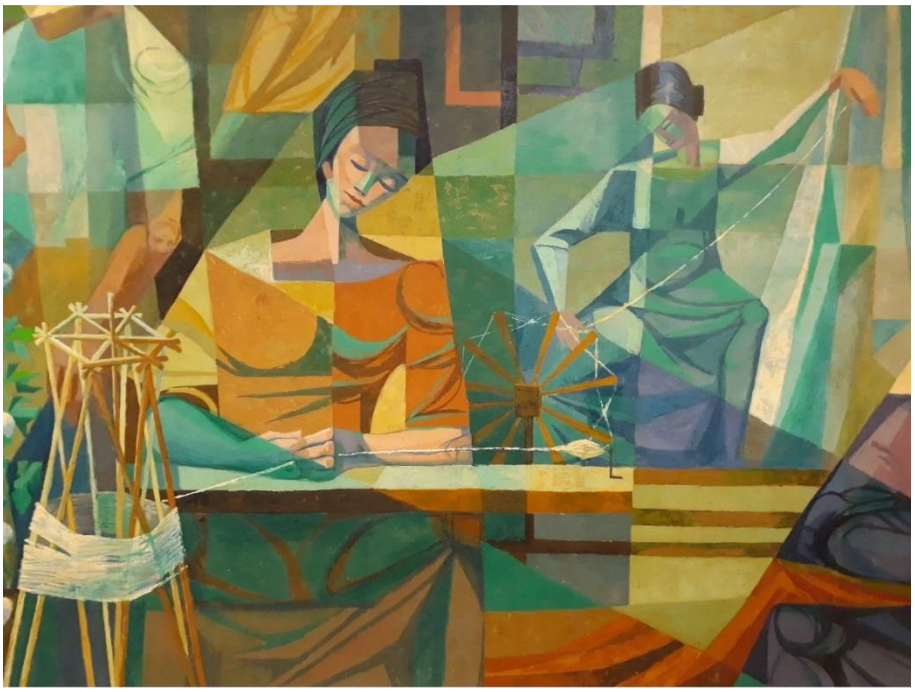


Figure 109 Malta Crafts, Frank Portelli, 1969.

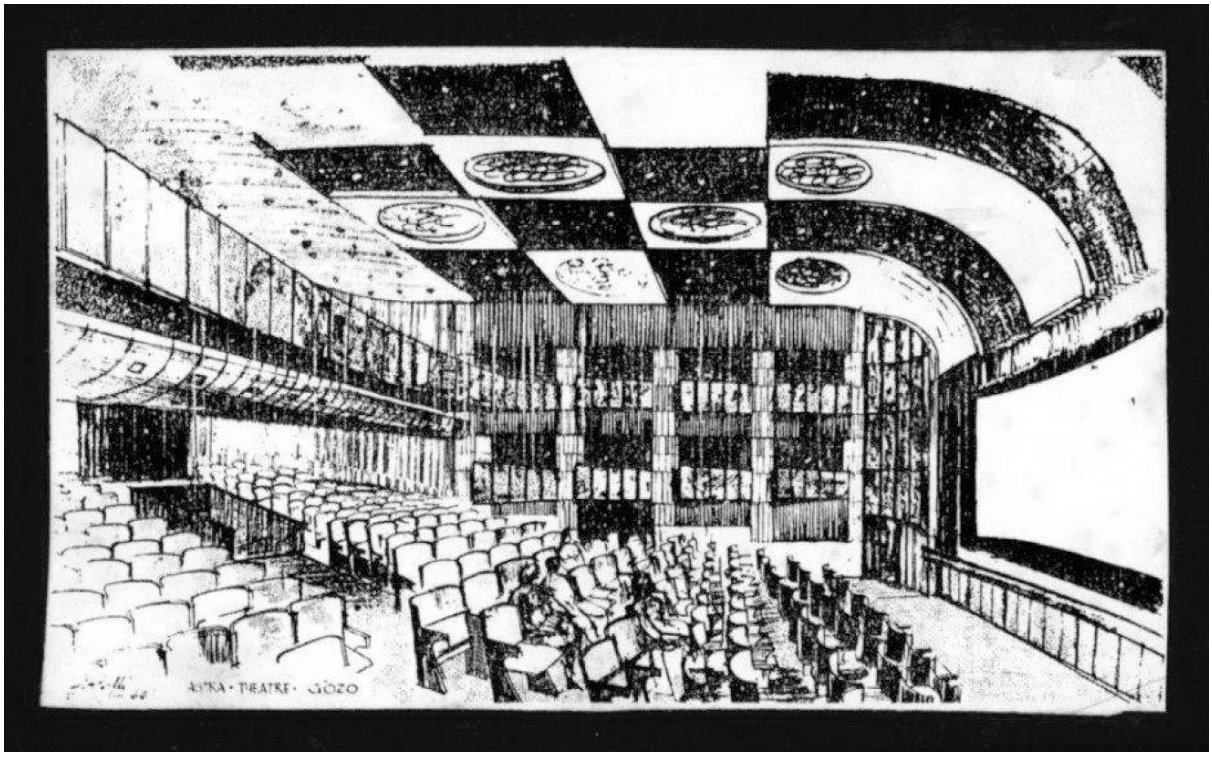


Figure 110 Original design of the Astra Theatre auditorium by Frank Portelli



Figure 111 Astra Theatre as designed by Frank Portelli

On 13 June 1966, the premises of the new La Stella band club headquarters were transferred to the new building in Republic Street. Even though the theatre was not yet ready, various activities were held in it. Bingo nights, which were a great source of income for the Society, became even more popular because now the Society had a larger space.[397]

The theatre had yet to be given a name and this issue was addressed during one of the committee meetings. The favoured names were: 'Apollo', 'Metropolitan', 'Astra' and 'Excelsior'. The decision on which name to choose was taken by a secret vote of the members of the Society and 'Metropolitan' got the most votes.[398] This name was quite an appropriate one since this theatre was found in the middle of the capital city but on the other hand, it would have been a difficult name for the people of the time to pronounce it since it was long. The committee members were planning to put a vertical neon sign on the façade. When they approached Frank Portelli, the designer, he explained the difficulties of having a 12-letter word set vertically. He suggested a shorter name, which would make the sign more imposing, so the name 'Astra' was chosen instead which was especially suitable for the theatre of the La Stella Society.[399]

[397] Zammit (2023), 45
[398] Cassar (2020), 132
[399] Ibid.



Figure 112 The “Astra” sign being attached to the façade. 1968.

During the building of the theatre (1967) funds ran out. The Society asked the government to lend them some money with low interest, but this proposal was refused. Instead, they asked the Curia. The interest proposed by the Curia was quite high (4¼%) and there was also a clause that had to be obeyed: the theatre could not show any films rated H.[400] In spite of the high interest, the Society accepted the conditions.[401]

It was intended that the cinema would be the main attraction of the new theatre. One of the committee members suggested introducing an advanced booking system to permit the theatre better cash flow. To minimise the costs the Astra Theatre management bought two refurbished projectors instead of new ones.[402]

The Society also wanted to capitalise on the fashion for social dancing: in the 1950s, Gozo also saw the birth of the 'dances' where live bands consisting of keyboards, lead guitar, bass guitar, drum kit and vocals performed. Such bands were 'The Four Stars', 'Gemini 5', 'The Tramps' and 'Joy Boys".[403] Locals used to flock to these dances which were held in small halls and later at both theatres.



Figure 113 The Four Stars with Joseph Vella in the middle

[400] H: Passed for Horrific – only patrons aged 16 year or over are admitted.
[401] Cassar (2020), 91
[402] *Ibid.,* 96-97.
[403] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna, '*Suċċessi Kbar fl-Aurora', 31 January 1975



Figure 114 The Tramps



Figure 115 The Joy Boys

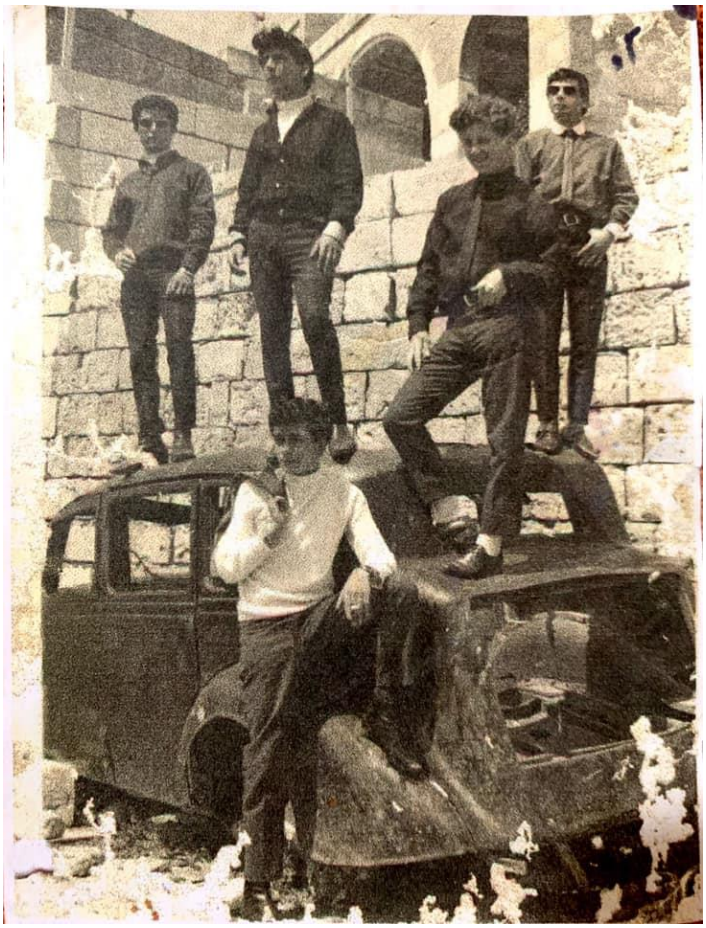
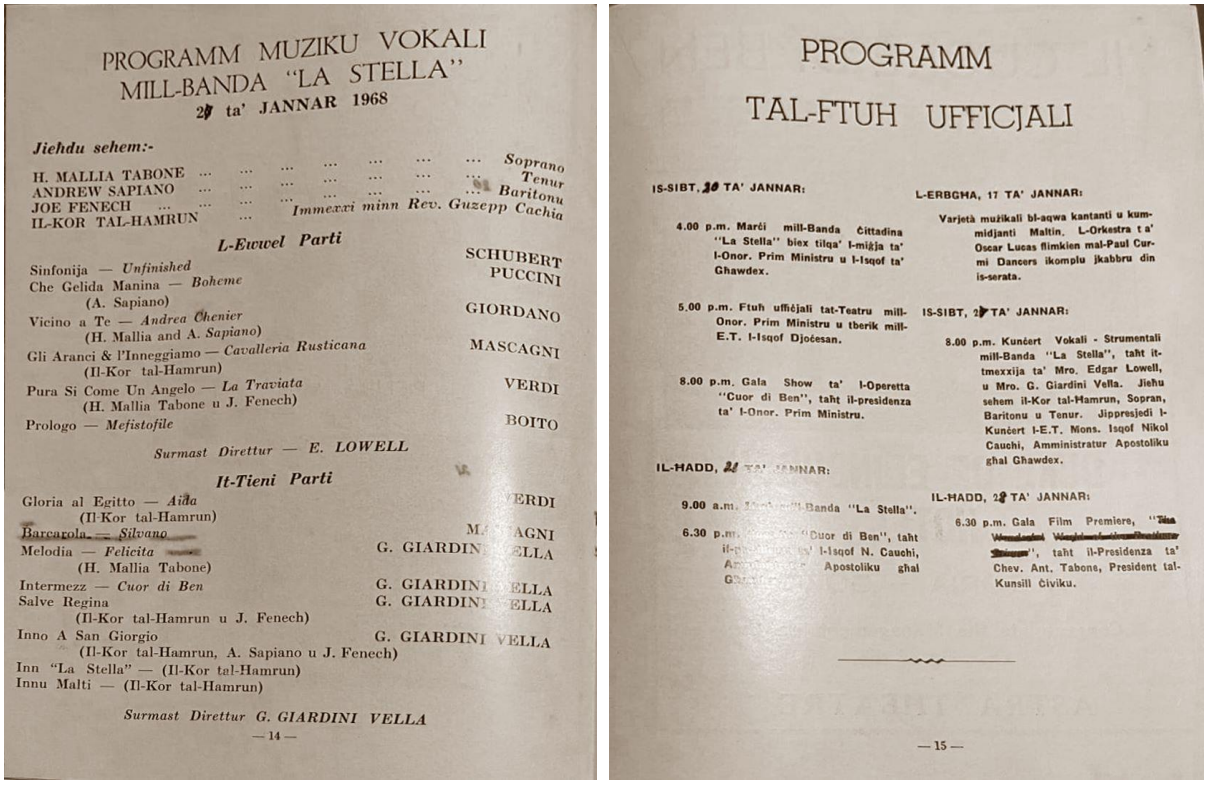


Figure 116 The Gemini 5

The Astra Theatre had been organising musical activities even before its official opening. Variety evenings were made up of dancing, singing, short plays, games, and sketches. Most of the shows included youths who were La Stella sympathisers and

they prepared the choreography, singing, acting, costumes and props for each event. Besides local productions, Maltese companies also came to perform at the Astra theatre. Whatever was organised at the Astra Theatre and later at the Aurora Theatre, the main aim was to earn money for the building and maintaining of the theatre.

The Astra Theatre was inaugurated on 20 January 1968 by the then-Prime Minister of Malta Dr. Geoge Borg Olivier. Celebratory activities spanned a whole week and included a band concert, the operetta *Il Cuore di Ben*,[404] band marches around the streets of Victoria and the gala film premiere in Malta of *Gambit*.[405]



PROGRAMM MUZIKU VOKALI
MILL-BANDA "LA STELLA"
2[illegible] ta' JANNAR 1968

Jiehdu sehem:-

H. MALLIA TABONE ... ... *Soprano*
ANDREW SAPIANO ... ... *Tenur*
JOE FENECH ... ... *Baritonu*
IL-KOR TAL-HAMRUN ... *Immexxi minn Rev. Guzepp Cachia*

L-Ewwel Parti

Sinfonija — *Unfinished* — SCHUBERT
Che Gelida Manina — *Boheme* — PUCCINI
(A. Sapiano)
Vicino a Te — *Andrea Chenier* — GIORDANO
(H. Mallia and A. *Sapiano*)
Gli Aranci & l'Inneggiamo — *Cavalleria Rusticana* — MASCAGNI
(Il-Kor tal-Hamrun)
Pura Si Come Un Angelo — *La Traviata* — VERDI
(H. Mallia Tabone u J. Fenech)
Prologo — *Mefistofile* — BOITO

Surmast Direttur — E. LOWELL

It-Tieni Parti

Gloria al Egitto — *Aida* — VERDI
(Il-Kor tal-Hamrun)
Barcarola — *Silvano* — M[illegible]AGNI
Melodia — *Felicita* — G. GIARDIN[illegible]ELLA
(H. Mallia Tabone)
Intermezz — *Cuor di Ben* — G. GIARDINI VELLA
Salve Regina — G. GIARDINI VELLA
(Il-Kor tal-Hamrun u J. Fenech)
Inno A San Giorgio — G. GIARDINI VELLA
(Il-Kor tal-Hamrun, A. Sapiano u J. Fenech)
Inn "La Stella" — (Il-Kor tal-Hamrun)
Innu Malti — (Il-Kor tal-Hamrun)

Surmast Direttur G. GIARDINI VELLA

— 14 —

PROGRAMM

TAL-FTUH UFFICJALI

IS-SIBT, 20 TA' JANNAR:

4.00 p.m. Marċi mill-Banda Ċittadina "La Stella" biex tilqa' l-miġja ta' l-Onor. Prim Ministru u l-Isqof ta' Ghawdex.

5.00 p.m. Ftuh uffiċjali tat-Teatru mill-Onor. Prim Ministru u tberik mill-E.T. l-Isqof Djoċesan.

8.00 p.m. Gala Show ta' l-Operetta "Cuor di Ben", taht il-presidenza ta' l-Onor. Prim Ministru.

IL-HADD, 21 TA' JANNAR:

9.00 a.m. [illegible] Banda "La Stella".

6.30 p.m. [illegible] "Cuor di Ben", taht il-[illegible] l-Isqof N. Cauchi, [illegible] Apostoliku ghal [illegible]

L-ERBGHA, 17 TA' JANNAR:

Varjetà muzikali bl-aqwa kantanti u kummidjanti Maltin. L-Orkestra t a' Oscar Lucas flimkien mal-Paul Curmi Dancers ikomplu jkabbru din is-serata.

IS-SIBT, 2[illegible] TA' JANNAR:

8.00 p.m. Kunċert Vokali - Strumentali mill-Banda "La Stella", taht it-tmexxija ta' Mro. Edgar Lowell, u Mro. G. Giardini Vella. Jieħu sehem il-Kor tal-Hamrun, Sopran, Baritonu u Tenur. Jippresjedi l-Kunċert l-E.T. Mons. Isqof Nikol Cauchi, Amministratur Apostoliku ghal Ghawdex.

IL-HADD, 2[illegible] TA' JANNAR:

6.30 p.m. Gala Film Premiere, "[illegible]", taht il-Presidenza ta' Chev. Ant. Tabone, President tal-Kunsill Ċiviku.

— 15 —

Figure 117 (left) Details of the concert by the La Stella band, (right) List of activities for the opening of the Astra Theatre

[404] Composed by Giuseppe Giardini Vella (1885-1974), a former musical director of the La Stella Band (1926-1951)
[405] Zammit (2023), 11



Figure 118 People waiting outside the Theatre while the La Stella band is playing, 20 January 1968



Figure 119 First official performance at the Astra Theatre: *Il Cuor di Ben,* 1968



Figure 120 Maestro Giuseppe Giardini Vella



Figure 121 Blessing of the Astra Theatre, 1968



Figure 122 The reception in the theatre's foyer after the inauguration, 1968

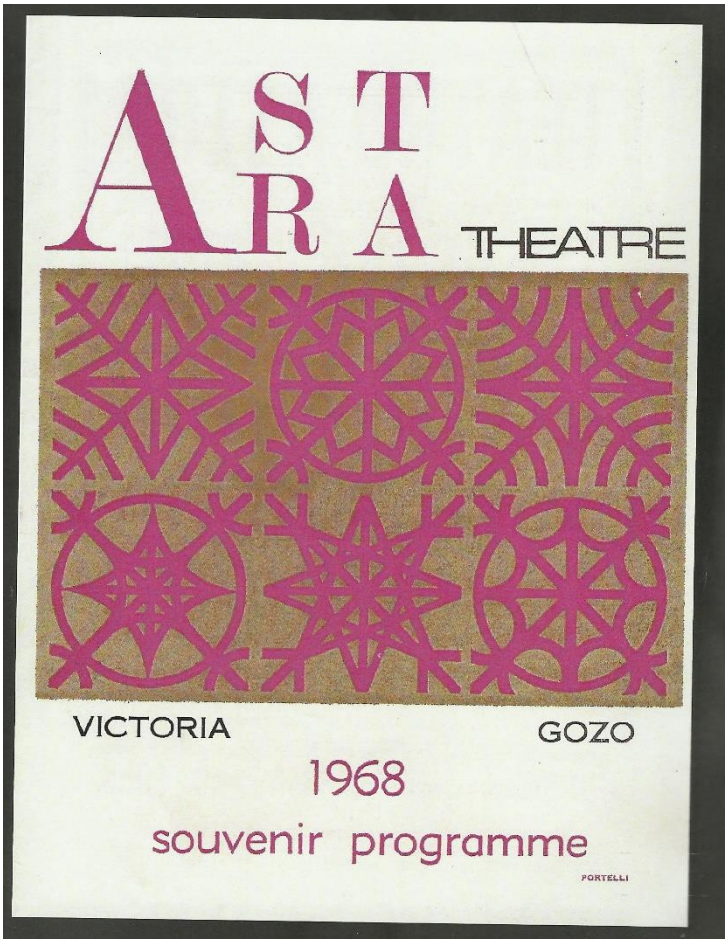


Figure 123 Souvenir programme for the theatre's opening, designed by Frank Portelli



Figure 124 The old façade of the Astra Theatre with billboards publicising the upcoming shows and films.



Figure 125 the Astra Theatre in the background, 17 March 1968



Figure 126 First International Carousel, Astra Theatre, 30 July 1968

During the first decade of the Astra Theatre, the management continued to organise many concerts and variety shows, which were well attended. Another popular event was the annual home trade exhibition where various white and household goods were exhibited. George Grech had various contacts in Rome and London and managed to bring internationally acclaimed musicians, singers, and groups to perform at the Astra Theatre such as 'The Platters', the 'Montparnasse Ballet Troupe', Goggi Sisters, Bobby Solo, Raffaella Carrà, (see Figure 127) Al Bano and Romina Power.



Figure 127 Raffaella Carrà at the Astra Theatre, 1977

3.5 The Building and Opening of the Aurora Theatre

The (old) Aurora in Saver Cassar Street was always busy but as Joseph Debrincat Sr., recounts, when the Leone supporters heard that the La Stella band had just purchased a house in the main street of Victoria to build a theatre that could house 1,200 people, they were crushed. The Leone band club had just spent a substantial sum on their current band club and could not compete. Ideas started rolling immediately on how to outdo the La Stella Society's project and hence they had to build an even bigger theatre. In 1971, the central committee managed to find enough money to buy a house in Republic Street which would be the new site for the new Aurora Theatre. (See Figure 128) The house that the Leone band club bought belonged to Ettore Tabone, who was a former president of the club.[406] The Society also bought some government land behind Tabone's house.[407]

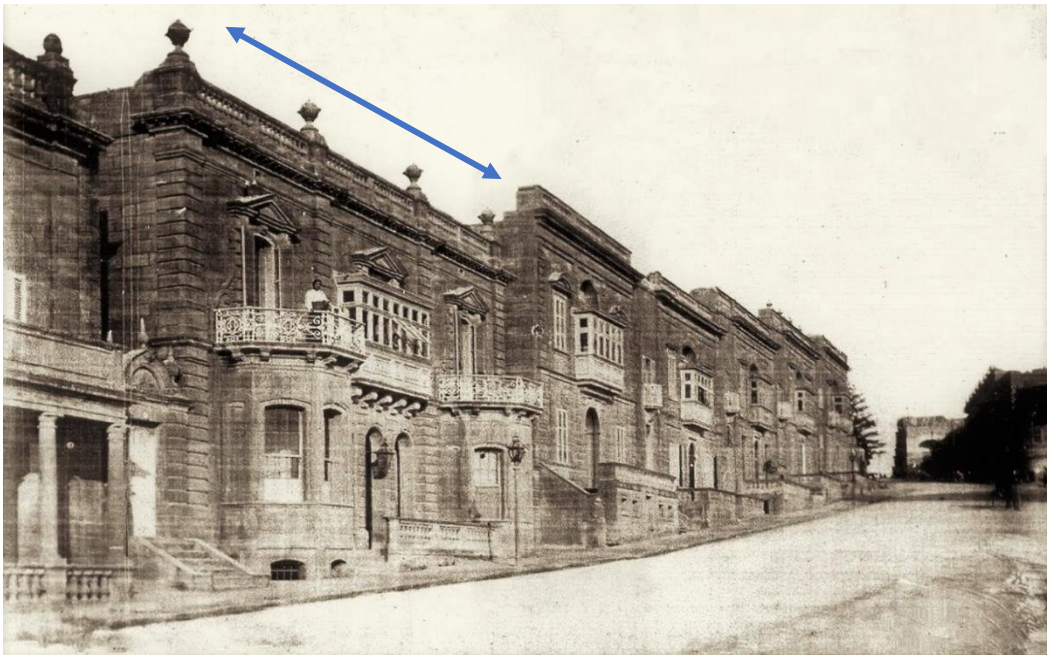
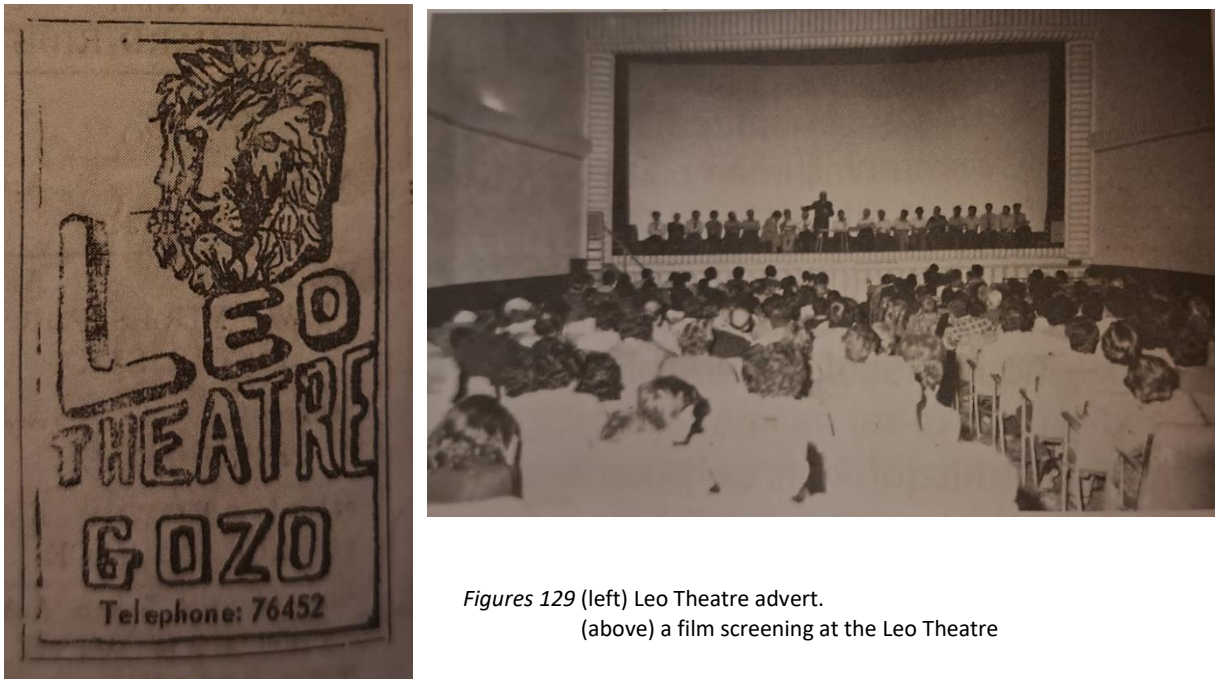


Figure 128 Republic Street. Tabone's house where the Aurora Theatre was built (marked by arrow)

[406] Grech (2012), 239
[407] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Sr.

The new theatre was to be named Aurora while the 'old' Aurora theatre was renamed Leo in 1975.[408] The Leo kept on serving as a cinema and small theatre. (See Figures 129) It kept generating money which went straight to the building of the new bigger theatre.[409]



Figures 129 (left) Leo Theatre advert.
(above) a film screening at the Leo Theatre

The shift of the Leone band club from the very centre of Victoria to a place further down the main road was not met with enthusiasm by all the Societies' supporters and some band players even left the Society as a sign of disapproval. The band club was considered the living room of many since those living close by used to go and watch TV there and spend their free time. People used to flock to the band club to be present during the band rehearsals. Since the old Aurora theatre was situated in a heavily

[408] Grech (2012), 218
[409] Interview with Matthew Sultana

populated area of Victoria, many people just stayed home and could listen to the band playing from their own home.[410]

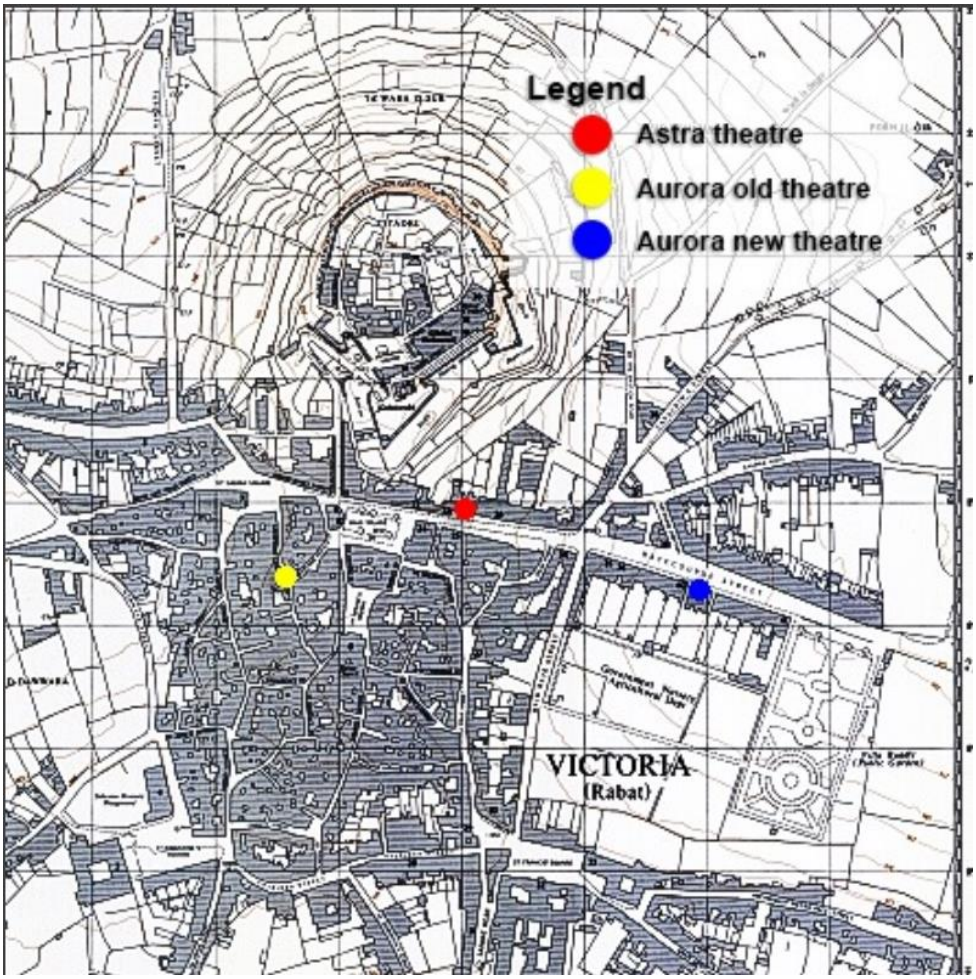


Figure 130 Map of Victoria showing where the Astra Theatre and the old and new Aurora Theatres are situated.

The demolition of the Tabone house started in July 1971[411] but the facade and the embellished room on the ground and first floor were kept intact.[412]

[410] Interview with Matthew Sultana
[411] Grech (2012), 239
[412] The ground floor painted ceiling is part of a restaurant while that on the first floor is part of the committee hall, where important committee meetings are held. Interview with Peter Paul Borg.



Figure 131 The original ceiling decorations from the Tabone's house



Figure 132 The original ceiling decorations from the Tabone's house

The Leone Society's main concern was funding and when the theatre was still in its early phase of construction, the management used to organise 'dances'.[413] (See Figure 133) The first part of the project was the entrance to the theatre. At the time, the floor of the Aurora Theatre was made of rubble and dust. Matthew Sultana recounts how Society members, before every dance, used to water the dusty dance floor. Eventually, by the end of the night, the dust floor would have dried up, and the moving feet would create a smoke machine effect from the clouds of dust.[414] Income from the Sunday dances came from the entrance fee, the cloak room and from sales of sandwiches and drinks at the bar which was managed by voluntary Society members. Dances used to run from around 5pm to 8pm since the last buses to the villages around Gozo left around that time. From the money earned on a Sunday, they paid for the material used in the construction and the wages of the workers for the following week.[415]



Figure 133 One of the dances at the Aurora Theatre

[413] Grech (2012), 244
[414] Interview with Matthew Sultana
[415] Ibid.

The Government never subsidized any of the theatres and both can be considered "theatres for the people built by the people". Many supporters of the Society donated their savings to the Society instead of depositing them in the bank. For them it was a form of support for the Society and eventually the patron saint which was so much at their heart. The Aurora management also borrowed money from local banks.[416]

From the start, the Leone management team wanted a theatre that could house any type of production, including opera. The love for opera had been instilled into the Leone band members since the 1920 when Giovanni Giumarra, (1862-1936) a former band master did his best to elicit the utmost from the band players and tried to teach them about the piece they were practicing. If it were an operatic piece, he used to recount the story or try to describe the scene. In this way the band players would involve themselves more and be more enthusiastic when playing. Louis Xuereb, who from a very young age frequented the Leone band club, remembers the band players recounting Giumarra's tutoring. Louis grew up in a household that owned a radio and the family used to gather around and listen to opera programmes. All this operatic background proved valuable for the Aurora Theatre since Mr Xuereb, who later became President of the Aurora Theatre, was the one who suggested that the new theatre should house a stage where operas could be produced and thus elevate the Aurora Theatre to Aurora Opera House.[417]

[416] Interview with Matthew Sultana
[417] Interview with Louis Xuereb



Figure 134 Funeral memorial card of Maestro Giovanni Giumarra

The Leone management chose the architect Louis A. Naudi (1925-2016)[418] from Valletta while the designer was Emvin Cremona (1919-1987).[419]

[418] Grech (2012), 239

[419] Emvin Cremona (1919-1987) is regarded as one of the best Maltese artists of the 20th century. He is well known for abstract paintings, (see Figure 121) designing buildings, and stamps. He furthered his studies in Rome and his works are found all around Malta and Gozo.
https://web.archive.org/web/20160603100925/http://www.schoolnet.gov.mt/history/F5/Matsec/WirtKulturaliARTI/EmvinCremona.htm



Figure 135 A Procession, by Emvin Crmona, 1973



Figure 136 An artistic impression of the Aurora Theatre by Emvin Cremona

The Aurora management wanted the new theatre to look like La Scala in Milan, but Emvin Cremona suggested a modern design that would stand the test of time.[420] This was the first theatre that Cremona had decorated, and he was very proud of this and took meticulous care to paint all flower designs on the boxes in a unique pattern where he signed just one.[421]



Figure 137 The intricate flower designs by Emvin Cremona

[420] Interview with Matthew Sultana

[421] Cremona visions were usually met with some criticism. Such an example was when he designed the top of the proscenium. He put the Aurora (symbolised by a woman) on one side. A committee member decided to put a sun on the other side, to balance it out. When Emvin saw it, he went up and tore down the sun himself. Interview with Joseph Debrincat Sr.

Like the Astra Theatre, the Aurora Theatre would not have been constructed if it were not for volunteers. The head mason and his workers were paid but when they left volunteers took up the work until late at night. One large sponsor was Joseph Caruana known as 'tal-Billi'.[422] This surname/nickname is closely associated with the Aurora Theatre and his son is the present president of the same Society. During the building of the new theatre, Joseph used to donate various building materials from his own shop.[423]

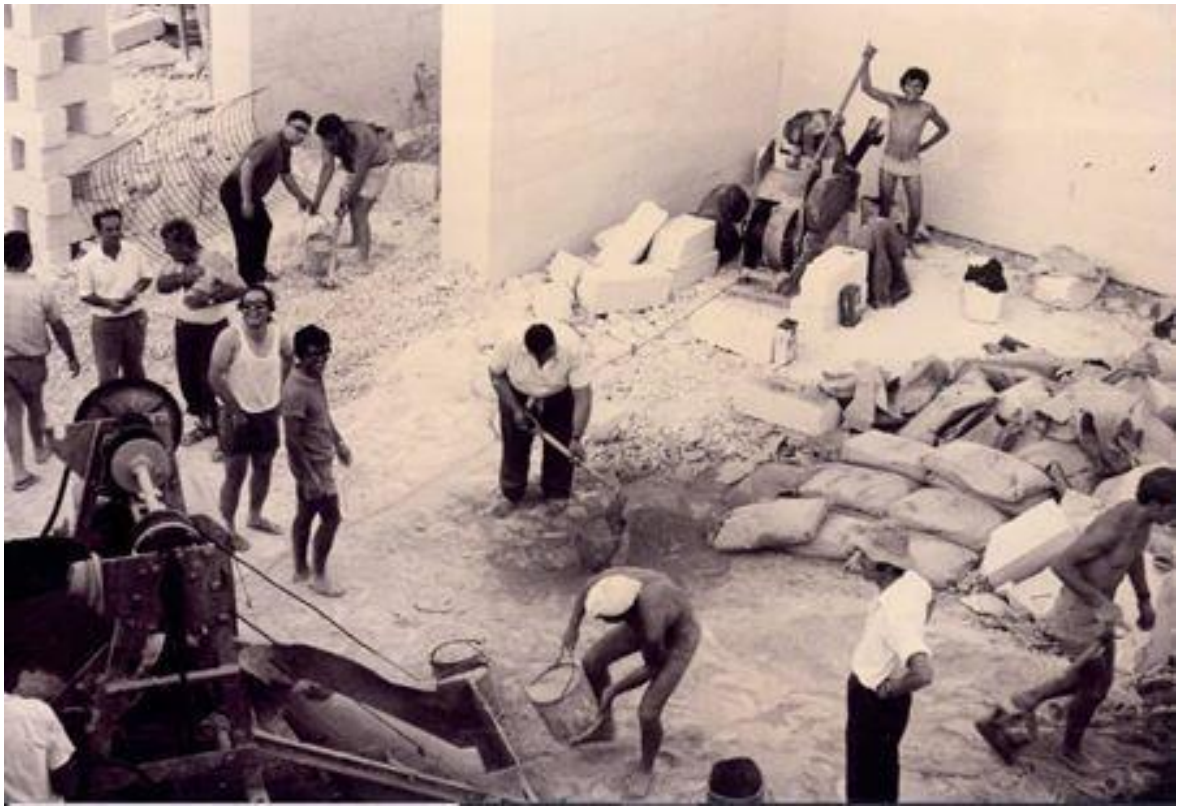


Figure 138 Volunteers on the Aurora construction site

[422] Grech (2012), 241
[423] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Sr.

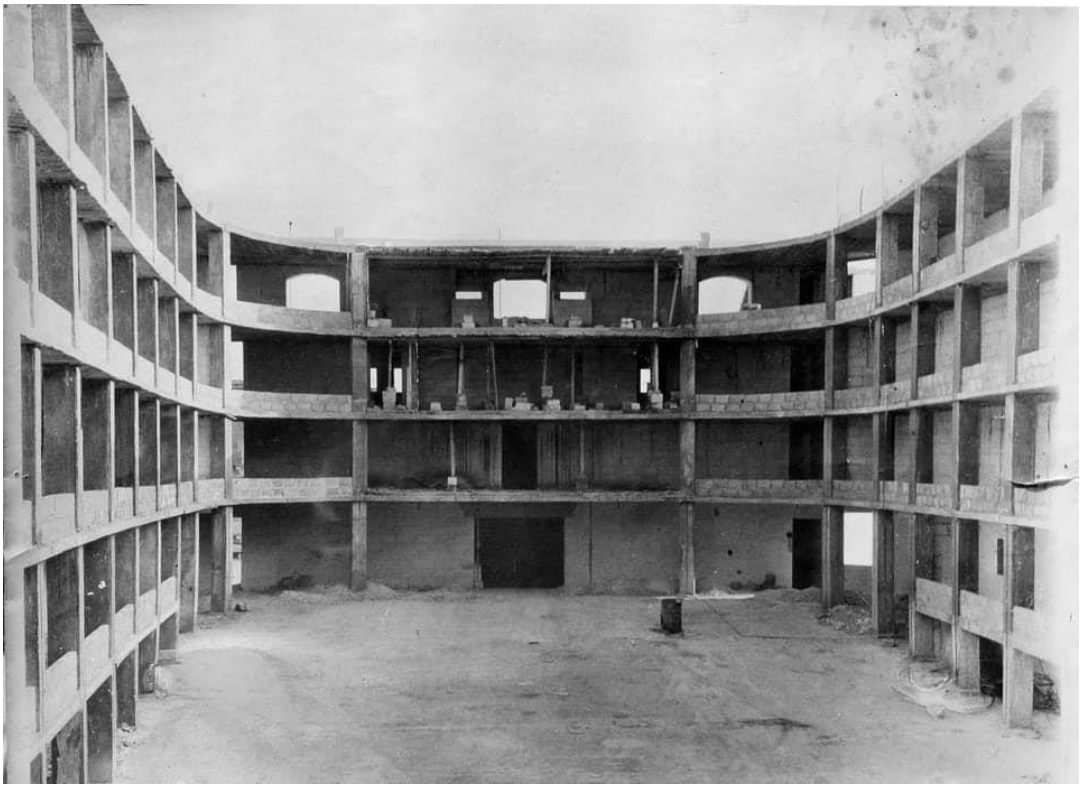


Figure 139 The Aurora Theatre auditorium under construction



Figure 140 The Aurora auditorium with the symbol of the Aurora above the proscenium

Louis A. Naudi's original architectural plans included a theatre that could house 1,600 people, but not a spacious backstage. The theatre management's main concern was to have the biggest stage possible while not considering the importance of the backstage. Cremona made various suggestions to Naudi on how to improve the setup of the auditorium and the stairs leading to the theatre. Another suggestion was to cover the auditorium in wood which contributes to excellent acoustics.

The Aurora management originally wanted the Prime Minister, Duminku Mintoff, to open the theatre but he never accepted such invitations and was not interested in attending such events. Instead, they invited the President, Sir Anthony Mamo who also did not accept, for the same reason. Anton Buttigieg, the Deputy Prime Minister accepted, while the building was blessed by the then-Bishop of Gozo, Nikol Cauchi.[424]

The theatre took five years to build and on the opening night of the Aurora Theatre, 9 October 1976,[425] it was raining heavily, and Republic Street was flooded. The bishop arrived drenched, and the cutting of the ribbon had to be transferred from the entrance of the theatre to the stairs that lead to the theatre. When it opened, the planned premises were completed and ready to function.[426]

[424] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Sr.
[425] Grech (2012), 246
[426] Interview with Matthew Sultana


Is-Socjeta' Filarmonika "Leone"
ghandha il-pjacir tistieden lis-
Mr + Mrs. Emmb Borg
ghal Fluh Uffiċjali u Membri tat-
Teatru AURORA
u Kazin Gdid
fi Triq ir-Repubblika, Rabat, Ghawdex,
nhar is-Sibt, 9 ta' Ottubru 1976,
fis-6.00 p.m.
Dan l-invit mhux trasferabbli.

Figure 141 Invitation for the opening of the Aurora Theatre, 1976



Figure 142 Bishop Nikol Cauchi making a speech before the inauguration



Figure 143 the cutting of the ribbon by deputy Prime Minister Anton Buttigieg

For the opening of the Aurora Theatre the committee organised various activities, spanning over two weeks, amongst which were a band concert, various dinners, a street march, chess and judo tournaments, a mass in the theatre and the screening of the first film *The Towering Inferno*.[427]



Figure 144 The Towering Inferno: the first film to be aired at the Aurora Theatre

[427] Interview with Matthew Sultana and Joseph Debrincat Sr.

Both theatres evolved over the years and towards the end of the 1970s the Astra Theatre management embarked on a large project that included restructuring the stage,[428] the construction of a new façade and the purchasing of land adjacent to the theatre that would become a discotheque.

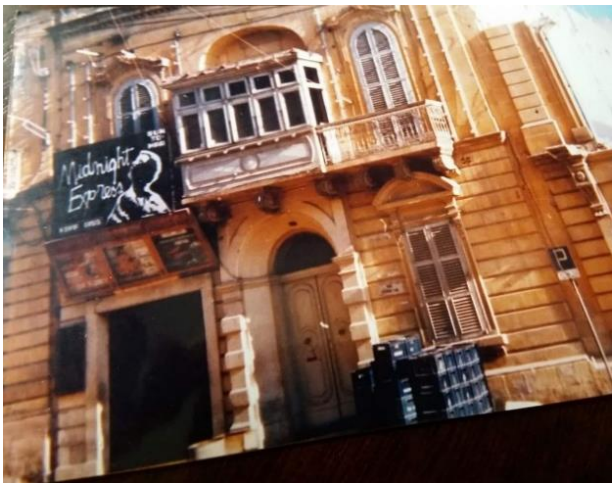


Figure 145 The Astra Theatre in the 1970s



Figure 146 The Astra Theatre today

In 1993 the Aurora Theatre also enlarged its premises by building another floor to cater for various amenities such as a larger rehearsal space for band members.[429]

[428] Adding storage space underneath stage and removing left side walls that obstructed the left side of the stage.
[429] *L-Aurora, Leħen il-Banda Leone*, March 1994



Figure 147 The Aurora Theatre in the 1970s



Figure 148 The Aurora Theatre today

The Aurora Theatre stopped showing films in 1998[430] while at the Astra Theatre kept going till 2001.[431]

Today no theatre of such size could be built in Malta due to the exorbitant costs to construct it and equip it. One must admire the sheer ambition of the two musical societies who in the late 1960s and early 1970s benefitted from the prosperity of the island and planned to build two massive theatres, in the same street, on a tiny island which at the time had a population of 26,000. Both societies started with a handful of thousands and had to go from door to door to plead for donations and/or loans for the two theatres to be built. Both theatres are considered to have greatly impacted the cultural, social, and recreational lifestyle of the island. The two theatres are a living testament to voluntary work, to the social lifestyle and to the cultural prosperity of the island in the late 1960s and 1970s.

[430] *Programm festa Santa Maria, Rabat, Għawdex*, 2001, 73-74
[431] Zammit (2023), 20

Chapter 4. Opera in Gozo

There is an expression in Maltese, *qisek ser tagħmel xi opra*,[432] used when someone plans on performing a large and important task. This expression fits perfectly when referring to opera as something that requires large amounts of work. Opera is the most complex theatre production that exists. “There is the orchestra, the singers, the changes of scenes and rich costume, not just for the stars, but also for the chorus... even ballet. It encompasses all the performing arts. It is not just expensive; it is a real headache”.[433]

The start of opera in Gozo dates back to January 1977 when *Madama Butterfly* was produced at the Aurora Theatre just three months after the theatre’s inauguration. The Astra Theatre followed a year later with *Rigoletto* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*.

Both theatres’ managements and members had no experience on how to put together such a massive theatrical production and so they resorted to Italian companies who practically brought over an entire cast, the scenery, and the costumes. Only the props, the orchestra, and the chorus were local. Basically, they were imported productions.

Over the years the theatres made various changes both in their physical structure and in their way of organising operatic productions. The musical societies preferred to work with locals and eventually they became autonomous. Today, the main singers are still foreign but the rest (scenery, costumes, chorus, minor roles, backstage hands, etc) are mostly Gozitan.

[432] It is like you are doing an opera.
[433] Anna Briffa, ‘Three Men and an Opera’, *The Sunday Times,* 4 May 1997

None of the productions organised at the Astra and Aurora theatres could have been possible if it were not for voluntary workers. These theatres can boast a great number of people who offer their services and time, free of charge. If it were not for these, the cost of the productions would drastically rise, and the theatres would not be able to afford them. The inter-parish politics way back to the seventeenth century led to the rivalry between the two band clubs and hence between the two theatres. The rivalry between the two theatres has been an important factor to success, since each theatre strives to produce the best opera year after year.

4.1 The First Opera in Gozo

In the late 1970s, opera in Malta was only produced occasionally: the Manoel Theatre might manage one production per year, or none at all. (See Appendix 3) The introduction of opera in Gozo, which was quite fortuitous, therefore, filled a gap.

The Astra Theatre, since its opening in 1968, was focusing on operettas, plays and variety shows and with the help of Paolo Pace,[434] (1917-1993) who was to become a key figure in the production of the first opera in Gozo, the Astra Theatre started to make plans to bring over a Roman operatic company.[435]

Paolo Pace was a La Stella (and Astra) sympathiser who had many connections in Rome[436] since he imported marble. In the early 1970s he organised guided tours to Rome, and in accordance with the Astra theatre, most of the profits went into the theatre's bank account.[437] Paolo was also the intermediary between St. George's church and the Santa Sede[438] and worked whole-heartedly for the church to become a basilica in 1958.[439] While plans for the first opera at the Astra were already in motion and contracts were signed, some committee members became suspicious of Paolo's money transfers and wanted to have a detailed account of the expenses.[440] He felt as if he was not being trusted, and so he switched his loyalties to the Leone.[441] This shift resulted in the Aurora Theatre being the first to organise an opera in Gozo thanks to a

[434] Grech (2012), 359
[435] Interview with George Grech
[436] His wife was Roman, and they lived between Gozo and Rome.
[437] Interview with Geroge Grech
[438] The Holy See or the See of Rome, is the government of the Roman Catholic Church, which is led by the Pope in his role as bishop of Rome and it resides in Vatican City. www.britannica.com
[439] Interview with George Frans Vella
[440] Ibid.
[441] Interview with George Grech

La Stella sympathiser. Hence, the Aurora theatre produced Gozo's first opera, *Madama Butterfly,*[442] on the 7 and 8 January 1978, just three months after its opening.

Paolo had previously made substantial donations for lavish decorations inside the Basilica of Saint George and these ornaments bore his name: as a sign of La Stella's and St. George's indignation his name was removed.[443]

Paolo Pace brought an Italian cast amongst whom were the soprano Flavia Tabili, tenors Salvatore Fisichella and Carlo Flammini, baritone Giovanni de Angelis and mezzo-soprano Giuliana de Filippo. The artistic director was Dario Micheli while Carlo Ventura was the repetiteur.[444] The latter had years of experience at the Teatro dell' Opera di Roma and together with Flavia Tabili (1932-2019), who played Cio Cio San in this first production, signed up the main singers. Flavia's husband was an accountant for many operatic singers which meant easier access to operatic professionals and hence Flavia, her husband and Carlo took the role of impresarios.[445] Besides the main singers who were Italians, the minor roles were sung by local singers.[446] Flavia was frequently involved in the operas held at the Aurora Theatre up to the late 1990s, even though she did not have an official role.[447]

[442] https://teatruaurora.com/event/madama-butterfly-2023/
[443] Interview with George Frans Vella
[444] *Il-Ħajja*, 5, 18 January 1977
[445] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior & Junior
[446] Grech (2012), 250
[447] Interview with Matthew Sultana



Figure 149 Madama Butterfly, Aurora Theatre, 1977

The orchestra was directed by the Leone band's musical director, Joseph Sammut,[448] (b. 1926) who was also musical director of the Manoel Theatre's Orchestra, which was the country's only professional orchestra. Therefore, the Manoel Theatre Orchestra with the addition of some Italian musicians performed in both performances of *Madama Butterfly.*[449] Besides the payment of engaging an orchestra, made up of local and foreign elements, other expenses included lodging, transportation, and food. The Aurora management encountered a big problem when they had to accommodate the

[448] Joseph Sammut is considered as one of the leading conductors in Malta of the late 20th century. Sammut had been the conductor of *The Commander-in-Chief Orchestra of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Flee*t, (1950-1968) which then became the *Manoel Theatre Orchestra,* where he spent 25 years in its helm. He was musical director of the Leone Band Club and Aurora theatre from 1958 until 1991.

[449] Grech (2012), 250

orchestra members for the night between the two performances of *Madama Butterfly*. In the 1970s, Gozo was not a tourist destination, and the island had few hotels with a limited number of beds. Musicians were put up in a hall with makeshift beds while others slept in apartments owned by committee members.

Louis Xuereb and Joseph Debrincat Sr. from the Aurora management approached the then deputy Prime Minister, Agatha Barbara, who organised a meeting with the hope of getting some government help for the upcoming opera *Madama Butterfly*: the meeting lasted six hours. The Aurora Theatre had no professional lighting system and Ms Barbara ordered that all floodlights, used during feasts to light the piazzas in Malta, were to be taken to the Aurora Theatre. Electricians from the Manoel theatre were sent to Gozo to help fix the lights onto the stage.[450] The scenery for *Madama Butterfly* was also made locally by Henry Lynch Robinson and Alfred Arnold, two retired Englishman living in Għarb and Xlendi respectively.[451]

Opera tickets costed LM3 (£5.97) or LM5 (£9.96) and tickets sold quickly. The Aurora's management was pleased knowing that most of the expenses were going to be covered from money earned by ticket sales. But their positive attitude was soon crushed when minister Barbara attended *Madama Butterfly*'s general rehearsal and decided that the opera should be filmed for the national TV station.[452] According to the agreement made with the members of the Manoel Theatre Orchestra, they were to be paid extra, which was a further burden on the theatre's finances since the cost for the orchestra would have doubled.[453] To make matters worse when the video operators

[450] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior
[451] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior
[452] *L-Orizzont*, 29 December 1976
[453] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior

arrived, they started moving lights and repositioning them without consulting the artistic director. They were so unprofessional and inexperienced that the sound operators put the microphone next to the bassoon, thus recording a very unbalanced orchestral rendition where the bassoon sounded like the protagonist of the opera.[454]

[454] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior and Junior

4.2 Artistic and Musical Direction

Both the Aurora and Astra brought over a foreign artistic director who changed year after year.[455] Up to the 1990s the theatres did not have a fixed artistic director and each year the director had to set a rehearsal schedule to accommodate the availabilities of the locals taking part in the production. All the locals (Gozitans and Maltese) taking part in the opera had a restricted schedule: choristers, stagehands, light engineers had to travel to Gozo after work, and back again to Malta to attend an opera rehearsal. Such a burden was only taken on due to the love of music and the theatre.

Amongst the artistic directors that worked at the Aurora Theatre there were Giuseppe Giuliano, (1978) and Rocco Spataro (1987, 1990) but the most notable of all was Novella Tabili, daughter of Flavia who was the soprano who sang in *Madama Butterfly* in 1977 and who was involved in the various aspects of the operatic production at Aurora over the years. From a very young age, Novella frequented the Gozitan theatre with her mother until in 1986, after completing her theatrical studies, Novella was responsible for the costume designs for *Norma*[456] and in 1987 was the artistic director of *Rigoletto*.[457] In 1994 Novella Tabili became the resident artistic director at the Aurora theatre.[458]

Committee members of both musical societies were elected yearly (and lately every two years) by means of a secret ballot in which band members vote. In 2016, a new and generally younger managing team was elected at the Aurora, and they were ready

[455] Various posters of past productions
[456] *The Times,* 24 April 1986
[457] *The Times*, 31 October 1987
[458] *The Times*, 24 April 1986

to cut the strings that bound the Aurora with the Tabili dynasty,[459] first the mother Flavia, then the daughter Novella. The Aurora's first step in being autonomous was to choose the main singers for the opera *Carmen* (2016) which was going to be interpreted in French. By mutual consent it was agreed with Miss Tabili that *Carmen* would be the last opera she directed.[460]

Having the same artistic director for so many years had caused the management of the Aurora Theatre to become complacent. Ms. Tabili knew them well, knew what the theatre lacked and always took care of these deficiencies herself. Suddenly, the new Aurora Theatre's management suddenly had to handle many things which before they did not have to worry about.[461]

In 2017, the Aurora theatre appointed a new artistic director, Vivienne Hewitt who directed *Tosca* (2017)[462], *La Boheme* (2019)[463] and *Aïda* (2022)[464]: for the latter, the theatre brought over the scenery and costumes designed by Franco Zeffirelli.[465]

[459] The mother Flavia: soprano and agent as from 1977 then the daughter Novella: artistic director and stage designer as from 1986 to 2016
[460] Interview with Matthew Sultana
[461] Ibid.
[462] *Malta Independent*, 12 August 2018
[463] *Times of Malta*, 10 November 2019
[464] *Times of Malta*, 14 August 2022
[465] Zeffirelli's *Aïda* production was created in 2001 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Verdi's death, specifically for the intimate theatre in the composer's hometown Busseto. This production was also performed eleven times at the Arena of Verona in 2022



Figure 150 Aïda, Aurora Theatre, 2022

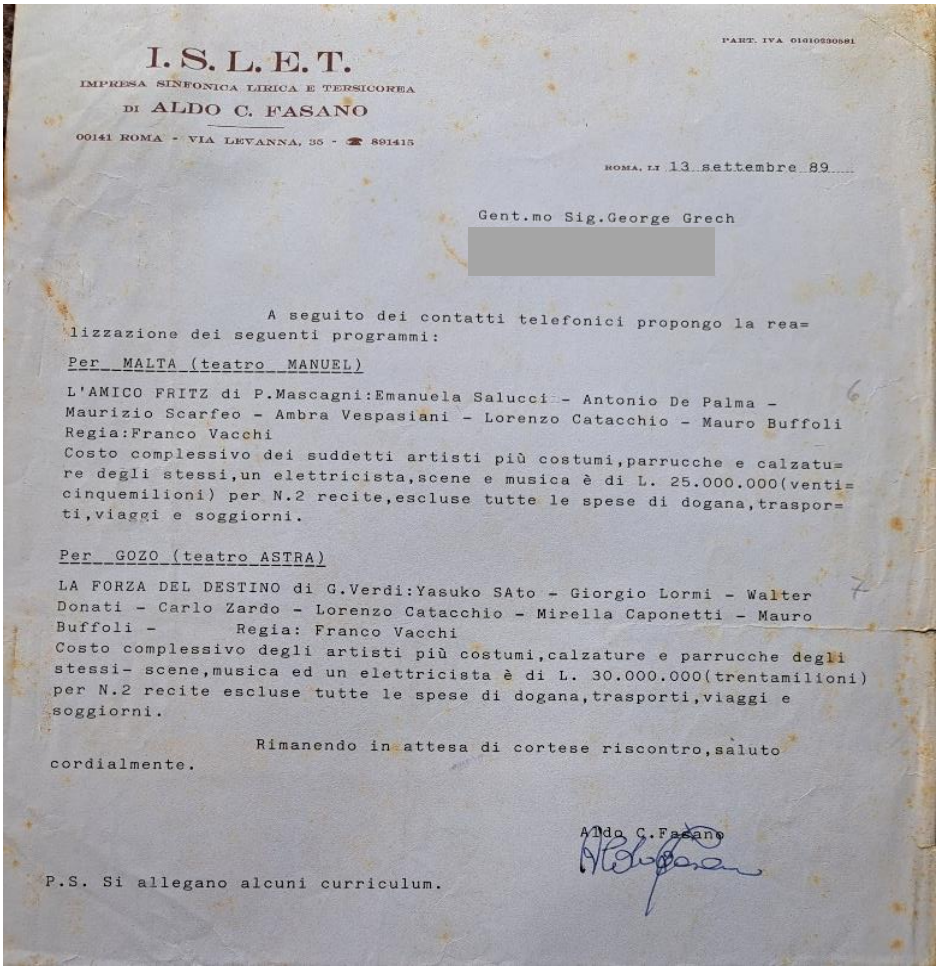
From 1977 till 1990, Joseph Sammut conducted several operatic productions at the Aurora theatre.[466] (See Appendix 4) Besides Sammut, Italian conductors were brought over when two operas were held over the same weekend: Alberto Leone conducted five productions while Giovanni Veneri only one. In 1990, Joseph Sammut ended his career as band master with the Leone Band and musical director of the Aurora theatre.[467] He was succeeded by Colin Attard,[468] (b.1962) who is the nephew of Joseph Vella, the musical director of the La Stella band.

[466] Various opera posters
[467] *L-Orizzont*, 11 May 1991
[468] *L-Aurora, Leħen il-Banda Leone,* April 1990

Attard started at the Aurora theatre as choir master in 1988 with the opera *Carmen*,[469] then, in 1991 he became the musical director of the Leone band.[470] In April 1994 he directed his first opera, *Il Trovatore*[471] in collaboration with the Russian Cultural Centre in Malta.[472] The singers were Russian, while the orchestra was a pick-up one; the players were contacted directly by the musical director.[473] Attard continues in his role of musical director until the present day.

The Astra theatre from the very start (1978) engaged the services of Impresa Fasano.[474] As shown in Figure 151, the Fasano company dictated which artists were to sing and provided the costumes, shoes, wigs, scenery, music scores and lights engineer. The management of the Astra theatre were finding these productions expensive: out of a total cost of LM14,829.50 (£29,554.40), LM8,863.12 (£17,657.30) went to the Fasano Company.[475] The management of the Astra urged certain supporters who possessed skills that could be useful in the theatre to observe the impresa's work, so that at a future point they would be able to do the work themselves.[476]

[469] Grech (2012), 319
[470] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna,* 23 May 1991
[471] Grech (2012), 356
[472] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior
[473] Ibid.
[474] Interview with George Grech
[475] Documents provided by George Grech
[476] Interview with Dolindo Cassar



PART. IVA 01610230581

I. S. L. E. T.
IMPRESA SINFONICA LIRICA E TERSICOREA
DI ALDO C. FASANO
00141 ROMA - VIA LEVANNA, 35 - ☎ 891415

ROMA, LI 13 settembre 89

Gent.mo Sig.George Grech
[redacted]

A seguito dei contatti telefonici propongo la rea=
lizzazione dei seguenti programmi:

Per MALTA (teatro MANUEL)

L'AMICO FRITZ di P.Mascagni:Emanuela Salucci - Antonio De Palma -
Maurizio Scarfeo - Ambra Vespasiani - Lorenzo Catacchio - Mauro Buffoli
Regia:Franco Vacchi
Costo complessivo dei suddetti artisti più costumi,parrucche e calzatu=
re degli stessi,un elettricista,scene e musica è di L. 25.000.000(venti=
cinquemilioni) per N.2 recite,escluse tutte le spese di dogana,traspor=
ti,viaggi e soggiorni.

Per GOZO (teatro ASTRA)

LA FORZA DEL DESTINO di G.Verdi:Yasuko SAto - Giorgio Lormi - Walter
Donati - Carlo Zardo - Lorenzo Catacchio - Mirella Caponetti - Mauro
Buffoli - Regia: Franco Vacchi
Costo complessivo degli artisti più costumi,calzature e parrucche degli
stessi- scene,musica ed un elettricista è di L. 30.000.000(trentamilioni)
per N.2 recite escluse tutte le spese di dogana,trasporti,viaggi e
soggiorni.

Rimanendo in attesa di cortese riscontro,saluto
cordialmente.

Aldo C.Fasano

P.S. Si allegano alcuni curriculum.

Figure 151 Correspondence between Impresa Fasano and the Astra Theatre

Over the years, the Impresa Fasano produced seven operas at the Astra:

- *Rigoletto* - 1978
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* – 1978
- *L'Elisir d'Amore* – February 1988
- *Lucia di Lammermoor* – February 1988
- *Aïda* – June 1988
- *La Traviata* – 1989
- *Norma* - 1990

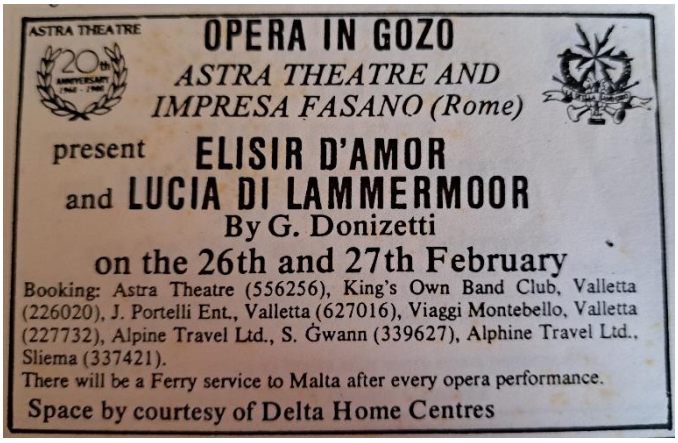


Figure 152 Advert for opera at the Astra Theatre, 1988

The last production by Impresa Fasano was *Norma,* in 1990.[477] (See Figure 153) This production was considered one of the best local efforts in the opera field for some time.[478] From then on, the Astra theatre management had enough contacts abroad to start contracting singers without the use of an agent.



Figure 153 Norma, Astra Theatre, 1990

[477] *Il-Mument*, 15 April 1990
[478] Albert G. Storace, 'Very Fine Norma', *The Times,* 7 April 1990

In 1978, on their first attempt to produce operas at the Astra, the Impresa Fasano, together with the management of the theatre, agreed that one opera, *Rigoletto*, was to be conducted by Joseph Vella, who was the musical director of the La Stella band, while the other, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, would be conducted by the Italian Danilo Belardinelli, who was brought over by Fasano.[479] (See Appendix 5) Opera at the Astra then stopped for ten years and from 1988 onwards, all operas produced at the Astra were conducted by Joseph Vella until his demise in 2018.[480] In that year Philip Walsh conducted *La Traviata* and the following year the newly appointed musical director of the La Stella band and the Astra Theatre, John Galea[481] (b.1960), took the realm as musical director at the Astra. In 2019 Dr. Galea conducted *Il Trovatore*[482] while in 2022 he directed *Carmen*[483] which was the first time it was being produced at the Astra.

The artistic directors at the Astra were numerous. Manrico Fasano, son of the impresario Aldo Fasano, was the artistic director for the first operatic performance of 1978. For the other remaining operas produced by Impresa Fasano, the artistic director was Franco Vacchi. Various foreign directors followed, most noteworthy were Joseph Bascetta who directed five operas between 1998 and 2005, and Mario Corradi between 2007 and 2009. The Astra management also entrusted the artistic direction to two locals: Joe Friggieri in 1992 and 2001 and Abraham Borg in 2006. Since 2011, the Astra Theatre has engaged the services of Enrico Stinchelli (b.1960) as artistic director.

[479] Documents provided by George Grech
[480] Various opera posters
[481] https://newsbook.com.mt/en/maestro-dr-john-galea-to-head-gozos-la-stella/
[482] *The Malta Independent*, 24 September 2019
[483] *Times of Malta*, 23 October 2022

4.3 The Operatic Repertoire

A total of 77 different representations have been held in Gozo from 1977 to 2022: 40 at the Aurora and 37 at the Astra.[484] (See Appendix 4 and 5) After analysing the list of operas produced, one immediately notices that the most popular operas are *Aïda, Carmen, Il Trovatore, La Traviata, La Boheme* and *Madama Butterfly.* Each theatre has a favourite: *Rigoletto* was performed four times (including the performance of October 2023) at the Astra, while only once at the Aurora while *Tosca* has been performed four times at the Aurora and only once at the Astra. On the other hand, operas like *Andrea Chernier, Ernani, Falstaff, Fedora,* and *Manon Lescaut* have been produced just once, all at the Aurora, while *La Gioconda, Suor Angelica* and *Un Ballo in Maschera* were performed once and *Macbeth* twice, all at the Astra. Figure 154 shows a list of operas held by the Astra and Aurora theatres since 2000.

[484] Various opera posters

Operas held by the Astra and Aurora Theatres since 2000		
Year	**Astra Theatre**	**Aurora Theatre**
2000	La Gioconda	Carmen
2001	Madama Butterfly	Ernani
2002	Un Ballo in Maschera	Turandot
2003	Otello	Il Barbiere di Siviglia
2004	Tosca	Nabucco
2005	La Boheme	Fedora
2006	Cavalleria Rusticana Pagliacci Suor Angelica	
2007	Macbeth	La Forza del Destino
2008	Turandot	La Boheme
2009	Rigoletto	Aïda
2010	La Traviata	Carmen
2011	Norma	Tosca
2012	Madama Butterfly	Turandot
2013	Otello	Falstaff
2014	Nabucco	Il Trovatore
2015	La Boheme	La Traviata
2016	Aïda	Carmen
2017	Lucia di Lammermoor	Cavalleria Rusticana I Pagliacci
2018	La Traviata	Tosca
2019	Il Trovatore	La Boheme
2020	No operas were held due to Covid-19 pandemic	
2021	No operas were held due to Covid-19 pandemic	
2022	Carmen	Aïda
2023	Rigoletto	Madama Butterfly

Figure 154 Operas held by the Astra and Aurora Theatres since 2000

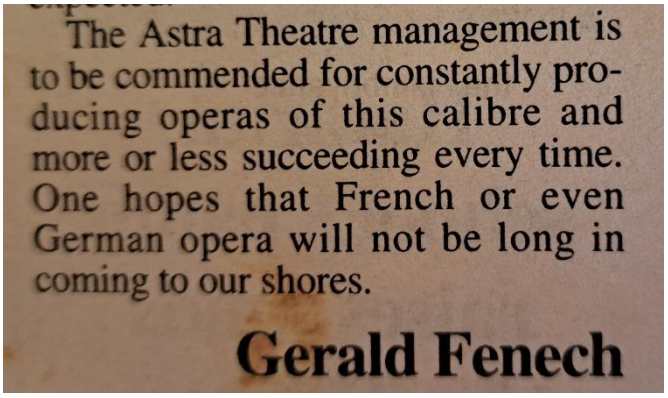
On observing these lists, it is clear that Verdi is by far the most popular composer: a total of twelve of his operas have been performed in Gozo. This number is to become thirteen in 2024 when the Astra theatre plans to produce *Giovanna d'Arco.* (See Figure 155) Puccini follows with five operas while composers like Bizet, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Rossini, Donizetti and Ponchielli all have only one opera to their name.



Figure 155 Giovanna d'Arco, Astra Theatre, 2024

The public, opera enthusiasts and journalists have sometimes commented on the fact that operas held in Gozo are all in Italian (except for *Carmen*) and suggested that for once the management should change course and choose an opera by a German or French composer.[485] (See Figure 155)

[485] Gerald Fenech, 'Il Trovatore at the Astra', *The Sunday Times,* 5 May 1996



The Astra Theatre management is to be commended for constantly producing operas of this calibre and more or less succeeding every time. One hopes that French or even German opera will not be long in coming to our shores.

Gerald Fenech

Figure 156 A newspaper review about the Astra Theatre

The theatres' main concern is that the opera tickets sell, and therefore repertory is chosen accordingly. Unfortunately, the two theatres have not always been able to co-ordinate their choices: in 1999 both theatres produced *Aïda* just days apart: at the Aurora on April 24 and at Astra on 1 May.[486] The production of *Aïda* at Astra had been planned for October 1998[487] but a general election was called abruptly and, in consequence, the opera was postponed to the following May. Meanwhile, the Aurora's *Aïda* was originally planned for 29 May 1999 but when it transpired that the Eurovision Song Contest was going to be held on the same day, they moved the performance to April.[488] In a conversation with a La Stella supporter, he gave an account of how both theatres leased the triumphal trumpets from the same company in Rome and since the two *Aïda* performances were just a week apart the Roman company suggested that the Aurora Theatre would convey the trumpets up the road to the Astra Theatre, also to save money on haulage. However, the Aurora theatre's management argued that the agreement was to send them back to Rome, and so they did. To compensate for

[486] *The Times*, 22 March 1999
[487] *In-Nazzjon*, 'Ir-*Rigoletto* f'Marzu u l-*Aïda* f'Ottubru', 15 November 1997
[488] *The Times,* 22 March 1999

the lost time, a member of the Astra Theatre was waiting at the airport of Rome so that upon arrival, the trumpets would be whisked back again on the same plane back to Malta. Although the production of *Aïda* at the Aurora was considered a success, and Lino Gatt, in his comments about the performance, praised the *messa in scena,*[489] he also commented that, during the triumphal march, the horses should have been left out. He argued that the stage was no place for animals and after all, two horses were insufficient to symbolise the greatness and power of the Egyptian Empire.[490] Similarly, at the Astra, the appearance of a single horse, got a round of applause, which detracted from the glorifying entrance of Radames.[491] The production of *Aïda* at the Astra was less well received, at least by Cecilia Xuereb, who, in her review observed that Joseph Vella had a hard task to keep the soloists in check since these were very individualistic and tried to have their way both with the tempi and dynamics, although she argued that this certainly did not justify the often-shoddy playing of the orchestra.[492]



Figure 157 Aïda, Aurora Theatre, 1999

[489] Overall production
[490] *Il-Ħadd Magazin*, '*Aïda* – Storja ta' Suċċess fit-Teatru Aurora', 16 May 1999
[491] Cecilia Xuereb, '*Aïda* – Part II*', The Sunday Times*, 9 May 1999
[492] Ibid.



Figure 158 Aïda, Astra Theatre, 1999

When a theatre decides to produce a not-so-popular opera, the ticket sales go down. Such was the case in 2017, when Astra produced *Lucia di Lammermoor.* The press and the theatre's musical and artistic team consider this opera as one of the most successful productions, both musically and artistically[493], but still, the theatre lost a considerable amount of money. On the other hand, both theatres consider *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* as the operas that generate the best earnings.

[493] https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/high-drama-doomed-love.667882

4.4 Opera in Gozo Through the Years

Following the first opera at the Aurora in 1977, the management produced four operas in the following year: *La Traviata* and *La Boheme* in April[494] and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (see Figure 159) and *Tosca* in December.[495] (See Appendix 4)



Figure 159 Lucia di Lammermoor, Aurora Theatre, 1978

Meanwhile, the Astra theatre kept its focus on other lighter theatrical genres and business activities[496] until 1978, when George Grech, a member of the Astra Theatre management, was approached by Giusy (Giuseppe) Lopez, who was an opera singer and a choir master, who suggested that the Astra Theatre should start producing operas. The Astra Theatre management after the moral setback conferred by Paolo

[494] *The Sunday Times*, 7 May 1978
[495] *The Sunday Times*, 10 December 1978
[496] The most lucrative were The Calypso Fair and The Ideal Home Exhibition where local businesses gathered under one roof to sell their products.

Pace, had made no further plans to produce an opera and after all they did not have the know-how to undertake such a massive production, so Giusy suggested the ISLET (Impresa Sinfonica Lirica e Tersicorea) managed by Aldo Fasano.[497]

The Astra Theatre's management checked the repertoire offered by the Fasano company and opted for *Rigoletto* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*[498] since both operas had just a male chorus which reduced rehearsal and performance costs. The chorus consisted of local Maltese singers. On 15 September 1978 *Rigoletto* (see Figures 160, 161 and 162) was conducted by Joseph Vella (1942-2018) while a day later *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* was conducted by Danilo Belardinelli (1915-1998), an Italian musical director brought over by the Fasano Company. The latter brought over their own scenery, which consisted of big pieces of canvas that were to be mounted on wooden panels. This process required some alterations to fit for the size of the Astra Theatre stage, so the theatre's management asked locals who possessed theatrical and handyman skills to join the Fasano workers while urging them to observe and learn the procedures for future reference. The cost of the two operas amounted to LM 11,570 (£ 23,146).[499] Around half of the money were spent on Fasano while the rest was spent on orchestra, transport, lodging and buying of material for the stage. In the first year of opera production, the Astra Theatre made a profit of LM1,138 (£2,273).[500]

[497] The Italian Impresa Fasano was an itinerant company that toured Italy and Sicily. From Sicily it was easy for them to cross over to Malta.
[498] Zammit (2023), 32
[499] Document provided by George Grech
[500] Personal archives of George Grech which includes all receipts and other details of every transaction in connection with opera expenses.



Figure 160 Poster 1978, Astra Theatre



Figure 161 Rigoletto. Astra Theatre, 1978



Figure 162 Rigoletto. Astra Theatre, 1978

Essentially, the first opera at the Astra Theatre was an imported production from Italy done for the simple reason that the Astra wanted to compete with the Aurora: the rivalry between the two theatres was ongoing and the Astra Theatre supporters would

comment that “they (Astra) started the opera in Gozo” since many considered early opera at the Aurora Theatre to be a mediocre and amateur parody.

The amenability between the Aurora and Paolo Pace, the person behind the first operatic productions at the Aurora, did not last for long: in 1979, Paolo Pace convinced the Aurora Theatre’s management to bring Raina Kabaivanska, a leading Bulgarian soprano at the time, to sing in Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut*. The management found her fee was too high, but Pace convinced them that such an important name would be worth the gamble. Unfortunately, this did not happen and caused a disagreement leading to the break-up of Pace and the Aurora Theatre.[501] The same weekend, just before the start of *Il Trovatore* the lights went out due to a power cut. The public had to wait for four hours until a generator was set up and the opera could start.[502]

Both theatres stopped operatic productions for some years: the Aurora stopped from 1979 to 1986 while the Astra stopped from 1978 to 1988. It was a time of political chaos and instability in Malta.[503] During these years the two opera houses concentrated their efforts on the physical structure of the theatres. (Discussed below)

The only exception was the production of *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 1984, held at the Aurora Theatre. This opera was already performed twice at the Manoel Theatre earlier that year, and the theatre’s production, wanted to reproduce it again in Gozo, so they made a random draw, and the Aurora theatre was chosen. This opera was conducted by Joseph Vella who was the musical director at the Astra Theatre.

[501] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior
[502] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna,* 10 October 1979
[503] *Times of Malta,* 12 December 2021

Then, in 1986, operas in Gozo seemed to take a different turn: productions became more regular and generally yearly, (apart from a few exceptions) while the standards started to considerably improve. After seven years when no operas were performed, the Aurora Theatre, in April 1986 produced *Norma* and *Nabucco* followed by *Andrea Chernier* and *Rigoletto* in October 1987. The Astra Theatre also resumed operas and in February 1988 produced *L'Elisir d'Amore* (see Figure 163) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* while two performances of *Aïda* were held in June. (See Figure 164) Joseph Debrincat Jr, a member of Aurora Opera Committee recounts how at the Aurora theatre they were outraged at the news that the opposing theatre was producing *Aïda* since this was always on top of the Aurora's list of future productions, but they were always discouraged because of the work it entailed in terms of scenery, props, costumes, and a large cast. The management at the Aurora wanted to counter this, so they produced *Carmen* (in Italian).



Figure 163 L'Elisir d'Amore, Astra Theatre, 1988



Figure 164 Aïda, Astra Theatre, 1988

The production of *Aïda* at the Astra was so successful that the Ministry for Culture asked the theatre's management to give three open-air performances at Mdina.[504] Over the years, there had been various operatic concerts and concert versions of opera, but this was the first attempt to produce an opera in the open-air. (See Appendix 3) The stage in Malta was to be constructed by government workers but they fell severely behind schedule, so backstage hands from Gozo were brought in to set up the stage.[505] The management of the Astra theatre, together with the Impresa Fasano transformed the Cathedral square at Mdina into an arena of towering colonnades, flowering shrubs, majestic thrones set against blue skies and pyramids, sphinxes, and golden statues. The artistic director, Franco Vacchi, opted for a 'carnivalesque' *messa*

[504] *L-Orizzont*, 14 September 1988, T*he Sunday Times*, 4 September 1988
[505] Interview with Dolindo Cassar

in scena, with brightly coloured scenes and costumes which, in the view of *The Sunday Times,* resulted in an artificial, extravagant, and overbearing atmosphere.[506] On the other hand, the backstage workings were frequently exposed to the audience. An opera held in an open-air theatre comes with many limitations, amongst which are scene changes, which often happen in front of the audience and, if the scene change occurs between arias, it can create an embarrassing waiting time during which the opera stops. During the Mdina production, bright light was shed onto the audience during the musical breaks and this manoeuvre to 'hide' what was happening on stage was severely criticised.[507] Despite these difficulties, producing three performances of *Aïda* was an ambitious experiment and, taking into consideration the magnitude of the production, it was considered that the audience had been given a once-in-a-lifetime experience.[508] This production marked the closing of Maltafest '88, a festival of culture organised by the Ministry of Culture. The latter was severely criticised in some quarters since the opera was imported from Gozo and not produced by a Maltese company or by Malta's national theatre, based at the Manoel.

In the 1990s, it was observed that although there was ample room for improvement, most of the operatic representations had improved as regards the standard of the main singers, the orchestra, the costumes, and scenery. In 1994, though, all four productions in Malta and Gozo were thought to have suffered from the lack of a suitable primo tenore, possibly due to budget considerations.[509] Another regular criticism about the opera's messa in scena was that the choral scenes were too static, with the chorus

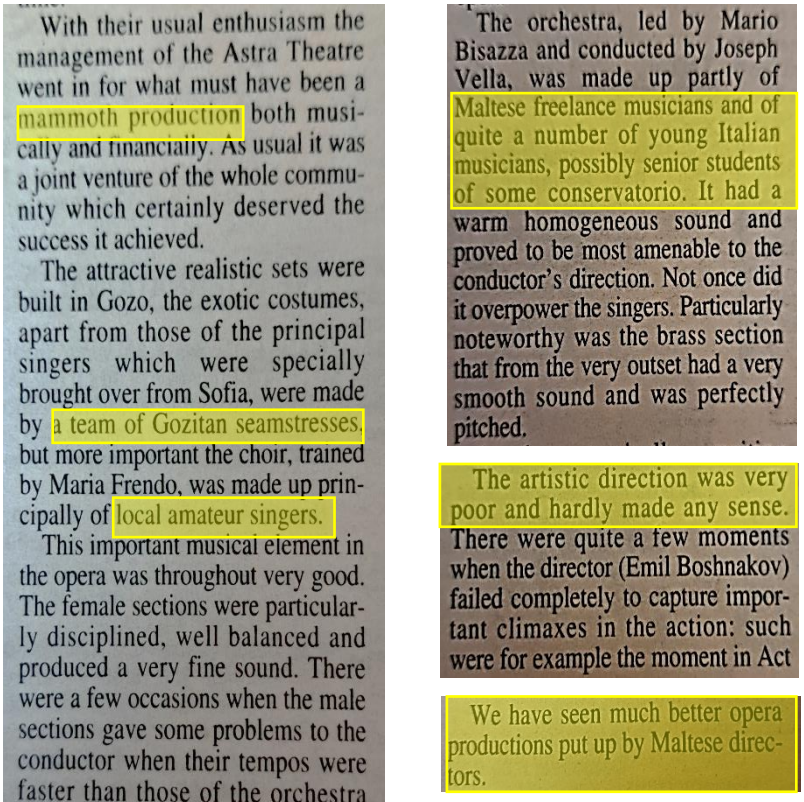
[506] Maria Ghirlando, 'Aïda at Mdina', *The Sunday Times*, 4 September 1988
L-Orizzont, 'L-*Aïda* bil-Ħobż u ż-Żejt', 14 September 1988
[507] Ibid.
[508] Romeo Micallef, 'Unqualified Success', *The Times*, 5 September 1988
[509] Personal archives of George Grech

only standing and singing. In some performances the balance between the orchestra and the singers was also criticised and at times a particular section of the orchestra (usually the brass section) was overwhelming the other sections.[510]

The Astra Theatre management, in 1992, came up with an initiative to encourage more youths to attend opera: they offered subsidized opera tickets to 130 students to be able to attend the opera *La Forza del Destino.*[511]

The reviews by the opera critic Cecilia Xuereb of the 1994 production of *Nabucco* at the Astra, were mostly positive (See Figure 165) She commented that the Astra Theatre, with their usual enthusiasm, had gone in for another mammoth production, both musically and financially. What was most admirable was the 'joint venture of the whole community'. Ms Xuereb observed that the sets and costumes were all locally made; she complimented the female chorus made of local amateur singers, but thought the male section were not as precise in certain moments.[512] The orchestra was made up of freelance local musicians and students from an Italian conservatorio. The production was also severely criticised since, in Xuereb's view, it made little sense, and she argued that local artistic directors could have done a better job.

[510] *L-Orizzont*, 'Ta' l-Inkwina fl-Astra', 3 May 1996
[511] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna, 'La Forza del Destino* għall-ewwel darba f'Għawdex', 6 June 1992
[512] *The Sunday Times, 'Nabucco* in Gozo', 13 November 1994



With their usual enthusiasm the management of the Astra Theatre went in for what must have been a mammoth production both musically and financially. As usual it was a joint venture of the whole community which certainly deserved the success it achieved.

The attractive realistic sets were built in Gozo, the exotic costumes, apart from those of the principal singers which were specially brought over from Sofia, were made by a team of Gozitan seamstresses, but more important the choir, trained by Maria Frendo, was made up principally of local amateur singers.

This important musical element in the opera was throughout very good. The female sections were particularly disciplined, well balanced and produced a very fine sound. There were a few occasions when the male sections gave some problems to the conductor when their tempos were faster than those of the orchestra while in Act II scene ii, the scene of the Levites with Ismaele, there was some confusion.

Otherwise, however, their singing of the various choruses was good.

The principal parts were taken by soloists from Bulgaria, and with the exception of the bass, they formed a fine team of singers. The role of Nabucco was played by Jivko Pranchev.

The orchestra, led by Mario Bisazza and conducted by Joseph Vella, was made up partly of Maltese freelance musicians and of quite a number of young Italian musicians, possibly senior students of some conservatorio. It had a warm homogeneous sound and proved to be most amenable to the conductor's direction. Not once did it overpower the singers. Particularly noteworthy was the brass section that from the very outset had a very smooth sound and was perfectly pitched.

The artistic direction was very poor and hardly made any sense. There were quite a few moments when the director (Emil Boshnakov) failed completely to capture important climaxes in the action: such were for example the moment in Act

We have seen much better opera productions put up by Maltese directors.

Figure 165 Newspaper review of *Nabucco*, Astra Theatre, 1994

Another feather in the cap for the Astra Theatre came in 1995 with the production of *Turandot*. This opera was supported by the Enemalta Corporation[513] which was commemorating 100 years of electricity supply in Malta.[514] The costumes for *Turandot* were all sewn by the Astra Theatre Wardrobe Department and the theatre's

[513] Established in 1977, Enemalta is the leading energy services provider in the Maltese Islands, entrusted with the distribution of electricity, and the development of the national electricity distribution network. https://www.enemalta.com.mt/about-us/

[514] *In-Nazzjon*, 10 August 1995

management allocated the sum of LM3,000 (£5,971) for the purchase and the making of these costumes.[515]



Figure 166 Turandot, Astra Theatre, 1995

The Aurora counteracted with *Otello* but unfortunately, it was heavily criticised by the press, saying that the tenor, soprano and musical director were not up to Verdi's standards.[516] (See Figure 168) Another case when the soloist was not up to standard was in 2004, when the soprano performing in *Nabucco* at the Aurora, had to be replaced at the last minute.

[515] *In-Nazzjon,* 5 October 1995
[516] Joe Farrugia Debarro, 'A non-stormy Otello at the Aurora', *The Times of Malta*, 15 December 1995

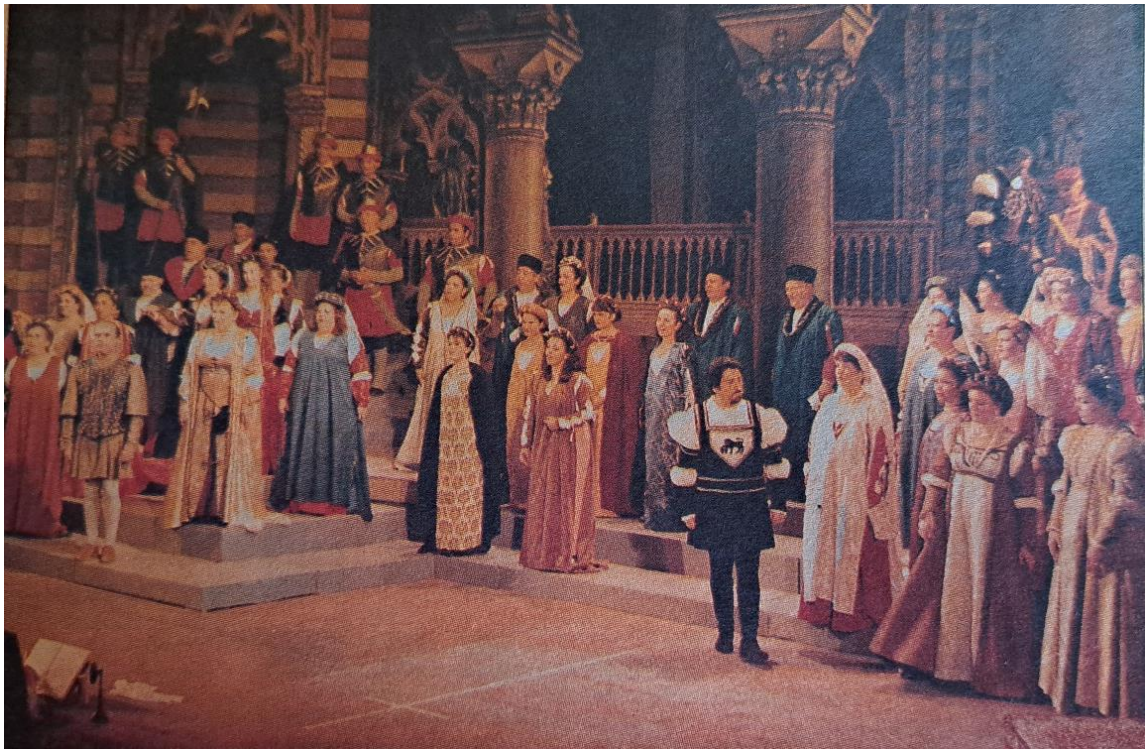
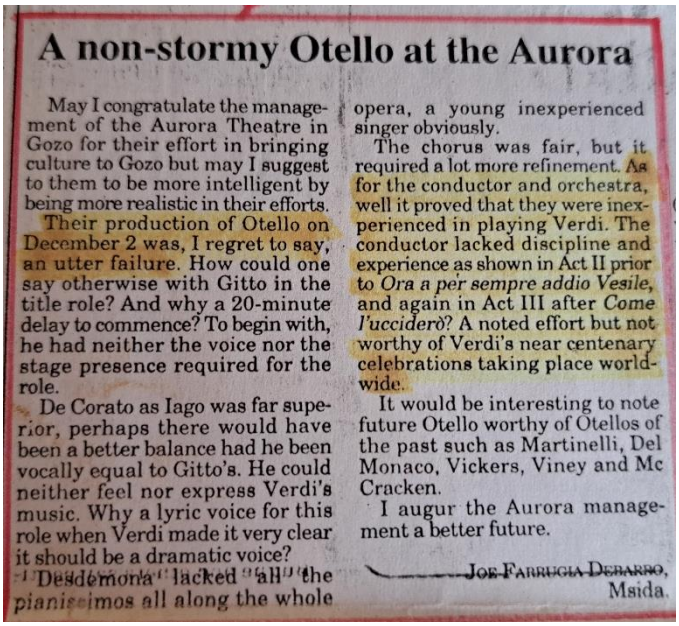


Figure 167 Otello, Aurora Theatre, 1995



A non-stormy Otello at the Aurora

May I congratulate the management of the Aurora Theatre in Gozo for their effort in bringing culture to Gozo but may I suggest to them to be more intelligent by being more realistic in their efforts.

Their production of Otello on December 2 was, I regret to say, an utter failure. How could one say otherwise with Gitto in the title role? And why a 20-minute delay to commence? To begin with, he had neither the voice nor the stage presence required for the role.

De Corato as Iago was far superior, perhaps there would have been a better balance had he been vocally equal to Gitto's. He could neither feel nor express Verdi's music. Why a lyric voice for this role when Verdi made it very clear it should be a dramatic voice?

Desdemona lacked all the *pianissimos* all along the whole opera, a young inexperienced singer obviously.

The chorus was fair, but it required a lot more refinement. As for the conductor and orchestra, well it proved that they were inexperienced in playing Verdi. The conductor lacked discipline and experience as shown in Act II prior to *Ora a per sempre addio Vesile,* and again in Act III after *Come l'ucciderò*? A noted effort but not worthy of Verdi's near centenary celebrations taking place worldwide.

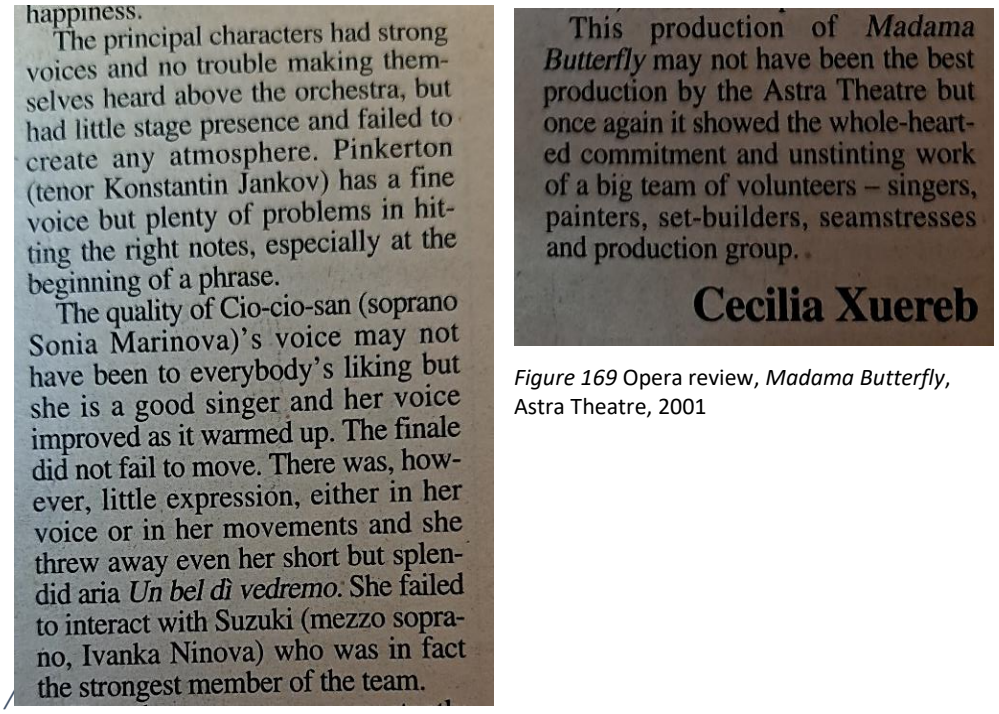
It would be interesting to note future Otello worthy of Otellos of the past such as Martinelli, Del Monaco, Vickers, Viney and Mc Cracken.

I augur the Aurora management a better future.

JOE FARRUGIA DEBARRO,
Msida.

Figure 168 The Times of Malta, 15 December 1995

In 2001, the Astra Theatre created a series of cultural events under the name of Festival Mediterranea which include conferences, walks, and talks in ancient and historical places in Gozo, field trips, food and drink events and exhibitions.[517] The opera is the climax of the festival. Most of the operatic productions at the Astra are performed twice, on a Thursday and Saturday, since its capacity is smaller than that of the Aurora. In 2001, the opera chosen by Astra was *Madama Butterfly,* which according to the reviewer Cecilia Xuereb, was not the theatre's best production, mostly because the principal characters, in spite of having strong voices, 'had little stage presence and failed to create any atmosphere'.[518] (See Figure 169)


happiness.

The principal characters had strong voices and no trouble making themselves heard above the orchestra, but had little stage presence and failed to create any atmosphere. Pinkerton (tenor Konstantin Jankov) has a fine voice but plenty of problems in hitting the right notes, especially at the beginning of a phrase.

The quality of Cio-cio-san (soprano Sonia Marinova)'s voice may not have been to everybody's liking but she is a good singer and her voice improved as it warmed up. The finale did not fail to move. There was, however, little expression, either in her voice or in her movements and she threw away even her short but splendid aria *Un bel dì vedremo*. She failed to interact with Suzuki (mezzo soprano, Ivanka Ninova) who was in fact the strongest member of the team.

This production of *Madama Butterfly* may not have been the best production by the Astra Theatre but once again it showed the whole-hearted commitment and unstinting work of a big team of volunteers – singers, painters, set-builders, seamstresses and production group.

Cecilia Xuereb

Figure 169 Opera review, *Madama Butterfly*, Astra Theatre, 2001

Opera in Gozo did not originally have a set date but since 2004 (Astra) and 2007 (Aurora) the operas have moved to October. April and May had been inconvenient because most of the choristers, who were locals studying at university in Malta, were

[517] https://www.mediterranea.com.mt/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6&Itemid=2
[518] Cecilia Xuereb, 'Pierced through the heart with a needle', *The Sunday Times*, 6 May 2001

focused on their annual exams, making recruitment of chorus members harder. October was a 'safe' month for students since exams were months away and the weather is still fair. In 2019, the then-Minister for Gozo, the Hon. Justine Caruana initiated the project 'Opera is Gozo',[519] (see Figure 169) through which Gozo is advertised as the home of opera in Malta and as a cultural destination. Additionally, October was considered a 'dead' month in the tourist industry, following the summer months, and anticipating the Christmas ones, so this initiative was created to help local industries such as restaurants, hotels, and also the two opera theatres in Gozo to attract tourists. The dates for operas in Gozo became fixed: the Aurora produces its opera mid-October while the Astra does so at the end. (See Appendices 4 and 5)



Figure 170 Poster of *Opera is Gozo,* the annual operatic appointment on the island of Gozo.

Certain aspects of opera in Gozo are not performed as expected or as in other theatres: Gozitan theatres are not stereotypical. This is because these theatres have to adapt

[519] https://gwww.visitgozo.com/blog/opera-is-gozo/

and manipulate whatever material and talents they have available, to rise to what is expected from an opera production.[522]

[522] *Campus FM, L-Opra f'Malta,* interview with Colin Attard

4.5 The Orchestras

The Manoel Theatre Orchestra[523] was the only professional orchestra in Malta in the late 1970s and hence both theatres utilized its services. Unfortunately, relations between the Manoel Orchestra and the Gozitan theatres was often strained. Evidence suggests that at times the orchestra management and musicians undermined productions with continuous complaints, incessant requests, and disobliging behaviours.[524] They argued that the new Gozitan theatres were not fit to produce any opera and the musicians asked for higher fees and complained about spending whole days in Gozo and expected VIP treatment.[525] They insisted on adhering to the planned schedule and if the agreement was to play until 11pm they would not play an extra minute even if this meant omitting just the final notes of the act.

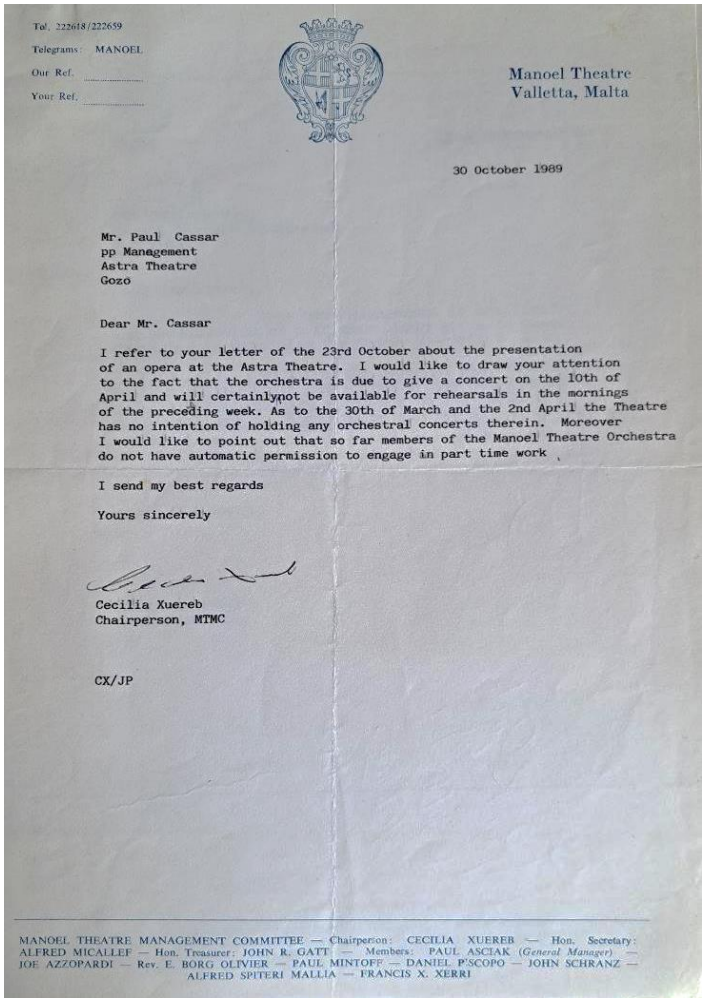
Another instance when the Manoel Theatre management hindered the Aurora theatre was in 1975, when the Leone band was going to perform in Rome and the management of the Manoel Theatre did not consent for Joseph Sammut, the musical director, to go with the Leone Band saying that he had commitments with the Manoel Theatre Orchestra.[526]

[523] The orchestra was founded in April 1968, when musicians from the defunct "Commander-in-Chief" (C-in-C) orchestra of the Malta-based British Mediterranean Fleet regrouped as the Manoel Theatre Orchestra. It continued to serve as the theatre's resident orchestra until September 1997 when it became an independent orchestra, taking up the name National Orchestra of Malta. The orchestra became the MPO (Malta Philharmonic Orchestra) in 2008 when it expanded into a full-size symphony orchestra bringing together musicians from Malta, Europe and beyond. www.maltaorchestra.com

[524] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior

[525] Ibid.

[526] Interview with Louis Xuereb



Tel. 222618/222659
Telegrams: MANOEL
Our Ref. .....
Your Ref. .....

Manoel Theatre
Valletta, Malta

30 October 1989

Mr. Paul Cassar
pp Management
Astra Theatre
Gozo

Dear Mr. Cassar

I refer to your letter of the 23rd October about the presentation of an opera at the Astra Theatre. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the orchestra is due to give a concert on the 10th of April and will certainly not be available for rehearsals in the mornings of the preceding week. As to the 30th of March and the 2nd April the Theatre has no intention of holding any orchestral concerts therein. Moreover I would like to point out that so far members of the Manoel Theatre Orchestra do not have automatic permission to engage in part time work .

I send my best regards

Yours sincerely

Cecilia Xuereb
Chairperson, MTMC

CX/JP

MANOEL THEATRE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE — Chairperson: CECILIA XUEREB — Hon. Secretary: ALFRED MICALLEF — Hon. Treasurer: JOHN R. GATT — Members: PAUL ASCIAK (*General Manager*) — JOE AZZOPARDI — Rev. E. BORG OLIVIER — PAUL MINTOFF — DANIEL P'SCOPO — JOHN SCHRANZ — ALFRED SPITERI MALLIA — FRANCIS X. XERRI

Figure 171 Correspondence between the Manoel Theatre and the Astra Theatre

From the correspondence above, (see Figure 171) we can see how rigid, inflexible, unaccommodating, and uncooperative the Manoel Theatre Orchestra's management was.[527]

[527] Dear Mr. Cassar,
I refer to your letter of the 23rd October about the presentation of an opera at the Astra Theatre. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the orchestra is due to give a concert on the 10th of April and will certainly not be available for rehearsals in the morning of the preceding week. As to the 30th of March and the 2nd April the Theatre has no intention of holding any orchestral concerts therein. Moreover, I would like to point out that so far members of the Manoel Theatre Orchestra do not have automatic permission to engage in part time work.
I send my best regards,
Yours sincerely,
Cecilia Xuereb, Chairperson, MTMC

The theatres' management had various issues with the Manoel Orchestra. The final one took place, in 1990, when the chairwoman of the Manoel Theatre Orchestra announced that the national orchestra would no longer play for the Gozo operas, threatening resignation if they did.[528] The Aurora Theatre management spoke to Dr. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, the then-Minister of Culture, who assured them that the orchestra would play and the day after the chairwoman duly resigned.[529] In September of the same year, the then-Minister for Gozo, Anton Tabone, made an agreement with the Manoel Theatre Orchestra, and the Astra and Aurora Theatres respectively, in which it was agreed that the Ministry for Gozo would pay all the costs.[530] This agreement still did not last long and discrepancies kept on going. To avoid all this trouble, both Gozitan theatres decided to bring in foreign orchestras or create pick up-orchestras consisting of local and foreign musicians. In 1996 and 1997, the Astra Theatre opted for the Accademia Filarmonica from Florence which played for *Il Trovatore*[531] and the year after an orchestra from Catania played for *Macbeth*.[532] The Aurora theatre brought the Nova Amadeus from Rome for the operas *Il Trovatore* (1994) and *Madama Butterfly (1997)* while for *Otello* (1995) and *Tosca* (1996), La Filarmonica G. Verdi from Palermo played.[533] Despite lower fees and fewer complaints, however, costs went up due to plane tickets and accommodation.[534]

Then in 1998, the new National Orchestra of Malta, today known as Malta Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) was set up and an agreement was made with the two theatres stating

[528] Interview with Joseph Debrincat Senior
[529] Ibid.
[530] *L-Aurora, Leħen il-Banda Leone,* December 1990
[531] George Maggi, *'Il Trovatore* Issaħħar fit-Teatru Astra', *Suppliment ta' In-Nazzjon,* 10 May 1996
[532] *The Sunday Times,* 4 May 1997
[533] Grech (2012), 357
[534] Interview with Dolindo Cassar

that part of the national orchestra's calendar of events would be the two operas held in Gozo.[535] From then on, the MPO always took part in the operas held in both Gozitan theatres.

[535] Grech (2012), 357

4.6 The Main Singers and Chorus

The main singers were mainly foreigners except for rare occurrences such as in 1988 where the main singers for *L'Elisir d'Amore* were all local. The part of Adina was entrusted to the local soprano Miriam Gauci (b.1957) (see Figure 160) who later made a name for herself abroad.



Figure 172 Miriam Gauci

The minor roles were usually performed by local singers who were usually praised by the local critics, for example in the case of *Il Trovatore* held at the Astra in 1996. In George Maggi's view, Anthony Montebello opened the opera with a steady voice in his role of Ferrando while Rosabelle Pavia, in the role of Ines, sang harmoniously the duet with Leonora *Di tale amor che dirsi.*[536] On this occasion, the same could not be said

[536] *Suppliment ta' In-Nazzjon*, 10 May 1996

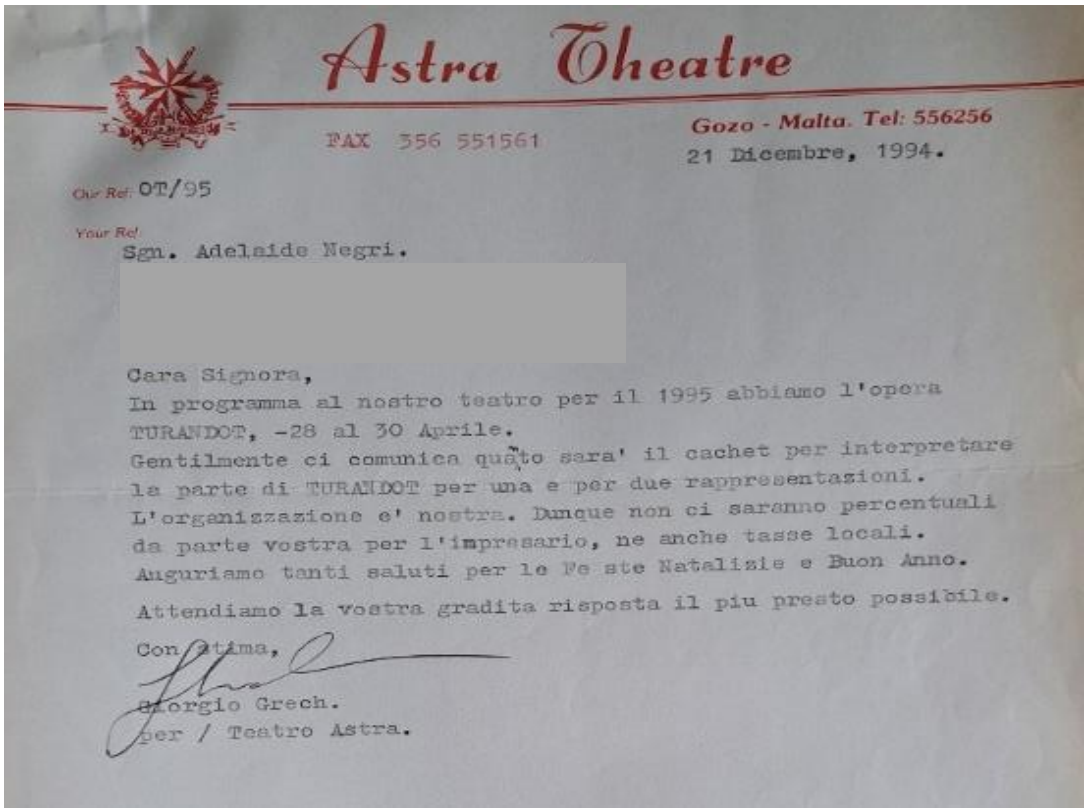
of some of the principals: while the local singers were praised, the tenor Aurelio Santolena, playing Manrico, who had already performed on the Astra stage the year before as Calaf in *Turandot,* was heavily criticised. He was considered not up to standard: at times he was flat, he also missed some entries and his sottovoce was barely audible.[537] When the Astra started contracting the main singers directly (1992), they opted for singers from Bulgaria[538] but many operagoers started complaining about the singers' diction and accents.[539] Then, from 1997 the American artistic director Joseph Bascetta, who doubled as agent, brought American singers. Amongst these were Pamela Kucenic, who performed in *Macbeth (1997)[540], Aïda* (1999)[541] and in *Un Ballo in Maschera* (2002).[542] However, as the former president of the Astra Theatre Dolindo Cassar remarked, the theatre could not cope with the expenses of bringing American singers mostly due to the high cost of the plane tickets. From then on, the main singers were restricted to those living or working in European countries.

In 1997 *Madama Butterfly* was performed at the Aurora. In a review in The Sunday Times, Rosa Micallef Judge remarked that the main singer, Maria Pia Jonata mumbled her notes while the orchestra, conducted by Colin Attard, pushed ahead too much. In her view, these factors undermined the musical atmosphere set by Puccini.[543] She also criticised the singers' gestures and facial expressions which, in her view, did not engage the audience.[544] Ms. Micallef Judge also criticized the stage setting. Most of

[537] *L-Orizzont,* 3 May 1996
[538] *The Sunday Times*, 18 March 2001
[539] Interview with Donindo Cassar
[540] https://www.mediterranea.com.mt/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=234%3Ateatru-astra-partnering-with-the-manoel-in-an-opera-workshop&catid=1%3Anews
[541] *Times of Malta*, 11 May 1999
[542] *Times of Mata,* 9 November 2002
[543] Rosa Micallef Judge, '*Butterfly* at Aurora', *The Sunday Times,* 9 November 1997
[544] Ibid.

the stage was taken by Butterfly's love nest while the weeping willow, the bridge, and the distant ships, typically represented in this opera, were missing. Consequently, this production lacked a sense of its Japanese setting.[545]

The man in charge of liaising with foreign singers at the Astra was George Grech (1927-2023): Figure 161 shows a letter from him to Adelaide Negri, booking her for the opera *Turandot* performed in October 1995.



Astra Theatre

FAX 356 551561

Gozo - Malta. Tel: 556256

21 Dicembre, 1994.

Our Ref: OT/95

Your Ref

Sgn. Adelaide Negri.

Cara Signora,
In programma al nostro teatro per il 1995 abbiamo l'opera
TURANDOT, -28 al 30 Aprile.
Gentilmente ci comunica quato sara' il cachet per interpretare
la parte di TURANDOT per una e per due rappresentazioni.
L'organizzazione e' nostra. Dunque non ci saranno percentuali
da parte vostra per l'impresario, ne anche tasse locali.
Auguriamo tanti saluti per le Fe ste Natalizie e Buon Anno.
Attendiamo la vostra gradita risposta il piu presto possibile.

Con stima,

Giorgio Grech.
per / Teatro Astra.

Figure 173 Correspondence between the Astra Theatre and the soprano Adelaide Negri

For the production of *Macbeth* in 1997, the management of the Astra brought over singers from the Metropolitan Opera, New York: Mark Rucker, who ranked as a genuine Verdian baritone,[546] soprano Pamela Kucenic, renowned for her agile, wide-

[545] Ibid.

[546] https://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/2010/12/mark-rucker-to-bring-a-true-verdi-baritone-to-palm-beach-operas-nabucco/

ranging *coloratura* singing, vocal opulence and dramatic compelling portrayals,[547] and the highly acclaimed bass baritone Hao Jiang Tian. In that production, the Maltese tenor, Joseph Calleja, (b.1978) made his debut at the Astra Theatre when he played Macduff.[548] (He sang at the Astra again in 2004, this time as Rodolfo in *La Boheme* and in 2007, once more in *Macbeth*.) The 1997 production of *Macbeth* was considered by *The Sunday Times* as 'a revelation, a great success and the best opera production…experienced in Gozo… it could be easily put on abroad and hold its own in practically any opera house'.[549] *Macbeth* subsequently became a yardstick against which future performances were measured and it was no easy feat for the Astra to maintain or exceed the high standard reached in *Macbeth*.



Figure 174 Joseph Calleja on his operatic debut: 1997

[547] https://www.mazzonevocalprogram.com/pamela_kucenic.html
[548] *The Sunday Times*, 25 May 1997
[549] Albert Storace, 'Highly successful *Macbeth*', *Times of Malta,* 26 May 1997

Each year, the management of both theatres tries to make the best choices to have the finest operatic productions. The Aurora Theatre opted for a brilliant cast for *Tosca* in 2011 which consisted of the soprano Michèle Crider, baritone Juan Pons (who has frequently performed at La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera) and tenor Neil Schicoff.[550] The latter is the most highly paid singer in history of Maltese opera followed by Maria Guleghina who performed in *Turandot* in 2012.[551] The chorus has always formed an essential part of a theatrical production. Unfortunately, in Malta, being a chorister is not a full-time job but a part-time one. The vocal capacity of the local amateur choristers in not strong and effective enough to support the whole opera production and so in the last two decades, the theatres have brought over a group ranging from six to twenty professional operatic singers, depending on the opera being performed. They usually come from various operatic theatres around Italy, and they have sung in numerous operas and concerts through the years. Their singing is confident and the sound of their voices, amalgamated with that of the locals gives a more professional and resonating sound.

Gozitan choristers are all volunteers, and most of them work or study in Malta and have to come up to Gozo every day for rehearsals. Unfortunately, not all choristers are committed because there is the mentality that if you are not being paid you are not obliged to attend all rehearsals. The choir mistress, musical and artistic director have their hands tied when during a rehearsal there is half of the chorus on stage. One cannot force them to attend since they are not employed by the theatre. They are not

[550] *Times of Malta,* 23 October 2011

[551] Neil Schicoff was paid €20,000 (£17,440) and expected to be paid before the performance starts while Maria Guleghina was paid €15,000 (£12.837). Usually, main singers are paid around €4,000 (£3,423) to €5,000 (£4,279). An opera ticket today costs €70 (£60).

bound by any contract. The artistic director must repeatedly explain all basic theatrical procedures and directions s/he gave in the previous rehearsal. This creates a waste of time and energy but ultimately (and miraculously) everything comes together in the final days.

4.7 Alternative Opera Providers

Although opera on Gozo is dominated by the two theatres, in 2014, the Gaulitana Choir, which was founded in 1990 by Colin Attard, the musical director of the Aurora Theatre, started organising a yearly operatic production, also at the Aurora Theatre. This opera concludes the Gaulitana Festival which is organised in spring and comprises an eclectic mix of musical events.[552] When speaking with Maestro Attard, he explained the extreme difficulties, both financial and organisational, that his team encounters to produce the opera. Nowadays it is easier to contact singers and artistic directors due to the improved means of communication and to social media which with a click of a button gives you all required details about singers and artistic directors. The Gaulitana is an independent entity and does not have the backup of a theatre, although it is a recipient of the Gozo Cultural Support Programme (issued by Arts Council Malta and the Ministry for Gozo) and the EFFE label (European Festivals Association).[553] The operas held by Gaulitana include:

- *Tosca* (2014)
- *Rigoletto* (2015)
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (2016)
- *Madama Butterfly* (2017)
- *Norma* (2018)
- *Manon Lescaut* (2019)
- *La Traviata* (2022)

[552] https://gaulitanus.com/gaulitana-festival/
[553] Ibid.



Figure 175 La Traviata by Gaulitana, 2023

In 2021 the Gaulitana organised 'Viva Verdi', an audio-visual project which presented operatic scenes from four of the best-loved operas by Giuseppe Verdi, namely *La Traviata, Rigoletto, Otello* and *La Forza del Destino*.[554] (See Figure 176) The scenes were filmed in various venues around Gozo like old historical buildings, convents, and valleys. The main aim of the project was to give a completely new perspective to Gozo's notable intrinsic link with opera. Another similar project that ended last January was 'Viva l'Opera' where this time around the operas *Pagliacci, Il Trovatore* and *L'Elisir d'Amore* were shot and streamed for free on various social platforms.[555] (See Figure 177)

[554] https://www.facebook.com/gaulitana/photos/a.486058631574254/1885815788265191
[555] *Times of Malta,* 'Gaulitanus to hold virtual opera series', 15 January 2023



Figure 176 Poster of *Viva Verdi* operatic series



Figure 177 Scene with the Brindisi of *La Traviata* filmed at the Aurora Theatre

4.8 The Stage

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Gozitan theatres' facilities were very limited. The two theatres in the main street of Victoria had invested in building two big auditoria to the detriment of other aspects such as equipment on stage. Additionally, neither theatre's backstage was adequately designed to cater for such big and complex productions.

The Aurora Theatre, despite covering a large square area, has a lot of wasted empty spaces. The open spaces above the lobby outside the auditorium may give a sense of openness but in fact could have been better planned and allowed for more storage areas and changing rooms. To compensate for this lack, the top tier of the boxes, which is more like a gallery, is used as changing rooms. Then, when the theatre is producing a popular opera and the box seats are sold, the chorus is moved to another part of the Aurora premises: to the ground floor of a nearby former discotheque which recently has been turned into a convention centre.[556]

Neither theatre has enough height above the stage for a fly tower where the scenery can be lifted when not in use. This results in the artists having no space to 'store' the scenery: the only available space is the stage. This creates many disadvantages in the run-up to an opera production. Rehearsals must take place elsewhere because the stage is being occupied by the set designers.

In the late 1970s the Astra Theatre went through some structural changes such as the enlargement of the stage (backwards), the elimination of a sidewall on the left side of

[556] Interview with Matthew Sultana

the stage that created more space backstage, the construction of a discotheque, and other rooms to be used for the band's amenities.[557]

In November 2003, the Astra Theatre caught fire due to an electricity fault on stage and the stage and auditorium were badly damaged. Thanks to the fire curtain, the auditorium only suffered minor damage. As part of the subsequent restoration, the management decided to prioritise the theatrical and operatic production; therefore, the cinema screen was removed, and the proscenium's size augmented in both height and width. The following year, 2004, the opera (*Tosca*) was still produced but, due to the ongoing reconstruction was held at the Grand Master's Suite at the Hilton Hotel in Malta.



Figures 178 damage caused by the fire of 2003

[557] Zammit (2023), 57

After the fire, the Astra theatre immediately started clearing the debris and new plans were made to start its reconstruction and reopening. In fact, the Astra opened its doors to the opera-loving public to a newly refurbished and redesigned theatre in October 2005 with the opera *La Boheme* in which the Maltese tenor, who was moving up the career ladder at a fast pace, Joseph Calleja, performed the role of Rodolfo. (See Figure 179)



Figure 179 Joseph Calleja in *La Boheme,* 2005

4.9 Scenery and Costumes

The Aurora theatre, through Paolo Pace, used to hire the scenery from Pino Izzo in Rome.[558] Peter Paul Borg, a member of the Aurora Theatre, recounts that when the scenography, made up of six large canvases, arrived, the backstage helpers had an enormous responsibility to lift them up and mount them as ordered. Many volunteers spent whole nights putting the canvases face down on the stage and pinning the ends to wooden rods. Then, they placed two other wooden bars in the shape of an X so that the canvas did not flex when it was upright. When the scenery was lifted, they would sprinkle some water on it to eliminate any wrinkles from the folding. The night between the two operatic performances were usually a long night spent changing the scenery from one opera to the other. These canvases had to be repacked diligently so as not to cause any damage and were sent back to Rome.[559]

Over the years many local artists have been asked to design or construct the opera set as was the case of Paul Stellini, who designed and constructed the set of *La Forza del Destino* at the Aurora in 2007. Austin Camilleri, a well-known contemporary artist, was commissioned, by the Astra, to work a set of lions and a large serpent out of fibreglass while the artist and academic, Mark Sagona, was responsible for the colour scheme for the set of *Turandot* (1995).[560] Since 1993 the artist Joseph Cauchi has been designing and constructing the opera sets at the Astra and his work has become well regarded: the props and scenery constructed for *Otello* were used in Rimini,[561] in

[558] Grech (2012), 319
[559] Interview with Peter Paul Borg
[560] Zammit (2023) 35
[561] *Times of Malta*, 25 January 2005

2005, while the team was also commissioned to construct the scenery for *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 2011, performed in Catania, Sicily.



Figure 180 Lucia di Lammermoor, Astra Theatre, 2017



Figure 181 Il Trovatore, Astra Theatre, 2019

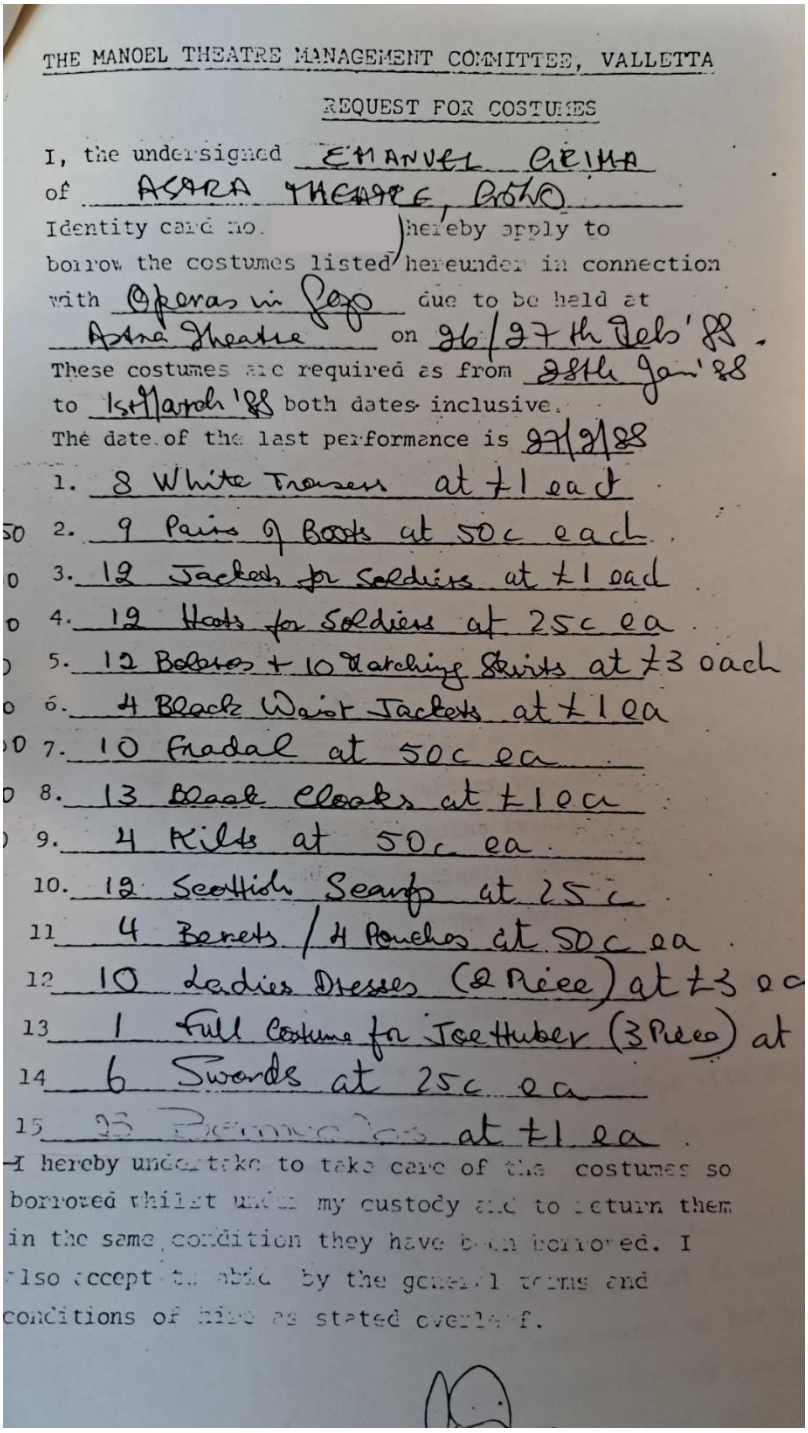


Figure 182 Carmen, Astra Theatre, 2022

The wardrobe department started slowly. In the 1990s, costumes were still being rented from various agencies in Italy and the service was not always up to standard. The Aurora Theatre rented the costumes of the main singers from Francesca Pipi in Palermo[562] and Casa d'Arte Jolanda in Rome,[563] while the chorus costumes were acquired from two ladies from Ħamrun, Malta, who used to provide costumes to the Royal Theatre in Valletta in the 1940s.[564] Later, when the business closed down, the Manoel Theatre bought all the costumes from them. This move was seen as another way of hindering the opera productions in Gozo.[565] In the late 1990s there was an agreement between the Astra Theatre, the Ministry for Gozo and the Manoel Theatre to rent opera costumes from the latter free of charge. (See Figure 183) There must have been a misunderstanding and the Manoel Theatre sent a hefty bill to the Astra Theatre which they were not able to pay.[566] Incidents like these led both theatres to invest in wardrobe departments where local seamstresses were asked to sew the opera costumes. Nowadays the theatres only rent the most expensive or complicated/intricate costumes, headpieces, wigs, and hats. Anna Briffa in an interview with Manuel Grima, who oversees the wardrobe department at the Astra theatre, commented that 'the fabrics that went into their production are sometimes bought, sometimes begged'.[567] Manuel continues to explain that "if we find something at a good price during a clear-out sale, we take it, whether we need it or not. We're bound to use it sooner or later... the result is, costumes that shimmer and shine lending the touch of

[562] Grech (2012), 356
[563] *The Times*, 31 October 1997
[564] Interview with Louis Xuereb
[565] Ibid.
[566] Private documents of Geoge Grech
[567] *The Sunday Times,* 4 May 1997

magic that is essential to a theatre production. Yet the need to keep the cost down in this area is crucial."[568]



THE MANOEL THEATRE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE, VALLETTA

REQUEST FOR COSTUMES

I, the undersigned EMANUEL GRIMA
of ASTRA THEATRE, GOZO
Identity card no.) hereby apply to
borrow the costumes listed hereunder in connection
with Operas in Gozo due to be held at
Astra Theatre on 26/27th Feb'88.
These costumes are required as from 28th Jan'88
to 1st March'88 both dates inclusive.
The date of the last performance is 27/2/88

1. 8 White Trousers at £1 each
2. 9 Pairs of Boots at 50c each
3. 12 Jackets for Soldiers at £1 each
4. 12 Hats for Soldiers at 25c ea
5. 12 Bolero + 10 Matching Skirts at £3 each
6. 4 Black Waist Jackets at £1 ea
7. 10 Fradal at 50c ea
8. 13 Black Cloaks at £1 ea
9. 4 Kilts at 50c ea
10. 12 Scottish Scarfs at 25c
11. 4 Berets / 4 Pouches at 50c ea
12. 10 Ladies Dresses (2 Piece) at £3 ea
13. 1 Full Costume for Joe Huber (3 Piece) at
14. 6 Swords at 25c ea
15. 33 [illegible] at £1 ea

I hereby undertake to take care of the costumes so borrowed whilst under my custody and to return them in the same condition they have been borrowed. I also accept to abide by the general terms and conditions of hire as stated overleaf.

Figure 183 The rental order of costumes from the Manoel Theatre by the Astra Theatre

[568] *The Sunday Times*, 4 May 1997

4.10 Finance and Marketing

Opera in Gozo was sought after by post-war Maltese opera-lovers who longed to attend grand opera. Even though the operatic standards in Gozo were not very high in the 1970's, the operatic situation in Malta was very limited. The theatres facilitated ticket sales in Malta by organised various selling points, such as the King's Own Band Club, d'Amato record shop, the travel agencies of John Portelli and Viaggi Montebello, amongst others. Each seller was given a number of tickets to sell. (See Figure 184) Obviously, these shops and individuals were given a commission from the ticket sales which either consisted of complimentary tickets or a percentage from every ticket sold. From documents provided by George Grech, (see Figure 185) the Astra Theatre's management reserved seats for each of the ticket sellers mentioned above.

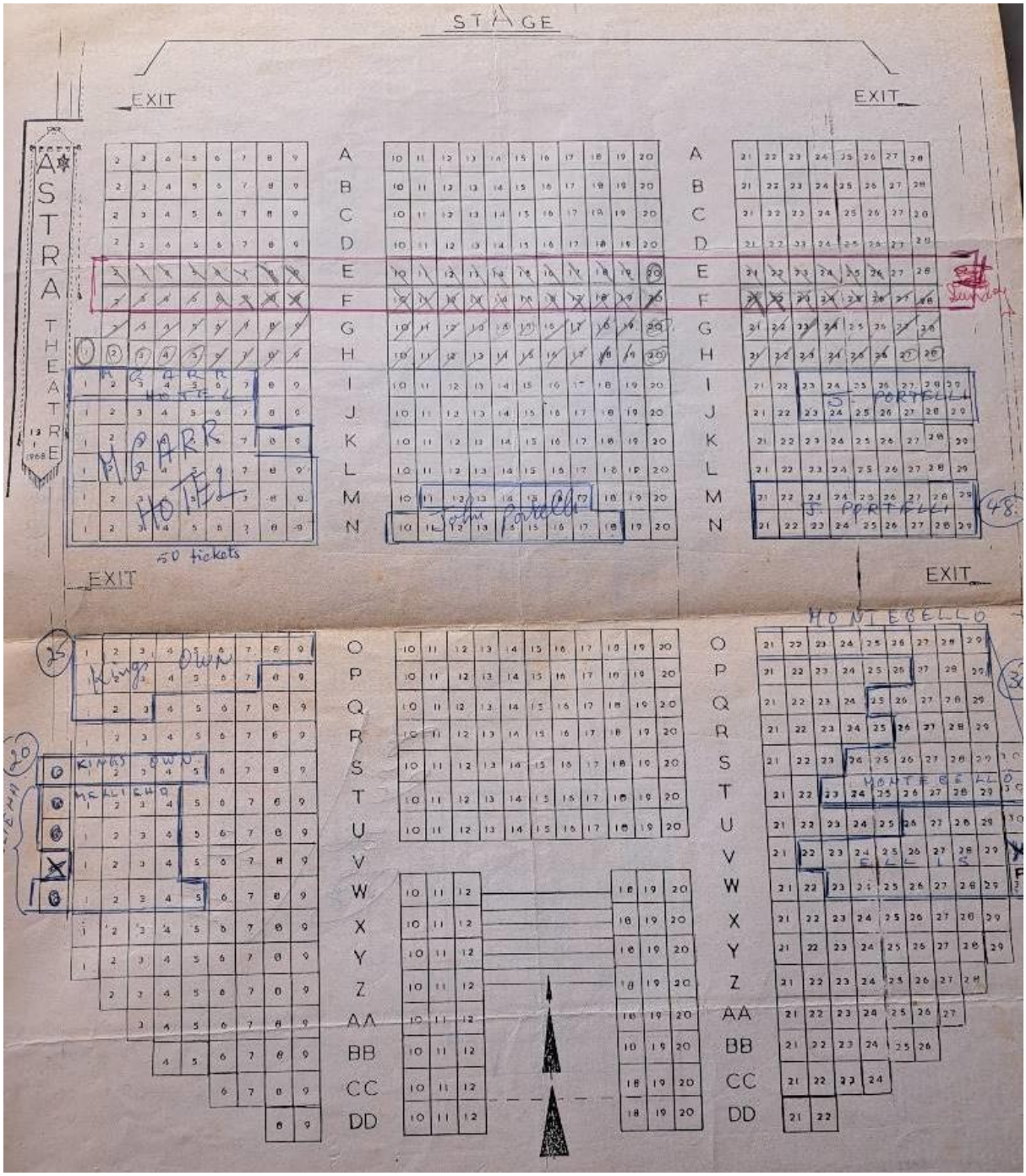
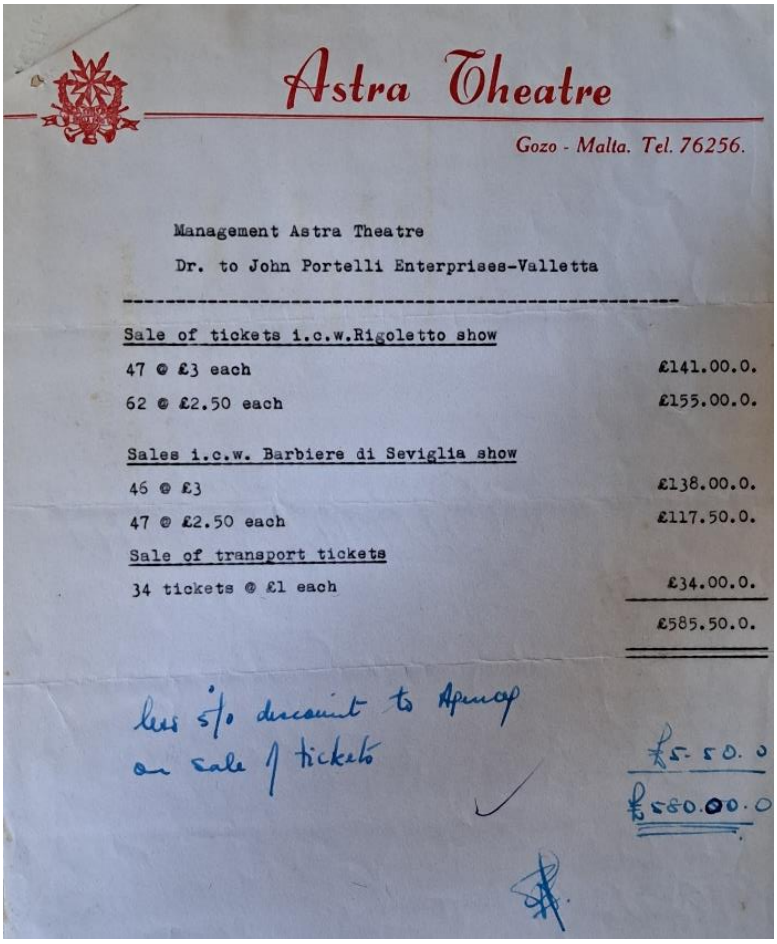


Figure 184 Seating plan for the opera *Turandot*, 1995



Astra Theatre

Gozo - Malta. Tel. 76256.

Management Astra Theatre

Dr. to John Portelli Enterprises-Valletta

Sale of tickets i.c.w.Rigoletto show	
47 @ £3 each	£141.00.0.
62 @ £2.50 each	£155.00.0.
Sales i.c.w. Barbiere di Seviglia show	
46 @ £3	£138.00.0.
47 @ £2.50 each	£117.50.0.
Sale of transport tickets	
34 tickets @ £1 each	£34.00.0.
	£585.50.0.

less 5% discount to Agency on sale of tickets £5.50.0

£580.00.0

Figure 185 Ticket sales from Maltese agents for the first operas at the Astra Theatre, 1978

The main aim of both theatres was, and still is, to enrich the operatic culture on the island, but not to the detriment of losing money so the management is constantly on the lookout for new sponsors. Opera in Gozo would be impossible without significant sponsorships and the most generous patrons are usually banks and big businesses such as the National Lottery, the Malta Tourism Association, Maltacom, the Gozo Channel company, and big factories such as Consolidated Biscuits and Coca-Cola. George Grech who was also the marketing director for the Astra Theatre, lived in Malta and was well-acquainted with the directors of some of these large companies. He used to build up personal contacts with sponsors, whom he called “friends making an astute

investment."[569] Sponsorship could be in the form of money, goods, or services, such as free dinners for choristers or airline tickets. Sponsors were then given complimentary tickets for the operatic performance, a full-page advertisement in the opera booklet,[570] rights over the publicity and the setup of prominent signs inside the theatre and on promotional material. One such sponsor offered a TV set which would then be raffled, and all the proceeds from ticket sales were used to cover opera expenses.[571] Other sponsorships came from small local business or individuals such as Maria Bondin who offered antique furniture from her own home and Joseph Scicluna, who owned a home decor shop, who also gave various items to use as props.[572] In the late 1980s an opera such as *L'Elisir d'Amore* or *Lucia di Lammermoor* would cost around LM8,000, (£15,936) while *Aïda* would cost around LM18,000 (£35,856).[573] When George Grech was asked (in 1997) how much money he actually managed to collect, from sponsors, for each production, he answered Lm3,000-Lm4,000 (£5,976-£7,968) so these sums were both significant and essential.[574]

The theatre's merchandising department has a crucial job to find sponsorships that support the operatic production. In 2018 the Aurora Theatre had a large sponsorship by Camilleri Paris Mode[575] and Luke Azzopardi, a local costume designer, who designed all the costumes for *Tosca*. (See Figure 186) x

[569] *The Sunday Times,* 4 May 1997
[570] Smaller companies chose to publish a full-colour sponsor on the souvenir booklet at the cost of LM 150 (£298)
[571] Interview with George Grech
[572] Interview with Louis Xuereb
[573] Correspondence between the Astra Theatre and the NSTF (National Student Travel Foundation)
[574] *The Sunday Times,* 4 May 1997
[575] Camilleri Paris Mode is a family run business. The fabric retail shop opened in Valletta in 1890 and has grown to include a large repertoire of luxurious products and services.



Figure 186 Tosca, Aurora Theatre, 2018

In the years 1978-79 and 1986-88 each theatre was producing two different productions on the same weekend, (see Appendices 4 and 5) and both theatres were losing money from ticket sales. These losses meant that the theatres could not afford to buy new and modern technologies. Louis Xuereb, a former president of the Aurora Theatre, tried to convince the management to produce one opera per season arguing that in doing so the theatre lost money from just one production, and not two. Concentrating on one production made logistics easier and all departments were more focused. However, when both theatres opted for one opera per weekend or per year, another problem came up. The principal singers were not used to signing a contract for just one operatic performance. This gave the impression that opera in Gozo was not a popular operatic destination and it seemed too troublesome to travel to a small

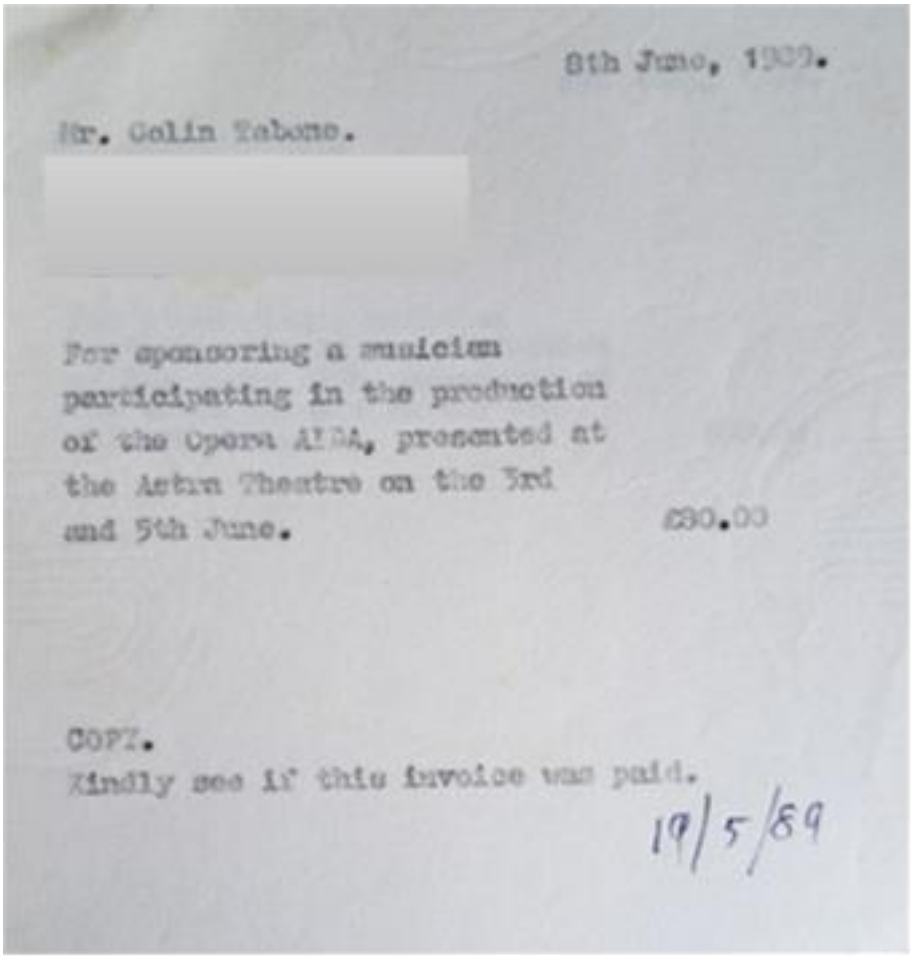
island in the Mediterranean for just one performance. Staging, scenery, props, costumes, and many other tasks were produced for just one evening. Main singers were contacted months before the performance and there were instances when they would receive a better offer, in a larger and more popular theatre with multiple performances and decide not to come to Gozo.[576] This could happen since there was no binding contract between the theatre and the singer. Such a contract would augment the fee drastically and the theatres could not afford such sums. Instead, an understanding was made, either by telephone (in the early years) or by email (later years) in which details about the performance, transport and lodging arrangements were made.[577]

Both theatres sought to better their respective operatic production but most of the committee members, instead of seeking ways to improve the artistic and musical aspects of the performance, focused on how to make money, or at least try not to lose too much. Most committee members did not appreciate the art of opera so, if one of the members suggested a very good singer, who cost a lot, the idea was immediately discarded. For most of them, the opera was produced just for the sake of saying "we did another one". Quality or improvement were not top priorities. All that mattered was that 'ours' was better than 'theirs'.

The management of both theatres tried to come up with various ideas on how to fund opera. In 1989, the Astra theatre created 'sponsor a musician' where an individual or a firm would financially support the theatre by donating the sum LM80 (£159) to cover

[576] Interview with Matthew Sultana
[577] Ibid.

their performance fee. (See Figure 187) This scheme was well received and in the first year about 25 individuals or firms participated.[578]



8th June, 1989.

Mr. Colin Zahone.

For sponsoring a musician participating in the production of the Opera AIDA, presented at the Astra Theatre on the 3rd and 5th June. £30.00

COPY.
Kindly see if this invoice was paid.
19/5/89

Figure 187 receipt for 'Sponsor a Musician'.

The Astra Theatre's management was sensitive to spending money unnecessarily and was always very frugal. George Borg recounts that when a light bulb burned, it was replaced by another bulb that was not being used from somewhere else in the theatre, maybe a corridor or a storage room. If nails were used to construct the scenery, when they were removed, someone was ordered to hammer the nails back straight so that

[578] Correspondence between the Astra Theatre and the NSTF (National Student Travel Foundation)

they could be used again. If a windowpane was broken it was not replaced but covered with some wood instead.

In the 1970s the Astra theatre bought a cyclorama[579] which was an avantgarde feature in the theatres of the time. Like most of the things at the Astra, it was bought second-hand from a theatre in England. A committee member got to know about this from one of the Englishmen living on the island and the Astra quickly made the purchase.[580]

Carmel Zammit, the Astra's stage manager recounts how staging effects in the 1970s were achieved with minimal resources. At the time they used a can in which they put a light bulb to mimic the effect of a spotlight. On top of the can, they put a piece of cinemoid[581] which was attached with chicken wire. The cinemoid did not fit properly on top of the can, so there were many stray lights (white light from the bulb). They had to improvise also when it came to creating props and special features, for example when they wanted to create a waterfall. The backstage hands managed to create a rotating mechanism which, with light effects and paint, looked like a waterfall. Indeed, all the props for the operas were produced at the theatre by various volunteers who spent long afternoons and nights working on these accessories. The management used to acquire left-over tin from a local factory and helpers modelled it into sceptres, swords and so on. The locals who oversaw the theatre's lighting system in the 1970s managed to create a home-made lighting deck that controlled the lights in the theatre and could also dim them. Additionally in Gozo, at that time, there were various foreigners who

[579] A large, concave curtain made of white canvas, positioned at the back of the stage. It creates a flat and even surface where pictures or videos can be projected.
[580] Interview with Carmelo Zammit
[581] Sheets of acetate that were self-extinguishing and came in various colours that were put in front of a spotlight to change its colour.

had moved to the island and several of them gave tips on how things should be done. One of them, Richard Pilbrow put forward the idea of having a 'front of house' which are the lights that light the faces on stage.

While the Astra management was in preparations for the 2006 operatic production, which was to consist of *Cavalleria Rusticana, Pagliacci* and *Suor Angelica,* the Aurora's management team were going through a conundrum: the theatre's secretary, Mario Gatt, fled the islands due to financial problems. This left the Aurora's management disorganised and unprepared, and in fact no opera was produced that year.

Finances were, and still are the crux of problems in any theatre. The patrons could not raise the opera ticket price too much since after all they depended on the Maltese public who, besides the ticket, must pay for the ferry, transport, food and maybe even lodging for an overnight or weekend stay in Gozo.

The theatres had various agreements with companies such as the Gozo Channel that granted a number of free ferry tickets for the opera participants but unfortunately this subsidisation ended a few years ago. Financial support from the government is also very important. In 2013, the Permanent Secretary for Culture, Jose Herrera created the Gozo Cultural Support Scheme – an agreement between both theatres and the government which donates a substantial amount of money to help in opera productions. Also, in 2016, the Arts Council Malta and the Ministry for Gozo launched the Gozo Cultural Support Programme to support Gozo's cultural calendar in which €230,000 (£196,702) was allocated annually, over a three-year period, to support

various artistic organisations, amongst which were the two opera theatres.[582] In 2022 the Ministry for National Heritage, Arts and Local Government granted €330,000 (£280, 260) between the two theatres, with an additional €60,000 (£51,320) from the Ministry for Gozo.[583]

[582] https://ifacca.org/news/2016/04/05/launch-gozo-cultural-support-programme/
[583] https://artscouncilmalta.gov.mt/news/an-investment-of-390000-in-opera-productions-in-gozo

4.11 The Driving Forces Behind a Production

The work that goes into any musical production often gets underestimated. While performers are in the spotlight, a lot of work lies behind the scenes. An essential human resource in a theatre are the backstage workers, who ensure that everything comes together for a seamless show. These 'invisible' participants include the props manager, stagehands, wardrobe department, lighting technicians and technical managers. Each of these departments encompasses another group of helpers. Besides, the theatre's management is responsible for the financial, marketing, human resources, and sales of a production.

The two band clubs evolved from a meeting place to a cinema and then to an opera theatre and this change is still ongoing. Nowadays both theatres have transformed their respective premises keeping up to date with the public's cultural and social interests and needs. The bingo nights are almost extinct since the younger generation is more interested in online entertainment, which is mostly done at home, like spending time on social media or watching films or tv programmes. The theatres stopped functioning as cinemas by the year 2001 while the discotheques survived a decade longer. The latter made way for a conference hall in the case of the Aurora Theatre while that of the Astra Theatre is planned to become a house for the elderly.[584] During the Covid-19 months both theatres underwent intensive transformations and part of the foyer was converted into a restaurant.

The two theatres produce operas that consist of a mixture of professional and amateur participants, but standards have been rising consistently. These productions have

[584] https://www.caremalta.com/caremalta-group-to-extend-its-services-to-gozo/

attracted the interest of the well-to-do Maltese middle-class, so the audiences tend to be larger than those at the Manoel Theatre.[585] The latest operas, held in 2022, at the Aurora and the Astra theatres were *Aïda* and *Carmen* respectively. (See Figures 188 and 189).



Figure 188 Aïda, Aurora Theatre, 2022

[585] Miceli (1997)



Figure 189 Carmen, Astra Theatre, 2022

Opera is assuredly the largest enterprise that the two Gozitan theatres produce but the calendar of both theatres is busy all year round. For example, the auditorium and stage are frequently hired by schools for their annual or Christmas concert. Since December 2022, the Astra has hosted a Maltese theatrical company, FM Theatre, which produces a pantomime on the Astra stage. Other events include the Leone band playing in *Leone Goes Pop,* normally around June, where the band plays pop music, while the La Stella band becomes 'rock' and performs in *RockAstra*. Since 2016, the Astra management, has ventured into producing musicals, a 'continuation' of the operettas which were very popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Musicals performed included *Grease, Evita, Jesus Christ Superstar, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat, Sister Act, The Sound of Music; West Side Story* is planned for March 2024.

Dr. Abraham Borg, an operatic historian, observes that in Malta the 'amor proprio'[586] towards a musical Society has drastically diminished and in various parts of Malta is absent. Everyone wants to get paid for a job at the theatre or church where he grew up thus making voluntary work obsolete. Fortunately, the voluntary aspect in Gozo, mainly at the two musical societies of the capital, is still alive. The operatic productions at the Astra and Aurora theatres are a mix of professional work (artistic/musical directors, singers) and voluntary work (costumes/scenery etc).

Voluntary work, or, as it is described by voluntary workers themselves 'the labour of love', alleviates the theatres from many expenses, and it ranges from the theatre's management up to scenography building and painting, costumes, prop-making, choristers, make-up, hairdressers, ushers and many more things. Seamstresses do not just sew costumes but go out of their way to visit large textile shops and ask if they can have some fabrics at a reduced price or even free of charge. Donated materials may range from lush velvety ones, which can be used for operas, to shiny metallic ones, for Carnival.

Despite still having many volunteers, the two Gozitan theatres have perceived that the enthusiasm has drastically reduced. Locals who support either of the two Societies find no problem in sending the bill to the theatre's management. Most find it difficult to do anything for free, especially at times when prices for services and goods have gone up.

Besides voluntary work, another driving force behind the success and persistence of the two theatres is the rivalry between them. Louis Xuereb, an ex-President of the

[586] Love towards something at heart

Aurora Theatre said ‘ta l-istilla avversarji, mhux għedewwa’ – ‘the La Stella and Leone are adversaries, not enemies’. They are like two football teams playing a match; may the best team win! In a way the two theatres should consider themselves lucky that this contest has been manifesting itself in pointless feuding in the past. It has been often said that conflict sets off the divine spark and in the case of the two opera houses in Gozo, long may it last.[587] Besides rivalry, there must be passion and pride, both in the work done and in regard of the theatre itself and to what it represents. Lately, the two band clubs have made an agreement to exchange operatic scores, thus avoiding extra costs.

It is notable how the two opera theatres in Gozo have stuck with producing operas throughout the years despite the financial risks and the numerous difficulties they involve. It is impressive to have two theatres, which together contain 2,800 seats, on a small island with a population of 39,000. Many bigger cities, even metropolises cannot boast such facilities. However, the operas at Astra and Aurora are still going strong. The fact that both theatres are managed by two band clubs and not by a private entity or the government helps to maintain the ‘amor proprio” and a strong sense of competition. Each theatre has experimented and sought to improve on each production; some innovations were not successful, but the managements have continued on course and learned from their mistakes. The persistence, enthusiasm and energy invested each year in such a massive artistic project is admirable. The passion and the continuing rivalry, which in this case is a healthy one, led both theatres to revive the operatic scene in Malta and even though the operatic seasons of today

[587] *The Sunday Times*, 4 May 1997

are nothing to compare with those of the pre-war years, the operatic art form still has a designated space in the cultural calendar of the island.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, when noble Maltese people were educated within a Maltese patriotic consensus, they had to have a standard of "patria".[588] Being Maltese meant being "Catholic by religion, Italian by cultural heritage and Maltese through local attachments and habits."[589]

Symbols of Roman Catholic faith in Malta can be seen everywhere: names of villages and streets, names of people and the numerous church domes that dominate the skyline of the island.[590] The epitome of Maltese culture is the village feast, in honour of the patron saint/s, which are celebrated throughout summer. Village feasts are fuelled not only by devotion, but also by rivalry as is the case of the feasts organised in Victoria. Whereas band clubs in Malta are associated with political parties, the La Stella and Leone ones are not. In fact, the people in charge of the two opera theatres do not change according to which political party is in government but they are elected by the band members themselves. Rivalry not only brought up tense moments in the history of the two theatres but also instilled a great sense of pride in one's work. The competition between the two musical societies dates back to their origin in the late 1800s. The disagreements were numerous and mostly focused on which band was to dominate and organise the feast of St. George, which was the most popular feast in Gozo. A solution was found in 1955 when it was decided that the La Stella band would organise the feast of St. George while that of Leone would organise the feast of the

[588] Homeland
[589] Henry Frendo 1991, *The rise of Maltese nationalism 1880-1888*
[590] Daniel Sciciluna, *'Kburin': a documentary film, focusing on the various elements of Maltese culture communications from different Maltese regions.* University of Malta, 2019

Virgin Mary. The rivalry between the two did not disperse but on the contrary, it continued to brew until the present day. All this antagonism led the two societies to build a massive, beautiful, and spacious theatre each. The Astra and Aurora Theatres are considered cultural gems.

The uniqueness of the two opera theatres in Gozo does not stop there. Various band clubs in Malta have majestic and highly adorned headquarters but none have a theatre that could host over a thousand spectators and a stage that could host any type of theatrical production. In this research I have explained how in the 1960s and 1970s the La Stella and Leone band clubs held various activities inside their respective clubhouses, such as bingo nights and later cinema, and how from the profits that these activities yielded, both clubs decided to enlarge their premises so they could cater for bigger audiences and mount theatrical productions. When they acquired a large piece of land, the new, bigger premises functioned as a cinema, theatre, rehearsal space, meeting place and music school. With two new theatres, both societies had the opportunity to widen the horizon of opportunities: to have a profitable business and at the same time cater for the social and cultural aspects of the people.

Operas in Gozo are considered accessible to all, while the two opera theatres have kept high standards through the years. Opera in Malta before World War II was long considered to be “high culture” entertainment, which only the small, richer section of society could attend. There was a code of behaviour, including a dress code, which could only be achieved by the upper-class. Opera was a ‘higher’ form of art intended for a cultivated audience.[591] Opera in Malta did not become unpopular, rather it was

[591] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarch in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1988, 102

made unpopular: it was appropriated from its popular audience by elite social groups determined to situate it as the crowning glory of their 'high culture'.[592] The fact that opera was sung in a foreign language continued to seclude it and mark it as 'non reachable'. Ironically, however, this elite interest has often been what has guaranteed opera's survival: either because these people pay large amounts for tickets and make opera financially viable, or because they have the influence which ensures that the state continues to subsidise it. The elitist tag remained until the early 1940s: the opera house in Valletta was not accessible to all and it was considered to be the meeting place for the upper class and later, the emerging middle class. This changed when more theatres were opened outside Valletta and opera in Malta became for all. While considering this art form in Malta one apprehends that local opera was never made up of modest touring troupes like the ones that trekked around Britain bringing cutdown reduced versions of popular operas in small towns at cheap prices, or, as in more recent years, like the City of Birmingham Opera, which produced opera differently, such as in aircraft hangars, power stations, nightclubs and ice rinks.[593] Opera in Malta was always produced in a traditional manner: in a theatre, with a full orchestra and cast, foreign main singers (except for the years when Italians were banned from Malta), scenery, costumes and so on. Other practices, such as performing on an open-air stage, did not last.

Ever since the early Maltese operatic productions at the Teatro Pubblico up to the present day, going to the opera has meant 'being seen'. The opera house was, and still is to some extent, also a club, a gallery, an arena in which vanities and passions

[592] John Storey 2002, *"Expecting Rain": Opera as Popular Culture?*
[593] https://www.birminghamopera.org.uk/our-work

were enacted daily. As much drama happened in front of the curtain than behind it.[595] Opera in Malta was considered a cult, a habit, part of life.[596] Opera in Gozo surely is a glamorous event where all (almost) wear their best attire, drink champagne in the foyer before the opera starts and during breaks, and it is also an occasion to meet people. But then, once you are inside the auditorium it is a totally different story: the melodrama and the greatness of rendering a libretto into passionate arias involve you emotionally. Each person might recognise him/herself in a character or a situation and then are overwhelmed by the emotions that run through the storyline.

Opera is an art-form that should be instilled in children from an early age. Opera, and cultural activities in general, are an essential ingredient for the well-being of society. Nevertheless, such culture cannot be obtained effortlessly or inexpensively, but must be physically promoted and in many instances financially subsidised by generous patrons and institutions within our society.[597] In 2018, in Malta, the Classique Foundation, led by Joseph Debrincat, came up with the project *Opera 4 Kids* where Gozitan primary students were introduced to the world of opera through a workshop, an interactive performance and a workbook. The following year, this same foundation produced the opera *Bo Peep*, an opera for children composed by Joseph Vella.[598]

During the pandemic, theatres and operatic companies have made opera more accessible, theoretically at least, without the emphasis of the socialite attitude and expense. One such example is *The Met's: Live in HD,* an award-winning series of live movie theatre transmissions also available to stream at home on demand. Watching

[595] Bonello (1997)
[596] John Wignacourt 1914*, A Night at the Opera* from *The Odd Man in Malta,* Chapman & Hall Ltd., London
[597] Miceli Farrugia (1997)
[598] https://newsbook.com.mt/en/a-opera-from-children-to-children-during-second-edition-of-music/

an opera on a TV screen is quite different from sitting in a theatre for over two hours, watching a story evolve on a stage, in a foreign language and with little or no special effects. On the other hand, even though musicals have the same setup as opera, the former are more popular. In musicals there are rapid scene changes, shorter musical numbers, and musical material alternates with dialogue: there is typically more variety than in opera.

In my research, I have interviewed various contributors who shared with me their stories, anecdotes, and thoughts. This method of research was essential, even though oral history has its limitations. The recent history of the two band clubs and the construction of the two theatres has always been recounted by historians. In my research I focused on the men[599] who were there when the theatre was built, the ones who came up with ideas on how to get funding for the building and eventually the maintenance of the theatres. They were amongst the committee members who suggested new titles for operas to produce and who went knocking door to door to ask for sponsorship: they were part of the history of the Astra and Aurora Theatres. My research is supported by various documents and photos kept in private archives and which were handed to me by some of the people I interviewed. Documents varied from correspondence, to bills and newspaper cuttings. In fact, I was instructed that after I finish my research, I am to hand these documents to the theatres so that they can include them in their library. Additionally, I have consulted various books and documents referring to the two Gozitan musical Societies but there was a gap in the research. This thesis explains the historical connections between the two musical

[599] All people interviewed were males.

societies, the building of two massive operatic theatres and the importance of opera production in Gozo.

In my analysis of opera in Malta from the time of the Knights of St. John to the present day, I examined operatic productions and seasons and placed particular emphasis on opera in Gozo. Malta has a long operatic history in which the love for opera by a group of Italian knights in 1631, was later passed to the Grand Master who donated a beautiful theatre to the Maltese population, which is still appreciated today. Behind the productions of operatic seasons there was always an individual, such as the Grand Master, or an institution, usually the government, who financially supported it. Opera in Malta was a celebration of Italian culture and was sometimes used as a political weapon, most obviously when Italian governments, principally the Fascist one led by Mussolini, used opera to promote Italian culture and hence attract locals to support anything Italian. On the other side of the political dispute were the English who made various political, social, and cultural contributions to Maltese society. The disagreements between the pro-English and the pro-Italian lobbies, known as 'The Language Dispute', ended when Mussolini declared war against the Allies and the English government took the drastic step in 1939, of banning Italians from Malta and expelling the Maltese who were pro-Italian. With this action, opera suffered a great setback and the Maltese started producing, participating, and organising opera themselves. Malta was heavily bombarded during World War II, since it was an aerial base for the English, close to both Italy and Africa. One building which was hit by enemy bombs in 1942 was the Royal Opera House. This could have led to the end of opera in Malta, but the Maltese considered opera to be part of their cultural heritage and instead, opera started being performed in small theatres outside of Valletta. In

1960, the Manoel Theatre reopened, and started producing opera again after a gap of 30 years; all the other theatres that had given opera in the post-war period turned to performing plays, organising pop and rock concerts, dance evenings or cinemas. This research shows the list of operas performed per year, as from 1942, and in which theatre they were performed. (Appendix 2 and 3) Manoel Theatre audiences consisted mostly of people who longed for the good old days of regular operatic seasons in Malta[600] such as those given at the Royal Opera House before its destruction in 1942. However, the small stage of the Manoel Theatre precludes grand operas like *Aïda*, *Il Trovatore* etc. from being staged in Malta. Such a small venue can only host operas that have a small cast and orchestra such as Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*.

Despite all the efforts to keep opera alive, in 1969, the Italian government stopped subsidising opera, and local operatic companies could not afford all the expenses of producing an opera. Consequently, opera came to a halt in Malta except for occasional attempts by some foreign companies.

Meanwhile, in the 1970s in Gozo, some 30 kilometres away from the Manoel Theatre, two band clubs were in great competition. It has not been previously understood how two band clubs, hailing from a small town, managed to build two opera houses, which was a feat not seen anywhere else in Malta.

This research shows that the Gozo theatres' first foray into the realm of opera was not a happy one but the continuity at the helm of these "club" theatres has produced results and the interest in this genre increases each year. Opera tickets are sought after from months in advance and all performances are fully booked. Gozo has become a cultural

[600] Miceli (1997)

destination and Maltese audiences look forward to attending opera and other concerts (of various genres) in Gozo.

Having a successful history behind you does not mean that you stop looking for more opportunities and to improve. An important aspect of my research observes that both the Astra and Aurora Theatres have been successful mostly thanks to voluntary workers.

Theatres are usually fully professional or entirely amateur. It has not been previously pointed out how the Astra and Aurora Theatres, through the years, have found a different way of existing in this respect: both have a semi-professional status but despite this, both produce operas which are highly professional. Given the size and nature of the two clubs, it is quite astounding that they have ventured into not just one, but two massive projects in a time (1960s-1970s) when the population was not wealthy, and many locals struggled to live and satisfy their basic needs. All the people that contributed towards the building of the two theatres and towards producing operas over the years were amateurs. None of them were experts in theatre building or opera organisation. Most of them learnt on the job or by trial and error but ultimately, they strived to have ambitious projects of high quality. With sheer determination and the driving force of being better than their adversaries, club members went knocking from door to door, pleaded for money, asked friends and strangers for help, got their hands dirty and even occasionally put the theatre before their own family. The two opera theatres in Gozo are a living testament to determination and commitment and the phrase, “where there’s a will, there’s a way” applies perfectly. The Astra and Aurora

theatres have kept the tradition of opera in Malta alive and succeeded in reviving and elevating it to very high standards.

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APPENDIX I

Impresarios from 1866-1942

Opera Season/s	Impresario
1866/67-1869/70	G. W. Malfiggiani
1870/71-1880/81	H. Zinelli and Le Brun (later H. Zinelli, Busuttil and Montanaro)
1881/82-1884/85	G.W. Malfiggiani
1885/86-1888/89	A. Nani & Ci.
1889/90	C. Ronzani & Ci
1890/91-1893/94	G. W. Malfiggiani
1894/95-1900/1901	A.W. Malfiggiani
April 1898	Maestro Paolino Vassallo
1899/1900	During this season Signor R. Castagna was appointed representative after A. W. Malfiggiani passed away.
1901/02	Benedetto Perez was appointed representative of A. W. Malfiggiani on the demise of R. Castagna.
1902/03-1905/06	L. Balzan passed away before the start of the season and the impresa was continued by Dr Em. Said MD represented by Mr A. Borg.
1906/07-1915/16	Cesare di Lancellotti & Dr Em. Said MD
1916/17-1918/19	Cesare di Lancellotti. Garanti: Luigi Apap
1919/20	Cesare di Lancellotti. Garanti: F. Falzon & G. Mifsud
1920/21	Dr Em. Said MD & Augusto German P.L. Dr Said was elected as a representative in the Maltese Senate and Augusto German P.L signed the contract on 3 January 1922.
1922/23-1926/27	Augusto German P.L/
1927/28-1929/30	Cav. Em. Said MD
1930/31-1931/32	The theatre was under government management from 1929 to 1932. Direttore Augusto German P.L.
1932/33-1934/35	G. Farrugia
1935/36-1938/39	Cav. Em. Said MD
1939-1942	A.W. Said/Augusto German

APPENDIX II

List of operas and venues from 1942 to 1969

All this information was gathered from Alfred Miceli's book, L-Istorja ta' l-Opra f'Malta (1866-2000)

Legend

- Roxy Theatre
- Odeon Theatre
- Manoel Theatre
- Gaiety Theatre
- Command Hall Theatre
- Teatru Stadium, Empire Ground Stadium, Gżira
- The Toc Headquarters, Sliema
- Radio City Opera House
- Orpheum Theatre
- Knightshall, Valletta
- Open air

Sung in Maltese – red
Sung in English – blue
Sung in original language - black

1942

- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
- Act 1 of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, act 3 of *Madama Butterfly*, act 2 and 3 of *La Traviata* (September-October)

1943

- *L'Elisir d'Amore*
- *La Traviata*
- Act 3 of *Madama Butterfly*
- *Madama Butterfly*
- *Don Pasquale*

1944

- *Rigoletto*
- *La Traviata*
- *Fedora*
- *Werther*
- *Lucia di Lammermoor*
- *L'Elisir d'Amore*
- *Madama Butterfly*

Act 1 of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Act 2 of *Il Trovatore*
Concert version of *La Boheme* (with piano accompaniment)

1945-46
Cavalleria Rusticana
La Boheme
La Sonnambula
Madama Butterfly
La Traviata
Il Trovatore
Lucia di Lammermoor
Il Barbiere di Siviglia
Pagliacci
Rigoletto
Carmen
Il Matrimonio Segreto
L'Elisir d'Amore
Werther
Fedora
L'Alpino (C. Diacono)

1946-47
Fedora
La Traviata
Carmen
Cavalleria Rusticana
Pagliacci
Rigoletto
Tosca
Madama Butterfly
La Favorita
Lucia di Lammermoor
La Boheme
Gala performance of *La Traviata*

1948-49
La Traviata
Lucia di Lammermoor
Cavalleria Rusticana
Pagliacci
La Boheme
Il Barbiere di Siviglia
Madama Butterfly
Un Ballo in Maschera (benefit concert for Cantoni)
Rigoletto
La Forza del Destino
L'Elisir d'Amore
Il Trovatore



Manon (Massenet)
Three concerts by Tito Gobbi

1950



Andrea Chernier
Cavalleria Rusticana
Pagliacci
Il Trovatore
Two recitals by Tito Schipa
Two recitals by Maria Caniglia
Aïda
Lucia di Lammermoor
La Boheme
La Traviata
Rigoletto
Madama Butterfly
Faust
La Gioconda
Tosca
Otello
Il Figlio del Sole (C. Ciantar)

1951



La Traviata
Rigoletto
Madama Butterfly
La Sonnambula
Fedora
Don Pasquale
Lucia di Lammermoor
Il Barbiere di Siviglia
Cavalleria Rusticana
L'Amico Fritz
Pagliacci

1952



Un Ballo in Maschera
Otello
Aïda
La Forza del Destino
Rigoletto
La Traviata
Mefistofele (Boito)
Carmen
Andrea Chernier
Un Ballo in Maschera
Rigoletto
Carmen

▲ *Il Pescatore di Perle*

1953

▲ *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*
▲ *Rigoletto*
▲ *La Boheme*
▲ *Il Trovatore*
▲ *La Favorita*
▲ *Turandot*
▲ *Lucia di Lammermoor*
▲ *La Traviata*

1954

1955

▲ *Otello*
▲ *Cavalleria Rusticana*
▲ *Pagliacci*
▲ *Un Ballo in Maschera*
▲ *Andrea Chernier*
▲▲ *La Traviata*
▲▲ *Tosca*
▲ *Aïda*
▲ *La Boheme*
▲ *Lucia di Lammermoor*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*
▲ *Iris* (Mascagni)
▲ *Cecilia* (Refice)
▲ *Carmen*
▲ *Rigoletto*
▲ *Norma*
▲ *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
▲ *Faust*

1956

▲ *La Fanciulla del West*
▲ *La Boheme*
▲ *Adriana Lecouvreur*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*
▲ *Cavalleria Rusticana*
▲ *L'Elisir d'Amore*
▲ *La Forza del Destino*
▲ *La Traviata*
▲ *Pagliacci*
▲ *Il Pescatore di Perle*
▲ *Tosca*

▲ *Carmen*

1957

▲ *Suor Angelica* *
▲ *Il Tabarro*
▲ *Gianni Schicchi*
▲ *Sansone e Dalila* (Saint-Saens)
▲ *Carmen*
▲ *La Gioconda*
▲ *Andrea Chernier*
▲ *Un Ballo in Maschera*
▲ *Cavalleria Rusticana*
▲ *Fedora*
▲ *Lucia di Lammermoor*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*
▲ *Otello*
▲ *Pagliacci*
▲ *Rigoletto*
▲ *La Sonnambula*
▲ *Il Trovatore*
▲ *Werther*

1958

▲ *Faust*
▲ *Turandot*
▲ *Nabucco*
▲ *La Traviata*
▲ *Aïda*
▲ *La Boheme*
▲ *Manon Lescaut*
▲ *Tosca*
▲ *William Tell*
▲ *Rigoletto*

1959

△ *Rigoletto*
△ *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
▲ *La Wally* (Catalani)
▲ *Il Piccolo Marat* (Mascagni)
▲ *Il Trovatore*
▲ *La Forza del Destino*
▲ *Lucia di Lammermoor*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*
▲ *Manon*
▲ *I Pescatori di Perle*

1960

△ *Otello*

△ *La Traviata*
△ *Cavalleria Rusticana*
△ *Pagliacci*
△ *Carmen*

1961

▲ *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
▲ *La Boheme*
▲ *Fedora*
▲ *Norma*
▲ *Rigoletto*
▲ *Zaza* (Leoncavallo)
▲ *Sansone e Dalila*
▲ *Amahl e gli Ospiti Notturni* * (G. C. Menotti)
▲ *Cavalleria Rusticana*
▲ *Lucia di Lammermoor*
▲ *Adriana Lecourveur*
▲ *La Traviata*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*
▲ *Tosca*

1962

▲ *Manon Lescaut*
▲ *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
▲ *Il Medico Suo Malgrado* * (S. Allegra)
▲ *Rita/Il Marito Percosso* * (Donizetti)
▲ *Andrea Chernier*
▲ *La Favorita*
▲ *Il Trovatore*
▲ *Un Ballo in Maschera*

1963

▲ *Ave Maria* * (S. Allegra)
▲ *La Serva Padrona*
▲ *La Forza del Destino*
▲ *Otello*
▲ *Rigoletto*
▲ *Iris* (Mascagni)
▲ *Tosca*

1964

▲ *Faust*
▲ *La Traviata*
▲ *Il Pescatore di Perle*
▲ *Manon* (Massenet)
▲ *Fedora*
▲ *Madama Butterfly*

1965

- *Caterina Desguanez* * (C. Pace)
- *L'Amico Fritz*
- *Turandot*
- *Cavalleria Rusticana*
- *Carmen*
- *La Boheme*

1966

- *La Guerra* * (R. Rossellini)
- *Pagliacci*
- *Werther*
- *Adriana Lecouvreur*
- *Rigoletto*

1967

- *I Martiri* * (C. Pace)
- *L'Elisir d'Amore*
- *Lucia di Lammermoor*
- *Turandot*

1968

- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*
- *Madama Butterfly*
- *Il Trovatore*

1969

- *Hansel and Gretel* (E. Humperdinck)

* New to Malta

APPENDIX III

Operas held in Malta 1970 - present

Legend

- Operas organised by the Manoel Theatre
- Operas held by other local and foreign entities.
- Concert version of opera or highlights
- Operas held at the Aurora Theatre
- Operas held at the Astra Theatre
- Maltafest: a cultural event organised by the government
- BOV (Bank of Valletta) Opera Festival or BOV Performing Arts Festival
- Gaulitanus production at the Aurora Theatre
- Valletta International Baroque Festival

1970

- *Caterina Desguanez* (C. Pace)[601]

1972

- *Rigoletto,* subsidized by the Italian Ministry for Tourism, produced by the impresa Teatro Municipale di Piacenza[602]
- *Tosca,* subsidized by the Italian Ministry for Tourism, produced by the impresa Teatro Municipale di Piacenza[603]
- *La Sonnambula,* subsidized by the Italian Ministry for Tourism, produced by the impresa Teatro Municipale di Piacenza[604]

1973

- *Angelica* (C. Pace)[605]

1974

- 3rd act from *Aïda*[606]
- 1st act from *Tosca*[607]

1975

- Istituto Italiano di Cultura in association with the Manoel Theatre Committee presented a recital including popular Italian and Russian arias.[608]
- highlights from *Ernani*, as part of the *International Arts Festival*[609]

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[601] *Times of Malta*, 23 October 1970
[602] *Times of Malta,* 20 May 1972, 24
[603] *Times of Malta,* 22 May 1972, 13
[604] *Times of Malta,* 28 May 1972, 17
[605] *Times of Malta*, 25 October 1972, 9
[606] Miceli (1866-2000), p. 274
[607] Ibid.
[608] *Times of Malta*, 9 October 1975
[609] *Times of Malta,* 9 October 1975, 12

1976

Ipogeana (C. Pace)[610]

3rd act from *La Boheme* – with the contribution of Istituto Italiano di Cultura[611]

1977

Madama Butterfly, two performances. Impresa Paolo Pace[612]

4th act of *Rigoletto* and selections from *Carmen* organised by the Manoel Theatre Management Committee as part of the *International Arts Festival* held at Mdina[613]

1978

La Traviata, Impresa Paolo Pace[614]

La Boheme, Impresa Paolo Pace[615]

Rigoletto, Impresa Fasano[616]

Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Impresa Fasano[617]

Lucia di Lammermoor, Impresa Paolo Pace[618]

Tosca, Impresa Paolo Pace[619]

1979

Il Trovatore, Impresa Paolo Pace[620]

Manon Lescaut, Impresa Paolo Pace[621]

1980

Caterina Desguanez, (C. Pace) all performers were Maltese[622]

1981

Academy of the Operatic and Ballet National Theatre of Sofia produced an operatic season at the Manoel Theatre between the 7th and 22nd November with nine representations of three operas: *Il Trovatore, La Boheme, La Traviata.*[623]

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[610] *Times of Malta*, 28 October 1976
[611] *Times of Malta*, 24 June 1976
[612] *Times of Malta*, 6 January 1977
[613] *Times of Malta*, 26 August 1977
[614] *L-Orizzont*, 26 April 1978
[615] Ibid.
[616] *The Democrat*, 7 September 1978
[617] Ibid.
[618] *Times of Malta*, 11 December 1978
[619] Ibid.
[620] *L-Orizzont*, 9 October 1979
[621] Ibid.
[622] *The Times*, 23 October 1980
[623] *The Times*, 11, 18, 25 November 1981

1982

- concert version of *Nabucco* by the *Choral Society* held a at the Manoel Theatre.[624]
- *Aida* in English by *The Bristol Opera Group*[625]
- an operatic season between 13 and 30 November by the *Academy of the Operatic and Ballet National Theatre of Sofia*. Operas performed: *Rigoletto, Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *Madama Butterfly.*[626] Debut of Maltese soprano Miriam Gauci as Gilda in *Rigoletto*.

1983

- Highlights from *I Cavalieri di Malta* (A. Nani) where all singers were Maltese.[627]

1984

- *Cavalleria Rusticana,* two performances by the Manoel Theatre Opera Company directed by Joseph Vella. All performers were Maltese.[628]
- *Il-Wegħda,* (C. Camilleri) three representations.[629] In August it was performed again at San Anton Gardens.[630]
- Concert version of *Agnese Visconti* (A, Nani) at San Anton Gardens as part of the Malta International Arts Festival.[631]
- *Cavalleria Rusticana*, produced by the Manoel Theatre at the Aurora Theatre[632]

1985

- *Il-Fidwa tal-Bdiewa,* (C. Camilleri) three representations at San Anton Gardens. Organised by Ministry for Culture and Foreign Affairs, Culture and Youth.[633]

1986

- *Norma,* Impresa Paolo Pace[634]
- *Nabucco*, Impresa Paolo Pace[635]
- *La Traviata,* three representations where all singers were Maltese[636]
- Concert version of *Tosca* as part of Maltafest 1986 held at Mdina.[637] All singers were Maltese.
- *Madama Butterfly*, three representations.[638]

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[624] *The Times*, 27 April 1982
[625] Miceli (2001), 281
[626] *The Times*, 22, 29 November, 3 December 1982
[627] Miceli (2001), 282
[628] *L-Orizzont*, 16 March 1984
[629] *The Times*, 18 May 1984
[630] *The Times*, 9 August 1984
[631] *The Times*, 17 August 1984
[632] *Times of Malta, 17 March 1984,* p. 4
[633] *The Times*, 29 May 1985
[634] *The Times*, 24, 25 April 1986
[635] Ibid.
[636] *The Times*, 29 May 1986
[637] *The Times*, 8 August 1986
[638] *The Times*, 25, 29 November 1986

- *Tosca,* three representations[639]

1987

- *L'Elisir d'Amore,* three representations where all singers except one were Maltese[640]
- *Andrea Chenier*, Impresa Paolo Pace[641]
- *Rigoletto,* Impresa Paolo Pace[642]
- *Fedora,* three representations[643]
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia,* three representations[644]
- *Madama Butterfly*, company and orchestra from Georgia, for the inauguration of MCC, Valletta[645]
- *Tosca,* company and orchestra from Georgia, for the inauguration of MCC, Valletta[646]

1988

- *L'Elisir d'Amore*[647]
- *Lucia di Lammermoor.* All singers except one were Maltese. Impresa Fasano[648]
- *Aïida,* two representations. Impresa Fasano[649]
- *Aïida,* three representations, organised in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Education at Mdina[650]
- *Rigoletto,* performed by the Associazione Mattia Battistini from Rome. A collaboration between the Manoel Theatre and the Istituto Italiano di Cultura. This company consisted of youths studying to become professional operatic singers.[651]
- *Carmen*[652]

[639] *The Times*, 25, 29 November 1986
[640] *The Times*, 19 February 1987
[641] *Il-Mument*, 8 November 1987
[642] Ibid.
[643] *Il-Mument*, 13 December 1987
[644] Miceli (2001), 286
[645] *L-Opra f'Malta,* Campus FM, interview with Michael Laus
[646] Ibid.
[647] *Il-Mument*, 20 March 1988
[648] Ibid.
[649] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 13 June 1988
[650] *Il-Mument*, 11 September 1988
[651] *Il-Mument*, 4 December 1988
[652] *Il-Mument*, 27 November 1988

1989

- *La Traviata,* two representations[653]
- *Lucia di Lammermoor,* produced by the *Associazione Mattia Battistini*[654]
- *Tosca*, produced by the *Associazione Mattia Battistini*[655]
- *Don Pasquale, Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* performed by the Associazione Mattia Battstini[656]
- *Dido and Aeneas* presented by the Malta Choral Society. All singers were Maltese.[657]
- *Otello, Rigoletto* and *Madama Butterfly* , two representations of each opera held at Manoel Island. They were produced by the Panstowa Opera Bydgoszcz from Poland.[658] Later this same company gave an operatic concert with works by Puccini, at the Cathedral Square in Victoria, Gozo.[659]
- *Die Opernprobe oder Die Vornehmen Dilettanten* presented by the Vienna Choir Boys on the parvis of the Basilica of Isla.[660]
- *I Martiri,* (C. Pace) all singers were Maltese.[661]

1990

- *Norma,* two representations. Impresa Fasano.[662]
- *Madama Butterfly*[663]
- *L'Amico Fritz*[664]
- *Suor Angelica* performed by the *Johann Strauss School of Music* (Malta)[665]
- *Il Trovatore, Andrea Chenier* and *Tosca* performed by the Plovid State Opera (Bulgaria) at Manoel Island.[666] Later they gave an operatic concert with works by Verdi, Puccini and Giordano at Nadur, Gozo.[667]
- *La Boheme*[668]
- *La Boheme,* three representations[669]
- *Adriana Lecouvreur*[670]

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[653] *Il-Mument*, 2 April 1989
[654] *The Times*, 27 May 1989
[655] Ibid.
[656] *Il-Mument*, 12 November 1989, *The Democrat*, 14 November 1989
[657] *Il-Mument*, 28 May 1989
[658] *Il-Mument*, 20 August, 3 September 1989
[659] Miceli (2001), 290
[660] *The Times*, 1 July 1989
[661] *Il-Mument*, 17 September 1989
[662] *Il-Mument*, 15 April 1990
[663] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 23 April, 5 Mapy 1990
[664] Ibid.
[665] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 14 May 1990
[666] *Il-Mument*, 29 July, 2 August 1990
[667] Miceli (2001), 295
[668] *Il-Mument*, 23 September 1990
[669] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 4 December 1990
[670] Ibid.

1991

- *Bo-Peep* (J. Vella) an opera for kids, performed by the *Johann Strauss School of Music* (Malta) performed in a school auditorium in Imsida[671]
- *Jeannot et Colin,* (N. Isuard) two representations performed by the students and teachers at the *Johann Strauss School of Music* (Malta) at the Manoel Theatre. The singing was done in French while the prose in Maltese. Another representation was held at Ninu Cremona Lyceum in Victoria, Gozo.[672]
- Concert version of *Cosi Fan Tutte* held by the Opera Studio. One performance was held at the Manoel Theatre while another at Piazza Annunzjata in Sliema.[673]
- *Le Nozze di Figaro*[674]
- *Don Giovanni*, two representations held at Mdina in collaboration with the Cultural Division[675]
- The Malta Freeport Corporation Ltd organised, in Mdina,a vocal and instrumental concert by Katia Ricciarelli and Jose Carreras as part of the opening of the Malta Freeport[676].

1992

- *La Cenerentola*[677]
- *La Forza del Destino,* two representations. Astra Theatre Production with Bulgarian singers[678]
- *La Cambiale di Matrimonio,* (Rossini) performed by the Opera Studio Society[679]
- *La Traviata,* two gala performances by the Plovdiv State Opera (Bulgaria) at the Manoel Theatre[680]

1993

- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at the Manoel Theatre.[681] Singers were from the United Kingdom.
- *Compostella,* new opera by C. Camilleri. Two representations were organised by the University of Malta in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Culture and the Manoel Theatre Orchestra as part of the 400-year celebrations of the founding of the University of Malta. Singers were Bulgarian and Maltese.[682]
- *Jaconde* by N. Isuard. Comic opera performed as a concert version by the *Johann Strauss School of Music* (Malta) at the Manoel Theatre.[683]

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[671] Miceli (2001), 296
[672] Ibid.
[673] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 12 June 1991,
[674] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 26 April 1991,
[675] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 23 August 1991
[676] Miceli (2001), 299
[677] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 7 March 1992
[678] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 15 May 1992
[679] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 17 July 1992
[680] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 14 September 1992
[681] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 22 February 1993
[682] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 27 March 1993
[683] *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 15 May 1993

1994

- *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly,* at Dar il-Mediterran (today known as Mediterranean Conference Centre) performed by *The Georgia State Theatre Company* from the Soviet Union[684]
- *Il Trovatore,* main parts were sung by Russians[685]
- *Rigoletto,* two representations[686]
- *Nabucco*[687]

1995

- *The Maltese Cross* by C. Camilleri[688] held at Dar il-Mediterran
- *Turandot,* two performances[689]
- *La Boheme,* two representations[690]
- *Otello*[691]

1996

- *Il Trovatore,* two representations[692]
- *Tosca*[693]
- *I Pagliacci* held at the Manoel Theatre[694]

1997

- *Don Pasquale* at the Manoel Theatre in collaboration with the *Teatro Petrarca* from Arezzo (Italy)[695]
- *Macbeth,* two representations. Singers were American and tenor Joseph Calleja made his debut[696]
- *Manon Lescaut* at the Manoel Theatre[697]
- *Madama Butterfly* [698]
- *Ben and the Dragon,* various representations of the children's opera by John Linton Gardner[699]

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[684] *The Times*, 21 January 1994
[685] *In-Nazzjon*, 1 June 1994
[686] *In-Nazzjon*, 29 August 1994
[687] *In-Nazzjon*, 3 November 1994
[688] *The Times*, 10 October 1995
[689] *In-Nazzjon*, 12 September 1995
[690] *In-Nazzjon*, 9 October 1995
[691] *In-Nazzjon*, 15 November 1995
[692] *In-Nazzjon*, 22 May 1996
[693] *In-Nazzjon*, 25 September 1996
[694] *In-Nazzjon*, 4 November 1996
[695] *The Times*, 17 April 1997
[696] *In-Nazzjon*, 23 April 1997
[697] *In-Nazzjon*, 7 October 1997
[698] *The Times*, 10 November 1997
[699] *The Times*, 15 October 1997

1998

- *L'Elisir d'Amore,* two representations[700]
- *Cavalleria Rusticana* performed at the St. Agatha's Auditorium in Rabat. Produced by the students from the Missionary College of St. Paul[701]
- *Rigoletto,* two representations[702]
- *La Traviata*[703]
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and two representations of *The Magic Flute* by the Salzburg Marionette Theatre Company[704]

1999

- *Norma,* two representations[705]
- *I Martiri* (C. Pace)[706]
- *Aïda*[707]
- *Aïda*[708]
- Concert version of *Cosi Fan Tutte* as a fund-raising activity for the Malta Community Chest Fund. It was held at the Palace Hall in Valletta.[709]

2000

- Society for the Promotion of Cultural Activities organised an exhibition, two concerts and a conference at the Manoel Theatre in honour of Verdi.[710]
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*[711]
- *Tosca*[712]
- *La Gioconda*, two representations[713]
- Concert version of *La Traviata* as a fund-raising activity for the Malta Community Chest Fund. It was held at the Palace Hall in Valletta.[714]
- *The Turn of the Screw* (B. Britten), chamber opera[715]
- *Carmen*, this production, sung in French, was in collaboration with the French Ambassy in Malta[716]

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[700] *The Times*, 11 March 1998
[701] Miceli (2001), 309
[702] *The Times*, 9 April 1998
[703] *In-Nazzjon*, 2 June 1998
[704] *The Times*, 16 March 1998
[705] *The Times*, 9, 23 March 1999
[706] Ibid.
[707] *The Sunday Times*, 2 May 1999
[708] *Il-Mument*, 9 May 1999
[709] Miceli (2001), 311
[710] *In-Nazzjon*, 26 January 2000
[711] *Il-Mument*, 16 April 2000
[712] Ibid.
[713] *The Malta Independent*, 25 May 2000
[714] *In-Nazzjon*, 30 August 2000
[715] Miceli (2001), 312
[716] Ibid., 313

2001

- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*[717]
- *Tosca*[718]
- *Le Pescatrici* (Haydn)[719]
- *Tracollo*, in collaboration with the Istituto Italiano di Cultura[720]
- *La Serva Padrona*, in collaboration with the Istituto Italiano di Cultura[721]
- *Pagliacci*[722]
- *Cavalleria Rusticana*[723]
- *Le contes d'Hoffmann* held at St James Cavalier[724]
- *Madama Butterfly*[725]
- *Ernani*[726]

2002

- *La Traviata*[727]
- *Cosi Fan Tutte*[728]
- *Semele* in collaboration with the British High Commission as part of Celebrating Handel.[729]
- *Un Ballo in Maschera,* two representations[730]
- *Turandot*[731]

2003

- *Lucia di Lammermoor*, two performances[732]
- *Don Giovanni*, two representations co-produced by Operalaboratorio[733]
- *Suor Angelica* held at St. James Cavalier[734]
- *Gianni Schicchi* held at St. James Cavalier[735]
- *La Boheme* at the Presidents' Palace and Porotmaso[736]
- *Otello*[737]
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*[738]

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[717] Private archives of Abraham Borg
[718] Ibid.
[719] http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/2001/04/haydn.htm
[720] Baroque Routes newsletter, No. 03, 2001
[721] https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar//handle/123456789/39958
[722] https://airmalta.com/en-mt/best-of-malta/music/bov-opera-festival
[723] Ibid.
[724] Private archives of Abraham Borg
[725] *The Sunday Times*, 6 May 2001
[726] http://www.leone.org.mt/opra
[727] Private archives of Abraham Borg
[728] Ibid.
[729] *Times of Malta,* 5 May 2002
[730] *Times of Malta,* 9 November 2002
[731] *Times of Malta,* 4 September 2002
[732] *Times of Malta,* 7 March 2003
[733] *Times of Malta*, 5 April 2003
[734] *Times of Malta*, 8 July 2003
[735] Ibid.
[736] *Times of Malta,* 7 August 2003
[737] *Times of Malta,* 15 October 2003
[738] *Times of Malta,* 23 November 2003

2004

- *L'Amico Fritz*, two performances[739]
- *Le Nozze di Figaro*, two performances[740]
- *The Maltese Cross* (C. Camilleri) held at Fort St. Elmo as part of Evenings of Campus[741]
- *Tosca* held at the Grandmaster's Suite Hilton[742]
- *Nabucco*[743]

2005

- *Romeo et Juliette*, two performances[744]
- *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, two performances[745]
- *Candide* (Berstein) held at the Valletta Waterfront as part of the Festival Malta

2005[746]

- *La Boheme*, two representations[747]
- *Fedora*[748]

2006

- *Rigoletto*, two performances[749]
- concert version of *Dido and Aeneas,* held at the auditorium of the Sacred Heart Convent in St. Julians[750]
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, two performances[751]
- *Madama Butterfly* performed by Opera Inteludes at the President's Palace in aid of the Community Chest Fund[752]
- A concert of arias from Maltese composers held at the auditorium of the Sacred Heart Convent in St. Julians[753]
- *Cavalleria Rusticana, Pagliacci, Suor Angelica*, two representations[754]

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[739] *Times of Malta*, 28 February 2004
[740] *Times of Malta,* 10 March 2004
[741] *Times of Malta*, 18 July 2004
[742] *Times of Malta*, 30 October 2004
[743] *Times of Malta,* 13 October 2004
[744] *The Malta Independent*, 20 March 2005
[745] *Times of Malta,* 21 March 2005
[746] *The Malta Independent*, 26 June 2005
[747] *The Malta Independent,* 11 October 2005
[748] *Times of Malta,* 28 November 2005
[749] *The Malta Independent*, 18 March 2006
[750] *The Malta Independent*, 5 March 2006
[751] *The Malta Independent*, 23 March 2006
[752] *Times of Malta*, 1 November 2006
[753] *The Malta Independent,* 5 March 2006
[754] *Times of Malta,* 13 August 2006

2007

- *Falstaff,* two performances in collaboration between Teatro Borghetti and Teatru Manoel[755]

Three productions in one night held at the auditorium of the Sacred Heart Convent, St. Julians:

- *La Serva Padrona*[756]
- *Il Maestro di Cappella* (Cimarosa)[757]
- *A Musical Joke* (Mozart)
- *L'Elisir d'Amore* in collaboration with Operalaboratorio (Palermo)[758]
- *Il Wegħda*[759]
- *Don Pasquale* held at the Mediterranean Conference Centre[760]
- *Macbeth*, two representations[761]
- *La Forza del Destino*[762]

2008

- *Cenerentola*[763]
- *Gianni Schicchi* in collaboration with the Italian Embassy. Opera performed by the artists and orchestra of the Puccini Festival Torre del Lago in Tuscany[764]
- *La Notte di un Nevrastenico* (Nino Rota) in collaboration with the Opera Laboratorio di Palermo[765]
- *Hansel and Gretel* held at St. James Cavalier[766]
- *Turandot*, two representations[767]
- *La Boheme*[768]

2009

- *Dei Zauberflote*[769]
- *Riders of the Sea* (Vaughan-Williams), a production by the French opera company ARCAL[770]
- *Le Pauvre Matelot* (Milhaud)[771]
- *Rigoletto*, two representations[772]

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[755] *The Malta Independent*, 15 March 2007
[756] *The Malta Independent*, 16 March 2007
[757] *The Malta Independent*, 2 April 2007
[758] *Times of Malta*, 21 March, 2007
[759] https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/31299
[760] *Times of Malta*, 12 May 2007
[761] *The Malta Independent*, 23 October 2007
[762] *The Malta Independent,* 7 September 2007
[763] *The Malta Independent*, 7 March 2008
[764] *The Malta Independent*, 15 May 2008
[765] https://maltaorchestra.com/concert-archives/bov-opera-festival-gianni-schicchi-notte-di-un-nevrastenico/
[766] *Times of Malta*, 2 April 2008
[767] *The Malta Independent,* 4 October 2008
[768] *The Malta Independent,* 10 October 2008
[769] *The Malta Independent*, 15 February 2009
[770] *Times of Malta,* 28 Februrary 2009
[771] *The Malta Independent*, 25 March 2009
[772] *The Malta Independent,* 26 October 2009

- *Aïda*[773]

2010

- *La Cambiale di Matrimonio*[774]
- *Aleko* (Rachmaninoff)[775]
- *Alcina* (Handel)[776]
- *La Traviata*, two representations[777]
- *Carmen*[778]

2011

- *Lucia di Lammermoor*[779]
- *Norma*, two representations[780]
- *Tosca*[781]

2012

- *Il Trovatore*[782]
- *Prima la Musica e poi le Parole (*Antonio Salieri) as part of Notte Bianca[783]
- *Der Schauspieldirector* (Mozart)[784]
- *Madama Butterfly*, two representations[785]
- *Turandot*[786]

2013

- *Zanaida* (J. C.Bach) performed by opera Fuoco[787]
- *Pimpinone* (G. P. Telemann) performed by Combattimento Consort Amsterdam[788]
- *Cavalleria Rusticana* as part of the BOV Performing Arts Festival[789]
- *Pagliacci* as part of the BOV Performing Arts Festival[790]
- *Otello*, two representations[791]
- *Falstaff*[792]

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[773] *The Malta Independent,* 4 January 2009
[774] https://www.music-news.com/news/UK/33109/news
[775] Ibid.
[776] *Times of Malta,* 17 March 2010
[777] *The Malta Independent*, 24 October 2010
[778] *The Malta Independent,* 22 September 2010
[779] *The Malta Independent,* 10 March 2011
[780] *The Malta Independent,* 14 August 2011
[781] *The Malta Independent,* 27 February 2011
[782] *Times of Malta,* 16 March 2012
[783] *Times of Malta,* 6 October 2012
[784] Ibid.
[785] *Times of Malta*, 7 October 2012
[786] https://gozo.news/24864/cast-announced-for-turandot-at-the-teatru-tal-opra-aurora/
[787] *The Malta Independent*, 4 March 2012
[788] *Times of Malta,* 23 January 2013
[789] *Times of Malta,* 10 March 2013
[790] Ibid.
[791] *Times of Malta*, 13 October 2013
[792] *The Malta Independent,* 6 September 2013

2014

- *La Clemenza di Tito,* premier with four representations[793]
- *Nabucco*, two representations[794]
- *Tosca*[795]
- *Il Trovatore*[796]
- World premiere of the parody of the opera *Hippolyte et Aricie* (Rameau) performed by life-size marionettes in collaboration with Centre de Musique de Versailles[797]

2015

- *L'Elisir d'Amore*[798]
- *Dido and Aeneas* performed by Teatru Manoel Youth Opera in collaboration with Valletta 2018 Foundation[799]
- *La Boheme*, two representations[800]
- *Rigoletto*[801]
- *La Traviata*[802]

2016

- *Aïda,* two representations[803]
- *Orphée et Eurydice* (Gluck), premier[804]
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*[805]
- *Carmen*[806]

2017

- *Le Nozze di Figaro*[807]
- *Lucia di Lammermoor*, two representations[808]
- *Madama Butterfly*[809]
- *Cavalleria Rusticana, Pagliacci*[810]
- *Atys en folie* (Lully) parody with puppets by Centre Musique Baroque de Versailles[811]

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[793] *The Malta Independent*, 23 February 2014.
[794] *Times of Malta*, 17 October 2014
[795] *Times of Malta*, 23 March 2014
[796] *The Malta Independent,* 7 October 2014
[797] *Times of Malta*, 22 January 2014
[798] *Times of Malta,* 1 March 2015
[799] *Times of Malta,* 7 October 2015
[800] *The Malta Independent*, 12 October 2015
[801] *Times of Malta,* 15 March 2015
[802] *The Malta Independent,* 12 January 2015
[803] *The Malta Independent,* 6 October 2016
[804] *The Malta Independent,* 28 March 2016
[805] *The Malta Independent,* 21 March 2016
[806] *The Malta Independent,* 21 September 2016
[807] *Times of Malta,* 27 February 2017
[808] *The Malta Independent*, 19 September 2017
[809] *The Malta Independent,* 20 February 2017
[810] *Times of Malta*, 14 October 2017
[811] *Times of Malta,* 14 January 2017

2018

- *Don Giovanni*[812]
- *Cendrillon* (N. Isuard)[813]
- *Aħna Refuġjati* (Mario Sammut) held at the Granaries, Floriana[814]
- *La Traviata*, two representations[815]
- *Norma*[816]
- *Tosca*[817]
- *Corto Maltese: Una Ballata del Mar Salato*, (Monique Krüs), two representations[818]
- *Dido and Aeneas* in collaboration with Strada Stretta Concept[819]

2019

- *Il Trovatore*, two representations[820]
- *Manon Lescaut*[821]
- *La Boheme*[822]
- *Venus and Adonis* (J. C. Pepush)[823]
- *Bo-Peep* (J. Vella) opera for kids[824]

2020

- *Otello* (Rossini)[825]

2021

- *Dido and Aeneas*[826]

2022

- *Carmen*, two representations[827]
- *Aïda*[828]
- *The Three Little Pigs* (Mozart) as part of the Malta Summer Festival[829]

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[812] https://revealmalta.com/thingstodo/unmissable-march-events-v18-calendar/
[813] *Times of Malta,* 11 June 2018.
[814] https://tvmnews.mt/news/opra-originali-bil-malti-dwar-l-immigrazzjoni/
[815] https://gozo.news/69223/la-traviata-for-festival-mediterranea-2018-in-gozo-at-the-astra/
[816] *Times of Malta,* 24 February 2018
[817] *Times of Malta,* 8 October 2018
[818] *Times of Malta,* 17 September 2018
[819] https://valletta2018.org/attivitajiet/dido-and-aeneas/?lang=mt
[820] *The Malta Independent,* 24 September 2019
[821] *The Malta Independent,* 26 March 2019
[822] *The Malta Independent,* 19 September 2019
[823] https://www.teatrumanoel.com.mt/default.asp?m=shows&id=745
[824] https://newsbook.com.mt/en/a-opera-from-children-to-children-during-second-edition-of-music/
[825] https://maltaorchestra.com/events/otello/
[826] *Times of Malta*, 28 February 2021
[827] *Times of Malta*, 23 October 2022
[828] *Times of Malta,* 14 August 2022
[829] https://newsbreak.edu.mt/2022/06/23/11644/

2023

- *Tosca,*[830] three representations
- *La Traviata*[831]
- *Madama Butterfly*[832]
- *Rigoletto,*[833] two representations

[830] *The Malta Independent*, 7 March 2023
[831] *Times of Malta,* 5 March 2023
[832] https://teatruaurora.com/event/madama-butterfly-2023/
[833] https://www.teatruastra.org.mt/events/2023/rigoletto

APPENDIX IV

Operas held at the Aurora Theatre

Information retrieved from opera posters and various documents from the Aurora archives.

Opera	Composer	Date	Conductor
Madama Butterfly	Giacomo Puccini	7 & 8 January 1977	Joseph Sammut
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	28 April 1978	Joseph Sammut
La Boheme	Giacomo Puccini	29 April 1978	Alberto Leone
Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti	1 December 1978	Alberto Leone
Tosca	Giacomo Puccini	2 December 1978	Alberto Leone
Il Trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	28 September 1979	Joseph Sammut
Manon Lescaut	Giacomo Puccini	29 September 1979	Alberto Leone
Cavalleria *Rusticana* *	Pietro Mascagni	3 March 1984	Joseph Vella
Norma	Vincenzo Bellini	18 April 1986	Alberto Leone
Nabucco	Giuseppe Verdi	19 April 1986	Joseph Sammut
Andrea Chenier	Umberto Giordano	23 October 1987	Giovanni Veneri
Rigoletto	Giuseppe Verdi	24 October 1987	Joseph Sammut
Carmen	George Bizet	3 December 1988	Joseph Sammut
La Boheme	Giacomo Puccini	29 September 1990	Joseph Sammut
Il Trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	23 April 1994	Colin Attard
Otello	Giuseppe Verdi	2 December 1995	Colin Attard
Tosca	Giacomo Puccini	28 September 1996	Colin Attard
Madama Butterfly	Giacomo Puccini	1 November 1997	Colin Attard
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	16 May 1998	Colin Attard
Aïda	Giuseppe Verdi	24 April 1999	Colin Attard
Carmen	George Bizet	25 November 2000	Colin Attard
Ernani	Giuseppe Verdi	27 October 2001	Colin Attard
Turandot	Giacomo Puccini	26 October 2002	Colin Attard
Il Barbiere di Siviglia	Gioachino Rossini	29 November 2003	Colin Attard
Nabucco	Giuseppe Verdi	16 October 2004	Colin Attard
Fedora	Umberto Giordano	3 December 2005	Colin Attard
La Forza del Destino	Giuseppe Verdi	13 October 2007	Colin Attard
La Boheme	Giacomo Puccini	11 October 2008	Colin Attard
Aïda	Giuseppe Verdi	10 October 2009	Colin Attard
Carmen	George Bizet	16 October 2010	Colin Attard
Tosca	Giacomo Puccini	15 October 2011	Colin Attard
Turandot	Giacomo Puccini	13 October 2012	Colin Attard
Falstaff	Giuseppe Verdi	12 October 2013	Colin Attard
Tosca **	Giacomo Puccini	12 April 2014	Colin Attard
Il Trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	11 October 2014	Colin Attard
Rigoletto **	Giuseppe Verdi	22 May 2015	Colin Attard
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	17 October 2015	Colin Attard
Il Barbiere di Siviglia **	Gioachino Rossini	23 April 2016	Colin Attard

Carmen	George Bizet	15 October 2016	Colin Attard
Madama Butterfly **	Giacomo Puccini	1 April 2017	Colin Attard
Cavalleria Rusticana	Pietro Mascagni	14 October 2017	Colin Attard
Pagliacci	Ruggero Leoncavallo	14 October 2017	Colin Attard
Norma **	Vincenzo Bellini	28 April 2018	Colin Attard
Tosca	Giacomo Puccini	13 October 2018	Colin Attard
Manon Lescaut **	Giacomo Puccini	6 April 2019	Colin Attard
La Boheme	Giacomo Puccini	12 October 2019	Colin Attard
Aïda	Giuseppe Verdi	15 October 2022	Colin Attard
La Traviata **	Giuseppe Verdi	29 April 2023	Colin Attard
Madama Butterfly	Giacomo Puccini		

*A Teatru Manoel production
**A Gaulitanus Choir production

Famous opera singers who performed at the Aurora Theatre

Information retrieved from opera posters and various documents from the Aurora archives.

Sopranos
- Eva Marton
- Raina Kabaivanska
- Milena dal Piva
- Rita Lantieri
- Maria Pia Jonata
- Paola Romanò

Mezzo-sopranos
- Gloria Scalchi
- Sylvie Brunet
- Katia Angelon

Tenors
- Salvatore Fisichella
- Nicola Martinucci
- Gianfranco Cecchele
- Benito Maresca
- Luciano Saldari
- Vincenzo Bello

Baritones
- Giuseppe Scandola
- Franco Giovane
- Marzio Giossi
- Luigi de Corato

Basses
- Mario Luperi
- Ivan Tomasev

APPENDIX V

Operas held at Teatru Astra

Information retrieved from opera posters and various documents from the Astra archives.

Opera	Composer	Date	Conductor
Rigoletto	Giuseppe Verdi	15 September 1978	Joseph Vella
Il Barbiere di Siviglia	Gioacchino Rossini	16 September 1978	Danilo Belardinelli
L'Elisir d'Amore	Gaetano Donizetti	26 February 1988	Joseph Vella
Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti	27 February 1988	Joseph Vella
Aïda	Giuseppe Verdi	3, 5 June 1988	Joseph Vella
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	15, 16 April 1989	Joseph Vella
Norma	Vincenzo Bellini	30 March, 1 April 1990	Joseph Vella
La Forza del Destino	Giuseppe Verdi	15, 17 May 1992	Joseph Vella
Nabucco	Giuseppe Verdi	5 November 1994	Joseph Vella
Turandot	Giacomo Puccini	21, 22 October 1995	Joseph Vella
Il Trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	27, 30 April 1996	Joseph Vella
Macbeth	Giuseppe Verdi	17, 18May 1997	Joseph Vella
Rigoletto	Giuseppe Verdi	28 March 1998	Joseph Vella
Aïda	Giuseppe Verdi	1 May 1999	Joseph Vella
La Gioconda	Amilcare Ponchielli	11, 13 May 2000	Joseph Vella
Madama Butterfly	Giacomo Puccini	28 April 2001	Joseph Vella
Un Ballo in Maschera	Giuseppe Verdi	22, 24 November 2002	Joseph Vella
Otello	Giuseppe Verdi	1 November 2003	Joseph Vella
Tosca	Giacomo Puccini	30 October 2004	Joseph Vella
La Boheme	Giacomo Puccini	27, 29 October 2005	Joseph Vella
Cavalleria Rusticana	Pietro Mascagni	26, 28 October 2006	Joseph Vella
Pagliacci	Ruggero Leoncavallo	26, 28 October 2006	Joseph Vella
Suor Angelica	Giacomo Puccini	26, 28 October 2006	Joseph Vella
Macbeth	Giuseppe Verdi	25, 27 October 2007	Joseph Vella
Turandot	Giacomo Puccini	24, 25 October 2008	Joseph Vella
Rigoletto	Giuseppe Verdi	29, 31 October 2009	Joseph Vella
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	28, 30 October 2010	Joseph Vella
Norma	Vincenzo Bellini	27, 29 October 2011	Joseph Vella
Madama Butterfly	Giacomo Puccini	25, 27 October 2012	Joseph Vella
Otello	Giuseppe Verdi	24, 26 October 2013	Joseph Vella
Nabucco	Giuseppe Verdi	23, 25 October 2014	Joseph Vella
La Boheme	Giacomo Puccini	29, 31 October 2015	Joseph Vella
Aïda	Giuseppe Verdi	27, 29 October 2016	Joseph Vella

Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti	26, 28 October 2017	Joseph Vella
La Traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	25, 27 October 2018	Philip Walsh
Il Trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	24, 26 October 2019	John Galea
Carmen	Georges Bizet	27, 29 October 2022	John Galea
Rigoletto	Giuseppe Verdi	26, 28 October 2023	John Galea

Famous opera singers that performed at the Astra Theatre:

Information retrieved from opera posters and various documents from the Astra archives.

Sopranos
Ghena Dimitrova
Pamela Kucenic
Adelaide Negri
Francesca Patane
Daniela Dessì

Mezzo-soprano
Sanja Anastasia

Tenors
Joseph Calleja
Rumen Doikov
Giuseppe Giacomini

Baritones
Aldo Protti
Mark Rucker

Basses
Nicola Rossi-Lemeni