

## Lifestyle & Culture

# A Night at the Cathedral

A well-deserved performance by the St Peter Philharmonic Wind Orchestra of Birżebbuġa, founded in 1990.

■ Dr Lydia Buttigieg

On Saturday, 24 February, the Philharmonic Society of St Peter's Band Birżebbuġa AD 1990 held a spectacular concert at the Imdina Metropolitan Cathedral, performing to a full-house audience. For the first time, the society invited me to perform as the principal harpist, an honour which will definitely remain in my recollection of memories as being one of the most rewarding and challenging concerts.

The concert was commemorating 50 years since the Blessed Pope Paul VI declared the authenticity and true relics of St Peter under the Vatican's main altar. It was appropriate for this occasion to perform works which were related to St Peter the Apostle.

The programme was divided into two parts having the first part focusing on vocal works, while the latter presented a much demanding repertoire, especially the Symphony No. 1 *The Archangels op. 50* by Franco Cesarini. The main soloists for the special occasion were two well-distinguished singers – soprano Ruth Sammut Casingena and tenor Charles Vincenti.

The concert consisted of 70



strong musicians, both seasoned and up-coming musicians who presented a programme of very high calibre, under the able baton of Mro Michael Bugelli. Among the standard instruments that are normally found in bands, other instruments such as the harp, double bass and the cor anglais were also involved with the band.

Due to official commitments, Minister Owen Bonnici launched the grand concert with a short speech, congratulating the committee and all its members for this outstanding initiative. As this year commemorates the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the demise of Chev. Mro Carmelo Pace (1906-1993), the concert commenced with a short work called *Innu Popolari lil San Pietru Appostlu* – an anthem about St Peter the Apostle composed in 1962. The work is reminiscent of the early 18th-century harmonic style, commissioned by Birżebbuġa parish priest of the time, Dun Gużep Minuti, to the

lyrics written by Fr Frans Camilleri.

Among the works that were performed was a composition by a Maltese composer and educator Mro Raymond Sciberras. The Prelude forms part of the *Inno di Gloria Tu Es Petrus* where the composer wrote a Cantata in honour of the patron saint of Birżebbuġa, St Peter Apostle. It was premiered on 19 February 2000 at the University of Malta auditorium, for the 10th anniversary of the Society's foundation.

The main thematic material of the composition was executed on the clarinet, which continued to recur in various parts of the sections of the band. Typical of Mro Sciberras' compositional techniques, the theme continues to develop in the next movements, put to text by Joe Julian Farrugia. Among the composer's extensive musical repertoire, who is renowned for his sublime melodic contours and superb techniques in harmony and orchestration, Mro Sciberras considers this work as one of his favourite compositions, so much so that he included it in his CD *Millenium Salute*, released in 2000.

The third work presented at this concert was *Ave Maria* from the film *Joyeux Noel*, written by the French composer Philippe Rombi, superbly sung with the controlled and well-articulated voice of soprano Sammut Casingena. The short aria was commissioned by Josef Schembri, a musician of the same band to Mro Christopher Sciberras. Despite its sublime melody and harmony, this work is rarely performed and the Birżebbuġa Wind Orchestra was in all probability the first music entity to perform this beautiful *Ave Maria* in Malta. After a short introduction by the band, the harp enters in soft arpeggiated passages, joined very sensitively by the band, accompanying the soloist with its sublime and gentle melodic contours. The aria continues to develop until it reaches a climax where a change of key diverts the texture into gentler and more profound harmonies. The concluding part of the aria culminates in an expression of lamentation, gently wittering off to very soft passages.

The band then performed *Dolce Sentire*, a famous sacred hymn composed by Riziero Ortolani for the film *Fratello Sole, Sorella Luna*. This film directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1972, meditates and examines the holy life of St Francis of Assisi. The theme that is employed in this work is the prin-

cipal thematic material that is heard throughout the whole film. This hymn, which was beautifully handled by tenor Charles Vincenti, was donated to the band by the arranger himself, Mro Gennaro Sibilano from Ruvo di Puglia, Italy. Mro Sibilano and the Birżebbuġa Philharmonic windband enjoy excellent ties of friendship together. A few years ago the Birżebbuġa band bestowed him with the title of Honorary Bandmaster for his help which proved to be very crucial.

The band then performed a very challenging work, a Selection from the Maltese movie *Anno Domini XXXIII*. The soundtrack of this film was originally composed for Symphonic Orchestra by Mro Raymond Sciberras. The film was released locally in 2008 and the soundtrack was even published on a CD. Josef Schembri, a local member of the band, asked Mro Ray Sciberras to compose an arrangement for symphonic band. The Birżebbuġa Band and Mro Sciberras have strong ties together. It is not the first time that Mro Sciberras composed works specifically for this band. Mro Sciberras chose to include the most dramatic three movements of this beautiful soundtrack: *Opening, Prelude* and *Anno Domini*. The delicate melodic contours that are employed in this majestic work are continuously developed and enhanced with gentle and subtle melodies that are presented from one movement to another. Mro Sciberras's musical creativity is not only found through the tranquillity and subtle harmonies which the composer so intellectually produces, but on the other hand, employs an explosion of profound sensitiveness that is evident throughout this musical work. Apart from utilising an integration of sophisticated harmonic progressions, the two leading singers, soprano Casingena and tenor Vincenti made justice to this outstanding piece of music.

Following Mro Sciberras' work, the most challenging piece of the programme is the Symphony No. 1 *The Archangels op 50*, composed by the Swiss composer Franco Cesarini who endured years contemplating and redrafting this composition. It is a 30-minute work written for a full symphonic band, making use of some unusual instruments like the harp and cor-anglais. This massive work constitutes highly

dramatic language, profound thematic developments and frequent polyphonic elaborations that are continuously developed and enhanced with great artistry and musicality, throughout the movements.

The fully-fledged symphony is structured in four movements which reflect the four different archangels, however, despite the title, it is a non-programmatic work.

Gabriel, the gentle archangel – the opening of the first movement incorporates two distinctive characteristics that are portrayed by energetic rhythmic passages produced by the timpani, and the heightening of intense and dramatic harmonic passages. The composer utilises in this movement two Gregorian hymns – *Ave Maris Stella* and *Hosanna filio David*.

Raphael, the supreme healer – the second movement portrays a gentler atmosphere of subtle passages, presented in open-arpeggiated passages on the harp against the melodic contours of the flute, oboe and the delicate melodies produced by the cor-anglais. The movement incorporates long sustained notes by the lower register of the brass which defines it as melodious and harmonious in its overall orchestration. The composer makes use of the old Gregorian hymn *Si Quaeris miracula*.

Michael, the energetic archangel – in the third movement, the composer employs an aggressive tempo of 14/8s which reflects the conflicts between the archangel Michael and Lucifer. With the use of elaborate melodramatic melodic contours and the fast complex rhythmic passages present a stimulating movement for all the musicians. The composer here elaborates on the two Gregorian hymns – *Ad Jesum Accurrite* and *Parce Domine*.

Uriel, the "forgotten" archangel – the last movement is dedicated the Archangel Uriel, the guardian of the time, of the ages and space, which focuses on dramatic passages based on the famous Kyrie of the *Missa de Angelis*. The final movement concludes in an explosion of sophisticated harmonies that enriches a climax of profound beauty which brought the appreciative audience to its feet in a well-deserved standing ovation.

Before the concert came to a close, the president Alex Caruana commented about the concert, and its initiative in launching this concert. For the finale, the concert concluded with the work called *Omaggio alla Filarmonica San Pietro di Birżebbuġa*, composed purposely by Caruana himself and arranged for the band by Simon Farrugia, a former assistant bandmaster of the same band. This work constitutes triumphal and majestic passages that reflect the society's ethos. A big well done to the St Peter's Philharmonic Society, Birżebbuġa Wind Orchestra.

A memorable and rewarding symphonic concert that was appreciative by all the guests who attended. We hope to hear of more successful concerts by the Philharmonic Society of St Peter of Birżebbuġa in the near future.

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