

## Music

### Messa Da Requiem

# Premiered work by Chev. Mro Mark Agius

■ Dr Lydia Buttigieg

On Friday, 16 March at St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, the St Paul Chamber Ensemble performed an outstanding rendition of *Messa da Requiem*. It is the latest orchestral work written by Chev. Mro Mark Agius, one of the most talented musicians and composers to emerge recently in Malta.

Under Mro Agius' able baton, the St Paul Chamber Ensemble is emerging to be one of Malta's finest orchestras, bringing together some of the most talented musicians and singers on our island. The 45-piece orchestra is made up of both seasoned and gifted young musicians. With an unfaltering and exquisitely delicate sound and ably directed by its experienced conductor, the orchestra performed with great ease and panache. The highly demanding passages, which were skilfully and creatively harmonised by the conductor himself, the delicate lyrical passages that were superbly executed with great sensitiveness, and the balancing of the orchestra accompanying the singers and choir, resulted in a concert of exceptionally high calibre. The orchestra was in its top form, attentively observing the conductor's clear direction, giving a superb rendering of what must surely be one of the most demanding works that the St Paul Chamber Ensemble has performed up till now.

The concert was in collaboration with the St John Co-Cathedral Foundation, under the distinguished patronage of Archbishop Emeritus Mgr Pawl Cremona. The orchestra was led by the talented young violinist Eric Bugeja.

The Requiem Mass is a fully-fledged orchestral work, scored for four main soloists and SATB choir. For this special occasion, the Rotondo Choir of Poznan, Poland was invited to premiere the orchestral work, who also gave a superb performance. The Rotondo Chamber Choir, under the patronage of the parish of St Padre Pio of Pietrelcina in Poznan, was created in April 2006. Its conductor and artistic director Natalia Sobkowiak-Bolewska is a graduate of the Academy of Choral Music in Poznan. The four main soloists were soprano Karen Gatt Darmania, contralto May Caruana, tenor Charles Vincenti and baritone Ivan Vella.

The main soloists and the Rotondo Chamber Choir gave a re-



markable performance, presenting their arias and choruses with confidence and assurance. The assimilation between the solo singers, choir and orchestra presented a showcase of artistry which provided the audience a tasteful of intricate and delicate filigree of textures, and an explosion of diverse and exquisite harmonies that transported the listener to a sphere of soundscapes of different tonalities. This orchestral work presented some challenging passages for the main soloists who were complexly fused with the orchestra, but on the other hand, it also offered some intricate delicate passages between the soloists and the harp. The subtleness of the harp against the lyrical contours that were presented between the main arias, and at times, with the choir, echoed throughout the cathedral giving a sense of peacefulness and tranquillity.

The *Messa da Requiem* is written in eight movements – the *Introit*, *Kyrie*, *Dies Irae* (which in itself is divided into a further eight contrasting sections), *Sanctus*, *Agnus*

*Dei*, *Pie Jesu*, *Libera Me* and *In Paradisium*.

In the opening movement (*Introit*) exhibited new textures, such as humming passages by the choir and an explosion of intricate melodic harmonies between the orchestra's sections. Agius makes use of intricate melodies which are artistically created to sustain a continuous flow of subtle and sublime textures of harmonies.

In the *Kyrie*, the elegance of the thematic materials that are presented throughout the movement are emphasised distinctively by the solo instruments, accompanied by delicate arpeggiated and glissando passages on the harp. The doubling of textures between the instruments and soloists are found frequently throughout the work, which heightens and emphasises the thematic materials that are artistically created through each section of the movement.

The *Dies Irae* is the longest and most challenging and interesting out of all the movements. It embarks in exhibiting strong elements of distinctiveness in tone and structure, interconnected by eight sections that are fused to display vigorous rhythms, sublime melodies and dramatic contrasts between the orchestra's sections, choir and soloists.

The *Sanctus* is relatively long, prominently exploiting an element of percussiveness. The recurrence of the opening theme is frequently heard, supported by the timpani playing isorhythm passages which educe short repetitive progressions that depict strong elements of percussiveness. Due to the recurrence of the main theme, and changes in tonality, the movement continues to heighten and intensify into in-

tricate and complex contrapuntal textures between the orchestra's sections, entering flourishing scale-like passages by the flute, harp and strings.

The *Agnus Dei* is a slow movement which opens with soft arpeggiated passages on the harp, followed by the main theme presented by the soprano section of the choir, and later by the male section. The movement continues to develop homophonically in the choir section, and gradually intensifies in sophisticated contrapuntal textures throughout the sections of the orchestra, after which the concluding part of the movement ends softly and serenely.

The *Pie Jesu* is a slow melodious movement, where intricate contrapuntal textures are presented in the woodwinds and strings, supported by firm sustained and triplet passages in the brass section. After a short introductory section at the beginning of the movement, the soprano presents the main thematic material, accompanied by chordal passages by the harp, and canonic progressions by the woodwind section, interweaved in contrapuntal textures by the strings. As the movement progresses, the thematic material consequently is enhanced homophonically by the soprano and alto, and later by the choir, concluding in a subtle subdued tone of textures, fading with delicate scale-like passages by the harp and strings. In the final few bars, the soprano and alto conclude the movement by emphasising the words *dona e is requiem, sempiternam*.

The opening few bars are entirely emphasised on the solo baritone, and are very expressive

in nature. The main melody continued to develop itself, fusing and culminating into intricate two-part textures with the solo tenor, constantly supported by firm harmonic and contrapuntal passages by the orchestra. The movement is generally structured on homophonic progressions of rhythms, continuously evolving to unrelated keys, but at the same time, maintaining a sense of unification, maintained with distinctive harmonic textures. The last section of the movement concludes with the recurrence of the main theme derived from the first movement, the *Introit*.

The final movement, *In Paradisium*, opens on a melodious angelic theme sung by the soprano section of the choir, supported by a succession of tremolos by the upper string section. The movement continues to develop the same theme by involving the whole orchestra in contrapuntal textures, but maintaining a tranquil sphere of gentle harmonies throughout the concluding movement.

At the end of this remarkable and unforgettable concert, Dame Marie Therese Vassallo was presented with an Honorary Patronage of the Medina Foundation for Music for her lifetime dedication to music and her contribution to the development of music in Malta. Chev Mro Agius, director of the Medina Foundation for Music and Karen Gatt Darmania, deputy chairperson, presented Dame Vassallo with a certificate and a memento of the occasion.

The concert concluded by performing *Agnus Dei* as an encore, which brought the appreciative audience to its feet in a well-deserved standing ovation.

