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PHILHARMONIC
ORCHESTRA

MIDSUMMER CLASSICS

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MIDSUMMER CLASSICS

Michael Laus
Conductor

Malta Philharmonic Orchestra

Saturday 1st July 2023, 9.00pm
Malta National Park Amphitheatre, Ta' Qali

PROGRAMME

Antonio Nani

Overture in E minor

Carmelo Pace (arr. Ray Sciberras)

Suite Melitensis

- I. Maltesina
- II. Lapsi
- III. L-Imnarja

Charles Camilleri

Knights of Malta Suite

Joseph Vella

Rebbieña, Op. 45

Edvard Grieg

Peer Gynt, Suite No.1, Op. 46

- I. Morning (Morgenstemning)
- II. Ase's Death (Ases død)
- III. Anitra's Dance (Anitras dans)
- IV. In the Hall of the Mountain King (I dovregubbens hall)

PROGRAMME NOTES

Antonio Nani (Malta, 1842 – Malta, 1929)

Overture in E Minor

Antonio (also known as Anton) Nani, came from a prominent family of musicians and composers who left their mark on Maltese music. His first studies were with his father Paolo, a prolific composer of sacred music, and with leading musicians Giuseppe Burlon and Giuseppe Spiteri Fremond. As was the custom at the time, the young Antonio pursued his studies further at the Conservatory in Naples, remaining in Italy from 1867 to 1879. There he composed his first mature works, including the opera Zorilla. On his return to Malta, he took over as maestro di cappella from his father, who had set up his own group providing music for several Maltese churches. Antonio's other works included two further operas and several major sacred compositions, such as his fine setting of the Requiem dedicated to the memory of his mother.

Although an overture may act as an introduction to a ballet, opera or other larger work, Nani's Overture in E Minor is a brief, free-standing orchestral work which provides a sprightly opener to tonight's concert.

Carmelo Pace (Malta, 1906 – Malta, 1993)

Suite Melitensis

arr. Ray Sciberras

Carmelo Pace was a precocious composer, and by his 20s had already composed works for piano, violin and cello, as well as larger-scale cantatas, and orchestral pieces. His later compositions include four operas, all of which are based on Maltese history and folklore amongst which, intriguingly, an opera (the 1976 "Ipogea") set in Neolithic Malta at the time of the temple builders. Pace's interest in Maltese culture is also reflected in his borrowing of folksong and traditional melodies. However, his style is more eclectic, combining Mediterranean lyricism with more challenging, modernist elements reflecting 20th century continental styles.

The Suite Melitensis is a three-movement work adapted by Ray Sciberras from three pieces by Carmelo Pace and first performed at an all-Pace concert held at Mdina in 2019. The first movement, "Maltesina", is an orchestral arrangement of a musical fantasy for band composed by Pace in 1931, based on Maltese folk tunes and għana. "Lapsi" and "L-Imnarja" were originally conceived as choral works (composed in 1966 and 1960 respectively) inspired by two traditional Maltese feasts.

Charles Camilleri (Malta, 1931 – Malta, 2009)

Knights of Malta Suite

Charles Camilleri is one of the pillars of 20th Century Maltese classical music. Locally, he is possibly best known for his works inspired by Maltese folk music, including the Malta Suite and the Piano Concerto No. 1 (Mediterranean) as well as the oratorios in Maltese, Pawlu ta' Malta and Dun Ġorġ. Nevertheless, he also wrote several works of a more abstract and experimental bent. In this regard, one cannot fail to mention his series of compositions that seek to express in music the philosophy and theology of Jesuit thinker Teilhard de Chardin, for instance, the epic organ piece *Missa Mundi* (once described as “the organ’s Rite of Spring”), *Cosmic Visions* and *Noospheres*.

“The Knights of Malta” is a ballet by Charles Camilleri which incorporates music actually used by the Knights of Malta, discovered by Professor Godfrey Wettinger at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. These historical manuscripts included a description of a typical celebration during the time of the Knights: “Some Knights of Malta devised a ballet for a court masquerade where there were an equal number of ladies and gentlemen who danced a ‘Branle in the Round’ with certain gestures and twisting of the body, which they called *Branle de Malte*”.

The Suite is drawn from the music for the ballet and, although having touches typical of Camilleri, it evokes the style of ancient courtly dances.

Joseph Vella (Gozo, 1942 – Gozo, 2018)

Rebbieña, Op. 45

Joseph Vella was one of Malta’s major musical figures, a leading composer, conductor and musicologist. Vella’s musical language is ingrained in a personal idiom influenced mainly by the 20th Century neo-classical movement, with a lyrical brand of atonality which tends to precipitate to a fundamental note. Nonetheless, there is an adventurous eclecticism to his oeuvre, evident in the diversity of styles he employed.

Rebbieña (1983, revised 1986) is a symphonic poem originally written for wind band, first performed in its orchestral guise in 1986. The title – “Victorious” – refers to Malta’s chequered history, and the country’s ability to overcome the challenges it has faced over the centuries, not least the Great Siege of 1565 and the bombings and deprivations of the Second World War. This idea is expressed in a one-movement work based on a tripartite structure. The opening *Allegro Moderato* is characterised by blaring brass fanfares and outbursts of percussion. The music settles down into a dirge-like section – *Tempo di Marcia Funebre* – which builds up to a heart-wrenching climax. In contrast, the closing *Allegro* is dance-like and celebratory. Towards the end, snatches of the Maltese National Anthem reveal the work’s patriotic intent.

Edvard Grieg (Norway, 1843 – Norway, 1907)

Peer Gynt Suite No. 1, Op. 46

Peer Gynt is a five-act play by Henrik Ibsen which portrays the adventurous travels of fairy-tale hero Peer, from the Norwegian mountains to the North African desert and back again. The play was written in 1867 and eventually premiered in February, 1876. For its first performance, Grieg wrote a 90-minute score in 26 movements to accompany the play. From this complete work, Grieg eventually drew two four-movement suites which have become among his best-known works.

The first suite begins with the “Morning Mood” that opens Act IV of the play. The music evokes the glory of the rising sun in the desert. The elegiac mood of “Ase’s Death” portrays the death of Peer’s mother. In “Anitra’s Dance”, Peer, disguised as a prophet, is seduced by the daughter of a Bedouin chieftain. The suite concludes with the ominous “In the Hall of the Mountain King”, drawn from Act II of the play, which brings the work to a fiery end.

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MICHAEL LAUS

Conductor

Michael Laus graduated in piano, harpsichord, composition, and conducting at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi of Milan in 1982. He later participated in masterclasses in conducting given by George Manahan in the United States and Vladimir Delman in Bologna.

Principal Conductor of Malta's national orchestra for twenty-five years and now its Resident Conductor, he has conducted the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra in symphonic concerts both in Malta's main concert venues and on tour in Belgium and Italy. He has conducted several opera productions which include the Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy, *Die Zauberflöte*, *L'Elisir d'amore*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Otello*, *Falstaff*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Werther*, *Pagliacci* and *L'amico Fritz*, as well as lesser-known titles such as Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto* and Nino Rota's *La notte di un nevrastenico*. His performed repertoire includes the major symphonies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Handel's *Messiah*, the Mozart and Verdi *Requiems*, Jenkins' *Mass for Peace* and other works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with several first performances of works by contemporary composers. In July, 2016, he conducted the first European performance of Arvo Pärt's *Greater Antiphons*, in the composer's presence, and in November 2016 he conducted a highly acclaimed performance of Verdi's *Requiem*. He opened the first edition of the Valletta International Baroque Festival in 2013 with Vivaldi's *Quattro stagioni* together with Carmine Lauri, and the second edition with Handel's *Messiah*. Other soloists with whom he has collaborated include Katia Ricciarelli, Cecilia Gasdia, Joseph Calleja, Brigitte Engerer and Andrea Griminelli, while he also works regularly with his wife, the soprano Miriam Gauci.

Michael Laus has guest-conducted prestigious orchestras such as the Bournemouth Symphony, the Slovak Philharmonic, the New Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Belgrade Philharmonic, the Orquesta Sinfonica de Asturias, the Berne Symphony Orchestra, L'Orchestra Sinfonica di Pesaro, the Sibiu Philharmonic Orchestra, the Moldavian Symphony Orchestra and the Croatian Chamber Orchestra. He has appeared as music director in operatic productions at the Berne State Theatre and in Oviedo. He regularly appears in the double role of pianist/harpsichordist and conductor in a concerto repertoire ranging from baroque to twentieth-century works. In this double role, he has won international critical acclaim for his recording of Cyril Scott's *Harpsichord Concerto*. His restoration of the score of Ignaz Brüll's *Violin Concerto* and his subsequent recording of this work has also been received with acclaim.

Michael Laus has recorded works for the piano and orchestra as well as orchestral music on CD, which have been released on Discover International, Unicorn-Khanchana and Cameo Classics labels. These include a series of recording of works by British composers, and another series on Jewish composers. He has appeared on Rai 3, France 3 and Mezzo television channels. He is Associate Professor in Music Studies at the University of Malta. He was the founder and first music director of the Malta Youth Orchestra, and also the founder and director of the Goldberg Ensemble, a choral and instrumental group specializing in the performance of baroque music.



MALTA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Malta's foremost musical institution

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 in 2008 when it expanded into a full-size symphony orchestra bringing together musicians from Malta, Europe and beyond.

Joseph Sammut, the C-in-C’s last conductor, was the orchestra’s first conductor, remaining at the helm until 1992. Since then the orchestra has also been under the direction of Joseph Vella, John Galea, Michael Laus, and Brian Schembri. In 2019, the MPO appointed Sergey Smbatyan as Principal Conductor, joining Resident Conductor Michael Laus as part of the orchestra’s Artistic Team. The MPO also works with local artists including Joseph Calleja, Simon Schembri, Carmine Lauri and Miriam Gauci, as well as international guest artists including Ray Chen, Diana Damrau, José Cura, Mikhail Pletnev, Camille Thomas, Gautier Capuçon, Daniel Lozakovich and Enrico Dindo.

As Malta’s leading musical ensemble, the MPO averages more than one performance a week including symphonic concerts, opera productions in Malta and Gozo, community outreach and educational initiatives, as well as various concerts of a lighter nature. During the past seasons, the MPO embarked on a digital transformation reaching over 32 million people worldwide through its Online Programme in 2021.

The orchestra has performed in leading venues across the globe, including in the United States, Russia, Dubai, Germany, Austria, China, Italy, and Belgium, and presently embarks on at least one international tour each concert season.

The MPO is a keen exponent of Maltese composers, regularly performing their works in Malta and overseas, as well as frequently premiering and commissioning new compositions.

Through the MPO Academy and the Malta Youth Orchestra, which regularly give concerts across Malta, the MPO is also responsible for the training and professional development of the next generation of Maltese musicians.

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Agnieszka Kuźma
Roberta Attard
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Fiona Giambra
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Riccardo Rossano
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Violin 2

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