



SPRING HARMONY

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SPRING HARMONY

Claire Massa

Mezzo Soprano

Michael Laus


Conductor

Malta Philharmonic Orchestra

Saturday 6th May 2023

Robert Samut Hall, Floriana

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PROGRAMME

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Adagio and Fugue, K. 546

Christopher Muscat

Extase

Richard Wagner

Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme, WWV 91

- I. Der Engel
- II. Stehe still!
- III. Im Treibhaus – Studie zu Tristan und Isolde
- IV. Schmerzen
- V. Träume – Studie zu Tristan und Isolde

Joseph Haydn

Hornsignal Symphony No. 31, Hob. I/31

- I. Allegro
- II. Adagio
- III. Menuet
- IV. Finale: Moderato molto

PROGRAMME NOTES

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Austria 1756 – Austria 1791)

Adagio and Fugue, K. 546 (1788)

In the early 1780s, Mozart embarked on a study of the counterpoint of Johann Sebastian Bach. Encouraged by Baron Gottfried von Swieten, an enthusiast for Baroque masters Bach and Handel, Mozart made arrangements of Bach fugues, composed a prelude and fugue based on Baroque models, and wrote a suite of dances in an archaic style. The Fugue in C Minor, originally written for two pianos, was a result of this deep dive into the Baroque. In 1788, Mozart revisited this work, arranging it for strings, and adding to it an introductory adagio which also looks back to Bach in its dotted rhythms reminiscent of a French overture. Whether Mozart intended it for performance or not remains a mystery – it is sometimes claimed that it was more of a “test piece” in preparation for the fugal and contrapuntal passages of his final symphonies.

Christopher Muscat (Malta 1977)

Extase (2006)

Extase is scored for flute, oboe, bassoon, percussion and strings, with the composer placing particular emphasis on instrumental colour. Muscat’s intentions are made very clear from the outset where he exploits the rich timbre of the flute’s lower register and the fragile sound produced by the oboe in its upper-most octave: a relatively unorthodox combination in orchestral writing. The opening section of the work conveys an intimate feeling where one wallows in a beautiful warm, caressing sound with the three wind instruments answering each other in contrapuntal manner. This dialogue contrasts well against the misty background of string harmonics. The central section is based on a repeated motif that is first played by the bass string instruments and gradually builds up, in pitch, momentum and intensity towards an ecstatic climax with clashing harmonies. The wind instruments reappear pronouncing fragments from previous statements, this time in a less assertive manner as the composition gently subsides, embellished by light touches of colour from the percussion section.

Richard Wagner (Germany 1813 – Italy 1883)

Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme, WWV 91 (1857-58)

Richard Wagner's revolutionary and left-leaning ideals, coupled with his penchant for getting into trouble with his creditors, often put him at odds with the authorities. These problems were at their worst following Wagner's participation in the abortive Dresden May Uprising of 1849. The composer spent eleven years on the run, practically an outlaw at risk of criminal prosecution by the Saxon authorities. With Liszt's help, Wagner and his wife Minna managed to escape to Switzerland. In 1852, Wagner made the acquaintance of a Zürich merchant named Otto Wesendock, who not only became the composer's patron and benefactor, but also placed a cottage on his estate at the disposal of Richard and his wife Minna. The couple took up the offer, becoming quite close with Otto and his young wife Mathilde. In the following years, whilst working on his opera *Tristan und Isolde*, Richard became hopelessly infatuated with Mathilde who, it seems, returned his attentions. Art and life fed off each other, the passion of *Tristan* fuelling Wagner's newly-discovered love-interest. Whether this relationship ever became physical or whether it remained on a platonic, intellectual level has been the subject of much prurient speculation. It certainly appeared serious enough to lead to a definitive separation between Richard and Minna. Before retreating to Dresden, the hurt Minna wrote to Mathilde, with scathing, barely disguised irony: "I must tell you with a bleeding heart that you have succeeded in separating my husband from me after nearly twenty-two years of marriage. May this noble deed contribute to your peace of mind, to your happiness."

Mathilde was a published author, playwright and poet. Wagner considered her a "dilettante" but liked her poems (or their author) well enough to set five of them for voice and piano over a period between November 1857 and May 1858. They were first published in 1862 as *Fünf Gedichte für eine Frauenstimme* – Mathilde was not credited as the lyricist and her authorship only became known after her death in 1902. The songs contain familiar Wagnerian elements, not least the soaring, seemingly endless melodies over throbbing accompaniments (a feature particularly evident in *Träume*). Their mood is close to that of *Tristan* and, in the case of *Im Treibhaus* and *Träume*, they actually share musical material with the opera – Wagner himself labelled these two songs "studies for *Tristan und Isolde*".

The Wesendock Lieder are often performed in an orchestral version, even though only No. 5 was orchestrated by Wagner himself (as a birthday present for Mathilde). The rest are generally presented in an arrangement by the conductor Felix Mottl.

Joseph Haydn (Austria 1732 – Austria 1809)

Hornsignal Symphony No. 31, Hob. I/31 (1765)

From 1761 until a few years before his death, Haydn was employed as a court composer for the music-loving Esterházy princes. He was initially appointed as Vice-Kapellmeister and, while Kapellmeister Gregor Joseph Werner had to write vocal and choral pieces for religious ceremonies, Haydn was tasked with directing and composing for a small court orchestra drawn from amongst Vienna's freelance players. Haydn's ensemble seems like a fun place for a musician to be – in 1765, the year in which the "Hornsignal Symphony" was composed, a jealous Werner wrote to the Prince complaining about "the lazy idleness of the whole band, the principal responsibility for which must be laid at the door of the present director, who lets them get away with everything, so as to receive the name of a good Heyden".

Whatever issues one may have with Haydn's management style, the opportunity to work closely and regularly with the musicians certainly favoured the creation of some great works – it explains, for instance, why Haydn wrote so many symphonies during this period (eventually leading to a total tally of 106), most of which contain original and personal touches possibly meant to highlight the skills of particular soloists.

This is certainly the case with the "Hornsignal Symphony", so called because of its large horn section – four players in what was a relatively small orchestra. Haydn wrote it some time after May 1765, in order to celebrate the engagement by Prince Esterházy of two new horn players– Franz Stamitz and Joseph Dietzl. Apart from the horn section, the score calls for one flute, two oboes and strings. It follows a four-movement structure, including an opening Allegro which brings the full horn complement to the fore, and a Finale based on a theme and seven variations, each of which highlights a particular instrument or section of the orchestra.

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CLAIRE MASSA

Mezzo Soprano

Claire Massa graduated from the University of Malta with a BA (Hons) in Music Studies and a PGCE in the teaching of music. She obtained an M.Mus with distinction in Voice Performance studying with Prof Jerzy Artysz from Chopin Academy in Warsaw, Poland and Prof Michael Laus from University of Malta. She has attended masterclasses in voice and courses in music education in the United Kingdom, Italy, Hungary, Switzerland, studying with the late Hungarian soprano Eva Andor.

Massa is a regular performer in vocal concerts. Her repertoire spans from Handel's 'Messiah' to the operas of Mozart and Rossini, German Lieder to the French romantics and impressionists and the more demanding twentieth century works. Her performances include Mercedes in Bizet's Carmen, The Little Sweep by Britten, L'Amico Fritz by Mascagni, Fenena in Verdi's Nabucco, Gertrude in Romeo and Juliet by Gounod, The Old Lady in Bernstein's Candide, Madalena in Rigoletto, and Clarina in La Cambiale di Matrimonio. She has also performed Verdi's Requiem, Mozart's Requiem, Grand Mass and other masses, Stabat Mater by Pergolesi and Rossini and Tucapsky, Dixit Dominus and Messiah by Handel, Christmas Oratorio by Bach, Gloria and motets by Vivaldi, 9th Symphony by Beethoven, Requiem and Canticles of St Luke by Sammut, Askesis and The Hyland Mass by Vella, Iconi di Donna and Ġames Kanti Poplari by Camilleri, Nani's Psalms and Responses for Passion Week as well as more recently Garzia and Mifsud's Ġġenba among others. She has also given recitals in St John's Co-Cathedral, Mdina Cathedral, the Manoel Theatre, St James' Cavalier, the President's Palace in San Anton, and the Mediterranean Conference Centre. Claire has also recorded CDs, some of which are War Requiem by Camilleri, This Holy Earth by Camilleri and England, Stabat Mater by Abos, various works by Zerafa as well as The Canticles of St Luke by Sammut (APS Bank) and Liturgical Works of St John's by Nani (APS Bank).

She was also invited to sing in Germany where she performed at the Leipzig Mendelssohn Hall, the Berlin Konzerthaus, and the Wiesbaden Konzerthaus. She sang the part of the Jester in Camilleri's Maltese Cross which was performed in Saint Germaine de Pres in Paris. She gave a recital in the Festival of European songs held in Warsaw, Poland as well as Elgar's Sea Pictures in an orchestral concert in London, and an operatic concert in the Municipal Theatre of Bastia, Corsica among others.

Claire is currently Head of Department of Music at the Malta Visual and Performing Arts School. She is also a lecturer of voice in the Music Department within the School of Performing Arts, University of Malta.



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 nevastenico*. 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 has 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 and international guest artists including Lawrence Renes, Diana Damrau, José Cura, Mikhail Pletnev, Gil Shaham, Joseph Calleja, 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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Vincenzo Picone
Elena Imparato
Fiona Giambra
Emilia Wiśniewska
Roberta Attard
Klara Nazaj
Francesca Moldovan

Violin 2

Matteo Colombo*
Inmaculada Muñoz Salgüero
Stefan Calleja
Rosanne Dimech
Stephen Scerri
Bernard Curmi

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Mateusz Kuźma
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Ákos Kertész*
Yaroslav Miklukho
Frank Camilleri
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Rebecca Hall*
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Jean Pierre Cassar^Δ

** Orchestra Leader

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