

GENTLE-MEN, MUSIC!

STEPHEN ZAMMIT AND MARIO PSAILA HAVE BEEN PERFORMING WITH THE MALTA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA FOR THE LAST 40 YEARS. THE TWO VETERAN SECTION PRINCIPALS GIVE ACCOUNT OF THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH THE COUNTRY'S NATIONAL MUSICAL ENSEMBLE



PHOTO BY KEN SCICLUNA

For the last four decades, concerts by the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) featured an organic link embodying the ensemble's evolution over the years. This continuum is manifested in two musicians who unyieldingly devoted their lives to music and currently lead the second violin and cello sections respectively - Stephen Zammit and Mario Psaila.

Reminiscing on his initial steps in the world of classical music, Zammit describes commencing violin tuition at the MUSEUM and then at the School of Music. Subsequently, he successfully sat for diploma exams in violin performance under the mentoring of Mario Bisazza. Psaila, on the other hand, started the cello with an organist. He eventually pursued his studies under the guidance of Rev Salvatore Scicluna, and later was awarded a scholarship to further his education in Rome.

The two musicians joined the then-called the Manoel Theatre Orchestra - within 2 years of each other - Psaila in 1977 and Zammit in 1979. The ensemble was a smaller formation of musicians performing on average a concert every 3 weeks. Psaila vividly remembers how Joseph Sammut, the orchestra's pioneering conductor, had first approached him following a concert at the Malta Cultural Institute. Both their auditions, Zammit adds, were held at the foyer of Teatru Manoel.

Throughout the years, a career as a full-time musician presented numerous financial implications. Zammit recalls spending his first wage, a mere 60 Maltese Liri, to purchase a Kenwood. On a particular occasion, the salary included only half the entitled sum due to an oversight from the tax department; a common occurrence at the time owing to the manual inputting system in place.

In the 1990s, musicians pitched for an equal status to educators. One of the pathways mooted included the downsizing of the orchestra to compensate for an enhanced remunerative package. Unfortunately, discussions reached a stalemate and authorities opted for the dissolution of the orchestra, an unexpected twist the musicians learnt about from the daily news bulletin. Thankfully, this tense scenario was resolved with the creation of a national orchestra.

In addition to playing, Zammit and Psaila contributed extensively towards the running of the orchestra.

The former was also responsible for the ensemble's logistics whereas the latter had a stint as a librarian and represented colleagues as a shop steward for a number of years.

Boasting careers spanning nearly half a century, anecdotes abound. Zammit remarks on the barrage of criticism the orchestra would receive after performing some of Mahler's symphonies with merely four 1st violins. Psaila recollects the infamous monthly programmes recorded for television, filmed in one take. Frequently, he notes, technical or musical hitches entailed the re-start of the whole process.

Both veteran musicians reflect with some nostalgia on the working environment of the orchestra. Psaila pays tribute to a number of key influential people: Joseph Sammut - the conductor who honed his musical abilities, George Spiteri - the long-serving charismatic yet principled leader of the orchestra who motivated and advised, together with Freddie Tonna and Guido Mamo - former players of the orchestra who provided an unwavering source of support. Zammit delineates the blossoming human relationships that characterised the ensemble. Musicians shared personal concerns and engaged on a holistic level, translating into a unique bond.

Delving into the ensemble which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, Psaila underlines the MPO's artistic development, stemming also from an adequately sized yet technically proficient group of musicians. This ongoing growth is also rooted in a change of mentality instilled and nurtured gradually by the respective managerial teams within the orchestra. Taking cue, Zammit maintains that the internships and scholarships offered to budding musicians and the investment in the Malta Youth Orchestra are truly acting as a catalyst for our country's cultural development.

Certainly, the dedication and aptitude demonstrated by the two musicians contributed towards bolstering the MPO's pivotal role in Malta's creative industries. Their efforts serve as an inspiration as the orchestra seeks to enhance its potential. In parallel, their individual achievements - whether interpreting Beethoven's violin concerto or the orchestral cello solos - set an aspirational milestone for young students to emulate.