

The beginnings of the Manoel Baroque festival

Petra Caruana Dingli

It is encouraging to see that in January 2013 the Manoel Theatre successfully revived the idea of organising a Baroque Festival on a regular basis, the Valletta International Baroque Festival. As one of the founding organisations of a similar, albeit smaller, festival organised between 2001 and 2005, the International Institute for Baroque Studies fully supports this initiative.

In 2000, Rev Professor Peter Serracino Inglott and Professor Denis De Lucca, as chairman and director of the Institute, had collaborated with the chairman of the Manoel Theatre, Comm. John Lowell, and its artistic director Tony Cassar Darien, to organise a festival focusing on the Baroque age.

They formed a committee and the festival was named the 'Manoel Baroque Festival', with the majority of events planned to take place at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta. Yet from the outset the idea was to spread the festival wider than Valletta, and to organise events in other Baroque buildings and churches in Malta and Gozo. The organising committee also included Dr Paul Xuereb and Maria Ghirlando, and Mgr Joe Farrugia provided his assistance. Support was obtained from the Embassy of France, the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, the British Council, and the German-Maltese Circle.

The idea was to organise a series of artistic and cultural events to highlight and celebrate

Malta's rich Baroque heritage, as well as to contribute to the development of cultural tourism in Malta. Baroque festivals are held in Europe each year, mainly in France, Italy and southern Germany, and the committee aimed to establish a presence within this network of festival-goers.

Writing about the launch of the festival in the Sunday Times on 22 April 2001, Maria Ghirlando had said, "It is so fitting that a Baroque festival be held at the Manoel Theatre, the epitome of baroque theatres cradled in one of the finest of baroque cities bursting at the seams with baroque tradition. When baroque music is making a comeback in Europe, it is so appropriate for the Manoel to be poised on the crest of this new wave, luring local and foreign music lovers to the island, and giving a boost to its cultural tourism."

The Manoel Baroque Festival was initially planned as a biannual event and the first edition of the Festival was held in May 2001. I had joined the team in the summer of 2001 and coordinated the second and third editions of the Festival, which were held in 2003 and 2005.

The first edition of the Manoel Baroque Festival was held over seven days in 2001 and received positive reviews in the local newspapers. It was well received and encouraged as a worthwhile and enjoyable initiative. The performances included two operas, a concert on period instruments, an organ recital at St John's Co-Cathedral and a concert of sacred music performed at the Basilica of St George in Gozo.

As part of the festival, the International Institute for Baroque Studies organised an international symposium on Baroque theatre called 'The Baroque *Theatrum Mundi*', and participants included Denis De Lucca, Vicky Ann Cremona, Elena Tamburini, Peter Serracino Inglott, Annabel Vassallo, John Galea, and John Azzopardi. The Institute also organised a walking tour of Mdina and Valletta, and a small exhibition on the architect Romano Carapicchia.

Apart from various musical concerts, the second edition of the Festival in 2003 featured





the play *The Knight of Malta* (1646) by Philip Massinger, John Fletcher and Nathaniel Field, staged by Theatre Anon (Malta) and directed by Jes Camilleri. This proved to be quite a challenge to perform. The play is set in Malta and revolves around a fight between Grand Master de Valette and the Turks, based on a story adapted from Boccaccio's *Filicolo*.

Highlights of the 2003 edition of the festival included an acclaimed production of the opera *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell (1659-95), conducted by Petr Wagner from Prague. Emma Kirkby and the London Baroque Ensemble (UK) performed a vocal concert, and an organ recital by Marco Fornaciari and Francesco Finotti (Italy) was held at the Mdina Cathedral. The *Ensemble Baroque de Nice* (France) performed a vocal concert of cantata by Michel Pignolet de Monteclair (1667-1737). The *Laudete Pueri* choir conducted by Mro Joseph Vella gave a performance at St John's Co-Cathedral, and walking tours of Mdina, 'Baroque Gozo', and 'Baroque churches of Valletta' were organised and well attended.

The 2003 edition also included a seminar called 'Triumph over Death: a Baroque Celebration', held at St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity in Valletta. Peter Serracino Inglott spoke about Baroque philosophy and death,

while Denis De Lucca focused on the Baroque *Festa Funebre*. Mgr John Azzopardi described the revival of Maltese Baroque music in the latter half of the 20th century, and Professor Mario Buhagiar gave a presentation on 'Images of Death in Maltese paintings of the Early Modern Period'. Dr Keith Sciberras gave a lecture on '*In Memoriam Principis*: Dying Well in the Late Baroque', and Shirley Cefai went over the history and documentation of Carapicchia's *Cappella Ardente* at St John's Co-Cathedral. At the time, the *Cappella Ardente* was in a poor state of repair – it is good to note that since then this wonderful sculptural piece is being restored. The papers were eventually gathered and published in an initial volume of the *Journal of Baroque Studies* in 2003.

In 2005, the third edition of the festival was referred to as the '*Festa Barokka*', and included a performance by the British period instrument ensemble Florilegium, led by Ashley Solomon. The festival also hosted the *Ensemble Européen William Byrd* and the Institute organised a symposium on the theme 'Baroque Connections'. This included a paper by Mro Joseph Vella on Maltese music of the Baroque age, with recorded examples of musical works by Maltese composers illustrating local practices and standards.