

As part of my Systems of Knowledge project, I decided to interview Maestro Joseph Debrincat about the Pontifical Mass of our parish since he was involved in its composition. This interview turned out to be both educational and interesting, which is why I decided to publish it on the parish website. Here it is..

1.)When was the Pontifical Mass composed and what were the circumstances to its being commissioned?

For years the Pontifical Mass which was performed during the feast of Saint Margaret was that composed by Mgr. Martin Portelli, then *maestro di cappella*. Just before the feast of 2000, Mgr. Portelli handed his resignation and I remember that Dr. John Galea and myself were engaged to be responsible for the music services during the feast. I was entrusted with the "Tridium" whereas Dr. John Galea was responsible for Saturday and Sunday (that included the Pontifical Mass). This change brought about the idea of commissioning a new mass for the feast of Saint Margaret. This idea was mainly Fr. Calleja's (a priest in our village) who felt strongly that someone well-known should be commissioned to compose a mass for our parish. The archpriest agreed and after lot of thinking who would be able to compose this mass it was agreed that Charles Camilleri was to be the composer. Admittedly this was quite a risk considering that Camilleri never composed a mass and he is very renowned for his modern and contemporary touches – alien characteristics of local sacred music. Keeping in mind that I was a student and close friend of Camilleri, I was entrusted to discuss all this with Camilleri and, above all, if he would be able to compose this mass. Camilleri accepted this commission eagerly because it was his first mass. Mind you, he was specifically told that the music must be sacred as far as possible. The archpriest and Father Calleja sponsored the mass. The music of *Missa in honorem Sancta Margarita* was finished in early 2002. I remember received the hand written manuscript by post and started right away to input the music on the computer. So from there one could print the individual

orchestral and choral parts. In the meantime a contract was signed by Camilleri giving all the rights to the parish.

The mass was premiered in the feast of 2002 under my direction – obviously after a long period of rehearsals. The composer was present and after the mass presented the score to the archpriest of Sannat. He even delivered a short speech to the congregation explaining his music.

2.) Artistically and musically speaking, how would you describe this composition?

Like all other Camilleri's compositions, this composition is not conventional. Keeping in mind that Camilleri was one of the first, or actually the first, to experiment to such a great extent with modern expedients, this composition is both innovative and unique. In fact, it does not follow the norm of Maltese sacred such the music by Nani, Bugeja and others. Having said this, Camilleri remained within the parameters required. The Mass was appreciated straight away and many still come over specifically to listen to it because it is something different.

3.) What are the Mass's particular qualities and characteristics?

I find it particular as a whole because it doesn't follow any tradition. This may be because this is actually Camilleri's first mass and he never tries to imitate or follow tradition. Just to mention a few instances, the *Benedictus* and *Sanctus*, which are usually and traditionally linked together, are totally different. The *Sanctus* which normally makes use of the whole instrumental forces, makes use of reduced instrumentation. It is in fact aimed at the strings and choir. The *Gloria*,

which is usually quite long, is relatively short whereas the *Agnus Dei* is unusually long.

4.) In your opinion, to what extent does the Mass convey the atmosphere expected of a pontifical mass?

First of all, one must admit that the official musical language of the Roman Catholic Church is Gregorian Chant – nothing else. Renaissance polyphony is also accepted for liturgical services. In this regards, our mass cannot be considered as very sacred. But which of the masses performed in the village feasts of Malta and Gozo is? In my opinion, none of them. All are written in a boisterous, theatrical form as was typical of music before the *Moto Proprio*, a statement issued on how masses should be written since they were losing their 'religiosity'. I'd say we have reverted to those times!

5.) Prof. Camilleri is a composer of world renowned stature. How does this Mass fit into his repertoire and style?

Foreigners who are accustomed to Camilleri's works wouldn't in the least suspect that this mass is written by him. I really believe that to appreciate Camilleri to the full one surely cannot take him off from his contemporary compositions that made him world renowned. Given his abstract, very modern style, this mass is very untypical of him yet as I said, its uniqueness does reflect his approach to music.

6.) You have conducted this Mass for several times. What challenges does it pose to the conductor?

All music is challenging, yet some pieces are more demanding than others. I would say this is of median rank because it is not a straightforward mass. The orchestration is quite colourful and is full of melodic lines, one more important than the other. Doubling of voices is almost alien – typical of Camilleri. The choir is used in an unconventional way and one cannot only really as the Maltese use to say “on his ears”. For example since the *Agnus Dei* is relatively long the conductor has to build up the music gradually so to reach the final fortissimo climax at the very end.

7.) Did the fact that the parish choir is an amateur impinge in the composition of this Mass?

Yes, but since it is known that the choir is an amateur, it was composed keeping this fact in mind. After all, the operatic productions in the island are conducted with amateur choirs and with very good and surprising results

8.) You collaborated closely with Prof. Camilleri during the composition of this piece. How has this experience affected your career?

This was the first time I collaborated so closely with Prof. Camilleri. Later in 2007 we worked again together on his opera ‘Il-Weghda’ which I conducted at the Manoel Theatre. As in the case of the mass the music was handwritten and if it was unrecognizable, I could not rely on my musical knowledge to figure it out because Camilleri’s musical palette is quite different from mine. The rest was a wonderful experience, from which I made a friend and learnt from a well-known person. Camilleri was a pleasant person to work with: despite his world fame, he remained down-to-earth and open to suggestions. He didn’t look down on students; on the contrary, he credited them when they were right and believed in them.

9.)Has this Mass in any way affected the prestige of sacred music on the island of Gozo?

As I previously said, it was a something new and different. Yet change is good, it was immediately accepted and is enjoyed up to the day. I wouldn't say that it affected the prestige of sacred music in Gozo; I think that it gave sacred music a new dimension, which is positive.

Thank you for your time Maestro. Debrincat. It was a pleasure speaking to you and learning about this mass.