

2025 to see more double bills and forum contributions. I hope other audience members will also persevere through the sometimes frustrating way that these are programmed, to stay with the important questions eavesdropping asks at its heart – and, ultimately, to be introduced to some brilliant new music.

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10.1017/S0040298224000408

Joseph Vella, *Valeriana: The Titan's Rock*, Teatru Astra, Victoria, May 2024.

I will begin this review with a brief précis of Maltese and Gozitan operatic culture for the benefit of those unfamiliar with it – Maltese and Gozitans can skip to the next paragraph. Non-locals will notice that I have already made a distinction here that Maltese politicians are careful to make when speaking broadly and inclusively to their constituents: ‘Maltese and Gozitans’. Gozo is a small, hilly, trapezoidal island north of Malta, itself a small, but comparatively larger, island. It has a distinct culture, cuisine and dialect – and, with a population of around 40,000, it has two separate opera houses within roughly 50 metres of each other. I raise this point because Joseph Vella, the composer of the opera *Valeriana*, was a *Gozitan* composer, and it was at one of these two Gozitan opera houses – Teatru Astra – where he worked and where his final work was posthumously premièred. Vella was one of the two titans of twentieth-century Maltese (and Gozitan) music, alongside Charles Camilleri, with whom he shared a pronounced professional rivalry. Both Camilleri and Vella have a stature that make them nearly metonymic with Maltese music, which is problematic both for their music and for Malta. Like many European territories on the receiving end of imperial designs, Malta’s emergence as a nation-state occurred rather late, and, as a consequence, its musical discourses are sometimes self-consciously frozen in the romantic nationalism of the mid to late nineteenth century. This is a shame, because very many Maltese musicians are short-changed by the nationalist tone-poem pigeonhole. Both Camilleri and Vella’s most internationally successful works involve some sort of symbolic national link to Malta, through the keywords ‘Malta’, ‘Maltese’ or, most forbiddingly, ‘Mediterranean’, but their best works are strikingly original and almost impossible to pin down in either time or place (Camilleri’s ‘New

Idea’ symphony, Vella’s *Jeux*). Far from being nationally limited, influences on Maltese music have been hugely eclectic (a favourite adjective of Maltese aesthetics generally), taking odds and ends of North African and European music and running with them towards unforeseeable ends. Joseph Vella, for example, was fundamentally influenced by the compositional methods devised by Paul Hindemith late in his life, wherein a new systematic and binding system of tonality is arrived at through methods that are not strictly tonal.

The tension between these two complex antipodes – on the one hand, the obligatory, tried and tested ‘Malta/Mediterranean/Little Italy’ brand, on the other, the contingencies of a unique personal style – is what makes *Valeriana* such a fascinating, wonderful and very fun opera. Musically, its model appears to be Hindemith’s *Mathis der Maler*: the transitions before and after scenes are the structurally significant musical set pieces, with the scenic music itself largely confined to an accompanying role. Dramatically, it is verismo – a realistic ‘slice of life’ narrative with ‘ordinary’ characters in a defined historical setting. The setting here is the Fascist era on *Valeriana*, a fictional island off the coast of Sicily, which might potentially be an allegory but is not, at least on a diegetic level, an allegory for Malta, which is repeatedly mentioned in the libretto as holding out against Fascist aggression. The island is ruled with an iron fist by Cirilo, a booming baritone baddie, and his blackshirts. Token resistance is offered by Rosario, a Maltese fisherman, and a kindly figure known as Il Professore. Over the course of four acts word gets out that Italy has lost the war and Mussolini has been violently deposed, leading to a reversal of fortune for the characters – Cirillo becomes a fugitive while Rosario and Il Professore help with the rebuilding of civil society. Eventually Il Professore convinces Cirillo as ‘a gesture of goodwill’ to clean out the mines he had laid on the island’s beaches. As he is ostensibly defusing the last mine, Cirillo instead detonates it, killing himself, which is how the opera ends. Good: it is always nice when an opera ends with a bang.

There are occasional pointed anachronisms in the libretto. In an extended aria, Cirillo laments that the locals do not have the imagination to appreciate his vision of the island as a holiday destination for Fascist officials – a landscape of ‘villas along the cliff edge... luxury yachts’. While promotional material for the opera is at pains to connect Cirillo’s speech to the historical fascist pleasure island of Capri, it is pretty clear

that the text is referring more to the Malta of the present rather than a fictionalised past, where plans for luxury-yacht marinas in densely populated seaside towns have mobilised enormous (and, as of publication, successful) popular protest from locals. The overall effect is Felliniesque, combining clownish memories of a semi-legendary past with emotional resonances from the present, accentuated by the dreamlike stage design of Anthony Bonnici and the beautiful archetypal costumes by Luke Azzopardi.

I mentioned at the outset that this was a post-humous première; Joseph Vella died suddenly in 2018 with about half the opera in some form of completion. The rest of the job fell to Christopher Muscat, who also conducted the première performance. If Vella might be seen to represent the quirky, inspired individualism of Maltese composition of the previous generation, Muscat can be read as a younger, savvy composer of a new globalised and yet self-consciously nostalgic Europe, mixing crowd-pleasing popular influences from Hans Zimmer-style film scores and skilfully engineered operatic climaxes à la Verdi. Many people noted to me that the second half of the opera sounded much, much different from the first – Vella's sedate structural writing was transformed into Muscat's explosive lyricism. It was a unique experience, and gave a vivid impression of juxtaposing the recent past and the present of Maltese art music.

The vocal cast were uniformly excellent, especially considering that amplification was kept to a bare minimum; only a small handful of local vocal lines were hopelessly drowned out by

the orchestra. Bass Noel Galea provided a magnetic, Roald Dahl-esque characterisation of the kindly and enigmatic Professore, while Ilyas Ige Sultana, a Xaghra native who turned ten this January, according to the programme book, had a beautifully melodic and powerful voice as Nello, Rosario's son. The standout performance was certainly baritone Louis Andrew Cassar – in harmony with the alternately cartoonish and dreamlike production, he played Cirillo as something like a silent-movie villain, stooping, scowling, bellowing and smirking lecherously even as he blows himself up with a landmine.

Two opera houses would certainly not survive, let alone thrive, with an island population in the low five figures if opera was truly an elite art form. In Gozo, at least, it emphatically isn't. Ministers and politicians mingled with farmers and masons in the audience of this world première of a contemporary opera. Nor is hermetic concert decorum zealously enforced – during performances it is not unusual to hear small children murmuring or see patrons of all ages eating bags of Twistees (a popular local proprietary snack of Tastees Manufacturing Ltd, akin to a meatier Cheeto). This is not to wax utopian at the end of a short review – it is only opera, after all, but here, with Vella/Muscat's *Valeriana*, it truly has something for everyone.

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