

# Five Bells from the Knights' *Ferreria* at the Gozo Cathedral

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The Cathedral belfry that dominates the Gozo Citadel now house a set of five new bells which were produced by *John Taylor Bellfounders Limited* of Loughborough, Leicestershire, United Kingdom, the largest bell-foundry in the world. They replace five other bells, the earliest of which has pealed from the belfry for the past three hundred and sixty four years.

## Bells and Social Routine

Bells of all sizes have been used throughout the world for signalling – tolling the hours, marking significant points of ritual, calling to worship, announcing events, rejoicing, warning, and mourning.

From medieval times to the early twentieth century, the division of the day and the night in Gozo and Malta depended entirely on church bells. This was due to the fact that in Gozo there was only one public clock, situated within the Citadel, and the number of clocks in households was negligible.

It was the church bells that proclaimed a succession of prayers and services from morning to evening at recognized hours. It was customary to refer to the hours of the day in relation to the striking of the church bells. At four in the morning, the *Pater Noster* bell announced day-break and summoned the people to mass and, later on, to proceed to earn their daily bread. *Tat-Tmienja*, at eight in the morning, invited them for a short prayer. *Tal-Borom*, literally 'of the pots', at eleven in the morning, marked the time for the rekindling of fires and the preparation of meals. *Ta' Nofs inhar*, at noon, marked midday. *Tat-Tlieta*, at three in the afternoon on Fridays, reminded the hour of the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. The *Ave Marija* bell was rung an hour before sunset and, an hour later, the *Ta' l-Imwiet* bell, invited the faithful to pray for the departed brethren.

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Special ringing called people to worship. A succession of twenty or so chimes by a single bell invited the people to mass. A *mota*, (plural *moti*), or the ringing of more than one bell successively and concurrently marked the celebration of a feast day or the beginning of a special ceremony in church. A very special ceremony was announced by the ringing of three successive *moti* several minutes long on each quarter of the hour preceding the beginning of the ceremony.

Bells were also rung to announce events. The election of a bishop or a grandmaster was proclaimed by the pealing of all church bells. They were also rung to open the city gate, to announce the approach of advancing armies, or the imminence of a storm. Death is always announced by the parish bell; the slow tone of a funeral bell was part of daily life.

Bells imparted the social routine in towns and villages and, for this reason, everyone, since early childhood, was taught how to translate the ringing into a precise message.

## Bells from the Knights' *Ferreria*

The foundation of the church that is presently the Cathedral goes back to medieval times. A document from 1299 hints that a church within the castle or citadel of Gozo was functioning as a parish church. A century later this church began to be referred to as the *Matrice* of Santa Marija, the mother church dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

On Sunday, 13 February 1575, the church received a very important person. Pietro Dusina, who a few weeks earlier had been designated as apostolic visitor to Malta and Gozo by Pope Gregory XIII, made his formal visit to the *Matrice*. From the report of this distinguished visitor (*Visitatio Apostolica* [1575] 419v), it is known that the *Matrice* church had three bells in 1575. It was the only church in

Gozo to have bells. Yet none of these three bells has survived.

In the 1630s, the *Matrice's* authorities decided to acquire two more bells to add to the three already hanging in the belfry. The order was placed with the *Ferreria* or Foundry of the Knights of Saint John, the rulers of Malta since 1530. The *Ferreria* was situated just inside the city gate, Valletta, occupying the block between the present Ordinance Street and South Street. It was demolished late in the nineteenth century to make way for the palace that took its name from the foundry, *Palazzo Ferreria*.

The *Ferreria* was established to meet the military needs of the Order, especially guns and related tackle. Bells were only a side-product of the *Ferreria* and were cast upon request by church authorities. The truth is that, according to Kenneth Cauchi, who kindly provided the technical information for this write-up, the founders at the *Ferreria* were not bell-founders, but simply master artisans of their craft. These founders did produce a number of good toned bells, but they lacked the expertise to complement the tones of the various bells that they produced. When bells did match, it was probably just a matter of coincidence.

### The Two Smallest Bells

The two new bells of the *Matrice* have been traced by Robert Cassar, an expert in the field, to Vincenzo Sardo, the master founder of the *Ferreria*, who definitely cast the two slightly larger bells at the Mdina Cathedral. The latter, produced six years earlier in 1633, are still in place. The Gozo bells were ready in 1639 and were blessed by Bishop Michael Balaguer at Saint Francis Church, Valletta, the church next door to the *Ferreria*.

The smallest, known in fact as *iz-Zghira*, has a diameter of 735 mm. Around its top rim, it carries the inscription 'VIVENTES VOCO ET QVE PERIERE GEMO' – I call the living, and weep for the dead. It has an embossment of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an incised coat-of-arms of Bishop Balaguer, and the inscription 'CONSACRATA', on

one side; and an embossment of the Holy Family and the date '1639', on the opposite side.

The slightly larger bell, lately called by the not so graceful name of *l-Imġelġla*, - the cracked (bell) - has a diameter of 840 mm. It also carries an inscription: 'DAEMONES EXPELLO, TEMPESTATESQUE SERENO, 1639' (I have the power to expel devils, and to calm tempests). This inscription is quite common on medieval bells of Europe, but a rarity in the Maltese islands. It has an embossment of the Immaculate Conception, an incised coat-of-arms of Bishop Balaguer, and the inscription 'CONSACRATA', on one side; and, like the other, an embossment of the Holy Family and the date '1639', on the opposite side.

These bells, probably slightly larger than the three earlier bells, have a very sharp hum tone. All five bells were lowered from the belfry in 1693, soon after the 11 January earthquake that caused considerable structural damage to the medieval church. In the following years, the old *Matrice* was demolished and the foundation stone of a much larger church was laid on 21 September 1697.

The new church, built on a design by the famous Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafà, was officially opened on 14 August 1711. The church was provided with a handsome well-proportioned campanile attached to its north-east side. The five bells were raised inside the new belfry and they peeled for hours and hours on 11 October 1716, when Bishop Giacomo Cañaves, in a twenty-four-hour-long ceremony, solemnly dedicated the new *Matrice* to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven and Saint Ursula.

### Two Larger Bells

The new massive belfry required two larger and better bells. They were ready in 1739, exactly one hundred years after the founding of the first two. They were again produced by the *Ferreria* of the Knights by the master founder Aloysius Bouchet. They were blessed in front of Saint Francis Church, Valletta, by

Bishop Alpheran de Bussan on 5 December 1739. When they were raised into the Matrice belfry, they probably took the place of the two small bells mentioned in 1575.

The third largest bell has a diameter of 1245 mm. It is named *Ursula et Barbara*, but was commonly referred to as *tal-Quddies*, ('of the mass'), since it was mainly used to announce the time of mass. It has an embossment of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, on one side; the date 'ANNO DOMINI 1738' and the coat-of-arms of Bishop Alpheran, on the other side. This indicates that the bell had been cast the year before and brought to Gozo with the other bell.

The largest bell, known in fact as *il-Kbira*, has a diameter of 1472 mm and is named *Maria Assumpta*. It has an embossment of the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus surrounded by putti, on one side; the date 'ANNO DOMINI 1739' as well as the coat-of-arms of Bishop Alpheran, on the other side. A flat moulding band spans the entire circumference of the soundbow, and further up, a set of three raised thin wires, span across the waist – a characteristic typical on all bells produced by master founder Aloysius Bouchet.

### The Fifth Bell

In 1791, still another bell was founded for the Matrice. It is the work of the brothers Francesco and Gioacchino Trigance, master founders of the Knights' *Ferreria*. It was popularly known as *il-Ġdida*, (the new one). It has a diameter of 1295 mm and is thus the second largest of the five. It is also the finest bell in both tone and in the founding work.

The bell was paid for by the Sodality of Saint Philip Neri for Priests founded within the same Matrice. It has an embossment of Saint Philip Neri on one side; and, on the other side, another embossment of the Blessed Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus, an inscription recording the benefactors and date, 'EXPENSIS SODALITATIS PRESBITERORUM FACTA ANNO DNI 1791', and beneath, the name of the founders, 'FRATRES TRIGANCE FECERUNT'.

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One of the new bells being lifted up to the belfry on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2003

These are very rich in artistic and sculptural content, and also employ high quality craftsmanship. The Buhagiar predella generally makes use of different types of wood together with fine wood-inlaid and ebony panels. These create a wonderful play of chromatic values, texture and contrasts. His first work in this genre, the predella for the titular statue of the Immaculate Conception at Cospicua Parish Church, set the standards in this item of church furniture for the following decades in Malta.



**Plate 2** Emanuele Buhagiar, *Predella for Titular Statue, 1925, Parish Church of the Assumption, Attard.*

This thesis has brought to light many works of art by Emanuele Buhagiar for the first time. Painstaking research, conducted in church archives and in private collections on a span of three years, has unearthed a very considerable number of designs which the artist produced in preparation for his commissions. These were usually produced in pen and wash, but pencil and charcoal also recur. The fact that the major part of these designs are signed and dated, have enabled the construction of the artist's chronological oeuvre, which is very difficult to ascertain where the decorative arts are concerned.

This post-graduate study has thrown substantial new light on this little known artist, filling a lacuna in the study of the ecclesiastical decorative arts in the Maltese Islands at the turn of the twentieth century. It has also contributed towards the full and holistic understanding of the exciting story of Maltese Art in general. However, it has also clearly shown the extensive amount of academic research that remains to be done so that the full story of church decoration in Malta and Gozo is woven into a one, coherent whole.

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### A Set of Five New Bells

These five bells rang their most important *mota* on Friday afternoon, 23 September 1864, when news reached Gozo that on 16 September, Pope Pius IX had established Gozo and Comino as a separate diocese and declared the old Matrice the Cathedral of the new diocese. These were rung for the last time at twelve noon on Pentecost Sunday, 8 June 2003. On 5 and 13 July 2003, they were lowered down from the Cathedral belfry for the last time.

The five new bells reached Gozo from Leicestershire on 31 July 2003 and were blessed by Bishop Nikol Cauchi of Gozo in a solemn ceremony held at Pjazza Savina, Rabat, on 2 August. The bells are named, from the smallest to the largest, *Aloysia*, *Pavla*, *Iosepha-Francisca*, *Ursula*, and *Maria Assumpta*. Their weight ranges from the 310 kg of the smallest to the 4275 kg of the largest, and their diameter from 800 mm to 1955 mm.

Each bell is decorated with a set of ornate canons bearing six cherubs, and a garland of English roses round the waist. The titular effigy of the Assumption and an inscription recording their blessing is embossed upon the largest bell, whilst Saint Ursula and Pope Pius IX are embossed on the second largest.

### Conclusion

The five old bells from the Knights' *Ferreria*, after a much needed rehabilitation, have been hung as a tourist attraction within the arched recess in front of the entry to the Cathedral crypt in Triq Bieb l-Imdina. They will continue to be rung on very special occasions to announce far and wide a message of good tidings.