

When the Maltese national anthem was barred by closing the Royal Theatre



Caricature of Robert Samut by Henry E. Davie. ALFRED SANT MANDUCA COLLECTION



Some years ago (November 5, 2006) I had written an article on the true genesis of *L'Innu Malti* culled from a letter written by Blanche Laferla, wife of Dr Albert Laferla. According to a note in his scrapbook (now in the author's collection), it was written for the 'Dominies', the Teachers' Theatrical Society, by 'Prof. C. Psaila', music by 'Prof. R. Samut'. Accompanying this feature is a charming caricature of Robert Samut painted in Paris by Henry E. Davie in 1914.

The names of Samut and Davie are both on the list of members of the Malta Art Amateur Association published on February 25, 1909. The works of this painter and cartoonist connected with Malta have been recorded in the encyclopaedia of artists published a few months ago.

An attempt had been made in the past to create a National Maltese Anthem, but it encountered fierce government opposition. The first attempt I have come across followed the publication of a lengthy poem in eight stanzas called *Canto Patriottico*.

It was printed anonymously without date, but on the copy I have there is a manuscript note in ink Sparsa clandestinamente [e]. 1885. (Disseminated clandestinely, 1885).

After every four stanzas, the following couplet was repeated:

Va fuori di Malta, va fuori ch'è l'ora,
Va fuori di Malta, va fuori, o stranier.

This was described in a bottom line as the cry of all peoples struggling for their redemption (REDENZIONE in capital letters). At the centre, top, there is an emblem of Malta, with the

ancient arms of Malta underneath the eight-pointed cross on a shield held up by two flags.

In 1885, just a year after the arrival of the new Governor, Sir John A. Lintorn Simmons, there was political agitation for a truly liberal Constitution in which the opinion of a majority of the people's representatives in the Council of Government would be strictly adhered to by the government in all questions of local interest.

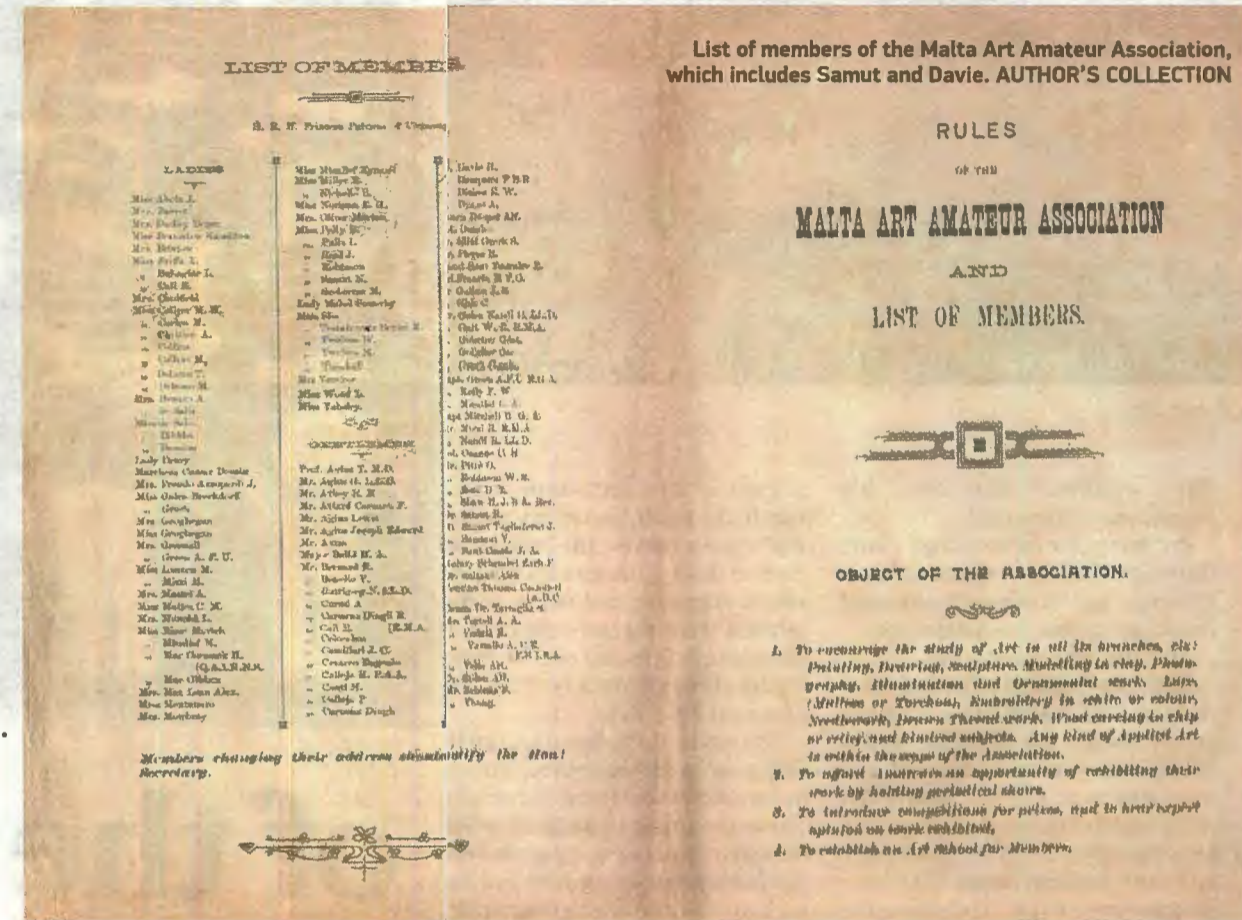
"The judge heard the evidence of the parties and delivered judgment in 24 hours"

In August 1885, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley (1841-1908), met a project drawn up by Marquis Vincenzo Bugeja (1821-1890) with a flat refusal to alter the restrictive constitution of Malta. In 1876, Bugeja, a renowned philanthropist, was created Knight of the Garter by Prince Edward of Wales.

Dr Zaccaria Roncali, a Maltese lawyer of Greek descent, and an anglophobe who had been elected to the Council of Government, caused a stir by calling out on the Palace Square, in front of the Governor's palace, Malta è dei Maltesi, fuori lo straniero (Malta belongs to the Maltese, out with the foreigner - namely, the British).

So it would not be in the least surprising were it to be ascertained that Roncali was truly the author of the *Inno Patriottico* although there is no hard conclusive evidence. Eventually, in 1895, he was appointed one of Her Majesty's judges, serving for 20 years.

It was only in the first year of the 20th century that the first ever



national anthem was composed abroad by a Maltese patriot who sent it to Malta to be played at the Royal Theatre. It was certified by local experts as being of excellent workmanship, produced by a highly competent composer, destined to become very popular in its innate simplicity.

The Maltese aficionados embraced it with enthusiasm. A decision was taken to play it immediately at the Theatre and the great day was set for January 7, 1902, during a vocal and instrumental concert.

Typical of the colonial governors and chief secretaries who suppressed

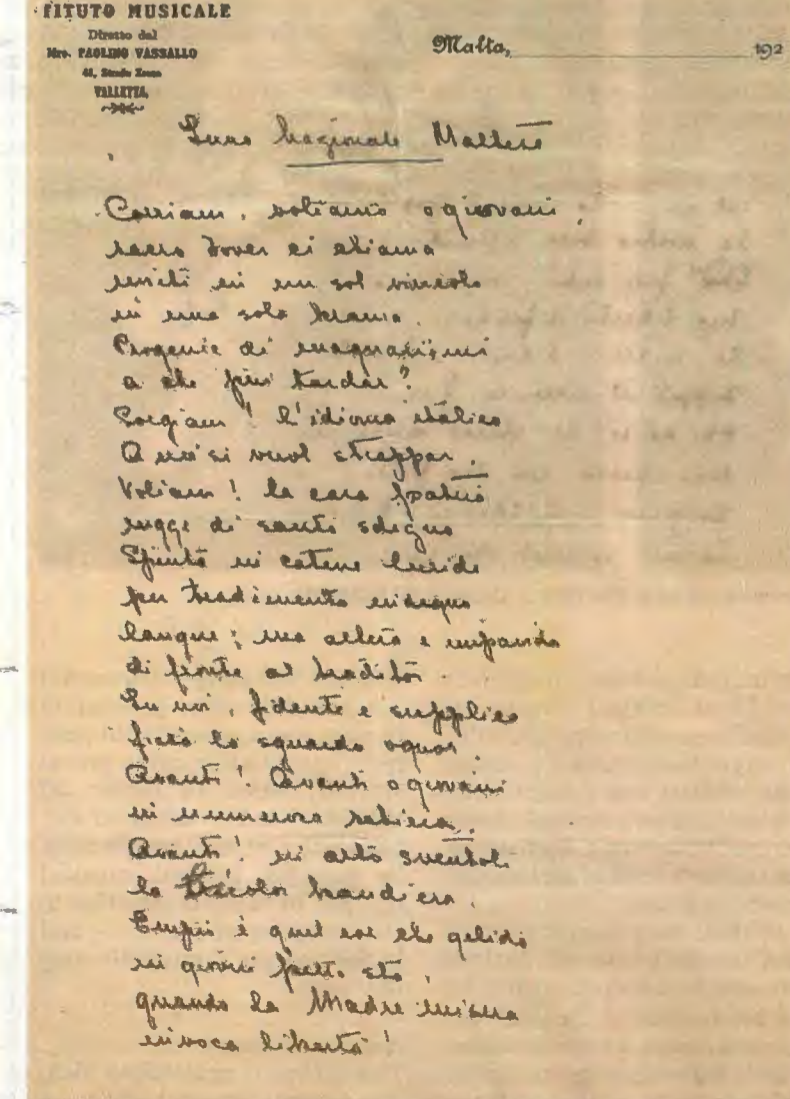
any manifestation of national identity and patriotism, on January 6, 1902, the eve of the national event, a Government Notice ordered the closure of the Royal Theatre on January 7 for reasons of so-called 'public order'.

Before issuing this notice, the government had, on January 4, ordered the lessees of the theatre, Malfiggiani and others, not to open the Royal Theatre on January 7, thereby breaking the terms of the contract of lease. The lessees had no option but to submit.

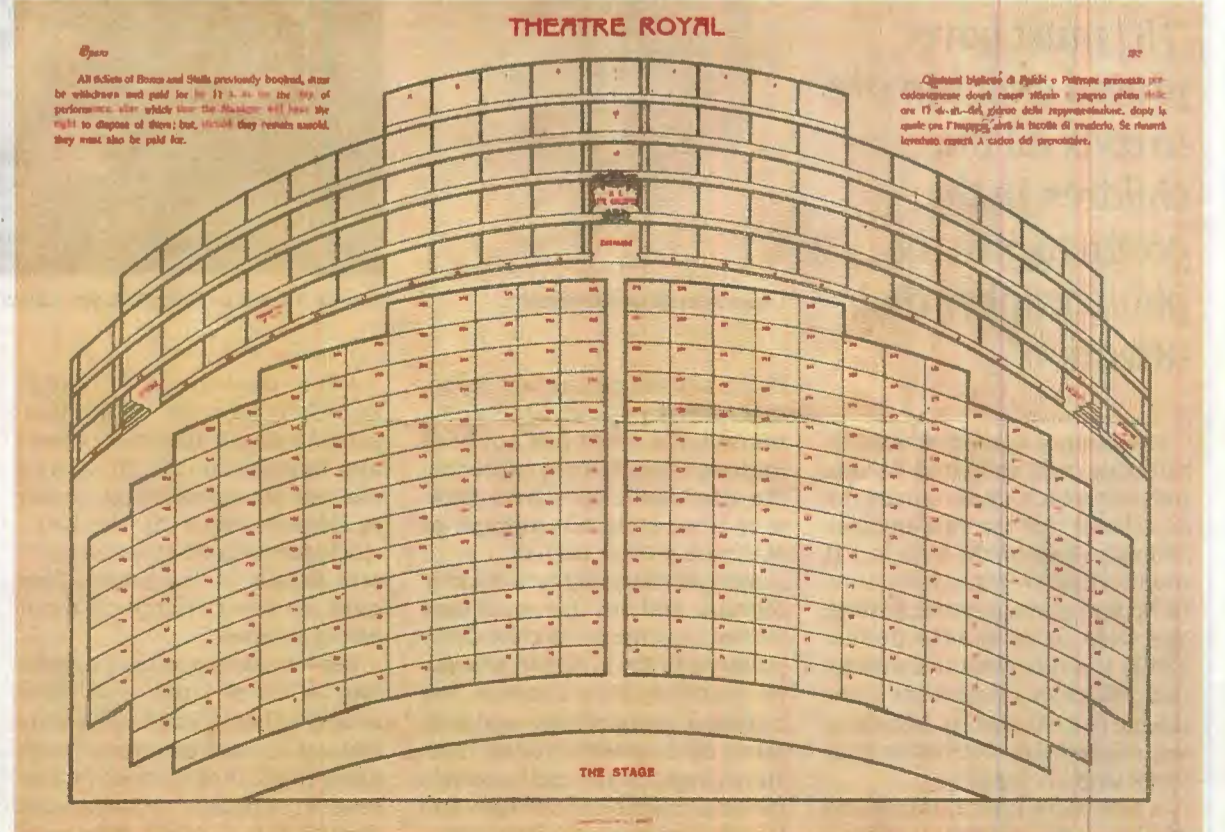
An elected member of the Council of Government, the legal procurator Francesco Azzopardi, filed a court

case against Malfiggiani et al, claiming that he had paid the defendants £10 for the use of the theatre on January 7 to hold a concert and play the national anthem, and requesting from the court an order to open the theatre on that day for the said purpose. Otherwise, he would hold the defendants liable for damages.

The defendants confirmed that they had entered into the contract for January 7, but their hand was forced by the Chief Secretary to Government (Sir Gerald Strickland) who wrote that the theatre was to be kept closed on that fateful day.



Letterhead of Mro Paolino Vassallo on which Vassallo wrote the *Inno Nazionale Maltese*. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Rare booking seating sheet of the Royal Theatre. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Dr Zaccaria Roncali. COURTESY OF ST CATHERINE'S BAND CLUB, ŻURRIEQ



Judge Paolo De Bono. Photocincograph by Vittorio Turati. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Azzopardi asked that the case be heard with urgency and the judge took it seriously. He heard the evidence of the parties and delivered judgment on January 5, 1902, in a matter of 24 hours. This is how our Courts of Justice administered justice in those days, irrespective of whether there was any government involvement.

In his judgment, Judge Paolo De Bono, renowned for his ability and probity, decided that the government could not order the closure of a theatre or any other public place by private correspondence with an individual; this was not an official measure in the usual form for reasons of public order over which the courts had no jurisdiction. Consequently the defendants were ordered to allow the plaintiff to use the theatre on January 7 to hold the concert and play the Maltese national anthem. The government immediately ordered the closure by publishing an official notice in the Government Gazette, using its iure imperii powers to undermine the rule of law hallowed in the court order.

Does the Maltese National Anthem of 1902 still exist? If so, where?

When Malta was granted a measure of self-government after 120 years of British rule, a patriotic hymn was composed by Mro Luigi Vella (1868-1950), of 2, Victoria Terrace, Sliema, to celebrate the event. The musical score was printed in Florence by A. Forlivesi & Co. with the title *Partitura per banda* and the verses were contributed by Prof. Luigi Billion (1860-1939). The hymn carried the title *Inno Patriottico Maltese per la proclamazione della nostra Autonomia 30 Aprile 1921*.

The final verses were dedicated to Sir Filippo Scerberras (1850-1928), the architect of the 1921 Constitution, and "to the blessed memory of the incorruptible Dr Fortunato Mizzi" (1844-1905) founder of the Partito Nazionale. They read as follows:

Salutiam la nova aurora di giustizia e libertà a chi lotta e non si scuora la vittoria alfin si dà.

The hymn was played with great success at the Teatro Vittoria, Sliema, on August 22, 1921.

Prof. Billion, born in Valletta, was an educator and a poet who wrote a considerable number of canti sacri and canti patriottici, one of which was set to music by Mro Gaetano Grech. Among the latter he commemorated the fallen of the Great Siege of 1565 and the Otto Settembre. He saluted the Maltese flag, the national colours and the heroes of Malta. The full text of the hymn composed by Mro Vella was published with the title *Inno a Malta* in his book *Voci Intime - Versi*, printed in 1927. It has been recorded that the music for one of his hymns was scored by Mro Paolino Vassallo.

"Does the Maltese National Anthem of 1902 still exist? If so, where?"

At about the same time, an *Inno Nazionale Maltese* was written, seemingly composed (or to be composed) by Mro Paolino Vassallo (1856-1923) as it is extant on his 1920s letterheads of the Istituto Musicale at 41, Strada Zecca, Valletta. It consists of 34 verses beginning with the words: *Corriamo, voliamo o giovani... quando la Madre misera invoca libertà...* (Let us run, let us fly oh young ones... when our unhappy Mother cries out for liberty).

On the same letterheads, two other hymns are extant - *Inno Patrio*, and *Inno Patrio (8 settembre)*. They are all written by hand, but the author is unknown. Even the probability that they were written in the early 1920s is uncertain. It happened that Bice Vassallo, daughter of Mro Paolino, was married to Enrico Mizzi (1885-1950), one of the most active nationalist politicians of that time. Perhaps they belong to Nerik's entourage.

The story of projected national anthems ends here. History was achieved through the initiative of Albert Laferla, who, unlike Nerik Mizzi, was a staunch anglophile, but who also harboured an unusual sense of Maltese national sentiment.

History repeats itself. When George Borg Olivier was prime minister he waged a 15-year battle for the *Innu Malti* to be recognised by the British Governors and armed forces before the long-awaited independence. Three years ago, Prof. Joseph Pirotta wrote this book about it, titled *Nation, Pride and Dignity, Borg Olivier and the National Anthem*.

Ever since Britain secured possession of the Maltese islands, our colonial masters almost always marshalled all their means to suppress and undermine anything that savoured of Maltese national rights, privileges and patriotism. Even the official Maltese National Anthem they downgraded to the status of a simple hymn. The exclusive anthem was *God Save the King/Queen*.