

Inaugural concert at the Manoel

Concert

*Concerto Per l'Unità
d'Italia*
Manoel Theatre

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There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that a large section of the music-loving audience in Malta loves Italian opera. This can be ascertained by the full houses that fill the theatre every time there is an evening based on such music. This was also the case last Friday when the theatre, in collaboration by the Italian Embassy, presented this season's inaugural concert.

It was entitled *Concerto Per l'Unità d'Italia* (perhaps the opening concert should have been nearer home, but that is another matter) and it featured celebrity soprano Lucia Aliberti, the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra led by Marcelline Agius and directed by Brian Schembri and the music of Verdi, Puccini, Catalani, Donizetti and Bellini.

Ms Aliberti is considered as one of the most accomplished Italian musicians. Besides voice, she has studied composition and can play a large variety of instruments including the piano, violin, guitar, accordion and mandolin. She has also appeared in many renowned theatres under the guidance of great maestros and over the years she has developed in one of the best singers-actors in the business. This ability stood out from the very first moments she treaded the boards, capturing the attention of the audience who were determined to enjoy the evening.



World-renowned Sicilian soprano Lucia Aliberti acknowledging the applause at the end of the concert.

This started with the Overture from Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, concentrated mainly on the two main themes, the first one known as the "fate" theme first introduced by the brass then taken up by the strings, and the slower more lyrical melody which represents Leonora's prayer and other arias and duets heard later on in the second act. The clarinet, oboe, flute and cellos shared the limelight with the strings.

Then it was time for the soprano to make her first entrance from Verdi's second opera *Un Giorno di Regno*. She sang the *cavatina* *Non san quant'io nel petto - non vò quell vecchio*. This opera was

Verdi's first attempt at a comical work and the premiere did not proceed well. Verdi was still under the influence of *bel canto* when he composed it. Ms Aliberti rose to the occasion when she entered unaccompanied - after a long introduction by the orchestra - to give a very emotional rendition. Her limpid voice suited the high notes and the many runs that characterise this work, emphasising her poise and self-assurance.

Then it was Puccini's turn with his wonderful Intermezzo from *Manon Lescaut*. This work has always been one of the best-loved works by the orchestra and Mro Schembri's interpretation was

nothing but magical. The cello, strings and harp were excellent.

In the next aria *Ebben! Ne andrò lontana* from *La Wally* by Catalani, the soprano exhibited her technical abilities, including her use of the diverse registers and her good breathing control. She demonstrated a creditable tragic side with her powerful and emotive rendition of this very beautiful work, reminiscent of Maria Callas who in my opinion surpassed all others. Ms Aliberti - who even looks like Callas - sang with passion accompanied by a very good orchestra that rose to the occasion.

Back to Verdi and now it was the turn of *Attila*, a heroic and tragic

opera which became popular in Verdi's lifetime. Besides the Prelude, which was directed with a taut kind of dynamism, we were regaled with *Allor che i forti corrono... Da te quest'or m'e concesso* from this very patriotic opera sung with aplomb and meant to end the first part of the concert with much fervour and enthusiasm.

The beginning of the second part brought some tense moments as the soprano quietly objected to the flashlight from cameras while she was interpreting *Piangete Voi, Al Dolce Guidarmi, Coppia Iniqua* from *Anna Bolena* by Donizetti. This *bel canto* opera requires many embellishments such as trills and *ritardandi* which make it so lyrical yet tragic and cruel at the same time. I was not very impressed by the soprano's version, mostly because I felt a certain coldness creeping in, which however was dispelled after the conductor informed the audience that the taking of photographs is forbidden in the theatre. The rest of the programme proceeded well, with the beautiful Overture from *Norma* by Bellini and the perennial *Casta Diva*, which was received enthusiastically by the audience, the well-known *Nabucco* Overture - taken at a different pace making the work sound fresh and new and *Tu al cui sguardo onnipossente.... O patrizi, tremate*, which ended with the *akuta* that was not always sung by the soprano.

The concert ended with not one but four encores which illustrated different sides of the soprano and the orchestra including kisses and dancing.