

Unearthing the genesis of Giuseppe Giardini-Vella's *Inno a San Giorgio Martire*

John Galea

Those who were lucky enough to have been acquainted with Giuseppe Giardini-Vella (1885-1974) can vouch for his great and fervent love for St George, the Patron saint of Gozo. The son of Giuseppe Vella and Giuseppe née Giardini, he was born in Catania, Sicily, on September 30, 1885. He started his musical studies under Maestro Frontini and soon started to explore the art of composition. During the opening years of the 1920's, he was given charge of an orchestra in Tunis.¹



After being appointed as bandmaster of La Stella Philharmonic Society, in September 1926, Maestro Giardini-Vella was commissioned to compose the hymn *Giovanette sull'arpe festanti* in honour of Saint Margaret. Subsequently, Maestro Giardini-Vella was approached by Msgr Alphonse Maria Hili, archpriest of St George's church in Victoria, to compose a hymn-cantata

¹ George Borg, 'Mro. Giuseppe Giardini-Vella' in *Il-Belt Victoria*, September/October 1994, No. 80.

(known locally as *Innu ta' barra* or *l-Innu l-Kbir*) for Saint George's feast. He gladly accepted the invitation.

Giardini Vella was a person of high literary tastes and he was not particularly impressed by any of the verse offered initially. He insisted that the text must possess high literary merit. He persevered until he was presented with a copy of Luigi Billion's *Al Glorioso Martire*. This immediately struck him as the most eloquent and he began writing the music for this *Inno* in 1930. The task was indeed novel for the time since St George's hymn-cantata was the first of its kind to be introduced during the start of the procession with the statue of Saint George from 1934 onwards and would eventually serve as a model to similar undertakings throughout Gozo. The composition was completed in 1930: its copyright was passed on to La Stella Band through a deed signed on August 15, 1955.²

In the autograph score, the year of its premiere is given as 1931. It was performed on the eve of St George's feast at Piazza Reale, better known as It-Tokk (now Pjazza Indipendenza). The composition was greeted with great enthusiasm and the *Inno a San Giorgio Martire* soon began to be performed regularly. In 1934, it was decided that the *Inno* should be performed during the start of the procession with the statue of St George (photo credit: Michael Said).



² *Il-Berqa*, November 7, 1963.

During the war, the Italian text was suppressed and a version in Latin translated from the Italian original was undertaken by a certain P. Schembri, a Maltese refugee residing in Kercem. To date the whereabouts of the original manuscript of this version are still unknown.³ According to an eponymous written statement made in 1894 by Mr Anton Tabone, the cashier *pro tempore* of the other Victoria band known as ‘Il Leone’, the feast of Saint George was labelled as ‘*una festa, che è la piu popolare del paese*’. It may be pertinent to point out that ever since 1897, the La Stella Band has always taken part in the procession with the statue of Gozo’s patron saint except when such participation was suppressed by Bishop Giovanni Maria Camilleri.⁴

My aim is the study of the sketches, recently unearthed by George Grech, honorary President of La Stella Band Club and their role in the final version of the *Inno a San Giorgio Martire*. The secondary objective of this study is the analytical assessment of this unique musical composition, which will help to reveal the technical prowess of the composer and the various factors and considerations that helped him transform Billion’s verse into such a powerful score.

Since the early seventies, sketches have formed an integral part of musicology. Although no finality is to be presumed from these initial motivic germs, an investigation of the preliminary sketches poses a fascinating journey that can explore the actual genesis of the work. Sketches do actually point to the first ‘determined’ assemblage of sounds that will eventually form the essential genesis of a composition.

Composers treasure the sketches scribbled during the early stage of a musical composition, although these are not to be considered as something complete and definitive. These sketches

³ This information has been provided by Mr George Grech, son of the late Giuseppe Grech-Cassar, the printer who was in charge of publishing this Latin version.

⁴ *Festi San Gorg 2002*, Victoria, Vol. 28, p. 62.

provide an illuminating journey into the creation of the final version and also into the actual compositional history of the work, as these nearly always include auto-critical revisions or modifications of materials.

Therefore, we have a close-up study of a composer's musical judgement in assembling, recycling, revising, omitting or admitting materials. Although there is always the question of the pertinence of such undertakings in the shaping of the definite version of the work, through such a study, one can trace the first ideas for the *Inno a San Giorgio Martire*. For such an inquiry into the compositional matrix, an ordered investigation into the dense terrain of such a matrix needs to be undertaken. This includes the study of the available sketches, the examination of the manuscript paper, the idiosyncrasies of the composer, the deciphering of dubious notation, and moreover the study of any extra-musical documents that may help to reveal the socio-political context surrounding the composition. Once the complexity of such a reality is ascertained, one can start to explore the grounds that can help reveal further focus as to the definition of the final version.

The eminent sketch studies scholar Douglas P. Johnson makes a subtle distinction between two finalities of such studies: on the one hand, studies whose primary objective is purely biographical, while on the other, sketch studies whose primary objective is purely analytical.⁵ The utility of such sketch studies will help to elucidate the 'organic' structural powers of the composer and the critical prowess to order such a fluctuating magma of creativity.

⁵ Douglas P. Johnson, 'Gli studiosi di Beethoven e l'interpretazione degli schizzi' in *Beethoven* (ed. Giorgio Pestelli), Il Mulino, Bologna, 1988. pp-367-391.

Inno a San Giorgio Martire is scored 'per tenore, baritone e coro di voci bianche' and full symphony-band. In the title page of the autograph score, just underneath his personal stamp, the composer gives a two-bar phrase as the *tema* (theme). These offer a deep perspective on the organic integrity of the whole work.

The composer's first scribbling in the first page of the sketches shows clear intentions, present also in the final version of the work's opening bars. If one were to closely examine the final version score, this thematic two-bar cell is a paramount seminal importance in the general structure of the whole work.

As a matter of fact, the opening bars of the hymn explore the intervallic qualities of this cell. Moreover, if one is listening attentively, this *tema* is given throughout the introduction of the trumpet calls that ensue. It follows logically that once Saint George was a tribune in the Roman army, the music for this hymn must have martial qualities. This is very clear from the choice of the interval of a fourth, which is found in the harmonic series and thus forming part of a series of notes that are naturally obtained on an open tube.

The musical example given overleaf shows this intervallic quality, which is exploited in the choral part of the introduction *Al glorioso martire*. In the sketches, this opening manifests itself in the fifth system of the first page and is actually used note for note; therefore, here there are the composer's clear-cut intentions as to the melodic contour and the underlying harmonies and hence the endorsement of such components towards the seminal importance attributed to the compositional structure and coherent eloquence.



After this choral introduction the tenor gets the limelight, In the first page of the sketches, this tenor solo is also present. Although the key signature is preserved also in the definite version, the melodic twist is somewhat different, and a comparison of both versions makes this very evident.

Being a consummate master of harmonic rhythm in composition, Giardini-Vella's critical judgement can be seen in the fact that the vocal germ present in the sketches undergoes revision and modification until the composer comes up with the finite. The final version of the tenor solo possesses an intense lyricism that betrays the passionate fervour that Giardini-Vella had for Saint George. The melodic line is tonally rich and shows the great influence of Italian

operatic romanticism so much widely diffused throughout Maltese music of the period. After all, this is one of the Giuseppe Giardini-Vella's foremost musical qualities.

After the tenor solo, the choir sings '*Odi ascolta le preghiere*'. The utter simplicity of this section contrasts strongly with the chromatic intensity of the tenor solo and provide basic materials that the composer develops in successive sections. This structural device serves the composer well to build a coherent and taut structure for a continuous wholesome movement that sub-divides into various contrasted sections.

In the sketches, the composer does not seem to have mused on the ensuing baritone solo and duet sections. This is definitely not to be interpreted as a shortcoming or a lack of creative impulse: composer must have had a clear picture of the developmental aspect of this core section and so this must be strategically worked out to ensure the maximum impact of such a section. A careful examination of the definite version shows the baritone's fervent prayer and invocation to St George, the champion of martyrs, so that he may grant the virtue of strength. The music does not possess the intense dramatic weave and dramatic qualities of the tenor's solo, but it encompasses melodic charm within the harmonic tools available to the composer – simple and direct, yet highly evident of an artistic excellence pertaining to the highest order.

The duet for tenor and baritone marked *Andante Calmo* is perhaps one of the hymn's greatest moments. '*Salve, oh Salve la grande vittoria*' radiates an exquisite melodic appeal that is so typical of the maestro. The arpeggiated accompaniment to this charismatic section is masterly handled in such a way that it does not obscure the vocal lines, while the solo parts float seamlessly within the compositional fabric. A particular harmonic twist is carefully used to illustrate the nuance of the musical text to the words '*Lagrimata di Roma la fe*'[de]'. A clarinet

cadenza which anticipates material used to the vocal cadenzas that follow after the repeat of the duet, certainly adds lustre to the whole composition and I presume that I would be correct in interpreting the upward run as an exhortation “ad Altiora, Georgii, ad Astra”. After the reprise of the duet, the movement resolves into a sonorous and rich climax that brings it to a triumphant temporary close.

The second page of the sketches shows the three principal sub-sections of the ‘seconda parte’ of the *Inno a San Giorgio*. Once more the, a direct link with the ‘tema’ highlighted in the title-page of the autograph score is exploited. The first system of the second page shows an embryonic form of the fanfare that open the second part of the composition. During this gestation period, the music became transformed into the final version with a prolongation of the harmonic rhythm. The actual notes of the fanfare also underwent revision to result in more idiomatic writing for brass.

The musical ideas for the following section marked *Religioso* are very clear and a preserved in the melodic contour of the final version in the autograph score. Even the harmonic layout was very clear, together with the characteristic chromatic passing notes of the final version being also present in the scribbling in the sketches. The *Religioso* section is anchored to the F major tonality through a persistent pedal, where toward the end of the section there is the characteristic leap of the fourth present in the ‘tema’ and echoed in the bass lines. This eventually unfolds into the ‘Andante assai mosso’, a section that is clearly and unmistakably present in the sketches.

The forward thrust of this melody culminates in the *Grandioso molto sostenuto* where the thick instrumentation complements the grandeur of the majestic moments envisaged in this final

section. The percussion section also calls for the use of the gong (tam-tam) and tubular bells that mark repeated quaver notes highlighting the vocal contour sung by the choir, that is further supplemented by the entry of the soloists and a three-part male voice choir. This particular section is greeted by the huge crowds thronging Saint George's Square singing and waving palm branches to honour the final prize of saintly glory reserved for martyrs. Moreover, the solemn tone of the fundamental bell 'Gorga' is pealed from this moment until the end of the hymn, adding dignity to this music composition.



Photo credit: Daniel Cilia

Unfortunately, the version to be found in the autograph score has rarely been performed as written and it is sincerely hoped that this 'final' version with the entry of the male-voice choir materializes in the coming years and will continue to feature regularly in the near future.

Although the initial and final key-signatures are different, the essential underlying harmonies have the structural power of directional tonality that is hereby adopted to ensure a grand

trajectory of the final key, a device that emphasizes the complete constructional grip of classical composition bringing the *Inno a San Giorgio Martire* to a triumphant close. This hymn-cantata has withstood the test of time, so much so that as already stated, it even became a model for similar compositions to be performed for all the Gozitan festas following the custom begun by Giuseppe Giardini-Vella in 1934.

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Music Studies Department,

University of Malta.