



The Maltese Composer Charles Camilleri: His Life and Musical Style

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I must start by saying that giving a short speech about Charles Camilleri (1931-2009), the Maltese composer of international repute, is no easy task. Camilleri's life and works have been written about quite extensively by both foreign and local music scholars and commentators. Amongst these, one may mention the works of Christopher Palmer (1975), Jeremy Walbank (1987), Ates Orga (1987), Guy Protheroe (1992), and Basil Ramsey (1996), and, more locally, the writings of Joseph Vella Bondin (2001), and my University colleagues John Galea (2001), Albert Pace (2002), and Hans-Jürgen Nagel (2007). All these writings draw a picture of the thriving life of this great composer, one who succeeded in being local as much as cosmopolitan, who classicized the popular, who fused the musical east with the west, and who wandered quite at ease between the academic and the artistic. Above all, they portray a man described by the late Rev Prof Peter Serracino Inglott in the composer's funeral address as of great commitment, one who sacrificed much for the art that he loved so intensely. My aim here is to present some of the highlights in the life of Camilleri followed by personal reflections about the composer's persona that emerge out of his musical style.

Charles Camilleri was born in Hamrun on 7 September 1931 to a musically talented family. He received his early musical training under the tuition of his father, and later studied with Joseph Abela Scolaro, Paul Nani and Carmelo Pace. Existing photos show Camilleri, at around the age of

Maestro Charles Camilleri

twelve, playing the accordion in an ensemble composed of trumpet, clarinet and violin—in itself, evidence of his early attachment to local popular music and its making. Indeed, his early compositions include a small number of *fiesta* band marches and, lately, one notes his interest in *ghana* (Malta's folk music) as a source of inspiration for his compositions. Both the wind band tradition and *ghana* as sources of inspiration are very evident in his *Malta Suite*—a composition in four movements depicting vignettes of Maltese life and the dynamics of local popular entertainment.



"Accordion Times" front cover dedicated to Charles Camilleri

During the 1950s Camilleri lived first in Australia, then in London. It was a time when he started to absorb a sense of belonging to the world artistically and to familiarize himself with the music that was being composed at that time. In both London and Australia he pursued a successful career in light music and popular entertainment, amongst other activities playing the accordion for Antony Hopkins's music in the 1957 British film *Seven Thunders*. A year after that production, that is in 1958, Camilleri moved to North America. During this phase of his life he became familiar with the music of celebrated composers of that time such

as Kodaly, Orff, Stockhausen and Stravinsky. From these he absorbed musical idioms which are very evident, for instance, in his Fantasy Fugue for strings and the Violin Concerto No.1.

Back in Europe in the mid-1960s, Camilleri divided his time between Malta and London. It was during this time that we find the composer's interest in the writings of the French philosopher and Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He also became increasingly interested in Maltese folk music, mainly for its inherent improvisatory character and harmonic compromises, as part of a wider musical soundscape encompassing the Mediterranean and even the world. The *Maqam Piano Concerto*, for instance, effectively fuses melodic lines inspired by the melodic modes and improvisation of Arabic music with Western musical concepts and techniques. In parallel with that, we see Camilleri resuming his activity in music for popular entertainment, such as with his musical composition and direction for Sax Rohmer's 1969 film *The Castle of Fu Manchu* and, also, the song called *L-Imħabba* he wrote for Malta's entry in the 1972 Eurovision song contest.

In the 1970s and 80s we see Camilleri lecturing in composition at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto and other acclaimed musical institutions around the world. It was during this phase that he produced his two operas in Maltese, *Il-Wegħda* (1984) and *Il-Fidwa tal-Bdiewa* (1985), both with libretto by Joe Friggieri; and, in 1985, the first oratorio in Maltese, *Pawlu ta' Malta*, with a text by Oliver Friggieri.

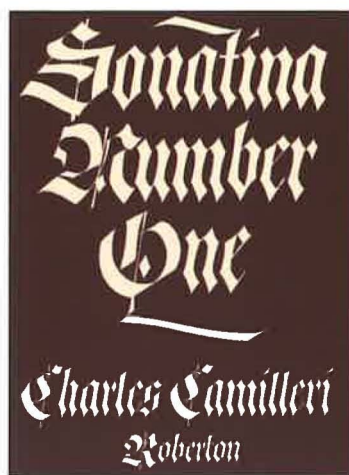
His appointment as professor of music at the University of Malta in 1992 (a position he held till 1996) occurred in parallel with the composition of the opera *Compostella*, with a libretto by Peter Serracino Inglott, and two concertos, one for flute and the other for violin. Between 2001 and 2009 (the year in which he died) Camilleri produced no less than two more operas, another oratorio, a cantata, a sonata for horn and piano, a concerto for two pianos and percussion, a suite for wind orchestra, and *The New Idea Symphony*, a work in which he celebrates the triumph of creativity (Garzia, 2009).

Of course, Camilleri was not the first in the musical world to employ his country's folk music in his compositions, Béla Bartók, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and other composers having already done so. What makes him a great composer is not this, nor his ability to fuse Western and non-Western musical elements. His great achievement lies in his ability in establishing his own personal musical style that leads one instantly to identify it as belonging to Charles Camilleri. Several aspects of this style are interesting. Some of them are purely technical, whilst others are more conceptual or philosophical.

An aspect that in my opinion contributes to Camilleri's stylistic integrity lies in his frequent reliance on the technique of intertextuality, in this sense understood as the composer's ability to intelligibly borrow, re-use, and at the same time transform material used previously in his own works into new compositions. Camilleri employs this technique very cleverly through a persisting compositional approach that values the context of where the new is being embedded as much as what is being implanted. Camilleri was a master in transforming the archaic, the known and the familiar into a fashionable new. The same motif or theme, even within the same work, is re-worked several times, given different colours each time it reappears in a mode that can be described as intra-textual. The sense of economy implied in Camilleri's works is to be acclaimed as it brings forth a feature employed by skilful composers in the history of Western music. His sense of transformation in all the aspects of his music gives evidence of his conviction that the familiar is more reassuring than the unfamiliar, and that one can build on it further and reach out more effectively, as he asserts in one of his interviews: "The test of the artist is to organise his music or painting into a structure that is itself a springboard to other structures" (Aquilina and Saliba 1988). At this stage, one must remember that Charles Camilleri was a product of his own times, a person who had experienced the terror, hardships and scarcity of the Second World War. Since music is very much linked to what happens in life, techniques such as that mentioned above coincided with a very receptive state in the composer's consciousness and in his persuasion that creativity is a

hard process, at the same time very time consuming and, by extension, economically valuable.

Camilleri's in-depth understanding of the syntax of Maltese folk music, something he attained through his long immersion in the process of musical translation, is another factor that helped him enhance his stylistic personality. From the restricted repertoire of Maltese folk tunes Camilleri managed to create a kind of generative grammar for himself, that is, a set of musical rules (expressed in particular melodic movements) that correctly predict which combinations of notes will form a sound that in



The libretto of 'Sonatina Number One' published by Roberton

the native listener's ear will echo as Maltese. An issue that regularly crops up from Camilleri's works questions the authenticity and the pseudo-authenticity of the local folk tunes he employed. Whatever the case, his works give evidence of his skill not only to translate the authentic but also to create new, though nevertheless familiar, melodic moves rooted in the general syntax of Maltese folk tunes.

In Camilleri's works, the local (Malta), the regional (the Mediterranean) and the global (the world) become one single reality in which the local becomes global and, therefore, Malta becomes part of the region and,

further, part of the world rather than its centre. For Camilleri, the local can only attain its ultimate value when it becomes global and, eventually, universal; or, put differently, when it becomes valuable to all peoples, times and places. It was a philosophy that Camilleri expressed in his compositions with sounds that at one moment sound local but are then reshaped to sound “Mediterranean” and later, craftily matched against the sound of other world music traditions alien to us in an attempt to sound simultaneously local, regional and global.

Village Music
For String Orchestra

Charles CAMILLERI

Allegro

The image shows a musical score for 'Village Music' by Charles Camilleri, intended for a string orchestra. The score is presented in two systems. The first system includes parts for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The second system includes parts for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The music is in 4/4 time and marked 'Allegro'. The score features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines across all instruments.

Music score of Charles Camilleri's "Village Music"

Scrutinizing the works of Camilleri not only presents a demanding task in terms of musical analysis; it invites us to explore his music within the processes through which he viewed himself as a citizen of a small nation in an increasingly globalized world. In his work one can sense his longing to connect Malta to the rest of the world, even if only conceptually and sonically. His music teases the “outsider” to have a taste of Malta and the nostalgic snippets that throughout the years forged the soul and character of its nation. This he achieves through a complex lifelong process in which

he was actively involved, a process principally aimed at overcoming the constraints of insularity, as well as the social, cultural and geographical claustrophobia of his native country—the same country that he loved both from near and afar in a kind of a dialectic between the hero and anti-hero. Charles Camilleri proved that a composer brought up in a small nation can attain much even in a market as fiercely competitive as that of music. This he achieved through his habitual way of thinking outside the box and with a vision that reached far beyond the shores of his small island home.



Charles Camilleri conducting the oratorio 'Pawlu ta' Malta'