

# The Largely Unsung History of Malta's Bells

By Noel Grima

It was a lecture but then it was also an object lesson.

As the audience settled down to listen to the lecture on the bells of Malta in the hall that forms part of the Birkirkara Collegiate Church, the sonorous Birkirkara bells on top of us began to solemnly peal the traditional '*Mota tal-Hamis*' which can be heard at around 7pm on Thursdays in the mostly traditionalist parishes, along with the tolling of bells at three pm on Fridays to commemorate the Last Supper and the death of Christ respectively.

The International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta held a public lecture on 'Maltese Bells and Bell Ringing in the Baroque Age' delivered by Kenneth Cauchi. This lecture was introduced by Professor Denis De Lucca, the Director of the Institute. Like the greater part of Malta's Catholic tradition, bells and churches are resolutely and overwhelmingly Baroque. The Baroque world-view was all-engrossing, and highly and tightly regulated. The post-Tridentine world even laid down the number of bells that a church could have, from seven bells for a cathedral to five bells for a parish church.

There are, of course, the technical specifications to consider: bells are usually made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. Bells are however cast out of bell metal which is a specific alloy of 77% copper and 23% tin. Malta's campanological heritage proudly boasts of a chime of six rare bells fabricated in cast iron, formerly used to chime the Ave Maria every four hours at Zabbar parish church. Due to heavy oxidation of cast iron the bells had to be inevitably replaced and are now intended to be a museum exhibit of the same sanctuary church.

Most of the bells in Malta are hung for stationary bell ringing meaning that they are installed to a

fixed beam and are rung by moving the clapper as is typical in southern Sicily from where the tradition seems to have curiously derived.

The more prevalent type of ringing in western Europe is the swinging method which means the bell is fixed to a beam which rotates on its axle thus the actual bell is swung on its fittings hitting its clapper freely to produce a particular sound effect. Malta can only boast of four swinging bells one of which is ironically the largest bell in Malta. Another three are to be found on Gozo.

The oldest bell in Malta was cast in Venice in 1370 and until a few years ago it was still in service at Mdina Cathedral. The bell was lowered for conservation reasons and is now one of the most prestigious exhibits in the Cathedral Museum. Christened Petronilla in 1645, the bell is proudly adorned with three armorial shields depicting the rampant lion - the symbol of St Mark patron saint of Venice and the effigy of a medieval St Paul patron saint of Malta and titular of the Cathedral.

Another equally old bell is that in the St Paul parish church in Rabat which still sounds the quarter strike, and dating back from 1525. In all, we have in Malta 44 bells dating back to the seventeenth century, 169 from the eighteenth, 307 during the nineteenth, 288 in the twentieth and already 51 so far in this century.

There is a clear reason for the spike culminating in the nineteenth century: this marks the establishing of Maltese bell foundries, as much as the decrease in numbers in subsequent centuries denotes the dearth of such. Having evolved to state-of-the-art musical instruments it is unlikely that bells will ever be cast again locally since the mastery of modern bell founding is a mathematical science mastered by few European bell founders. Having said this it

is obvious that all modern bells are imported. Most of the bells that were imported in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries came from Italy, while later imports also came from Sicily. Like what happened elsewhere in Europe, foundries were used indistinguishably to produce bells and cannon and sometimes bells were melted down to become cannon.

Many of us do not have a clear appreciation of the wealth in the Maltese campanological scenario. Domenico Canciani *'il Canciano dalla Venezia'* renowned worldwide as one of the most elite and expensive late eighteenth century bell founders is known only by a handful of bells still existent worldwide. *Il Canciano* was historically renowned for having cast the prestigious ring of five bells for the *Campanile* of San Marco in Venice.

This ring of bells was largely destroyed on 14 July 1902, when the belfry collapsed. Only the *Campanone Marangona* - the largest bell was thankfully saved while the rest was reconstructed from the sherds and subsequently recast by the famous Milanese bell founder Prospero Barigozzi who travelled from Milan to Venice to cast the bells on site.

In Malta we seem to have more bells by Canciani than they have in the *Duomo di San Marco* in Venice. We have two Canciani bells in the Basilica of Senglea and another large one at Cospicua; the three of which largely escaped almost complete destruction during World War II. In fact the largest of the Senglea bells lost one of its Venetian characteristics namely its grotesque ornate mask suspending crown which was removed in a post-war repair intervention at Malta Drydocks after a claim to recast it into a new bell failed to be upheld in a War Damage request. This incident actually saved one of Malta's most important bells from recasting.

The foundry of the Order of St John in Valletta stood on the site now called Palazzo Ferreria or Palazzo Buttigieg Francia facing the ruins of the Royal Opera House. The nearby church of St Francis has a historic link with this foundry. The Master Founder was in many cases also the rector of the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in St Francis church and were subsequently also buried in the Church crypt. Bells in Malta have gradually increased in size

and weight over the time - from a maximum of 1.5 to 2 tons at the Mdina and St John's Co-cathedral, the tonnage rose to 2.5 in the Gozo Matrice, Gharb, Tarxien and Żurrieq parish churches.

In the eighteenth century too there was competition fuelled by the struggle for supremacy between the Order of St John and the Bishop and thus the ecclesiastical authorities. The Order of St John represented by Grand Master Perellos and subsequently by Vilhena, Despuig and Pinto on one hand while Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri and subsequently Alpheran de Bussan kept the competition rife and further fuelled the struggle in the size and weight of bells they commissioned respectively.

This was also around the time when Maltese bell founding depended almost entirely on the foundry of the Order of St John. Amongst the most prominent founders the names of the Menville brothers Luca and Mederico (ca1695-1720) who cast significantly sized bells now hanging in St John's, and other churches. Their young nephew and son of their sister Marchesa Menville who played around in the foundry, eventually succeeded his uncles and became the ambitious Luigi Bouchut who was the Master Founder under Grand Masters Vilhena, Despuig and Pinto, creating evermore heavy bells ranging from 4.5 to 7.5 tons for a bell consecrated in the name of San Antonio di Padua. Bouchut is probably also the founder of the hemispherical bells, struck by the Moorish jacquemarts at the turret-clock of the Grand Masters' Palace in Valletta.

In the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the brothers Francesco and Gioacchino Trigance became the last of a line of notable founders employed under the auspices of the Order of St John. Francesco Trigance, the elder of the siblings had been apprenticed in Turin, but only a handful of bells bear his name. Most bear either the siblings partnership or alternatively Gioacchino's name only. When the French forced the Order out of Malta, the Order's foundry was subsequently closed down. Bell-founding took an itinerant form, building make shift foundries on the site of the church commissioning the casting of the new bells. In 1810 they were commissioned to cast four bells for the Church of St Helen which are



documented on the bells themselves as having been cast on site.

To fulfil various vows that the faithful made to be spared the plague outbreak, several large bells were commissioned to this effect in 1813. This occurrence was further encouraged by a number of redundant cannon which were made available for recasting by the then new British rulers. Such recasting was undertaken by the itinerant Sicilian bell founders Ferdinando and Sebastiano Leotta who teamed up with Maltese metal craftsmen and founders under the names of Gio Antonio Tanti and Salvatore Cauchi. Gio Antonio and his son Antonino were mediocre bell founders however Salvatore was more promising. On the death of the Leotta founders, Salvatore seemed to have taken over the business as a family trade. From 1854 we see Salvatore and his son Giuliano take over Maltese bell founding.

This is the background to the greatest bell founder in Maltese history, Gulju Cauchi, or Giuliano, who came from a foundry family. The foundry seems to have been sited at Għajn Dwieli. Born to a father who came from Nadur, he served first with his father but then he began his long list of bells (to name a few) - 1877 - St Publius Floriana; 1878 - Qormi, St George (redundant new bell refused from Floriana); 1879 - St Publius, Floriana; 1880 - The Annunciation, Birgu; 1881- Senglea Basilica; 1882 - St Lawrence, Birgu; 1885 - Żejtun; 1887 - Tarxien; 1891 - Żabbar; 1895 - Cospicua.

Seeing we were in Birkirkara, and also because the history of the development of bells in Malta came to a climax in Birkirkara, the next bell founding topics focused on the Basilica of St Helen.

The history of the biggest church bell in Malta, that in Birkirkara, is a story on its own. Three times a new bell was pulled and hoisted in the belfry and twice they had to lower them down again. The Birkirkara ecclesiastical authorities wanted to commission Giuliano Cauchi to cast the largest bell in Malta, but he must have for some reason or other refused. It seemed that another founder under the name of Guze Grech availed himself to serve their whims.

It is understood and taken as fact that it was a nightmare to collect enough scrap metal for recasting purposes. Due to this problem the

provenance of such a large quantity of metals could not be controlled thus the quality of the casting was indeed dubious. The eventual casting thus turned out to be of very poor quality a subject which was undoubtedly gossiped about. After a number of heated arguments which even lead to legal disputes at Court, the ecclesiastical authorities were forced to lower it down from the belfry and stored it in a corner on the parvis. Giuliano Cauchi eventually accepted to recast Grech's bell commencing by smashing it on the parvis presumably in the presence of many a curious onlooker. Faced with no choice Cauchi accepted the Birkirkara commission which kept him occupied from 1900 to 1901 until the finished monumental bell was ready and proudly paraded into Birkirkara.

The Cauchi bell is documented as having a wonderful tonality however owing to the dubious metal quality it did not serve much for it outlived Cauchi by only a decade subsequently cracking in 1914.

The death of Cauchi brought mayhem to the Maltese campanological scenario as Cauchi had not divulged the bell founding trade and took the secret to his grave in the Addolorata Cemetery. Malta was forced to look outside its shores to procure new musical bells. Thus faced with such a problem, the Birkirkara ecclesiastical authorities turned their eyes outside Malta towards the eminent Prospero Barigozzi of Milan who had made a name for himself after casting the new ring of the Venice Duomo.

Barigozzi cast his ever largest bell for Birkirkara a bell which turned out to be a tribute to this outstanding Italian founder, (The sobriquet with which people usually tease the people of Birkirkara of having a flat backside seems to have derived from an accident during one of the hauling up of the bell, when a rope slipped and all those pulling fell back on their back side.)

It seems many Maltese think that a bell, once cracked, can never be restored. The truth is that although a bit trickier there are many cases of restoration by British experts who have been successful using the non-ferrous welding technique. In Malta, many repairs of bells were carried out at the Naval Dockyard which specialized in naval engineering rather than bell restoration. This coupled with the fact that bell intervention was rather sporadic, did not augur

well hence the dismal results of bell restoration in Malta. The recent restoration of the Lascaris bell at St John's and another war-damaged bell from the Church of St Francis in Valletta which were both heavily damaged show that

proper restoration can be done if specialized professionals are employed to the job.

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