

Benigno Zerafa

300 Anniversary from his Birth



Benigno Zerafa (1726–1804): Life, Music, and Legacy

Early Life and Musical Beginnings

Benigno Zerafa was born in Rabat, Malta, on 25 August 1726 to Nicola Zerafa, a surgeon, and his wife Teresa née Lombardo. One of eight children, his family later moved to Strada dell' Carmine in Mdina. At the age of eight, he began serving at the Cathedral of St Paul as a diaconus or clericus chori, sharing a small salary with his brother. In 1737, he joined the Cappella Musicale, singing treble in the choir and receiving an additional stipend, before leaving the post in 1738.

Studies in Naples

In 1738, aged eleven, Zerafa travelled to Naples to study at the Conservatorio di Santa Maria di Loreto. Enrolled as a boarding student at a seminary linked to the conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo, he was also being prepared for the priesthood. His studies were funded by the Cathedral Chapter in Malta. During six years in Naples, he composed at least three major works, including a Dixit Dominus and two Masses in the stile antico. His teachers included Francesco Durante, Francesco Feo, Alfonso Caggi, and Girolamo Abos.

Appointment as Maestro di Cappella

After the conservatory became a seminary, Girolamo Abos sent testimonials praising Zerafa's abilities to the Curia in Malta. On 21 August 1744, he was recommended to Bishop Alpheran de Bussan and appointed Maestro di Cappella at Mdina Cathedral just before his eighteenth birthday. His contract required him to compose new music suited to liturgical needs.

Duties and Musical Output

Zerafa's duties included conducting, composing, teaching choirboys, and performing on several instruments, including violin and double bass. He soon began directing music at other churches and composed numerous masses, motets, and large-scale works. One of his finest pieces, a Messa a due cori dated 21 April 1752, was likely written for the Feast of St Peter and St Paul.

Priesthood and Career Challenges

Although a successful composer, Zerafa's primary vocation was the priesthood. He was ordained in 1750 at the age of twenty-four. In 1751, disputes with the Cathedral Chapter led to his dismissal as Maestro di Cappella, but he was reappointed in 1753 with a higher salary. He also ran a music school attached to the Cathedral and introduced wind instruments into the Cappella Musicale.

Later Years and Legacy

From the 1770s onward, his output declined, and by 1783 Francesco Azopardi assumed many of his duties. In 1786, Zerafa retired, donating all his works to the Cathedral Chapter. He died on 20 March 1804 at the age of seventy-seven.

Today, 148 of his sacred works are preserved in the Mdina Cathedral Archives, making his music one of the most important surviving bodies of Baroque sacred composition in Malta.

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Multiple Choice

1. Where was Benigno Zerafa born?

- A) Valletta, Malta
- B) Rabat, Malta
- C) Mdina, Malta
- D) Naples, Italy

2. At what age did Zerafa begin serving at the Cathedral of St Paul?

- A) 6
- B) 8
- C) 10
- D) 12

3. Which of the following statements is true about Zerafa's early choir experience?

- A) He sang alto in the Cathedral choir.
- B) He joined the Cappella Musicale at the age of eleven.
- C) He received a stipend as a diaconus or clericus chori.
- D) He left the Cathedral to study in France.

4. Where did Zerafa study music at the age of eleven?

- A) Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia, Rome
- B) Conservatorio di Santa Maria di Loreto, Naples
- C) Conservatorio di San Pietro a Majella, Naples
- D) Royal Conservatory of Malta

5. Which of the following teachers did Zerafa study under in Naples?

- A) Antonio Vivaldi
- B) Francesco Durante
- C) Giacomo Carissimi
- D) Domenico Scarlatti

6. When was Zerafa appointed Maestro di Cappella at Mdina Cathedral?

- A) 1738
- B) 1740
- C) 1744
- D) 1750

7. Which of the following was NOT part of Zerafa's duties as Maestro di Cappella?

- A) Conducting the choir
- B) Composing liturgical music
- C) Performing on the violin and double bass
- D) Painting altar decorations

8. In what year was Zerafa ordained as a priest?

- A) 1744
- B) 1750
- C) 1751
- D) 1753

9. What happened to Zerafa's career in 1751?

- A) He retired from the Cathedral
- B) He was dismissed due to disputes with the Cathedral Chapter
- C) He moved to Naples to study further
- D) He became Bishop of Mdina

10. How many of Zerafa's sacred works are preserved today in the Mdina Cathedral Archives?

- A) 48
- B) 98
- C) 148
- D) 248

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Word Search

C	O	N	S	E	R	V	A	T	O	R	I	O	V
I	D	L	C	N	O	E	G	R	U	S	N	Q	N
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RABAT
VOICE
CAPPELLA
ORDER
CONSERVATORIO
BENIGNO
PRIEST
NAPLES
MDINA
CATHEDRAL
SACRED
ZERAFA
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