

## INTRODUCTION

### THE COMPOSER

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Born in Senglea, one of the two cities that survived the Great Siege of Malta by the Ottoman Turks, Michel'Angelo Vella (1710–92) came from a rather wealthy family with maritime interests. Presumably as a younger son he was intended for the Church, and at the age of eleven was already referred to as 'Chierico' (cleric); he was tonsured on 22 December 1725. In 1730 he was sent to Naples to study music at the Conservatorio S Maria della Pietà dei Turchini, commencing with the *primo maestro* of that school, Nicola Fago, and his assistant, Andrea Basso. He later studied with the opera composer Leonardo Leo (1694–1744), and his Maltese colleagues in Naples at this period included the successful opera composer Girolamo Abos (1715–60), Benigno Zerafa (1726–1804) and Giuseppe Arena (1709–84).

Ordained a priest in the parish of the Province of Acerra in Naples on 18 December 1733, Vella later returned to Malta at the beginning of 1738, serving as a priest in the parish of Senglea. In 1740, on obtaining the necessary licence from the Bishop, he commenced teaching grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and humanistic studies, which included music.

From 1530 Malta had been ruled by the Order of Malta: the Knights of St John. A religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, the knights found Malta to be on the fringe of Christendom and for over 270 years defended Malta and the western Mediterranean from the Ottoman or Barbary Corsairs' depredations. The island was intensely religious in character, and the cathedrals and parishes on both Malta and Gozo encouraged a significant musical presence in the liturgy. Vella returned to this milieu and worked as a *maestro di capella* and priest on the island. His return unfortunately coincided with a decree by the then Bishop that music employed in the liturgy was deliberately to be kept simple and short, with the effect that Vella's obvious talents as a composer were curtailed or restrained.

Vella's musical reputation rests almost solely on the publication in Paris in 1768 of a set of parts (but no score) of a superlative set of *Sei Sonate a Tre Violini col Basso*. They were dedicated to a Knight of Malta (and obvious patron), the Bailli Frà de Wignacourt, the Prior of Champagne and a relative of the great Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, himself immortalised in his armour by another Knight, the painter Caravaggio. These six works are a model of *galante* composition, in four movements and in a style that is a mixture of the German Enlightenment combined with French elements reminiscent of the works of Rameau, as well as the Italianate influences of Vella's teachers. They are modern for their time and of exquisite architecture and construction. Apart from these major works, we have only the recently located twenty-four Sonatas for three flutes, published herein; a recently found Sinfonia in C; and some short choral pieces of liturgical music composed on Malta. Judging from the *Sei Sonate*, the apparent loss of so many of Vella's other manuscripts is a tragic loss for Maltese musical heritage. One can only hope that from one of the private music archives on the Islands, some of the composer's works will emerge.