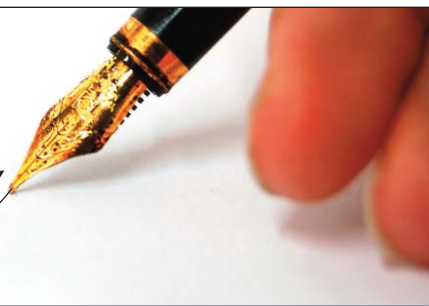


Lifestyle & Culture



Marie Benoit's Diary



Albert Storage and the pianist Nicolò Giuliano Tuccia



The pianist with two young students from the Academy who were in the audience



Milica Lawrence who started the Malta International Piano Festival introducing the pianist to the audience

Music for the soul from a young Italian pianist

Milica Lawrence is almost a household name, especially in Gozo, where she started the Malta Piano Academy a few years ago and later a branch in Mosta and a third in Paola.

She is full of energy and enthusiasm, and an able pianist herself. She understands the world of music. I interviewed her recently. Not only does she love music but her very life is music.

The Academy has a mission statement. Milica told me that the teaching is focused on three fundamental aims: to instruct, to inspire and to encourage. "With these aims in mind, we will do our utmost to ensure that our students are always confident, stimulated and capable. This is our simple recipe for their success. We believe that this success is best achieved in a setting that is supportive and welcoming." She also believes that it is essential for students to play in public as often as possible to gain confidence. So, during the scholastic years, the academy organises several student concerts. Then there is The Malta International Piano Festival in August which combines an international student competition and concerts in which renowned musicians participate.

I discovered this Festival last year and was determined to attend this year. It was held at the Malta School of Music in Hamrun, a first visit for me. It wasn't easy to find as it is not on GPS. Luckily I had an excellent Ghanaian taxi driver who was determined to take me right up to the door (silver hair and a walking stick have their uses, too) and he was not content before he dropped me at the right building.

I was there to watch Nicolò Giuliano Tuccia, a 24-year-old pianist from Emilia-Romagna, play on a white piano. This was the penultimate concert of The Malta International Piano Festival which took place from 25th to 29th August.

This young man brought all his pianistic skills to bear with crystal clear articulation but above all a deep feeling for the music.

He boasts over 30 prizes in national and international competitions and more than 50 recitals as a soloist in important institutions and concert halls under his belt.

Each piece was introduced by Albert Storage who is so knowledgeable.

The pianist started with a Scarlatti sonata. Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) was the son of the renowned Alessandro Scarlatti and the sixth of ten children. Today he is mainly known for his 555 keyboard

Sonatas. Nicolò played *Sonata K32&K1*. It is essentially a melancholic piece and the pianist captured the mood beautifully.

Scarlatti shared a birth year with two composers who were much more famous, two giants of the Baroque period, Handel and J.S. Bach.

Legend suggests that Scarlatti once had a keyboard duel with Handel. The former played the harpsichord and the latter the organ. The judges appear to have sat on the fence when it came to naming the winner: Scarlatti was declared the better harpsichordist and Handel the better organist.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) tragically died early at the age of 38. He came from a very talented family. His grandfather Moses was one of the most respected scholars of his day on everything from Theology to Metaphysics. He was a child prodigy and is said to have been good at everything, like granny. That evening Nicolò gave us *Variations Serieusés Op. 54* in which his technical abilities shone. He sits there, cool and in complete control. Wonderful.

The third piece on the programme was Franz Liszt (1811-1886) *Ballade No 2*. Liszt as is well known was also a phenomenally accomplished pianist. His ability to play the sheer

number of notes that he did, at such speed and with such precision, amazed all who heard him. So it's not surprising that in his solo piano repertoire, Liszt stretches the capabilities of both the instrument and soloist to their limits. This piece required a strong technique and the pianist had it. It is a poetic piece and the pianist certainly rose to the occasion.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) was a musical giant and something of a physical one, too. He stood at over six feet tall and had enormous hands – very useful for performing his own music. He could stretch over twelve piano keys from the tip of his little finger to the tip of his thumb. That's around four keys more than average.

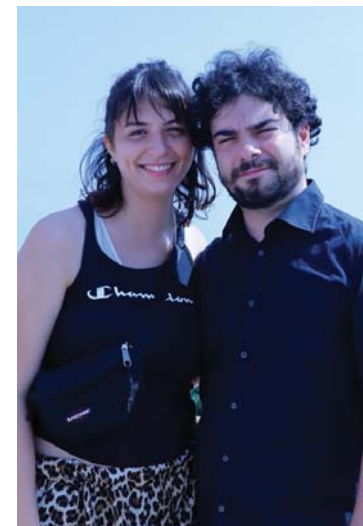
His life is, not surprisingly, filled with anecdotes. He was once giving a recital in New York with a fellow composer Fritz Kreisler. The former was on the piano and the latter on the violin. Kreisler was in a muddle about where he'd got to in the music. Panic-stricken, he whispered to Rachmaninov, "Where are we?" The whispered reply came back from Rachmaninov: "Carnegie Hall".

That evening we listened to his *Moments Musicaux Nos 1, 3, 4*. Varied, intense, difficult for the pianist to play but most enjoyable for those of us who had to just sit down, listen and enjoy the music.

As if that were not taxing enough for the pianist we demanded an encore. Nicolò gave us the poignant *Nocturne No 2 in C sharp minor*, made even more famous after the film *The Pianist* was made. Who can forget the scenes of devastation in Poland and the pianist. That *Nocturne* saved his life. This is one to listen to with your eyes closed. It goes straight to your soul.

And so Grazie Nicolò. Bravissimo. He will be performing in other places including Rome, Léon, London, Berlin and goodness knows where else. Good luck.

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Nicolò with his girlfriend before the concert started