

Article**The Life and Times of Marie Benoit****Marie Benoit**

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I think the highlight of my week – musically at least – was Leo Debono's concert at the Music Room, St James Cavalier which he entitled: Holy Russia: Fire, Ice and Cosmos. It was organized by the indefatigable Rosetta Debattista after she heard one of his CDs and was impressed. I wonder where Leo sprung from? I love all these successful Maltese who come along here occasionally, show us what they can do and then disappear into thin air again. Well, not exactly into thin air for he is a pianist, conductor, composer and recording artist who presently lives in Paris and teaches at the Ecole Nationale de Musique at Issy-les-Moulineaux and that's not thin air. Leo is another one to add to our local pantheon of musicians. His is a striking presence and he presented a full music room with quite a programme: from Tchaikovsky to Sergei Rachmaninov to Prokofiev and after the interval it was Just Scriabin. I can barely spell out their names let alone play any of their works. My word, how utterly demanding. He made an impact straight away as, hand on heart he sprung on the stage and with great authority gave us the first notes of February from Tchaikovsky's February: Mardi Gras. We knew immediately that his heart is rightly placed and he was not just another pianist playing with great technique but without a euro's worth of emotion. Works by Alexander Scriabin took over the second half of the programme. The pianist for his Masters degree at the Royal College of Music had made a specialist study of the piano works of Scriabin and is therefore very knowledgeable about him. Scriabin was also a pianist the equal of his friend Rachmaninov. He had absorbed himself in philosophy and mysticism and became a follower of the theosophist Madame Blavatsky which influenced his compositions. I read that Madame Blavatsky, a much travelled woman with a very colourful life, started the Theosophical Society after she became ill with an infected leg. During her illness she underwent a transformation which inspired her to found her society. In a letter dated June 12, 1875, Madame Blavatsky described her recovery, explaining that she dismissed the doctors and surgeons who threatened amputation. She is quoted as saying 'Fancy my leg going to the spirit land before me!' Her last words regarding her work were: "Keep the link unbroken! Do not let my last incarnation be a failure." Her body was cremated and one third of her ashes were sent to Europe, one third to the United States and one third to India where they were scattered on the River Ganges. What a relief it must be for our relatives that we do not leave such difficult instructions for them to follow when we die. Leo Debono was as thoroughly at home in the Scriabin miniatures that he played such as the three studies, the Poèmes and the Morceaux as he was with Sonata No 5 readily finding their special atmosphere and colour. He had manic moments while playing Scriabin, moments of feverish intensity in one instance surprising his audience when he tapped his feet loudly and finished with a flourish of his left hand. In fact he is much given to the occasional

flourish which was accomplished with panache. As encore he played an Etude which Scriabin had composed when he was but 15. I must say that after all the fire and brimstone, though it was all brilliant, the soothing Etude was very welcome so that we could all calm down. I was generally impressed with this pianist's marvellous fingers and abundant energy. I hope he will come again. You never know what life's rich tapestry is going to present us with next and the unexpected nice happening is enough to keep those of us who are badly wounded soldiers cheerful. I received an email from the States from someone wanting to publish one of my late husband's thesis on Eugène Morel who was a pioneer of public libraries in France. This was indeed a surprise as it came 30 years after he had presented it to the Library Association (London) in 1977. It took the publisher concerned quite some time to track me down it seems. I discussed the project with the girls and we decided to accept the terms offered as even if we do not earn a single dollar from it at least they and their children will have a printed copy of a work in which much blood, sweat and tears went in. I lived with Eugène Morel for a number of years – in fact since I met my husband at Library School in London for he was already researching this French librarian then. By 'lived' I mean that he was very much alive in our home and in our lives although he had died in 1934. Our homes have always been full of books and papers and Eugène Morel was one of the culprits. At the time Marguerite Gruny, Morel's niece was still active and so there was much going and coming to Tours where she lived for interviews and so on. There was no email at the time. Think how much easier writing a thesis is these days. We did ours – two are his and one is mine - mostly on a little red Olivetti and luckily, our chapters were sent to London through the British High Commission's diplomatic pouch. Kind friends obliged us as they knew how erratic the post from Mauritius could be. Morel was an interesting fellow and on his military service in Amiens had been introduced to Jules Verne who was then an old man, by Verne's son. Jules Verne was one of Morel's favourite authors. He was later to write of his first encounter with Verne in *Le Nouvelle Revue* : 'As for myself, I met him in 1890. I was a soldier. Amiens the town in which I was garrisoned seemed to me to be a very special town when I knew that in that town Jules Verne had retired and that his son wanted so much to introduce me to him...I saw coming towards me a tall bitter old man...shambling along like a big bird which has its foot caught...' This encounter with his favourite author enabled Morel to get an appraisal for one of his novels and to discuss it with Verne. One piece of advice from the distinguished author rather shocked Morel: 'You see,' said Jules Verne, 'You must ask at the end of every page what you will put into it so that the reader wants to turn to the next page. Urge him to look for what follows. That's the secret.' Morel found Verne's attitude to literature –'That of a good businessman' rather revolting. The American publisher tracked down my husband's thesis as it is the only existing work on Morel written in English. Most of the original sources were in French and mostly in various libraries and other institutions in France. My husband did a prodigious amount of work to finish his thesis of 320 pages, spending nights translating documents from French into English. I am very happy it is going to be published. It was always his intention but fate dictated otherwise. In fact the thesis was used as a very important source for a book by Jean-Pierre Seguin, the first director of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. It is dedicated to my husband 'his first biographer', to

Morel's niece, Marguerite Gruny and to his children Perrine Ronsin-Morel and Frédéric Morel, Eugène Morel's children. M. Seguin had sent me a copy of his work and I subsequently met him in Paris at a time when I was particularly angry at God. He had told me that his children too, are very angry as they had just lost their mother who was not of an age to die. I now have to brace myself to write a preface to it. The deadline for that is over already but I shall get it done and sent. Thank goodness for email. Well, what do you know. I parked near St James Cavalier one evening a couple of weeks ago as I was attending a concert there and when I came out I found one of those revolting papers on my windscreen. Another Lm10 kissed goodbye into the coffers of the government. I have now received the formal Kontravvenzjoni paper from the Local Council in Valletta and frankly a plague on all their houses. There were no green or blue boxes where I had parked so I went round to see where the notice that this was an area reserved for residents was stuck. I had to walk quite a while before I came across this microscopic whatever. I am certain that there was no CVA indicator as you entered that area, as there is now. It must have been put there recently. I intend going to Valletta as little as possible. The Local Council should have given us a couple of warnings, until we get used to the new system, before demanding money from us. As far as I am concerned Sliema is good enough for me and I shall step into Valletta as rarely as I can. They know only too well that most of us cannot spare the time to go and defend ourselves in front of the tribunal. I shall reluctantly part with Lm10 i.e. Euros 23.29, which sounds even worse, and send a cheque covered in bad vibrations. Yes, those of us who were fined – and I know of several cross people who were – think we should have been given a couple of warnings until we understand the system and the new non-parking areas. But there are more pleasant things in life and the launch of the Labour Party's Plan Ghal Bidu Gdid with a smiling family on the cover, at The Carriage in South Street, was a convivial event. Dr Sant looking tanned and cheerful, made it quite clear that this was not a manifesto. I am not going to quote his speech here but he speaks a beautiful Maltese which is a pleasure to listen to. The book is 648 pages long and in Maltese so I don't think I shall be taking it to bed with me as it will merely have a soporific affect on me. However, I shall read the chapters in which I am mostly interested such as the one on equality between men and women, the old, the environment, culture, heritage, conditions of work and so on and find out what plans the Labour Party has on these matters. We had a delicious lunch too with lovely Valletta views thrown in for good measure. Even the presence of Lou Bondi sitting on the left of Dr Sant did not manage to upset me too much. I mean, there's nothing we don't see through. At least we are relieved of his grin on Tuesday evenings throughout the summer months. Will he or won't he be given back his programme? Of course he will and probably make them sign a ten year contract that if Labour is elected he will be compensated if the programme is stopped. That's the trend apparently. Everyone is signing ten year contracts in case they lose their post. What a country! I hope my Lm10 to the Valletta Local Council will not be used towards one of these obscene contracts.