



Milica performing on the edge of a Gozitan cliff. Her husband Sava is a keen photographer

# Music Matters to Milica!



A concert at Palazzo De La Salle, one of several

Croatian-born **MILICA LAWRENCE** talks to **Marie Benoit** about her love of music, how she found herself living in Gozo, The Malta Music Academy she set up and her dislike of laziness.

## How long have you been in Malta?

I arrived in Malta in March 2019 with my husband Sava, and I was immediately blown away by the people's kindness, beautiful architecture, cheerful atmosphere, amazing food, glorious weather and crystal clear sea.

## How did you finish up here?

The decision was made by me on 5th of March early morning at the highway petrol station in Croatia. That was a true, life-changing moment. My husband being British suggested that we should relocate to the UK, Mongolia or even India. I had never been to Malta before, but when he suddenly asked me: "Do you know where we are going to?", I answered straight away, "Let's go to Gozo". As soon as we exited the ferry in Valletta, we continued our journey to Gozo. Later that evening, we arrived in St. Lawrence, where we met our first friends Juliet and Godwin, and we stayed on in Gozo ever since. My life in Gozo changed me profoundly. Deep down in my heart, I felt at home. I felt the enormous positive energy of this island and its people. Soon after, I became a Catholic and was very lucky to

be guided by His Excellency Bishop Anton Teuma of Gozo, Mgr Anton Borg and Fr Joseph Curmi, Archpriest of St George's Parish.

## I know you started the Piano Academy in Gozo. Could you tell me something about it?

One day, I was playing the piano in my apartment in Victoria when someone knocked on my door. That was my next-door neighbour with her daughter Mariah. She kindly asked me if I would teach her piano. Mariah was the very first student of our future Malta Piano Academy, and I was so happy and excited. I must say that I am truly fascinated with Maltese children. Their talent for music, dedication and eagerness to learn. They are so well-behaved, intelligent and humble.

My mission as a Founder and Director of Malta Piano Academy is to provide these children with the highest level of education so that one day they can perform and compete with the students their age, worldwide.

As we all know, we live today in an extremely competitive world. Investing in knowledge is the best thing we can do in



Milica performing at the music festival in Tiggiano in June this year where she performed the works of ten contemporary Maltese composers

our lives, and Maltese children deserve the last drop of knowledge they can get. Today, Malta Piano Academy counts approximately 140 students, seven piano and four theory teachers. We are based in Victoria, Mosta and Paola. During the scholastic year, we have regular events such as the Annual, Christmas, Dinner Concert...etc. The idea is to encourage our students to perform in public as much as possible, so they can gain experience and confidence on the stage.

## What role did music play in your early years?

Music has always been the meaning of my life.

## Do you come from a musical or artistic family?

My parents were not professional musicians, but they supported my musical journey wholeheartedly. My grandma took me to piano lessons regularly. Cold, heat, rain, snow, traffic congestion... nothing could stop her.

## Who inspired you to pursue a career in the music industry?

I was two years old when I asked my parents to buy me a little red piano for my birthday. I don't remember how I came up with that idea. When I was five, my parents enrolled me in

a local music school. My first teacher was Xenia Elizabeth Zilli. Later, I continued my music studies in a secondary music school with my teacher Davorka Sperac-Polojac. She taught me until university where I studied piano under the mentorship of Prof. Marija Djukic and harpsichord with Prof. Zorica Cetkovic. I specialized in the field of chamber music with Prof. Uros Pestic and received my DMA (Doctor of Musical Arts) diploma under the guidance of Prof. Dejan Subotic.

The last fifteen years before I came to Malta I was working as a university professor.

## Who are your main inspirations as a pianist?

There are many popular pianists nowadays, but the real inspiration is a French pianist Colette Maze, whose recording career began in her 80s and she continued playing piano until she passed away last year. She was 109.

## Do you have a favourite composer(s)?

I finished my classical studies of piano and graduated in harpsichord in a department for old music. I find it difficult to choose my favourite composer, there are many from different epochs. What attracts me the most today is the music of con-

temporary composers. For example, I performed the pieces of ten living Maltese composers during the MusicArte Festival in Tiggiano, Italy on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June this year. My understanding is that it was the first time the Italian public had the opportunity to listen to a concert of piano music by living Maltese composers which makes me feel so privileged and proud.

## Is there a favourite piece you like performing?

It really depends on the day and mood. I have my favourite living composers and I play their music regularly.

## Do you have a message to give to those who hope to pursue piano as a career?

I was taught that only hard work, discipline and dedication can produce great results. Of course, we need talent too, but talent can't go far on its own.

## Could you tell us all about the Festival taking place in August in Hamrun?

Malta International Piano Festival (now officially registered by Malta Industrial Property Registration Directorate) is the third in a row this year and I am very passionate about it. This year it will take place at the Malta School of Music, in Hamrun.

We have more and more visitors on our website from all over the world looking for our live and online competition. Our festival combines international piano competitions, masterclasses, workshops and concerts. Based in one of the most beautiful countries, in the heart of Europe and the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, I strongly believe that our Festival will grow to be a worldwide recognized and respected event.

## NOW FOR SOMETHING LIGHTER:

### What is your idea of perfect happiness?

I understand happiness as an ability to love, learn, work, share and create harmony.

### What is your greatest fear?

Not being able to play the piano.

### What is your greatest extravagance?

Playing the piano on the edge of the cliff in Gozo. I was inches from the precipice. That was scary. My husband Sava is a photographer and is always in search of the best photoshoot location. Bless his heart.

### What is your favourite journey?

My last journey was a trip to

Northern Macedonia where I was invited to be a jury member for the International Piano Festival in Bitola city. I travelled with my husband in our little Peugeot 107 and that was a very relaxing and enjoyable experience. In two weeks, we visited four countries (Italy, Albania, Northern Macedonia and Greece). This is my favourite journey so far.

### What is it that you most dislike?

Dishonesty and laziness.

### Do you have a code that you live by?

It is a great desire to be happy and communicate happiness.

Life is not easy, but our privilege and moral duty is to keep going and be useful to ourselves, our family, friends and the community we live in. And finally.... Music, music, music.... the language we all understand and feel...Less words and more music that's my motto!



This article is supported by Arts Council Malta