

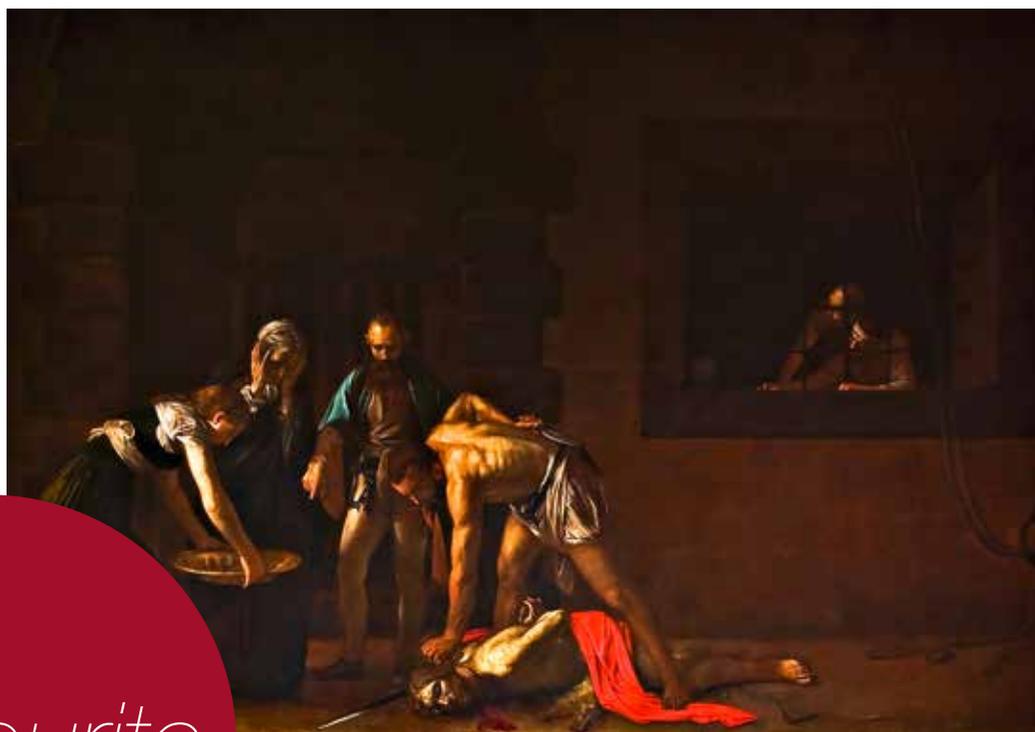


My Favourite Room

Superstar tenor, **Joseph Calleja**, chooses Caravaggio's dark masterpiece in the splendour of St John's Cathedral, Valletta

When you enter St John's Cathedral in Valletta, Malta, you are immersed in a world of opulence and unrivalled magnificence. I sang there as a schoolboy in the De La Salle College choir (I had a good voice back then, but they didn't realise quite how good). It was also the scene of my first, if you like, operatic moment: I fainted in the procession down the aisle, as the clothes I was wearing were too tight. The church and its ceremonies were the fabric of my life – I was an altar boy, and had two uncles who were priests – but this cathedral, for all its baroque exuberance, is elevated to a different plane by a painting: *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* by Caravaggio.

This work, which is in a side chapel, is in stark contrast to the golden swirls all around. It is a dark, brooding work – and a game-changer that was way ahead of its time. When Riccardo Muti, the conductor, came to Valletta and saw it for the first time, he found it so compelling that he stood in front of it for more than an hour. It shows the moment of St John's execution, while Salome, the saint's nemesis, stands by with a golden plate to receive his head.



The eye is initially drawn to the executioner, rather than to the saint. His upper body caught in a beam of light, this man is about to deliver the coup de grâce. Your gaze follows the line of his arm, which is holding the saint's hair, and then moves to take in the bone-white torso of John, drained of blood, which is pooling on the floor in the forefront of the picture. A red cloak, draped over the saint's body,

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is a reference to that blood, as well as providing a shocking accent to the picture as a whole. But in a way, it is what you discover next that makes Caravaggio's picture so absorbing. In the dark, dark background, two haunting figures peer through a window: they are observers like us, looking on in horror.

I'm sure that one of the reasons this work is so powerful is the circumstances under which it was produced. It was commissioned by the Knights of Malta when Caravaggio was in last-chance saloon. The artist was (briefly) inducted as a Knight of St John: the Grand Master was impressed by having such a celebrated artist as a member; Caravaggio – on the run from murdering Ranuccio Tomassoni in Rome – was seeking sanctuary. It did not take long before Caravaggio was expelled from the Order (as a 'foul and rotten member').

But what a painting! Caravaggio has distilled the essence of opera in this work: the pivotal moment, when the world freezes before a dramatic and shocking conclusion. It is the dark counterpoint to the brilliance of its surroundings.

The world-acclaimed tenor Joseph Calleja is singing Enzo in Ponchielli's La Gioconda at Grange Park Opera, West Horsley Place, Surrey, from 4 June to 12 July 2020. For more details, visit grangeparkopera.co.uk.