

Malta's Lost Voices: The early recording of Maltese Folk and Popular Music, 1931-32.

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Introduction

The early recording of Maltese folk and popular music in the interwar period is a largely forgotten, yet significant part of local, musicological and socio-political history. Almost erased from local memory, through the gradual demise of the obsolete playback machines and the shellac and vinyl records, is a story of music and musicians, who along with local agents and international record labels, made history by documenting local music in the vernacular, or local dialect prevalent at the time.

The impetus to record Maltese music came in early 1931, when the music establishments in Valletta were thriving businesses. At the time, music played back on 78rpm records and gramophones was a popular pastime. The music on the Maltese records attests to a vibrant musical activity present in Malta at the time¹. The local journals and newspapers gave witness to an unfolding phenomenon, which would entertain the people for decades to come. At the time, these records in the Maltese language caused quite a stir in various levels of society, as some even spurned their quality and content². Indeed the music and culture recorded on these discs, coupled with the technological commodity of playback machines, would act as a self-reflective tool, as, for the first time, the local folk heard their own music played back to them.

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¹ 'Dischimania', *Il-Hmara*, 16 May, 1931.

² 'Gramophone Records in Maltese', *The Mid-Day Views*, 27 March 1931.

The recording industry in the early 20th Century

In 1931, the major record labels merged to form Electric and Musical Industries (EMI). This was a strategic move, which would eliminate fierce competition and secure a bigger portion of the international market for the market leaders. The rise in potential to sell gramophones and records worldwide gave rise to the 'ethnic series' recordings, as companies realized there was a market for music beyond the palate of the western world. The impetus to record and make records of vernacular music was essentially driven by the commercial desire to sell gramophones worldwide. Playback technology, recorded music became the attractive new product, which, with the increasing ease of mass-producing records, and better playback technology, would be sold worldwide³. More organised and strategic recording sessions, in fact encouraged local entrepreneurs to take on the novel business of recording local music by selecting the better-known artists across a variety of genre prevalent then.

The Tunis recordings

The earliest documented activity of recordings of Maltese music makes reference to a certain Mr. Fortunato Habib. Mr. Habib, who organized the first recording trip to Tunisia in February 1931, was a respected member of the Jewish community residing in Malta⁴. The early recordings by Dr. Habib, were published under *Polyphon* label, and are documented in the regular advertisements, which appeared in the local newspapers. Listed in these are the tunes that were recorded in Tunis, pressed in France and which were later shipped back to the local agent⁵.

The Maltese musicians boarded the ship to Tunis in February of 1931, to record the first local folk and lyrical songs on the red-labelled *Polyphon* series. Among the group were ballad singer Emmanuel Mercieca 'Is-Semenza', who along with Giuseppe Xuereb 'Ix-Xudi', executed the folk singing for this series of records. 'Semenza', the paraffin-seller and poet from Tarxien, sang a number of his own ballads, including an entrancing rendition of high-pitched chant (*ghana fil-gholi or il-Bormliza*) appropriately named *Ghanja Maltija*. Others, who accompanied this Maltese party to Tunisia, were popular, local entertainers and lyrical singers, Walter Cachia and tenor Antonio Teuma Castelletti who with, Giuseppe Prato on guitar, provided the accompaniment for the lyrical, comic and operatic-style songs. Walter Cachia, a baritone singer, was best known for acting prose and his operatic interpretation. Cachia and his Tony Teuma Castelletti, made regular appearances at the Chalet, the once-famous dance and entertainment hall in Sliema. They also performed regularly at the Café Premier in Valletta, with the dance-orchestra known as 'The Hungarians'.

It seems that initially, these early recordings stirred up a huge commotion on many levels of society.⁶ As is testified by the journals of the day, the records were an extremely popular and successful phenomenon amongst local audiences, who after having experienced listening to English and American songs, as well as a good dose of Italian operatic music, were now in awe of their own music played back through the horn of a gramophone⁷. Recorded, playback sound induced a perception and reflection of oneself and one's cultural context. Due to their popularity and the nostalgia they induced, these records of Maltese music were also sold to immigrant communities overseas. Retail

³ Paul Vernon, *A look at the engineers who made history traveling the world recording music*, Vintage Jazz Mart No. 94, 1994. Available at http://bolingo.org/audio/texts/vjm_engineers.html

⁴ Shelley Tayar, *An account of Malta's Jewish Community since 1800*, pp.4-5.

⁵ 'Id-Dischi bil Malti', *Il-Hmara*, 18 March, 1931.

⁶ 'Dischi Giodda Maltin', *Il-Cotra*, June 1931.

⁷ 'Dischi Giodda Maltin', *Il-Cotra*, June 1931.

outlets like *Bembaron & Cie.*, based in Tunis, sold records to the 20,000 strong Maltese community there at the time. It is documented that these and the ensuing records, released under various labels and by other agents including D'Amato Records of St. John Street, were also marketed and sent to Maltese migrants living in Australia and elsewhere.

D'Amato and HMV

By mid-1931, the Maltese record mania had caught on. Agent and distributor for His Master's Voice, Anthony D'Amato, had long since established a commercial relationship with HMV Gram Co. in Hayes, Middlesex. D'Amato was already an established wholesale and retail seller of 78rpm records, with a variety of titles in classical and operatic music, now took on the new enterprise of producing records of Maltese music. By entering into an agent deal with the Middlesex based, Gramophone Company, Mr. D'Amato had the responsibility and artistic license of finding and signing on the musicians, rehearsing them and organizing the recording trip to the Milan branch of HMV. All costs of travel, lodging and musician's fees were at the expense of Mr. D'Amato who would eventually be reimbursed with 'in-kind' deal of records, once they were pressed and 'exported' back to the agent. Musicians were on a royalty basis with the local agents and once they recorded had to follow up on sales to make sure they were paid their dues.

D'Amato proceeded to contract the well-known composer and director Mro. Vincenzo Ciappara, for writing the musical scores. Carlo Satariano, comic entertainer and owner of the journal 'Dr. Brombos', was contracted to write the lyrics for songs. He also engaged the well-known bass singer Domenico Busuttill, tenor Giuseppe Cefai, and baritone singers Ruggieru Falzon and Michele Smith. Emmanuele Cilia, with a repute of being one of the best ballad singers of the day, was contracted for the *ghana* singing⁸. After two months of writing and rehearsal, the party of five artists, along with Carlo Satariano, travelled to the His Master's Voice studios in Via San Antonio, Milan, via Syracuse. On arrival, they were greeted by an expectant Mro. Carlo Sabajno, who was the official musical director for the HMV studios⁹.

Between the 8th and the 12th of June 1931, chief-engineer of the Milan studios, Edward Fowler¹⁰, recorded the music of these Maltese musicians and produced the first twenty tracks which would appear with an HM prefix and his signature matrix code 'OF'. The ten-inch H.M. series sported a white label with gold lettering and a splendid red Maltese cross superimposed below the now famous, HMV logo of Francis Barraud's painting of Nipper the dog and the gramophone horn. H.M.1, the first in the series, features the ballad track 'L'Istoria ta Arturo u Maria'¹¹. These ballads, executed by folk singer Emmanuele Cilia 'Ta' Zabett' from Ħaz-Zebbug, would also establish him as one of the first *ghana* singers to be recorded. It was not before 1964, that D'Amato would re-release a selection of Cilia's ballads on 45rpm vinyl, securing his legacy for generations to come. Besides Cilia's folk ballads, the visiting party recorded other songs in a variety of styles and genres, which seem to have been written specifically for these sessions.

⁸ 'Il-Maltin ikantaw fid-diski tal His Master's Voice', *Il-Hmara*, 20 June 1931.

⁹ Mro. Sabajno was an Italian, opera director from *La Scala*. He was not only a conductor and accompanist but also an accomplished, although little published, composer. He worked in the HMV Milan studios for 30 years from the turn of the century and was responsible for musical direction of many classical and operatic HMV records.

¹⁰ "In August 1930, Fowler visited Naples and was then posted to Milan as resident engineer. Fowler remained in that position until about 1944, when he returned to England to work at Abbey Road studios, a position he held until his retirement in the 1960's". Paul Vernon, *A look at the engineers who made history traveling the world recording music*, Vintage Jazz Mart., no. 94, 1994.

¹¹ *Malta File Correspondence*, May 1931, EMI Archive Trust Fund.

These include tangos, waltzes, foxtrots and lyrical songs, as well as a number of comical stories and anecdotes musically accompanied by the studio ensemble. The resident Milan studio ensemble accompanied the singers and played the scored music of Mro. Voncenzo Ciappara. Maltese orchestras and musicians were also recorded by *Deutsche Grammophon* in mid 1931, on a series of sessions organized by local record dealer and agent, P. Carabott of Merchant's Street, Valletta.

P. Carabott and the Odeon Catalogue

Early in 1931, the local journal *Il-Berka* advertised the arrival of a new list of records, produced and sold by local establishment, P. Carabott Music Establishment of *Strada Mercanti*. These advertisements boasted a catalogue of 48 records, on *Odeon* label, which were made by the finest local artists; a contribution of 200 people, it stated, who first recorded in Malta, and later on in Tunis¹². The catalogue features various composers and conductors, solo musicians, comic artists, operatic and lyrical singers, poets, guitar soloists, a mandolin orchestra, as well as a good number of folk, *ghana* singers, including women singers. The front cover of the 1931 Odeon catalogue, displays Antonio Gerada's label illustration, *Dischi Maltin*.

The music on the catalogue series covers a variety of popular genre; comic songs and tales (*parlanti*), romantic, sentimental and lyrical songs, folk ballads and improvised chant, as well as some arias and sacred works. These recordings include the only recorded documents of the work of composers such as Carlo Diacono, Carmelo Pace and Mario Cirillo. The two Maltese orchestras featured in this catalogue, were organized by Mro. Diacono and Mro. Bellizzi. The two, directed the 40-piece, *Orchestra Chbira Maltija*, whilst Mro. Mario Cirillo directed the Orchestra 'Carabott'. These orchestras provided the musical accompaniment for the majority of the records listed in the catalogue supporting an array of singers of various genres. The Odeon catalogue also covers a number of comic artists and theatrical personages, who formed part of a well-known *teatrin* company, known as *Kumpanija Indipendenza*; comedy and parody, with highly localized, slapstick humour, where clear diction, humour and stage presence overruled the importance of voice quality.

Musical overview

One can distinguish two main categories of styles on these early recordings. The first, is that in the form of local folk song and chant; the 'authentic' hybrid of music prevalent in rural society, which reflects the yearnings and aspirations of a folk culture. Most notable amongst these the folk singers are 'Xudi', 'Semenza' and Manwel Cilia 'Ta' Zabet'. The other styles, such as tangos, foxtrots, and waltzes, reflect the imported influence in music, which resulted in numerous entertainers and dance orchestras, who provided music for entertainment for society in the frivolous 1930s. The lyrical and operatic-style songs, show the influence and proximity of Latin culture on early 20th century Malta. The concept of recorded and documented sound had its impact on society, as well as on its musicians and composers; whilst providing them with an opportunity to make a living, it also created the impetus to produce for records under contract by the agents. It also posed a unique opportunity for musicians and composers to have their works documented for posterity.

¹² 'Dischi Giodda Maltin', *Il-Cotra*, June 1931 ; *Il-Hmara* , August 1931.

Conclusion

The recordings presented on these early discs of Maltese music, are invaluable documents of local music; they are a reflection of the cultural patterns, socio-economic and socio-cultural climate of the time. To date, they are the earliest recorded sound of the country and attest to the variety of musical genre available at the time. Now transferred to the more durable medium of audio file, for the sake of preservation, this music serves as a reference, both musicological and historical, for the island and its people.

