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A new look at maltese high pitched folk singing "La Bormliža"

Une nouvelle vision sur l'interprétation musicale folklorique de Malte "La Bormliža "

Una nueva visión sobre la interpretación musical folklórica de Malta "La Bormliža "

نظرة جديدة في كيفية أداء الغناء الفلكلوري المالطي "البورمليزا"
(La Bormliža)

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Abstracts

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Traditional music performance on the Maltese islands of Malta and Gozo, better known as *ghana* ['a:na], is predominantly vocal, covered in a limited melodic repertoire and with a strong emphasis on textual content related to a local audience. It includes different types of sub,genres, partly singing and improvised in words without further preparation. In particular is a loose term for performing words with forced and tense voice, over long melodic lines and stretched and distorted across long ornamental passages.

So far three theories have focused on the origin of *Ghana la Bormliža* : (1) the Spanish,Sicilian origin (assuming that any other Maltese folk music is non,existent); (2) the Arabic,European symbiosis; (3) the indigenous origin.

The performance merits attention only while performed locally (and in Australia by Maltese migrants). Until recently it contained attitudes in the affiliation to distinct class division, but it is virtually incomprehensible to any but the initiated in a distinct music milieu.

The presentation will focus on the collision and opposition between music and performance, and on possible influences from European and non,European context. Furthermore, its social function is changing within a new cultural context while been recently resuscitated in a process of proactive enculturation.

L'interprétation musicale traditionnelle est connue dans les îles de Malte et Gozo sous le nom de *ghana*, et elle est généralement vocale, couvrant un répertoire mélodique limité avec un contenu textuel relatif au public local. Cette musique comprend différents types de sous genres, chantés en partie et improvisés par des mots sans préparation préalable, en particulier les mots décontractés chantés avec une voix tendue, forte et avec des cordes mélodiques trop longues qui s'étendent et changent leur forme à travers les longs passages ornementaux.

Pour l'instant, trois théories portent sur l'origine du *ghana* la Bormliża : la première d'origine espano,sicilienne (supposant la non existence d'une autre musique folklorique maltaise), la seconde constituant une symbiose arabo,européenne, et la troisième d'origine indigène.

L'interprétation musicale ne mérite d'attention que lorsqu'elle est chantée localement (en Australie par les migrants maltais). Jusqu'à ces derniers jours, elle comporte des attitudes dans l'affiliation pour une répartition de classes distinctes, mais cela est quasiment incompréhensible pour quiconque, mais pratiquée dans un milieu musical défini.

La présentation de cette étude se focalise sur l'affrontement et l'opposition entre musique et interprétation, et sur la possibilité de l'existence des influences de la part du contexte européen et non européen. En outre, sa fonction sociale change en fonction d'un nouveau contexte culturel lorsqu'elle a été récemment réanimée dans un processus d'acculturation proactif.

La interpretación musical tradicional está conocida en las islas de Malta y Gozo bajo el nombre de *ghana*, y es generalmente vocal, cubriendo un repertorio melódico limitado con un contenido textual relativo al público local.

Esta música comprende diferentes tipos de subgénero, cantados en parte e improvisados por palabras sin previa preparación, en particular las palabras relajadas cantadas con una voz tendida, fuerte y con cuerdas melódicas demasiado largas que se extienden y cambian su forma a través de los largos pasajes ornamentales.

Por el momento, tres teorías tratan del origen del *ghana* la Bormliża : la primera de origen hispano,siciliano (suponiendo la no existencia de otra música folklórica maltesa), la segunda constituyendo una simbiosis arabo,europea y la tercera de origen indígena.

La interpretación musical sólo merece atención cuando está cantada localmente (en Australia por los migrantes malteses). Hasta estos últimos días conlleva actitudes en la afiliación para una repartición de clases distintas, pero esto es casi incomprensible para quienquiera, pero practicada en un medio musical definido.

La representación de este estudio se focaliza en el afrontamiento y la oposición entre música e interpretación, y en la posibilidad de la existencia de influencias de parte del contexto europeo y no europeo. Además, su función social cambia en función de un nuevo contexto cultural cuando fue reanimado recientemente en un proceso de enculturación proactivo.

يعرف الأداء الغنائي التقليدي بجزر مالطا و غوزو أكثر باسم "الغنا *ghana*", و في الغالب هو أداء صوتي, يشمل قاموسا موسيقيا محدودا على مضمون نصي متعلق بالجمهور المحلي بالخصوص. و تتضمن الموسيقى مختلف الأنواع الثانوية, التي تغنى إلى حد معين و ترتجل في كلمات دون تحضير مسبق, و خصوصا الكلمات الطليقة التي تؤدي بصوت ممدود و قوي, و بحبال صوتية طويلة تمتد و يتغير شكلها عبر فقرات منمقة و طويلة.

و إلى حد الآن, ركزت ثلاث نظريات اهتمامها على أصل غناء البورمليزا: الأولى ذات الأصل الأسباني الصقلي (الاعتقاد بعدم وجود أي موسيقى فلكلورية مالطية أخرى)؛ الثانية تمثل التعايش العربي الأوروبي؛ أما الأصل الثالث فإنه ينحدر من الأهالي. إن الأداء الغنائي جدير بالاهتمام حينما يؤدي محليا فقط (و في استراليا من طرف المهاجرين المالطيين). و نجد حاليا, أن الأداء يتضمن سلوكات تتجلى ضمن الانتساب قصد إبراز التقسيم الطبقي, و لكن هذا الأمر يتعذر فهمه لأي كان, و لكن يمكن توظيفه في وسط موسيقي معين.

سيركز التقديم اهتمامه على التصادم و التناقض بين الموسيقى و الأداء الغنائي و بين إمكانية وجود تأثيرات من الوسط الأوروبي و غير الأوروبي. إضافة إلى ذلك, فإن وظيفة الأداء الاجتماعية تتغير حسب سياق ثقافي جديد حينما يتم إحيائها حديثا في تنقيف دينامي.

Index terms

Mots-clés : Bormliża, Ghana, interprétation, symbiose, musique traditionnelle

Keywords : Bormliża, Ghana, Malta, performance, symbiosis, traditional music

Palabras clave : Bormliża, Ghana, interpretación, simbiosis, música tradicional

Index by keyword : البورمليزا, غنا, مالطا, أداء, تعايش, موسيقى تقليدية

Full text

- 1 Maltese folk singing or "*ghana*" is sung by folk singers from Malta and Gozo, as well as Maltese emigrants in Australia. The music and folk singing is the work of

semi-literate or illiterate singers and musicians and musically untrained composers, rather than self-taught, which means by ear and hand (rather than by score and teacher)¹. Their age ranges between ten and eighty-six, and includes children, young men and women who are constantly encouraged to perform in the various *għana* programmes on the media and *seratas* organised by the *għannejja* themselves or by the various local councils. They sing in wine shops and restaurants and village/town celebrations, as in the *Lejla Maltija* (Maltese Night).

2 *La Bormliża* is one of the four sub-types of *għana*², better known in Maltese as *għana la Bormliża* or *għana fil-għoli* (lit. « singing in high register »), *għana tan-nisa* (lit. « women's song/singing »), or *la nisa* (lit. « singing like women/in women's way »), or *għana bit-tkaxkira* (« dragged song »), implying that men either find it very hard to sing or must sing it in the female vocal register.

3 This is contrary to the improvised (*spirtu pront*) or ballad (*fatt*). It is imperative that the *La Bormliża* singer have great vocal and lung power, breath and vocal control, and a magnificent full voice to sustain the melismatic intricacies of the presentation of its inherently long phrases. In spite of its simple diction, *La Bormliża* singing demands a sound knowledge of its intricate rules.

Historical references

4 George P. Badger refers to *għana* singing in the cities and villages of his times:

5 I have often stood and listened to individuals seated upon two opposite trees, or engaged in some kind of labour, singing answers to each other on rhyme, without any previous meditation. This the natives call *taqbeel*. The subjects vary according to circumstances, sometimes partaking of the nature of epic poetry, and sometimes of satire upon the faults or character of each³.

6 Godfrey Wettinger, as quoted by Ġuzè Cassar-Pullicino (1921-2005), furnishes documentation going as far back as the second half of the fifteenth century when folk singing is already associated at least with nobility wedding feasts. Performers faced direct competition by others in the neighbourhood and were remunerated in their dual role of musicians and singers. Musical instruments included the trumpet, the viole and the lute.

7 There are no relevant historical sources on *La Bormliża*, though a few tape recordings date back to the 1960s and 70s. In post-war Malta *La Bormliża* was on the decline and on the verge of extinction. However, as Paul Sant-Cassia aptly remarks: « *għana* has always formed a resistant and resilient part [of 'traditional culture'] »⁴ Relying on her informants, American musicologist Marcia Herndon contends that one of the contributing factors for the decline was « the lack of excellent voices. »⁵ Yet there must have been various other factors, as Herndon intuitively concludes⁶. The major factor might be the dominance of *spirtu pront* singers in any *għana* discourse, where others' interests, including those of musicians and ballad and *La Bormliża* singers, as well as the wine shop proprietor are ignored by *spirtu pront* singers.

8 *La Bormliża seratas* are never organized in Malta, except on the sole initiative of the present writer. This is the case of our recorded session in May 2001 at Ta' Ġanna Bar, Żejtun. Here performance is characterised by absolute silence by the members of the audience who listen in awe and enjoy the melismas of the singers, the harsh sounds, glissandi, ornamentation, and the sliding from a higher pitch to a lower one. No attempt is made by anyone to catch the meaning of the lines. This genre is hardly ever heard in Gozo, except in a few isolated instances, the more so as *għana* on the sister island has lost its best performers and the remaining handful are not crowd pullers. Various *għana* sessions in Gozo are generally well attended when Maltese singers are invited to participate.

9 *La Bormliża* is performed solo or by two, in which case the singers must alternate phrases of music. A song is only one verse long, but it is divided in two parts: the first is generally one of many fixed or standard traditional texts thematically having much in common with the traditional *banju* verses, the second is known as *kadenza* (cadence), at times improvised by the singer. It is here in the improvised *kadenza* where the performer can comment concisely on a particular theme. *La Bormliża* may be sung in either of three forms, the first two applicable for a duo, the third for a solo.

10 In the first form singer A has the right to choose a traditional text. Then each of the two singers alternately perform twice his line of this first part with the poetic rhyme scheme a-b-a-b; in the *kadenza* each singer has his two lines of an improvised comment to sing, although there are times, as with the case of Mikiel Cumbo *L-Iżgej*, that his *kadenzi* have also become fixed for him with much repetition and use. The rhyme scheme of the form becomes a-b-a-b-c-d-e-d.

11 The second *Bormliża* type is simpler: as with the first form, singer A has the right to choose the traditional text, but each singer now sings the same two lines *en bloc* and not one, then repeats them. In all, these same two lines are heard four times, to be followed by the *kadenza* when each singer performs two lines of his own. The rhyme scheme of this form is: a-b-a-b-a-b-a-b-c-b-d-b, as in the following excerpts sung by two contemporary singers Ċensu Abela « *Tal-Pitrolju* » and Salvu Cassar « *Il-Ħamra* »⁷.

<p>1 –</p> <p>Ċensu: W erġa' semmagħli l-ħelu leħnek, Dak li għandek il-ħanin.</p> <p>Salvu: W erġa' semmagħli l-ħelu leħnek, Dak li għandek il-ħanin.</p> <p>Ċensu: W erġa' semmagħli l-ħelu leħnek, Dak li għandek il-ħanin.</p> <p>Salvu: W erġa' semmagħli l-ħelu leħnek, Dak li għandek il-ħanin.</p> <p>Ċensu: Meta nisma' d-daqq u l-għana U ma naraxx għaddej il-ħin.</p> <p>Salvu: Għax kulma nagħmlu kollu sewwa, U kulma nagħmlu kollox bnin.</p>	<p>Ċensu: And let me listen to your sweet voice once more, That kindly voice of yours.</p> <p>Salvu: And let me listen to your sweet voice once more, That kindly voice of yours.</p> <p>Ċensu: And let me listen to your Sweet voice once more, That kindly voice of yours.</p> <p>Salvu: And let me listen to your sweet voice once more, That kindly voice of yours.</p> <p>Ċensu: When I hear music and song I don't notice the time pass.</p> <p>Salvu: Because all we do is right And all we do is wholesome.</p>
<p>2–</p> <p>Ċensu: U għalkemm aħna kumpanija Bħal qaqqoċċa mdawrin –</p> <p>Salvu: U għalkemm aħna kumpanija</p>	<p>Ċensu: And although we are a pair Close together like an rtichoke –</p> <p>Salvu: And although we are a pair</p>

Bħal qaçoċċa magħqudin –	Close together like an artichoke –
Ċensu: U għalkemm aħna kumpanija	Ċensu: And although we are a pair
Bħal qaçoċċa magħqudin –	Close together like an artichoke –
Salvu: U għalkemm aħna kumpanija	Salvu: And although we are a pair
Bħal qaçoċċa magħqudin –	Close together like an artichoke –
Ċensu: U din il-mewt trid tkun għalina	Ċensu: Only death can draw us
Biex tifridna minn xulxin.	Apart from each other.
Salvu: ???	Salvu: ???

12 The third *La Bormliża* form is performed solo, and the singer may opt for either of the two forms mentioned above, where the scheme of the second would be a-b-a-b-c-b. Three prominent singers Ċensu Abela « *Tal-Pitrolju* », Mikiel Cumbo « *L-Iżgej* » and Ċikku Degiorgio « *Tal-Fjuri* » prefer singing according to the second rhyme scheme.

13 Here are typical *La Bormliża* verses, five (1-5) by « *L-Iżgej* », our foremost *Bormliża* singer, followed by two verses (6-7) lately sung by Ċikku « *tal-Fjuri* »⁸ :

<p>1 Kemm ili għanja ma Ngħanni Għax ilsieni rabba' s-sadid, Kemm ili għanja ma ngħanni, Għax ilsieni rabba' s-sadid. Ommi ħabbet lil missieri, U jiena nħobb lil min irrid</p>	<p>It has been such a long time since I last sang a stanza Because my tongue has grown rusty, It has been such a long time since I last sang a stanza Because my tongue has grown rusty, My mother has loved my father, And I love whomever I want.</p>
<p>2 Fejn hu leġni ta' dari?! Kemm kelli leġni sabiħ! Fejn hu leġni ta' dari Kemm kelli leġni sabiħ! Fejn hu qiegħed ġibuhuli Għax naħseb ħadhuli r-riħ.</p>	<p>Where is my voice of past times?! How beautiful my voice was. Where is my voice of past times?! How beautiful my voice was. Wherever it is bring it back to me Because I believe the wind has taken it away from me.</p>
<p>3 Jekk timradli kemm niħassrek, Jekk itmutli kemm nibkik, Jekk timradli kemm niħassrek, Jekk itmutli kemm nibkik, Jien niġik iċ-ċimiterju, Fuq qabrek nitlob għalik.</p>	<p>If you get sick I'll pity you, If you die I'll cry your loss, If you get sick I'll pity you, If you die I'll cry your loss, I will visit you at the cemetery, And pray for you on your tomb.</p>

<p>4 Xitla sbejha ġol-ġnien għandi, Kemmm ilma ġerrejt għalik, Xitla sbejha ġol-ġnien għandi, Kemmm ilma ġerrejt għalik, Meta ġejt biex il-frott tagħmel, U ... ħaddieħor qed igawdik.</p>	<p>I've a beautiful plant in my garden, I've carried so much water to water you, I've a beautiful plant in my garden, I've carried so much water to water you, When time was ripe to mature Oh ... someone else is enjoying you.</p>
<p>5 Jiena u inti żewġt igriedel, Fuq siġra ngħannu qegħdin, Jiena u inti żewġt igriedel, Fuq siġra ngħannu qegħdin, Daqskemm qed nieħu pjaċir miegħek Ma nixtieq isir il-ħin.</p>	<p>You and I are two goldfinches, Singing on a tree, You and I are two goldfinches Singing on a tree, I'm enjoying so much myself with you I wish time would not pass.</p>
<p>6 Wiċċ ta' warda bellusija Mistoħbija qalb il-weraq. Wiċċ ta' warda bellusija Mistoħbija qalb il-weraq. Jien għalik nidħol f'tempesta Waqt ix-xita, ragħad u beraq.</p>	<p>You have a face of a velvety flower Hidden among the leaves. You have a face of a velvety flower Hidden among the leaves. For you I would plunge in a storm In the rain, thunder and lightning.</p>
<p>7 Rajtek tielgħa fuq is- Saqqajja, Ħandbeg iswed fuq spallejk. Rajtek tielgħa fuq is-Saqqajja, Ħandbeg iswed fuq spallejk. Ir-raġel keċċiek 'il barra, Id-dmugħ nieżel minn għajnejk.</p>	<p>I saw you going up to Saqqajja hill With a black handbag hanging from your shoulders. I saw you going up to Saqqajja hill With a black handbag hanging from your shoulders. Your husband has chased you away, With tears streaming from your eyes.</p>

14 As remarked by Annette Erler of Denmark, « *La Bormliża* is a loose term for performing words with forced and tense voice, over long melodic lines and stretched and distorted across long ornamental passages covered in a limited melodic repertoire and with a strong emphasis on textual content related to a local audience »⁹.

Different theories

15 No particularly reliable study or analysis has as yet been undertaken to discuss comprehensively the immanent nature of this sub-type of *għana* (or of the other sub-types) in Malta, Gozo, and Australia. So far three theories have focused on the origin of *La Bormliża*: (1) the Spanish-Sicilian origin (assuming that any other Maltese folk music is non-existent); (2) the Arabic-European symbiosis; (3) the indigenous origin.

16 Joseph Vella, in his study "*L-Identità Kulturali Maltija – Il-Mużika*" [Maltese Cultural Identity – Music] (1989)¹⁰ outrightly does away with the possibility of the existence of any indigenous folk music, defining the existing motifs as « pseudo-folk tunes »:

17 Contrary to what has been and is still being insisted upon, indigenous folk music is rare, almost non-existent, I would say. The appearance in certain almost phenomenal aspects of a large number of pseudo-folk tunes in Malta in the last 30/40 years, is the result of completely different exigencies to those from which pure form is formed and created. This phenomenon can be attributed to personal/national interests, as a result, for example of the development of the tourist industry, whose local food and indigenous music are considered an integral part of his stay in our islands¹¹.

18 Vella is here defining post-war Maltese folk music as folklorismus. He contends that due to the small geographical size of the Maltese islands, our forefathers (including those of the pre-war period) felt no need to create their own music¹². Their constant cultural contacts with artistic (religious) music neutralised any internal music energy and made of them passive and not active performers¹³. Moreover, *għana* as the strongest, true expression of Maltese folk music, is predominantly textual and not musical, the “spiritual” origin of which is Spanish-Sicilian¹⁴.

19 Vella’s three-pronged theory is diachronic: whereas there is still room to discuss and investigate his Spanish-Sicilian origin for *għana*, the sparse published documentation by George Percy Badger¹⁵ in 1838 (Vella wrote 151 years later!) and Cassar-Pullicino¹⁶ proves him wrong on the first and second score.

20 As I have argued elsewhere, « *Għana* justifiably was part and parcel of Maltese culture at more than one level of society, females not excluded. Sections of the people in seventeenth-century Malta ignored the objections of the Authorities, and lute players and others continued and were permitted only to accompany the bridal couple to the church door »¹⁷ not to mention the people’s persistent behaviour in gathering in large numbers to listen to the guitar accompanied singing and watch the dancing.

21 The predominant theory is that *għana*, particularly the *La Bormliża*, is a unique symbiosis of Arabic and European characteristics.¹⁸ I will quote Charles Camilleri, himself a Maltese composer, in his recent publication jointly with Cassar-Pullicino:

22 The singing style of the *Bormliża* is one of the oldest examples of musical form of the Maltese Islands. It is akin to Arabic music and its style of singing possibly developed during the Arab occupation of the Maltese Islands between the ninth and eleventh century.

23 The guitar accompaniment was probably added much later and led to the death of the original concept.

Its main musical features are:

- a. Melismatic type – the use of several types of pitches to one syllable of the text.
- b. A wide variety of non-Western pitches, harsh and loud sounds, glissandi

and ornamentation.

- c. Melodic type of motives (melody) which generally slides from a higher pitch to a low one.
- d. The avoidance of landing on the “tonic” (head-note) until a considerable time has passed by landing a tone higher.¹⁹

24 However, other scholars, particularly Paul Sant-Cassia and Paolo Scarnecchia, do not consider any possibility of this Arab/Muslim relation and are in favour of an indigenous origin of *għana* as with other Mediterranean islands or a vocal Mediterranean *koine* respectively.

25 There is no reason in order to believe that *għana* is in fact Arab/Muslim. In fact it may be a genuine local creation and this form of singing is found in many other places in the Mediterranean, in islands such as Sardinia, Crete and Cyprus²⁰.

26 Alcuni studiosi, Cassar-Pullicino e Camilleri, per spiegare il suo carattere eccentrico hanno ipotizzato un’influenza araba, anche se i suoi tratti appaiono riconducibili ad una koiné vocale che abbraccia una più ampia fascia mediterranea....²¹.

La Bormliża and prostitution

27 Marcia Herndon and Norma McLeod were the first and the only scholars to associate *La Bormliża* and *għana* in general with prostitution²².

28 Indeed, few women who are not prostitutes or former prostitutes sing at all, although this may not have been the situation twenty-five years ago or more²³.

29 This [*la Bormliża*] ... is the type of song used by those women who sing in the public arena in Malta. The women who sing *Bormliża* are “prostitutes.” They sing with men or with other women in the bars and houses of “prostitution”²⁴.

30 This statement has always intrigued me. Their research in the early seventies happened to coincide with various clashes between two groups of folk singers, dominated by the figures of two performers, connected with prostitutes, one of the latter was the best *La Bormliża* performer at the time,²⁵ and the other « a novice singer and ardent supporter »²⁶ of the second male singer. Reference is also made to a *La Bormliża* specialist and a « madame [*sic*] of genteel house ... and proprietress of the bar »²⁷ where the best *La Bormliża* singer worked.

31 Though one cannot overlook these connections of the two top *għana* performers, the allegation that Maltese folk singing in general and *La Bormliża* in particular is the domain of prostitutes and that folk singers live with prostitutes was, and still is, far from the truth. Through my long years of ethnographic research since the early seventies I have repeatedly interviewed many *għannejja* on different occasions, including prominent ones of the time, notably the late Fredu Abela « *l-Bamboċċu* » who features so often in Herndon’s work,²⁸ and Żepi Meli « *Ta’ Sika* ». Both have refuted Herndon’s contention that *La Bormliża* implies a prostitute as a performer – Meli himself is a *La Bormliża* singer! In particular *Bamboċċu*’s blunt statement needs to be quoted verbatim:

32 [Herndon’s informant, one of the two top folk singers,] ... made Marcia believe many a tall story to endear himself to her, even passed off bottles of the adulterated wine he gave her as pure wine. This one of folk singing and prostitutes you’re telling me about must be one of his tall stories²⁹.

33 With the exception of four younger ones who have taken to this genre as a result of the Singing Festival,³⁰ the present *La Bormliża* singers are among the « few remain[ing] who know the intricate rules [of *La Bormliża*] and possess the magnificent voice required by the form »³¹ who were already flourishing at the time and none of them ever lived with a prostitute.

34 To conclude: though Herndon's conclusions on prostitution and *għana* are interesting to follow and to study with reference to the five singers implied, they are biased. Same goes for her remark with Norma McLeod that

35 It is common to find two men holding hands and kissing in one corner [in a singing bar], while singers battle out a fine philosophical subject and a prostitute meets a customer in the back room³².

La Bormliża and the present *għana* revival

36 The present revival of Maltese high-pitched singing falls within my proactive cultural project of injecting new life in various aspects of Maltese folk culture, mainly folk singing, folk narrative and material culture. He started his research on *għana* in the late 1970s.³³ Women and high-pitched performers proved to be a hard nut to crack, refusing to collaborate due to family pressure. This was the first phase of an arduous and slow, though continuous cultural project, demanding perseverance, dedication and disregard of the various pecuniary interests of individual who regarded his initiative as a threat.

37 I have been locally criticised for giving prominence to high-pitched singing during the eight editions of the festival. Other factors causing the decline include the tremendous vocal power, control, agility and endurance, lung power and breath control needed.

38 It was only in 1999 that unaccompanied *għana* was introduced in the Second National Folk Singing Festival on the initiative of the adjudicating board of the previous year's Festival and on mine as artistic director of the festival. The former suggested in their short report that unaccompanied singing should be introduced for high-pitched singing (*l-għana La Bormliża*). The latter dared take the opportunity to present all types of *għana*, resulting in the best moments of the whole event³⁴.

39 The first results were reaped in 1998 when the First National Folk Singing Festival was held in Argotti Gardens.³⁵ To date seven editions of the festival have been held, with the participation of various local and foreign folk singers and musicians, mainly from the Mediterranean area. Whereas in 1998 high-pitched singers had to be practically pushed on the stage to perform and were practically ignored by a large section of the audience. Nowadays, through broadcasting and wider publicity of the previous editions of the festival and the installation of a monitor for simultaneous and/or consecutive translation and transcription (Maltese-English), we see the majority of our audiences enjoying these performances.³⁶ A concurrent strategy of recording and broadcasting performers' life biographies and *għana* programmes on two local radio stations have helped me in gaining the trust of many singers and musicians. This led to the founding of *Kadenzi* in October 2002, followed by the official opening of its club in Qormi on March 14, 2004. *Kadenzi* is the only society of Maltese folk singers and musicians in contemporary Malta.

40 In spite of its geographical size it is not correct to draw one common line for the whole musical discourse of folk singing in Malta. The more so when, to quote Herndon, « the music of Malta is basically an intervillage activity, and not a village-oriented phenomenon. The mobility of musicians » and, we would add, folk singers, « as they go from bar to bar across the island, is constant, and seemingly almost random. »³⁷.

41 Moreover, in the past eight years the situation has been changing, at times at a rapid pace. There still exists "popular culture" which Paul Sant-Cassia in his in-

depth analysis of Maltese folk music has recently defined « *de rigueur* »³⁸ for intellectuals and students. Hundreds of *għana* aficionados attend the annual Folk Singing Festival as *għana* is part of their life and they thus come into personal contact with the singers. For other levels of society the festival has been an enculturative experience, the catalyst towards a constant operative process of enculturation, making *għana* part of Maltese culture and society. Since the second edition (1999) of the Festival Mediterranean folk groups and musicians have been participating and the programme is purposely formulated in such a way as to alternate foreign folk singing and music with Maltese folk singing and music. Hundreds of middle class Maltese as well as tourists attend. The three-day festival, edited and serialised by the present writer, is broadcast on the national television station thus enjoying the largest percentage of viewership. The situation, as partly described by Sant-Cassia in 1991, namely, « (...) a process of 'discovery' and 'marginalization' as occurred with the Gozo carnival »³⁹ has been changing eventually, due to diffusion and cultural transmission in process. Here we quote Sant-Cassia again,

42 n]owadays *għana* has become *an* other (rather than *the* other) like all other othernesses, and therefore acceptable. It becomes an ordinary otherness rather than an extraordinary otherness, and just another vehicle to generate metaphors of difference.... To a great extent *għana* has been disinvested of the sharpness of (coded) class commentary, as indeed have many other traditional markers of social distinction...⁴⁰

43 A critical eye at the cultural situation in Malta can easily identify examples of voluntary acceptance of *għana* at various levels. In this process *La Bormliża* stands to gain a new crop of *La Bormliża* singers in the near future.

44 In 1991 Sant-Cassia wrote:

(...) [M]odern appreciation of *għana* concentrates much more on the voice, even on the 'pain' of the singer, rather than on the uneasy laughter that greets the singers' riposte. Contemporary appreciation of *għana* is thus very different to that in the past, and it seeks different experiences.⁴¹

45 Since then *għana* has come a long way and *La Bormliża* stands to gain, even if at the expense of, as Sant-Cassia concludes after Harvey (1996), becoming a « hybrid of modernity. »

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Notes

1 M. A. Herndon, *Singing and Politics. Maltese Folk Music and Musicians*, Ph.D. thesis, USA, 1971, pp. 180-81; P. Sant-Cassia, 'L-Għana: Bejn il-Folklor u l-Ħabi' [*Għana: Between Folklore and Concealment*], in T. Cortis, ed., *L-Identità Kulturali ta' Malta* [Maltese Cultural Identity], (Malta, 1989), p. 89.

2 The other three sub-types are: *l-għana tal-banju* (traditional *għana* stanzas; lit. « singing at the washing fountain »), *l-għana spirtu pront* (extemporised singing), and *l-għana tal-fatt* (ballad singing). See, Mifsud-Chircop, *Il-Folklor Malti I* [Maltese Folklore I], Kullana Kulturali [Cultural Series] n. 56, Malta, 2003, pp. 188-212, *Il-Folklor Malti II*, Kullana Kulturali n. 57, Malta, 2003, pp. 323-350, and "Malta's *Għana*: The Folk Music of the Maltese", *Malta. Roots of a Nation*, K. Gambin, ed., Malta: Heritage Malta 2004, 149-162. A recent off-shoot of *għana* is the *makkjetta* (humorous song). It has developed since the 1960s due to the merits and persistence of young Fredu Spiteri *l-Everest* who died tragically in 1965. His worthy successor is the late Fredu Abela *Il-Bamboċċu* who has a good number of compact discs to his name.

3 G. P. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*. Malta, 1838, p. 84.

4 See, "Tradition as 'Discovery' of 'Marginality': *Għana* and Folklore Mark II," part 7, Exoticizing Discoveries and Extraordinary Experiences: 'Traditional' Music, Modernity, and Nostalgia in Malta and Other Mediterranean Societies. January 1991. <http://www.maltese-ghana.ndirect.co.uk>.

5 Herndon, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

6 Ibid.

7 Recordings in the author's possession.

8 Recordings in the author's possession.

9 Personal communication, April, 2004.

10 J. Vella, *L-Identità Kulturali Maltija – Il-Muika* [Maltese Cultural Identity – Music], "L-Identità Kulturali ta' Malta" [Maltese Cultural Identity], T. Cortis, ed., Malta, 1989, pp. 35-58.

11 Ibid., p. 37. [Original: « (...) Kuntrarjament għal dak li sostnew u forsi għadhom isostnu xi whud, mużika 'folk' [sic] indigena f'it li xejn għandna, anzi ngħid li hija kważi inezistenti. Id-dehra taħt ċerti aspetti kważi fenomenali ta' numru kbir ta' psewdo folk tunes hawn Malta fl-aħħar 30/40 sena hija prodott ta' esiġenzi differenti għal kollox minn dawk li minnhom tingħagen u tissawwar il-mużika folk pura. Dan il-fenomeni jista' jiġi attribwit għal interessi personali/nazzjonali kawża, per eżempju, ta' l-iżvilupp ta' l-industrija tat-turiżmu, fejn, għat-turist, ikla u daqqa indigena huma kkunsidrati bħal parti integrali mill-mawra tiegħu f'pajjiżna. »].

12 Original: « (...) Matul i-minijiet f'it kienu dawk il-Maltin li jassewhom tant kompletament iolati li nibtet fihom ix-xewqa li jikkreaw espressjoni muikali tagħom infushom. » (Ibid.) [« (...) Along the ages few were those Maltese who felt so totally isolated that they felt the urge to create their own musical expression. »].

13 Original: « (...) Il-knejjes f'Malta dejjem servew ta' swali tal-kun`erti fejn il-poplu kollu sata' jattendi ming'ajr]las, g]al servizzi reli[jui/muikali ta' livell g]oli: dawn is-servizzi setg]u jitqiesu b]ala kun`erti regolari. Dan g]all-Maltin kien ta' vanta[[u fl-istess]in ta' vanta[. Kien ta' vanta[[g]aliex il-livell ta' konoxxenza u apprezzamnet muikali kien dejjem jikber u jikkonsolida ru]u. (Dari ma kinitx]a]a rari li mastrudaxxa, bajjad, jew nies o]ra tas-seng]a manwali, waqt xog]olhom ikantaw jew isaffru arja minn xi opra Taljana flok xi melodija 'folk'.) L-ivanta[[[ie g]aliex din is-sitwazzjoni [[enerat udjenza konoxxenti imma passiva. » (Ibid.) [« (...) Churches in Malta always doubled up as concert halls where everybody could attend, for free, religious/musical services of a high level: these services may be considered as regular concerts. For the Maltese people this was an advantage and a disadvantage simultaneously. It was an advantage because musical knowledge and appreciation kept rising and consolidating itself. (In the past it was not a rarity for a carpenter, a whitewasher, or other skilled manual workers while at work to be heard singing or whistling some tune from an Italian opera rather than a folk tune.) The disadvantage stems from the fact that this situation generated a knowing but a passive audience. »].

14 Original: « L-g]ana huwa l-akbar espressjoni (u f]afna aspetti forsi l-unika vera espressjoni) ta' muika 'folk' [sic] Maltija. Ida minkejja dan, l-interess artistiku prin`ipali ta' l-g]ana m'huwix muikali ida letterarju. Fl-ambjent ta' l-g]ana niltaqg]u ma' numru g]ir ta' melodiji, jew aljar forom melodi`i, u dawn iservu biex bihom l-g]annej jew jimprova r-rimi tieg]u (l-hekk imsejja] g]ana spirtu pront), jew inkella jirrakonta f'taqbila storja di[à eistenti (g]ana tal-fatt). "Kif wie]ed jista' jinnota, fi-ew[kajjiet l-element muikali huwa dejjem sekondarju, filwaqt li t-test g]andu l-importanza prin`ipali...

"G]alkemm g]ad irid isir studju sew fuq dan is-su[[ett, jien nissu[[erixxi li l-ori[ni spiritwali ta' l-g]ana kif nafuh a]na nsibuh fix-xtajta t'isfel ta' Spanja u din l-influenza waslet g]andna minn Sqallija. Min sama' kant tradizzjonali minn dawn l-in]awi mill-ewwel jinduna bix-xebh ta' kostruzzjoni u eekuzzjoni tieg]u, u l-uu sa mill-bidu nett ta' kitarra b]ala strument akkompjanjatur, huwa wkoll dettall rilevanti jafna f'dan ir-rigward. » (Ibid., p. 38) [« Folk singing is the best (and from many aspects the only real) expression of Maltese folk music. However, in spite of this, the main artistic interest of g]ana is not musical but literary. In g]ana we come across a small number of melodies, or better still melodic forms, and these serve the singer to improvise his rhymed lines (the so called g]ana spiritu pront), or else narrate in a rhyming pattern an already existing narrative (ballad).

"As may be noted, in both cases the musical element is always secondary, whereas the text takes first place.

"Although this field still has to be researched, I would suggest that the spiritual origin of *g]ana* as we know it is to be found in the southern coast of Spain and this influence reached us from Sicily. Whoever has heard traditional singing from these areas, would notice immediately the similarity in construction and performance, and the use of the accompanying guitar from the very first, is also a very relevant detail to this regard. »].

15 G. P. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, Malta, 1838, pp. 82-92.

16 Cassar-Pullicino and Ch. Camilleri, *Maltese Oral Poetry and Folk Music*, Malta, 1998, pp. 1-3.

17 Mifsud-Chircop, *G]ana: A Living Culture in Malta*, p. 85.

18 See, Herndon, op. cit., pp. 16, 308.

19 Cassar-Pullicino and Camilleri, *Maltese Oral Poetry and Folk Music*, p. 87.

These comments are in full agreement with musicologist Marcia A. Herndon's. For example, « *The Bormliża*, a melismatic impromptu haiku-like sung poem, is one of the oldest forms of Maltese music, according to informants. Its antiquity is further supported by its clearly Arabic aspects, such as melisma, melodic contour, and voice type, suggesting that this is a tradition which possibly dates from the Arab occupation of the islands. » (op. cit., p. 78; see also, pp. 307-308) Same remarks are found in N. McLeod and M. Herndon, "The *Bormliża*. Maltese Folksong Style and Women", *Journal of American Folklore*, 1975, p. 87.

For a musical example of *la Bormliża* transcribed by Camilleri, see op. cit., pp. 87-89.

20 P. Sant-Cassia, "L-Għana: Bejn il-Folklor u l-Ħabi" p. 87. [Original: « (...) M'hemm l-ebda raġuni biex wiehed jemmen li l-għana fil-fatt huwa Għarbi jew Musulman; fil-fatt jista' jkun li huwa ħolqien ġenwin lokali u dis-sura ta' kant jinsab [sic] f'ħafna nħawi oħra fil-Mediterran, fi gzejjer bħal Sardinja, Kreta u f'Ċipru. »]

21 P. Scarnecchia, *L-Għana, il canto a chiterra di Malta*, "Ittiritmi '99 – il canto delle isole, la voce del mare", P. Scarnecchia, ed., Ittiri 4-7 agosto 1999, p. 20.

22 Herndon, op. cit., p. 18.

23 Ibid., p. 202.

24 McLeod and Herndon, op. cit., p. 90.

25 Various references to my radio programme series *Mill-Prejjem sal-Kadenza*, broadcast on Radio Malta in the mid-nineties. See also, Herndon, op. cit., p. 283.

26 Herndon, op. cit., p. 249; see also, p. 199.

27 Ibid., p. 259.

28 See, amongst many instances, ibid., pp. 66, 145-150, 162-163, 164, 193-196, 200-201, 232, 240, 241, 278, 289.

29 Personal communication, July 2003. [« [L-ghannej] *kien ibellgħalha ħafna affarijiet lil Marcia biex jinħabb magħha, anki fliexken ta' l-inbid li ma jkunux inbid kien jagħtiha. Din ta' l-għana u l-qħab li qed issem mili oħra minn tiegħu!* »]

30 These are Frans Mifsud « *Ta' Żaren ta' Vestru* », Janice Spagnol « *Ta' Żeppi ż-Żejtuni* », Neil Vassallo « *Tar-Ronnie* », and Kalcidon Vella « *d-Danny* ».

31 Herndon, pp. 79-80

32 Norma McLeod and Marcia Herndon, op. cit., p. 86.

33 Male and female folk singers and folk musicians were repeatedly interviewed to the extent that they were eventually convinced that their sub-culture restricted to wine shops, should be projected in public through close collaboration and trust.

34 R. Fsadni, "Second National *Għana* Festival: A Success – But the Judges Risk Being Immortalised ... in Pungent Song", *The Sunday Times* [of Malta], 30 May 1999.

35 I found the full support of the then parliamentary secretary Joe Cilia, and director of the Department of Culture, Joseph J. Mifsud.

36 As the originator and artistic director of the National Folk Singing Festival, it has always been my topmost priority to involve talented female performers and promising elements of the younger generation in *ghana*. For the first edition (May 1998) only ten-year-old Jesmar Bezzina « *l-Artist iż-Żgħir* » participated as an accompanying guitarist; for the second edition (April-May, 1999) one also finds twelve-year-old and seven-year-old sisters Melissa and Mirabelle Caruana « *Tal-Mellieħa* », twenty-one-year-old Charmaine Catania « *Tal-Ballu* », nine-year-old Jean-Vic Cutajar « *Tal-Mellieħa* », eight-year-old Rebecca Dalli « *Ta' Birżebbuġa* », thirteen-year-old Jean Paul Gauci « *Ta' Seba' Rġiel* », ten-year-old Julia Grima « *Tal-Mellieħa* », and nine-year-old Jean Claude Zahra « *Ta' Gawdura* » as new folk singers, and twelve-year-old Kevin Spagnol « *iż-Żejtuni iż-Żgħir* » as a new accompanying guitarist. In 1998 there were only two practising female *ghannejja* in Malta and Gozo, Fidiela Carabott « *Ta' Ċikku tal-Madum* » and Lordes Mifsud « *Ta' Nazju* ». In the seventh edition other female singers will be participating: Susann Agius « *Ta' Ħat-Tarxien* », Rita Pace « *Ta' Ħ'Attard* », Katerina Saliba « *Tar-Rabat* », and Marisa Sammut « *Tal-Mellieħa* ».

37 Herndon, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

Other examples of generalizations are to be found in Herndon's work, as with nursery rhymes and children's songs: « In Malta, there are no nursery rhymes or children's songs directed against the present government or any former occupation forces ... » (Ibid., p. 310) Various political songs and rhymes related to the prominent political personalities in the sixties, including Duminku Mintoff, Giorgio Borg-Olivier, Archbishop Mikiel Gonzi and Mabel Strickland, were and still are common knowledge to forty- and fifty-year olds.

38 See, "Tradition as 'Discovery' of 'Marginality,'" part 7.

39 . Ibid.

40 . See "Revitalised rituals, or Reperceived rituals ?" part 8, Exoticizing Discoveries and Extraordinary Experiences: 'Traditional' Music, Modernity, and Nostalgia in Malta and Other Mediterranean Societies. January 1991. <http://www.maltese-ghana.ndirect.co.uk>.

41 . Ibid.

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