

Carnival musicking and *organett* ensembles in Gozo

by Philip Ciantar

MUSIC is a human activity that helps people to project an identity and feeling part of a group, to evoke their past and pray for the future; to express their grief for their loved ones who are no more and to revel during their village *fešta*. An interesting kind of musicking (encompassing all kinds of music-making) in Malta is that which manifests itself during Carnival in Gozo in what are referred to as *organett* (accordion) ensembles.¹

Normally, these male-dominated ensembles come together during Carnival days and, for some instances, no rehearsing takes place. Nowadays, Carnival *organett* sessions would normally be held in bars and band clubs.

A popular venue for these ensembles are the bars and clubs in December 13 Street in Nadur. It is in this main street of the village where Carnival develops spontaneously during its five days of festivities.² Revellers walk up and down the street covered from head to toe, wearing grotesque masks, boiler suits and whatever comes to hand.

From the bars hosting these ensembles, one would also be able to hear a cacophony of sounds coming from outside, consisting mainly of ringing bells, banging, whistling and the sounding of horns and sirens; it is a kind of cacophony that provides a complementary "background" to the playing inside – the performance inside mirroring in a somewhat elaborate style the performance outside.

This has been subtly expressed by a *rabbaba* (friction drum) player. After years of gadding about the villages of Gozo disguised in grotesque costumes and banging on an iron rod during Carnival days, he decided to make something "cleverer" out of this time of the year and took to playing the *rabbaba* in these *organett* ensembles.

This kind of musicking led him to start doing the *rabbaba* himself, improving the external appearance of his instrument, from a paint can wrapped up in a dark cloth to one enclosed in a varnished wooden vessel.

Sometimes, instead of a *rabbaba* he plays the tambourine, castanets or a pair of Egyptian hand-bells that he had bought from an Egyptian folk group on board the Gozo ferry. The presence of such hand-bells might contribute to a more "primitive" (if not "exotic") rhythmical sonority that contrasts harmoniously with the more "modern" technology and sound of the accordion.

In conjunction with the traditional sound of the *daqqaqa* (musicians)



ORGANETT ensemble in Gozo

playing in bars, one is also exposed to the modern sound of two rock-bands performing on two erected stages at either end of December 13 Street – an idea introduced some years ago by the local village band club.

In this "street theatre", the dichotomy between the "old" and the "modern" is not only confined to the presence of rock-bands *vis-à-vis* the *organett* ensembles but it could also be extended to the hanging up of acoustic guitars next to traditional instruments, such as the *rabbaba* and *tambur*, on the interior walls of bars.

This might remind passers-by that December 13 Street symbolises a compromise between the "old" and the "modern", and that both "worlds" could co-live, sometimes with the "modern" bringing forth certain changes in a music-culture as to maintain the preservation of the "old".

Set-up and repertoire

Organett ensembles have an "open" set-up, in the sense that non-musicians may get a musical instrument (that, for all we know, might even have been gathering dust stacked in some cabinet since some previous Carnival) and join in and leave the ensemble at any time of the session.

Ensembles such as these would provide an opportunity for non-musicians to participate, at least once a year, in some kind of musicking. The shopkeeper, who might hardly have had time to listen to a piece of music throughout the year, due to his business commitments, would look up for his castanets and after shutting down his business in the evening would leave to Nadur to "play" ("*biex jaghti daqqa*") his castanets.

This is the kind of music-making that seems possible and acceptable only during Carnival days. What is important is that whoever joins in would have "an ear for music" not to disrupt the smooth development of the session.

A participating musical endeavour in these ensembles would normally start on the triangle, which plays on every beat. This would eventually progress on to instruments considered, within the context of these ensembles, as technically and musically more "demanding" than the trian-

gle, instruments such as the tambourine and castanets.

The core instruments that make up an *organett* ensemble are the *organett* (accordion), *rabbaba* (friction drum), *trepied* (in this context it could be either a triangle or any struck metallic object) and the *tambur* (tambourine).

As the name of such ensembles suggests, it is the accordion that leads the ensemble from one song to another either in the form of a medley or in separate songs; in either case it is the accordionist who assumes responsibility for the evolution of the session.

The role of the *rabbaba*, which normally would have its membrane made up of cat's skin for a more penetrating sound, is that of keeping a steady tempo for the ensemble together with the triangle.

The tambourine, which is struck with the fingertips, provides an elaborate rhythmic background heavily characterised by eighth-note triplets. Due to long playing sessions, that sometimes even take up to three or four hours, certain tambourine players cover their fingertips with sticking-plasters in order not to crack them.

Other instruments one might find in these ensembles are the guitar, strumming triadic chords; the bass drum, especially when the session takes place in a band club; the mouth-organ, which can either play along with the accordion or alternating sections with it; the castanets, which could either follow the rhythm of the tambourines or providing a different continuous eighth-note pattern; and in outdoor performances, such as during the *Kumittiva* held in the village square of Xaghra, a drum kit as to reinforce the rhythm section.

The *Kumittiva* is an open-air dance performed by a dancing troupe of men and men dressed as women heavily depending on the sounding of the beat and rhythm for the success of their performance. Joint rehearsals between the instrumental ensemble and the dance troupe would be held from weeks before Carnival.

Certain instruments have disappeared from these ensembles while others were introduced. People from Nadur still remember *Il-Kaxxa* (the box), a wooden box with a metal rod stuck to it producing a bass sound. A recently introduced instrument in these ensembles is *Il-Martell* (the hammer). This consists of two big pivoted hammers struck together with both hands and played on every beat of the music. This was copied from an Italian television programme featuring an Italian folk group.

A successful session would mainly depend on the smooth transition from one song to another, a steady tempo on part of the rhythmic instruments, a sound repertoire of songs on the part of the accordionist and, undoubtedly, an appreciative audience. The music played develops within a limited harmonic framework that channels the

accordionist to repeat the same main tune of the song several times without any further development of the same song.

The songs played during these sessions are popular Fifties and Sixties hits such as *You are my sunshine*, *Rose Marie* and others. Other songs which can be classified as Maltese and which are also played by these ensembles are *Il-Maltija*, *Lanċa Gejja u Ohra Sejra* and *Viva l-Karnival*.

When a session is held in a band club, such as at the one in Xewkija, the repertoire would include popular Maltese band marches that people normally dance for whenever and wherever they are played. Typically Gozitan carnival songs, such as *Ara Gejja l-Muħa*, have either completely disappeared or are very rarely played due to a different socio-cultural background that makes them incomprehensible in today's world.

Group musicking

The kind of musicking that develops during Carnival in Gozo emphasises the group and solidarity cohesion within a particular group. Music is created by people within a group as if there is no place for individual musicking during carnival days.

Carnival in Gozo publicises the type of private musicking that evolves throughout the year in houses, garages and even in warehouses. The accordionist who normally spends the year playing the accordion alone at home or the *rabbaba* player thinking of how he could "technologise" and embellish his instrument would feel important during carnival days. They would play within a group and, there-

fore, away from their solitary places of practicing. Identities of people that might have passed unnoticed all year round will come out, intending to be recognised or remembered during carnival.

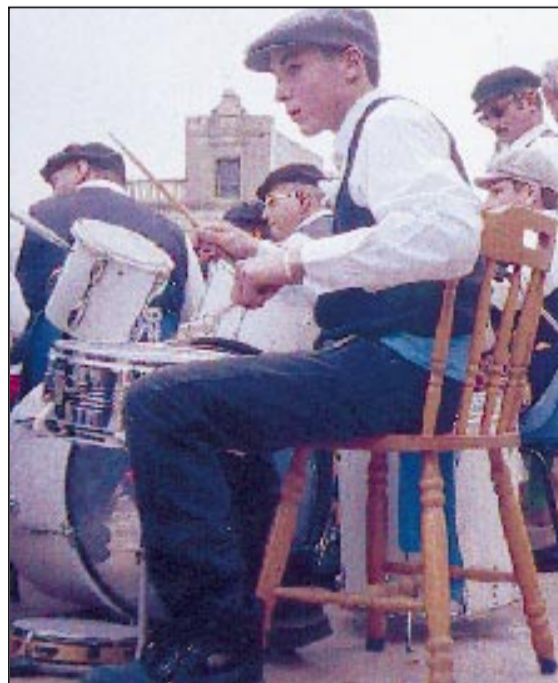
Gozitan *organett* ensembles help to bring to light the various identities of people rather than hide them. This contradicts the highly characterised anonymity marking the Gozitan Carnival. This is, in fact, the kind of anonymity that permits misbehaviour, sometimes even giving individuals the opportunity to ignore public morality. The wives of the *daqqaqa* would have their minds at rest knowing that their husbands are not part of such Carnival "misconduct" but that they are taking part in a "respectable" activity.

In this context, *organett* ensembles provide "discreet" entertainment while identifying all those involved in this unique public music-making.

This article is the result of fieldwork conducted by the writer during last year's Carnival. The fieldwork team was made up of students from the Music Studies Programme at the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta. Thanks are due to Dr Vicki Ann Cremona for her professional assistance during the fieldwork period in Gozo.

1. An *organett* is a small hand accordion, but the term is used nowadays in Gozo to refer to the normal-size accordion.

2. For a comprehensive discussion about Carnival in Gozo see: Vicki Ann Cremona, "Carnival in Gozo: Waning Traditions and Thriving Celebrations" in *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1995), pp. 68-95.



A DRUM KIT is used to reinforce the rhythm section

ADVERT