

# Music, language and style of Maltese folk music

**A**CULTURAL ASPECT that might influence the style of a musical tradition is the language spoken by the same musical culture. The stylistic features of a singing style may partly depend on how speech and music interact and how one mode affects the other.

Speech melody, for example, sets up certain patterns of sound which must to a considerable extent be followed by the music, if the music-text fusion (that is, the entire sound of the song) is to be perceived and favourably assimilated by the listener.

I shall here try to focus on aspects of the inter-relationship between language and music as manifested in *ghana* (Malta's folk music), particularly how this correlation influences, and sometimes even determines, the overall style of this genre of music.

Although the formal organisation of Maltese folk singing is principally guided by poetical and musical considerations, features of the internal structure heavily depend on factors such as the phonological and syntactical features of the Maltese language.

This article is to be considered as an attempt to call attention to a correlation which deserves closer attention and a more detailed analysis; a correlation that could also be analysed in the context of other classical genres of Maltese vocal music.<sup>1</sup> In view of this, it focuses on the most common features of *ghana* rather than on the particular peculiarities presented by its individual sub-genres.

The approach I have adopted re-

lies on the methods and theories proposed in the field of ethnomusicology defined by Titon (1996) as "the study of music in the context of human life". Ideally, expertise in linguistics would be required to do justice to this subject. Since my domain of study is ethnomusicology I beg the reader's indulgence.<sup>2</sup>

A graph transcription has been used instead of a transcription in musical notation.<sup>3</sup> This might help readers unfamiliar with musical notation to follow my examples and arguments. Some examples may be accessed from my multi-media online paper on <http://research.umbc.edu/edu/MA/index/numbers/ciantar/cia>. For its linguistic information this article relies heavily on Borg/Azzopardi-Alexander's book *Maltese*, which, to my knowledge, includes the latest comprehensive study in the field of Maltese phonology.

## Sound intensity

An element of language which has not been given its due importance in Maltese phonology is the sound intensity or loudness of the language. Maltese is often spoken in a loud voice, probably to sound more convincing.

The level of loudness in Maltese tends to be relatively high when compared, for example, to English or French. A noticeable element in *ghana* is the loud voice the singers employ in their singing, even when they are aided by modern technology.

Nowadays, *ghana* sessions take place either in bars, recording studios or on stage normally assisted by an amplification system. In the past,

by Philip Ciantar

*ghana* was sung in small-knit places, such as houses, as well as in open planes and spaces, such as streets and on beaches. In any circumstance, the loud voice of the singers was, and still is, a stylistic requisite that distinguishes *ghanni* (to sing in the style employed by *ghana*) from *tkanta* (normal singing).

Whether *ghana* was "imported" with this stylistic feature, found in similar Mediterranean folk singing, or whether it developed this quality due to acoustic exigencies of performance context and practice, has not been determined. Indeed, whatever the reason for this linguistic characteristic, *ghana* has evolved within a localised linguistic soundscape that in itself has sustained this stylistic quality over the years.

A relatively higher sound intensity in *ghana* could frequently be noticed on stressed syllables compared to the unstressed ones sung in the same word or line. This might be another voice dynamic imitation of what normally happens in everyday speech.

In this regard, Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander (1996) note that stressed syllables in Maltese are usually uttered louder than the other unstressed syllables of the same word or sentence. A case in point is the second stanza in example 5 taken from the above-mentioned paper online.

The following represents a close aural analysis of such a stanza whereby the italicised letters highlight the stressed, and therefore the most loudly sung, syllables:

Se niġi għalli għidt qabel  
Ha nurik kemm jien għannej  
Inti kont l-Anglu Kustodju  
Iż-Zejtuni l-feddej

Loudness is also a stylistic quality found in *ghana* guitar playing. An interesting aspect in many musical cultures is that the sounds of instruments have characteristics similar to those of the singing style in the same culture. Indian violin playing, for instance, sounds very much like Indian singing, and very different, therefore, from European violin playing.

This stylistic transmission from the vocal to the instrumental is also present in local folk music. As I will show later, *ghana* guitar playing is very much influenced by its counterpart singing repertoire. For the moment, I only want to draw attention to the fact that *ghana* guitarists would prefer playing on guitars that apart from having a physical structure that facilitates their playing (such as strings close to the fingerboard) would also satisfy their acoustic expectations, that is, guitars with a loud sonority similar to the loud and convincing voice of the singer.

Such an observation, apart from reflecting stylistic qualities, links to Lortat-Jacob's assertion that in Mediterranean countries things seem to acquire a reality when they are loudly pronounced (1995). It is no wonder, then, that Maltese bands play so loudly – a feature that strikes foreign musicians observing the local band scene.

## Melodic contour

By melodic contour one refers to the shape of the melodic line, its fluctuating movements, rather than the intervallic relations. By melodic peak I simply mean the highest pitch in the melodic line of a musical phrase. The general melodic movement of Maltese *ghana* music can be described as following a downward trend through a series of undulating melodic phrases (see graph).

In *ghana* singing, each musical phrase is equivalent to a line in the poem (or a "statement", in linguistic terms). The lines of music and text coincide, and the points at which the music comes to a temporary rest are also those at which a line, phrase or thought in the words is completed.

A thorough analysis of various *ghana* transcriptions shows that the peaks of these undulating melodic contours are frequently reached on syllables which in normal speech (and in the meaning context of the line) would be stressed, as in the words *diefeġ*, *jigri*, *Madrid*, *izda*, *Franciżi* and *waslu*.

In this context, one would argue that these syllables might have been backed up by either the accents of the poetic metre, or the strong beat of the established musical tempo, or by both. To an extent this is a valid argument and a case in which the "natural" stress of words coincides with that of the music and the poem. But I came across cases in which the placement of a "naturally" stressed syllable on a melodic peak was due neither to the musical strong beat nor to the poetical accent of the verse.

A case in point is a line from the folk-opera *L-Atti ta' l-Appostli: L-ghamar illi għibn' għalikom*.<sup>4</sup> The stress pattern in octosyllabic verses is normally such that stress falls on the third and seventh syllable. This, however, is not the case with the above line since the syllable *gib* of the shortened word *gibna* does not occur as either the third or the seventh syllable. Its positioning at the peak of the contour is also devoid of the strong beat of the established musical tempo. It derives its positioning, therefore, from its "natural" speech melody when uttered in the above context.

Such an observation might be supported by the fact that in Maltese, a phonetic correlate of stress is pitch height; "a stressed syllable is almost always said on a higher pitch than its neighbouring (unstressed) syllables" (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander). This is analogous to what frequently happens in the music of *ghana* in which a stressed syllable reaching a melodic peak is, therefore, followed by an unstressed syllable at a relatively lower pitch.

## Syncopation

Stressed syllables, whether appearing on a high or low pitch of the melodic line, are very often emphasised by a relatively shorter time value followed by the longer time value of the unstressed neighbouring syllable. This process contributes in generating what in music is called syncopation, defined by White (1984) as "the disturbance or contradiction of the pulse of the melody by the rhythm of the melody itself."

The graph transcription shows the melodic movement of the first two lines of the popular Maltese ballad *L-Gharusa tal-Mosta* as interpreted by Frans Baldacchino (*Il-Budajj*) from the CD *Ballades et Joutes Chantées* (1992).

Apart from showing a downward melodic movement of two undulating melodic phrases with a rest in between, the graph also includes

ADVERT

three shaded syncopated areas chiefly generated by the stressed syllables (in italics) of the words *xebba*, *tghaxxaq* and *sbuħija* respectively. In all three cases the relatively short time value of the stressed syllables followed by the longer time value of the neighbouring unstressed syllable produce contradiction with the pulse of the melody.

Syncopation is also a very common characteristic of *ghana* guitar playing since, as has already been hinted, this style of playing is to a large extent vocally inspired and, therefore, partly results from the same common basis of singing – language.

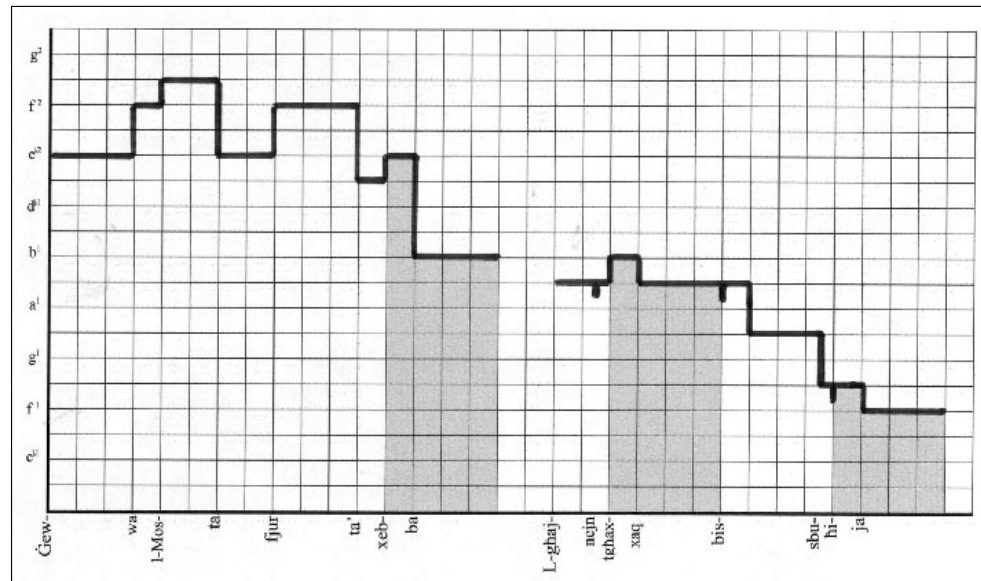
Probably, what makes a tune sound Maltese on the guitar is the stylistic qualities inspired by the vocal repertoire; and whatever approaches the overall structural qualities of *ghana* singing, such as foreign tunes which the guitarists present as *prejtem* (solo improvisations) might, in time, also be included in the “jargon” *ghana*.

### Coda

I have here tried to shed light on the rapport between music and language as one of the stylistic determinants in Maltese folk music. Needless to say, there is ample room for further investigation. One might tackle what would be the structure of the music on words which achieve their meaning from the intonation or stress pattern of the word itself such as in the words *standard* (a banner) and *standard* (in the sense of “established criterion”). In tone languages, tones normally used in speech are reflected in the contour of the melody so as not to contradict the meaning of the word.

The components that make up the style of Maltese folk music, as in any other music, are various. Language makes part of this complex scenario to the extent, that this makes us think of a stylistic genesis that Curt Sach (1943) refers to as *logogenic* (word-born) against the *pathogenic* (emotion-born); while the former is highly influenced by the structure of the language, the latter is strongly influenced by emotions, dance and ritual.

The style of Maltese folk music will continue absorbing from the character of the Maltese language for the sustenance of its identity. Changes in the language will definitely leave



A GRAPH transcription of the first two lines from the Maltese ballad *L-Gharusa tal-Mosta*

an impact on the deep structure of this music with an eventual change, even if very gradual, at the surface level where the well-known *ghana* tunes would hardly be recognised due to a drastic change in their normative musical patterns.

At this stage, one would assume that the changes that have taken place over the years in *ghana* are, in part, a result of the changes which have occurred in the language over the years. The language-music rapport in *ghana* will continue evolving in the context of the socio-cultural changes that will take place within Maltese society.

### Notes

1. For further reading on the inter-relationship of music and language in the context of Maltese music see also Joseph Vella Bondin, *Il-Mużika ta' Malta sa l-Aħhar tas-Seklu Tmintax*, Malta, PIN, 2000).
2. I wish to thank Dr Marie Azzopardi-Alexander from the Institute of Linguistics (University of Malta) for her valuable comments on matters of linguistics dealt within this article.
3. The graph is designed in a pitch-time matrix, with each square on the horizontal axis being equivalent to an eighth note and a vertical pitch-axis covering the vocal range employed in the two transcribed lines. A small suspended line indicates a division of the beat according to the same pitch.
4. This folk opera was performed at Argotti Gardens in July 1995 as part of the *Ijjieli Mediterranji* arts festival. The text of the opera is by Frans Sammut. The quoted line was interpreted by Frans Baldacchino (*Il-Budaj*) in the role of St Paul.

ADVERT