

"OUTSIDE" INFLUENCES ON MUSICAL LIFE IN GOZO

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Casting a retrospective glance at the long line of Gozitan musical tradition, one finds that on more than one occasion it has been fertilised and shaped by influences arriving from outside its boundaries. In such a small place like Gozo these influences proved to be very beneficial towards the consolidation and progress of the rather limited sphere of music-making which such a restricted artistic environment perforce provided. Especially in the 19th century, these 'fertilisations' bore immense fruit as regards such aspects as church music and the traditional band clubs.

When in the middle of the last Century a group of Jesuits, fleeing the growing secularly biased political turmoil in Italy, found refuge at the Seminary in Rabat, Gozo experienced a veritable unexpected musical windfall. Enrico Scio was a member of the Order of Jesus who had to go through this temporary exile. Scio was an excellent composer and teacher. In his class at the Seminary there was a certain young man aspiring for the priesthood by the name of Giuseppe Farrugia. We owe it to Padre Scio, perhaps, that in Farrugia, Gozo found its best musical exponent of the 19th Century. Farrugia was lucky to have Enrico Scio as his teacher, because even though apparently Scio was his one and only mentor, Farrugia's music betrays a degree of sophistication and profundity that is hard to come by even among his contemporaries active in mainland Malta.

Ever since the British started to govern the Island, Fort Chambray in Mgarr had always served as a base for one or other of the English regiments stationed in Malta. In true English tradition all of these had their regimental band. We know that these bands participated actively in the musical

life of Gozo by executing programmes of musical works in the town and village squares, and by taking part in religious processions and celebrations on the feast day of the local village saint. One suspects that regimental bands must have served as a role model to nascent wind instrument groups in Gozo.

By the 19th Cent. local random groups of players (known as *bande popolari*) had been teaming together to form musical ensembles in the fife and drum tradition that harked back to the time of the Knights of St. John and even earlier. It was to be another "outsider" (this time from Valletta) who provided the final impetus towards the formation of a formal band structure as we know it today. Andrea Borg with his legendary 'Banda ta' Fefu' (or Banda ta' Indri, as some people know it) crossed over to Gozo in 1872 to give some concerts. In the process this led to the establishment of the first two Gozitan bands, namely La Stella and Leone Band Clubs.

Although the English type of wind band had been around for several decades, Gozitan bands (like their counterparts in Malta), always seemed to find their musical inspirations and inclinations in Italian musical traditions. Perhaps this is the reason why over the years the two above mentioned bands have had among their conductors a number of Italian musicians or ones of Italian descent. In this respect the more prominent ones to mention would be Alfonso Cini and Giuseppe Giardini Vella for the La Stella, and Giuseppe Giummarra and Orlando Crescimanno for Leone Band. There is no doubt that these musicians brought along with them to Gozo innovative musical ideas, new approaches, and fresh repertoires. Among them, the one who exerted the most

conspicuous and incisive popular influence was perhaps Giuseppe Giardini Vella whose pioneering work in the introduction of a 'new' genre of musical expression, namely the operetta, found an extremely receptive and fertile ground among the Gozitan music loving public.

Pre-war years saw Giardini Vella's personal effort in this direction when he presented his own compositions like "*Cuor di Ben*" and "*Stella di Barberia*". These were played with great success and their popularity ensured a ready audience for similar later productions. The inter- and post-war years, in fact, saw a widening interest in operetta performances, not least through the influence of Maltese dilettantes who had found temporary refuge from the bombardment in Malta by crossing over to Gozo. Sidney Jones's operetta "*The Geisha*" was an unqualified success as was Romolo Corona's "*La Piccola Olandese*".

The British Institute was established in Malta and Gozo by the British administration primarily for political considerations. But, at a tangent, this move had a wide salutary effect on the cultural life of both Malta and Gozo, since one of its undeclared aims must surely have been to counteract the predominance of the Italian influence on our national culture. After the war years these aims started bearing fruit, because one finds Gozitan audiences being exposed to music other than that of the Italian operatic tradition which up to that time had provided the staple fare of music making, both secular and religious.

Works by English composers started to be introduced and gain a foothold among Gozitan music lovers. Compositions by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor ("*Petite Suite de Concert*"), Edward German ("*Gypsy Suite*"), Charles Wood ("*Prelude for Strings*"), Edward Elgar ("*Serenade Lyrique*"), were heard in

Gozo for the first time. Especially popular, perhaps because of his Gozitan "connections", were the works of Albert Ketèlbey *In a Monastery Garden, In a Persian Market*.

Besides, the Gozo branch of the British Institute used to commission local musicians, (among them my late father Mro. Ganni Vella), to organise regular concerts in the Hall of the Institute at It-Tokk. One condition requested by the Directors was that the conductors should include at least one composition by a British composer in these concerts. Besides, visiting ensembles from Malta were also engaged to perform at It-Tokk. It was through these performances that the classical repertoire (Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert; practically unknown entities before the war years), started to be tapped, with their music making tentative inroads in the knowledge and appreciation of the average Gozitan music lover.

However, what ultimately burst the dam and completely liberalised Gozitan musical tastes was the gradual proliferation of the mass media-first the Rediffusion system, then the radio and finally television.

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