

## GOZO AND ITS MUSIC

**Joseph Vella**

**M**alta has a long, established and glorious musical tradition. Documental evidence in this regard harks back to the beginning of the 16th century although, of course, circumstantial evidence points to a far earlier period. Gozo, on the other hand, has generally been regarded as being a cultural backwater where music is concerned. However, the role and modality of music making in Gozo over the last four centuries or so has hardly even been scratched by historians, and I am sure that future in-depth studies in this regard will not only contradict this misconception but will show that Gozo has had its own niche (albeit a limited one) in the history of music of these Islands.

The course of Gozitan music making in its three main dimensions can be classified into four categories, namely (1) vocal/ orchestral activity, (2) folk singing and (3) bands.

### **Vocal and Orchestral Music**

Judging by the music found, for example, in the archives of the Gozo Cathedral, and in private ones like those of Fr Joseph Farrugia, Mgr John Gauci and my late father Mro Ġanni Vella, one must come to the conclusion that ever since the 18th Century, musical tradition in Gozitan churches must have been quite a healthy one. These archives represent a wide selection of works by Gozitan, Maltese and Italian composers. The variety attests to the fine taste of Gozitan ecclesiastical authorities who seemed keen to ensure that nothing but the best would be performed during the various services.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See for example *Messa Soleme in Re* (MS 17) and *Messa Breve in Do* (MS 18) by F. Azzopardi; *Messa da Requiem* (MS 124) and *O Salutaris Hostia* (MS 165) by P. P. Bugeja; *Antifona Beata me Dicent* (Ms 512) by G. Spiteri Fremond; and *Gloria in Re* (Ms 435) by Dr Paolo Nani - all found in the Gozo Cathedral Archives.

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Some of the Italian composers represented are Domenico Amore, Michele de Ferraris, Pietro Varvaro and Giuseppe Parisi. One of the best composers in the history of Maltese music, namely Francesco Azzopardi, is also generously represented in the above collections. Besides, about a dozen works of his are only found in the archives of the Gozo Cathedral (e.g. Ms 17, 18, 59, 72, 73).

Another important contemporary composer, Pietru Pawl Bugeja, seems to have been very popular in Gozo. No less than 66 works of his are to be found in the Cathedral archives alone. Apparently when it came to performing these works, the main difficulty seems to have been that often the church authorities did not have the means (i.e. the musicians) needed for their execution. The *cappella* at the Mdina Cathedral in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries consisted of three or four violins (playing 1st and 2nd), cello, and organ, together with 2 oboes (sometimes doubling on the flute) and 2 horns (also playing trumpets, at times). There were also four singers, Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. From circumstantial and written evidence, we know that the *cappella* (meaning resident orchestra) of the Gozo Cathedral followed closely the above set up. However, when it came to certain orchestral and vocal elements, we find that very often these had to be brought over from Malta. This was especially the case for the major festivities.

### *Church Music*

Church organizations often felt they had to have that something extra for the musical side to match the pomp and circumstance of the ceremonial service. In 1820, for example, we know that the Cathedral made use not only of guest singers and musicians from Malta, but also brought over a *maestro di cappella*. In time, local Gozitan musicians started to fill this important post. Among these we find Vincenzo Bondi who was *maestro di cappella* at the Cathedral during the period 1849-1871, and Giorgio Mercieca who occupied the same position during the years 1882 through to 1892. Adriano Lanzon held the post intermittently between the years 1844-1894.

Part of the duties of a *maestro di cappella* was to compose music for the numerous church functions which, at that time, peppered the religious calendar. All the three above mentioned musicians, Bondi, Mercieca, and

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Lanzon, were prolific composers whose works abound in church and private Gozitan archives. Unfortunately, their activity was limited to Gozo, and so they are hardly even known in Maltese musical circles.

Antonio Calleja taught music and singing at the Gozo Seminary during the latter half of the last century. He was also a very good bass singer and an efficient pianist, besides being a discreet composer. He liked to call himself a *compositore dilettante* as evidenced by the frontispiece to his "Kyrie per basso obbligato e cori con piena orchestra" (Cathedral Archives Ms. 198).

Another important figure in Gozitan music circles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was Anton Buhagiar (1861-1932), popularly known as Toni "ta' Lucija", Lucija being his mother. Buhagiar served as *maestro di cappella* for several churches and composed a great variety of music, although, apparently, no works of his are represented in the Cathedral Archives. Tradition has it that he was also a very good violinist who set a certain interpretative standard to be looked up to and imitated by fellow Gozitan musicians. Other minor composers of the period included Giuseppe Debono, Anton Camilleri and Giuseppe Grech.

However, the custom of importing *maestri di cappella* from Malta prevailed even throughout this period. Thus we witness visits by members of the Nani, Diacono, and Bugeja families. These musicians were among the best that Malta ever produced and there is no doubt that, by their involvement, they helped to raise the standards of music making in Gozo. The tradition of bringing over *maestri di cappella* from Malta was especially strong in some of the Gozitan villages, and lives on to the present day (witness Xaghra, Nadur, and Ghajnsielem).

## Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia

During the span of seventy years starting from the middle of the 19th century, Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia was perhaps Gozo's most famous man of the arts. He was born on the second of June 1852 and died on the 18th of March 1925 after a fruitful life spent in artistic endeavours and scholarly pursuits. He was a very good musician, whose works, in their conception and treatment, were often ahead of what was being written contemporaneously even in Malta. Farrugia wrote various masses, psalms, antiphons and hymns, and a few secular works. He is best known



**Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia (1852-1925) man of culture, distinguished prelate, erudite intellectual and outstanding composer of sacred music.**

for the music he composed for the feast of St George which is still played in St George's Basilica in July. As Stephen Attard in his thesis "Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia - His Life and Achievements" rightly says, Farrugia is surely one of the jewels in the Gozitan musical crown.

### *The Influence of the Operatic Style*

Reference has already been made of the influence that Italian music had on local composers. This was especially true as regards Italian opera, the style of which permeated all facets of local music making. The compositions that were written for the church services towards the end of the 19th century were for all intents and purposes operatic style pieces simply taken out of their context. The "*stile ballabile*" as it was known, became the fashion and was abused to the point where Pope Pius X, in 1910, issued a decree, known as the "*Motu Proprio*", to put an end to these secular infiltrations and to curb the stylistic excesses that had made churches more like opera houses, than places of worship.

It is true of course that local churches, since time immemorial, had served as the "poor man's concert hall" and, in this regard, they had performed an immense service towards the dissemination of musical culture. But the extremity to which the situation had developed is clearly illustrated by the following. At the Cathedral in Gozo, before the actual church

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service began, it was customary for the orchestra to play an introductory piece to serve as a kind of overture to the religious ceremony.

Of course, this introduction was neither conceived nor treated like, say, the sober chorale preludes of J. S. Bach. Rather, the orchestra struck up popular overtures from operas like the ones from *Semiramide* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* by Rossini, or Donizzetti's *Gemma di Vergny* or the one from Verdi's *Nabucco*. All the above music, purposely arranged for a reduced church orchestra can still be found in the Archives of the Gozo Cathedral. There are also others arrangements of works by Gasparo Spontini, Saverio Mercadante, Domenico Cimarosa, and Luigi Marescaldi.

The line of *maestri di cappella*, who died in recent years, but whose contribution to music making in Gozo is worthy of mention, includes musicians like Giuseppe Giardini Vella, Mgr Giuseppe Debrincat and Ganni Vella.

## The Operetta

In the 1930s, the cult of the operetta began to find a fertile ground in Gozo, and productions of this genre became very popular. Operettas, vaudevilles, and plays with incidental music, took a tremendous boost during the last war when quite a number of refugees, mostly from the Valletta and the Cottonera areas, crossed over to Gozo to avoid the aerial bombardments which (luckily for the Gozitans) were not as heavy and constant as those in Malta. These included accomplished actors, singers and musicians, and their involvement proved to be like a shot in the arm for local musical life. Productions like *The Geisha*, *Cuor di Ben* and *La Piccola Olandese* are still fondly and nostalgically remembered. Both my father, Ganni Vella, and Giuseppe Giardini Vella were very active in this line of musical activity.

## Classical Music

The influence of the classical music *repertoire* was almost non-existent before the forties both in Gozo and in Malta. Everybody, of course, knew the names of, and could hum, numerous excerpts from opera composers like Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini. Others like Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, even the great Beethoven himself, meant little or nothing to local audiences.

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It was only after the war, with the advent of the mass media, that Maltese and Gozitan music lovers began to be exposed to these great masters and to realise that music-making meant other things besides opera - quartets, oratorios, symphonies, instrumental concertos and the like.

In Gozo, the former British Institute (which was housed at It-Tokk in Victoria) played an extremely important role in the cultivation of this *repertoire*. Guest musicians who were invited to give concerts there came not only from Malta but also from Britain. These groups (mainly *trios* and *duos*, besides soloists) introduced local audiences to many an established classical piece. The British Institute also encouraged local music by commissioning concerts involving Gozitan instrumentalists. These Gozitan orchestras very often had to resort to a guest or two from Malta to strengthen their forces, but there is no doubt that a healthy musical life started to be nurtured through this initiative.

I remember my father telling me that one of the conditions that the local representative of the British Institute would impose whenever he was commissioned to put up a concert, was that at least one work by a British composer should be included. Obviously, this was one way for the British Administration to try to loosen the cultural ties with Italy that in this regard had made Malta look (and sound) like just another Italian province.

### **The Folk Element**

As regards the folk element in Gozitan life, *ghana*, of course, formed an intrinsic part of the people's entertainment. The *ghannej* and the guitar formed an inseparable couple, the former taking the lead in the proceedings and the latter providing the musical support. In *ghana* the music obviously takes a secondary role to the literary element. Its main interest, in fact, lies in the improvised rhymes of the singers who often compete with each other in a pungent, witty dialogue.

The short instrumental breaks in between stanzas serve not only for the singer to catch his breath, but also provide the necessary few seconds for the *ghannej* to think up and formulate his next intervention. On special occasions (carnival, weddings), other folk instruments would make their

appearance - the *fifra* (reed flute), *tambur* (hand drum), *tamburin* (tambourine), the *rabbaba* or *zuvzafa* (friction drum), the *grajna* (bull's horn with a reed as a mouth piece) and *bronja* (sea shell horn), the *flejguta* or *bedbud* (flute of Pan) , and the *zaqq* (Maltese bagpipe).

## Gozitan Bands

The fifes and drums were, of course, a constant and regular feature in festivities held during the time of the Knights of St John not only on secular (read mostly military) occasions but also during processions and other types of public religious manifestations. Maltese and Gozitan bands as we know them today are the direct descendants of these musical groups.

With time, fife and drum groups began to lose their essentially military character by having any other available instruments (mostly wind) joining them. This process gradually led these groups to lose their original military flavour to become more and more civilian orientated. By the turn of the 19th century, Malta was replete with these makeshift-type of bands. These were never formally organized and combinations varied widely depending on random availability of instrumentalists.

In official circles these groups were referred to as *bande popolari*, that is popular bands. It is interesting to note that while in popular jargon, these *bande popolari* in Malta were called *baned tat-trieq* literally meaning street bands, the term used in Gozo was *baned ta wara l-bibien*, the nuance of which is rather difficult to translate in English (a literal translation is 'bands which play on the doorsteps of houses?'). The role of the *bande popolari* was mainly to contribute to the merry making on national festivals (*L-Imnarja* and *Lapsi* for example) or to enhance the secular, social element of the town or village *festa*. But sometimes bands were also called to accompany the religious procession as it threaded its way through the winding streets of the locality. As time went by the involvement of the *bande popolari* in the social life of the islands became even more marked and widespread. Most social or civic occasions of a personal or family nature that suited some kind of celebration (and, of course, in the villages of Malta and Gozo everybody knew what was happening to everybody else) would see the local *banda popolare* tripping

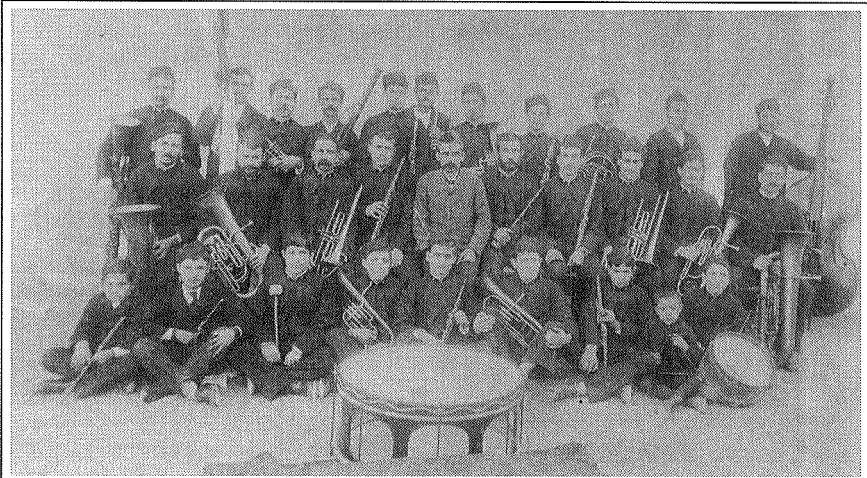


The *banda ta' Fefu* of Gozo. A small band which during the middle of the 18th century was generally invited to take part in fiests and other happy occasions. The caricature is by "Vampa" pen-name of Pietru Attard. From the collection of Mr. Pawlu Mizzi.

its way to the particular household, unannounced and uninvited. Forming themselves in a semi-circle in front of the main door, they would then start to play their lungs and hearts out, stopping only after whoever it was inside decided to come out not only to thank them but, more importantly, to pay them.

These occasions would include events like winning a court case, passing a public examination and getting a new appointment or a promotion. This custom was still thriving in Gozo right up to the early 1950s. When Governor Le Marchant visited Gozo in 1864, we know that a *banda popolare* (curiously enough made up mostly of blind musicians) was "imported" from Malta. But it was the outstanding success of the legendary *banda ta' Fefu* (alias *banda ta' Indri*), led by the blind Valletta born Andrea Borg, that in the early 1880s provided the final impetus towards the formation of the first two Gozitan bands in Victoria, namely *La Stella* and *Leone* band band clubs.

Andrea Borg's band visited Gozo in 1872. As regards the establishment of the first two Gozitan bands on an acceptable professional formation, and not haphazardly put together as was the case with the *bande popolari*, due credit (not often acknowledged) should go to British military bands.



***La Stella Vincitrice Band, in the 1880s. This photo is believed to be the first ever of a band in Gozo.***

Ever since the beginning of the British presence in Malta, a British regiment used to be barracked at Fort Chambray in Mġarr. In true British tradition, all these had their regimental bands which were often invited to play on town and village squares. At times, they even participated in the religious processions on the feastday of the local village saint. There is no doubt that their musical involvement in Gozitan life helped to create a better awareness of the finer points of band playing.

In the context of regimental bands, it is appropriate to mention the English composer Albert Kettelbey, the writer of such popular works like “In a Persian market” and “In a Monastery Garden”. Kettelbey, for a time, was the band master of a regiment stationed in Gozo during the Great War. They were camped at the western periphery of Victoria in the then open fields facing Kerċem and Santa Luċija. It is said that his other popular work “Bells across the Meadows” was composed when he had heard the church bells of Kerċem pealing in the distance across the fields on a calm Sunday evening. I believe that the archives of the *Leone* Band Club include a very early copy of this work which was donated to the late Giuseppe Cordina by the composer himself.

However the musical culture of the two Islands was so deeply rooted in

Italian traditions that soon bands could not but look towards Italy, both for their *repertoire* and for their musical ideals. At the turn of the century, this manifests itself in the widespread practice among the better and more established bands to "import" Italian conductors to lead them. In Gozo we meet with names like Alfonso Cina' and Giuseppe Giardini Vella (*La Stella Band*), and Giovanni Giumarra and Orlando Crescimanno (*Leone Band*).

Coming to the present, we find that music in Gozo plays a significant part in the social life of the people. Besides the two band clubs in Victoria, already mentioned there are four village clubs - Xaghra, Nadur, Xewkija and Ghajnsielem.

### **Recent Times**

Music in Gozo has become part and parcel of the island's culture. Good quality performances are produced in the two Gozitan opera houses, the *Astra* and the *Aurora*. Past and recent productions in these theatres have put Gozo in a very favourable light not only with Maltese opera buffs, but also with foreign visitors.

The contribution that the band clubs make to Gozitan life is very important, and the role of the band in the village *fešta* is of major importance.

Music is also taken very seriously at the academic level. The proportion of students taking up musical studies today is far greater than it was 20 or 30 years ago, and many Gozitan musicians (singers, instrumentalists and composers) have asserted themselves on a national and international level.

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