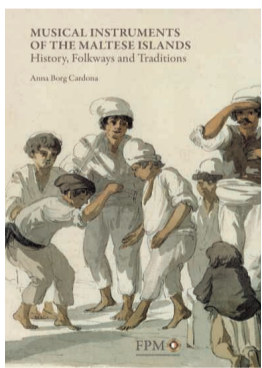


## Books

# An intriguing journey in Maltese organology

Philip Ciantar



ANNA BORG CARDONA: *Musical Instruments of the Maltese Islands: History, Folkways and Traditions*. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti. 2014. 291 pp.

The study of musical instruments encompasses a wide range of topics, such as construction, classification, operation and playing techniques, notation, and performance practice, as well as related ethnographic investigation and technological development.

It takes into consideration not only the instrument as a sound-producing device but also any extra-musical associations such as spiritual associations, associations of gender and sexuality and implications of cultural status.

Anna Borg Cardona's book presents an intriguing journey in

Maltese organology by bringing together the study of the instrument as an item of technology with the world in which it once existed or still remains.

Her approach considers not only what is conventionally considered as a musical instrument (such as the bagpipe or friction drum), but also other sound-producers used for the effect they create over a wide spectrum of functions, from magic and religion to everyday life and games.

Examples of sound-producers covered in this book are several and range from rocks or stones which are made to vibrate by being struck to bottle-cap clappers used as a child's toy and limestone whistles.

The author studies these sound-producers with the same interest as musical instruments, for they frequently lead us to the very origin of sound-production, apart from throwing light on a local soundscape that is no longer with us.

Other sound-producing devices included in this book may also have a multifunctional role, such as the ratchet that can be used both as an auxiliary percussion instrument in bands and orchestras as well, as rightly pointed out by Borg Cardona in diametrically opposing contexts.

The latter, include being used in church during Holy Week, as a sound producer to generate merrymaking during the carnival period and among football fans during matches.

For her investigation the author relies on an extensive array of sources, including interviews, written documentation, folktales, sayings, and current performances as well as popular poetry.

The division of the book into four chapters is based on the classification system for musical instruments proposed in the early 20th century by the German scholars Curt Sachs and Erich von Hornbostel.

Other instruments featured in the first chapter are the *damdam* (known in Italy as the *triccaballacca*), an instrument used in Gozitan folk music and the clappers employed in both Maltese folk and wind band music.

It is worth noting that Borg Cardona's understanding of Maltese popular music is quite embracing and, therefore, her investigation considers instruments coming from musical set-ups such as that of Dun Pawl Mifsud's *Rotunda Orchestra* and from the mandolin bands which became popular on the Island towards the end of the 19th century.

In the second chapter the author discusses a spectrum of membranophones, the most prominent being the *tanbur* (tambourine) and the *rabbaba* or *żafzafa* (friction drum).

Borg Cardona's discussion of these instruments and others featured in this chapter shifts from the construction process to the performance practices and ensemble playing where such instruments are typically found.

The third chapter focuses on both plucked and bowed chordo-

phones. Examples of the former include an interesting coverage of the different models of Maltese *ghana* guitars, such as round and angular guitars as well as others with elongated arms.

However, the most striking guitar shape is *tat-tromba* (also known as *tan-nofs qamar* or *bil-qarn*), which was produced in large numbers by Malta's then leading guitar-maker Indri Brincat *il-Pupa* from Qormi.

**“Another popular guitar-maker mentioned extensively is Krispin Attard”**

Another popular guitar-maker in Malta mentioned extensively by Borg Cardona is Krispin (Crespino) Attard from Żabbar, whose guitars can be found in the Musical Instrument Museum at Phoenix, Arizona.

In the same chapter there is also a historically-supported discussion, accompanied by existing depictions of the use of the *lira* (lyra, a popular instrument in Greek music) by wandering street musicians who used to stroll around the streets of the Island, possibly, to make some money.

The fourth chapter on aerophones includes a discussion of instruments which are either blown

to produce sounds or in which sound is produced mechanically.

Examples of instruments belonging to the former are in the majority and include the *żaqq* (the Maltese bagpipe), the *flejguta* (the fife), *il-bronja* (the trumpet shell), and the *sfafar tal-pulvieri* (golden plover whistles).

The chapter dedicates an extensive discussion to the bagpipe with the different parts of the instrument and the construction process explained and supported by appropriate illustrations.

The author points out that a 19th-century *żaqq* model can be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Apart from an interesting introduction, which serves as a general background for the subsequent chapters, the book contains a very useful bibliography and a thorough book index that follows the convention of capitals for people and italics for names in other than English and normal small fonts for all the other entries.

All illustrations are professionally reproduced with close-ups aimed at explaining more effectively morphological details and construction processes.

Borg Cardona's book is a milestone in the study of Maltese instruments not only for the comprehensive survey it includes but, moreover, for the broad historical and socio-cultural framework in which the same survey unfolds.

This book should prove very useful not only for music researchers but for all those interested in the study of Maltese culture and identity more widely.