



MUSICIANS ON THE MALTESE ISLANDS PRIOR TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY BANDS

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This article is based on a presentation given at the seminar *Exploring the Tradition and Artistic Contribution of local Bands on 14th November 2015*

Musicians have always played a very relevant part in the culture of the people of the Maltese Islands. There were different instruments used over the years, and different influences that predisposed us for the establishment of the wind, brass and percussion bands, which we embraced so fully by the mid-nineteenth century. Folk musicians, instrumentation in sacred and secular music, pageantry and finally the early military bands all played a part.

First and foremost I cannot omit the influence of the Ottoman Bands (*Mehter*), which from medieval times accompanied all Turkish attacks. Some of the Turkish instruments, most significantly the kettledrum, were adopted in instrumentation of European bands and orchestras. During the Great Siege of 1565, the Turkish attack on Malta was accompanied by numerous musical instruments, several of which sounded 'strange' to the western ear.¹ Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, who in 1584 painted frescoes of the Great Siege in the Grand Master's Palace in Valletta, depicts long trumpets, kettledrums, smaller kettledrums, bass drums, shawms and cymbals being played by the Turkish band. In Malta kettledrums, bass drum, trumpets and cymbals all formed part of the later wind, brass and percussion bands.

On the Maltese Islands, instrumentalists, occasionally alone, but usually in very small groups, accompanied all sacred and secular functions, family celebrations, public celebrations, feasts and processions. Over the years different instruments were filling these various functions. There were particular instruments which were associated with specific times of the year. The *żaqq* and *tanbur*, for example, were closely associated with Christmas time and would perform in the streets of towns and villages on Christmas Eve. The *rabbaba* or *żafzafa* (friction drum), on the other hand, was used mostly during the carnival period.² Stringed instruments had a strong presence on the islands: they had their place in wedding processions (*wilġa*), and in wedding entertainment, in dance music, and street entertainment. Violins or fiddles were mostly associated with dance in both Malta and Gozo,³ whilst

lutes are often mentioned in the accompaniment of wedding quatrains in praise of the bride and groom and are already recorded in the wedding context in Gozo as far back as the fifteenth century.⁴ The *lira* was a very common peasant instrument throughout the eighteenth century and later.⁵ Guitars were constantly present, particularly in association with song. All these stringed instruments provided the traditional melodies and improvisations for the music of the Maltese people.

Though brass instruments may seem to have made their first appearance in the mid-nineteenth century, their sound was in fact already very familiar locally through secular music, sacred music and pageantry. The Order of St John, ever since its arrival in 1530, was accompanied by constant pageantry, which above all included drums and trumpets. It was customary to announce the presence of Grand Masters with drums and trumpets; Proclamations, known as *Bandi*, were also generally announced by drums in order to attract attention. On a more private note, we find Grand Master de Verdalle (1582-1595) enjoying music during his meals, particularly trumpet and flute concerts.⁶

Looking at another important centre of music, the Mdina Cathedral, we find that between 1622 and 1649 there were instrumentalists of brass-family instruments employed, playing trombone, *cornetta* and trumpet.⁷ The same was happening in the Conventual church of St John, where it is worth singling out the serpent, which we find recorded in 1756.⁸

Instrumentalists on board the Order's galleys were usually also brass and percussionists. In 1673, Grand Master Cotoner was giving these musicians a special gift over and

Islands: History, Folkways and Traditions (Malta, FPM 2014) 145-149.

4 CEM, AO, Vol.3, f.329v. Godfrey Wettinger, 'Aspects of daily life in late medieval Malta and Gozo' Stanley Fiorini (ed.) in *A Case Study of International Crosscurrents* (1991) 81-90.

5 NLM, Ms 143. Gian Piet. Agius De Soldanis *Damma tal-kliem* vol.1, f.329v

6 Dal Pozzo, F. B. (1703). *Historia della Sacra Religione di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano detta di Malta*. Verona, Giovanni Berno.

7 ACM, Misc. 275, f.61v, f.68v.

8 Petruzzo Caruana, *virtuoso del serpente*, formed part of the Order's *Cappella* of St John's in 1756. See J. Vella Bondin *Il-Mużika ta' Malta sa l-aħħar tas-Seklu Tmintax* (Malta: Pin 2000) 48-49.

1 Anna Borg Cardona, 'Sounds of war and the exotic *alla turca*' *Treasures of Malta* vol. XXI no.3, (Summer 2015) 36-43.

2 Anna Borg Cardona, 'The Maltese Friction drum' *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*, vol. XXVII, (2002) 174-210.

3 See Anna Borg Cardona *Musical Instruments of the Maltese*



above their salary. They were given 4 *scudi*, as a New Year gift ('*per la Strena*'). This happened every year and was still being awarded by Grand Master Perellos in 1699. It is important to note that the musicians employed by the Grand Masters were Maltese. In 1707 we find Paolo Balzan who was employed as *tamborlino* getting a monthly salary of 2 *scudi*.⁹ Gio Batta Saliba, likewise *tamborlino* was getting 2 *scudi* 6 *tari*,¹⁰ and Barbaro Vella was getting the monthly salary of 2 *scudi* for playing the *fifra*.¹¹

Looking at sacred processions on the Islands, it is evident that musicians had long formed an integral part of these. Records show seventeenth-century processions in Mdina were using a *spinetta* or a *regaletto*, both of which were small keyboard instruments.¹² These may also have been accompanied by string instrumentalists, who were in regular employ with the Cathedral. However, a marked change is recorded in a procession of the Immaculate Conception in Valletta in 1796. Musicians were following a blue banner, and a crucifix and were in turn followed by monks carrying a statue. The instruments included in this procession were drums, pipes, horns and flutes. This shows that wind, brass and percussion bands had already taken over from previous instruments and had started filling the function of accompanying sacred processions.¹³

A caricature of the procession of St Lawrence in Birgu from the same period further records a full fourteen-strong band in uniform leading the procession: trumpets, French horns, trombones, triangle, bassoon (or dulcian?), cymbals, bass drums, and jingles.

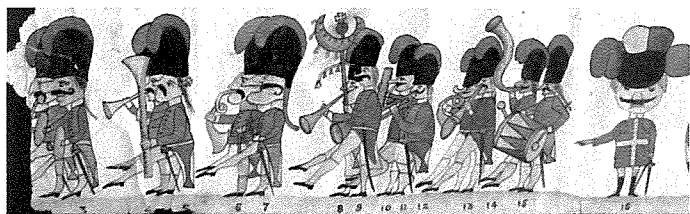


Fig.1 Caricature showing a late-eighteenth century Brass Band in uniform, heading the St Lawrence Procession in Birgu. Anonymous,

Courtesy Birgu Parish Museum

Militia Regiments also played an important part in the formation of bands. Already in the Militia lists of the fifteenth century we find the presence of musicians listed as 'jukulari'.¹⁴ Though their precise function is not known

9 AdeP, Ms 104, *Rollo 1707-1708*, f.17v

10 Ibid, f.18v.

11 Ibid, f.5v.

12 Franco Bruni, *Musica e Musicisti alla Cattedrale di Malta nei secoli XVI-XVIII* (Malta University Press, 2011) 186. ACM Misc. 169 f.239, f.499.

13 Sven Sørensen and Joseph Schirò eds. *Malta 1796-1797: Thorvaldsen's visit* (Malta: Beck Graphics, 1996) 40.

14 Godfrey Wettinger 'The Militia Roster of Watch Duties of 1417' *The Armed Forces of Malta Journal* 1979. 'The Militia List of 1419-20' *Melita Historica* 5/2 (1969), 80-106.

they are most likely to have been instrumentalists who could sound the alert in case of danger and who would provide marching music. Ġusè Gatt claims that by the end of the eighteenth century, several towns and villages (such as Birkirkara, Żebbuġ, Rabat, Mdina and Valletta), had their own Militia regiments, each with its own drums and fife band. These musicians received a soldier's pay and an additional bonus for band performances during Carnival, Religious processions such as Corpus, I-Imnarja, and during horse races.¹⁵ The continued participation of these small bands of drums and fife in processions of Good Friday and Easter Sunday can be confirmed through the several depictions of Gerolamo Gianni throughout the nineteenth century. By 1800, Alexander Ball already had at San Anton one of the earliest-established wind and brass bands on the Islands.¹⁶

The influence of these military band instruments can be seen by the mid-nineteenth century when small groups of folk musicians known as *Ta' wara l-bibien* began to include band instruments in their group instead of their more traditional instruments. These musicians knocked at doors and performed for remuneration wherever they knew there was a family celebration, such as an academic achievement, an engagement, a marriage, or the birth of a child. An etching attributed to Charles Frederick de Brocktorff (1775-1850) shows this very clearly. Five musicians are seen playing clarinet, French horn, a very large drum, triangle and cymbals at the door of a house in Valletta. These musicians may possibly have formed part of regiments and may have been using their free time to earn some extra pennies. They could also have picked up discarded instruments, as is surely the case with the cracked cymbals in this etching.

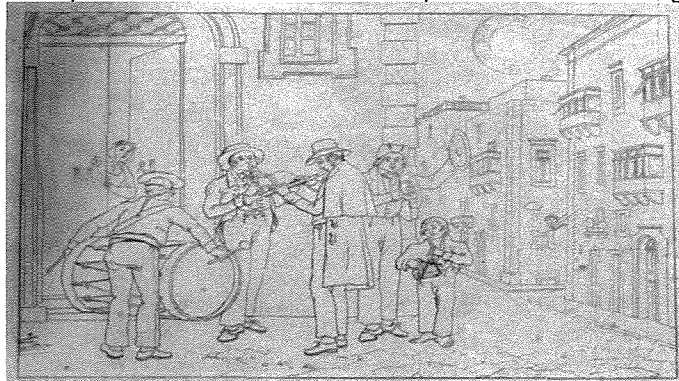


Fig.2 Small Band of musicians 'Ta' wara l-bibien'. Etching attributed to Charles Frederick de Brocktorff. Courtesy National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta (Inv.no. 1459-60).

At this point large changes began to take place. Instrumentalists joining military bands started learning to play new and different instruments, and above all, began to read music notation. As a result, the old traditional melodies and the improvisations were replaced by a new,

15 Ġusè Gatt, in an appendix to the historical novel *Il-Famiglia T-Traduta* by Arturo Dimech (sd) 699-704. Though information is taken from documents, sources are unfortunately not quoted.

16 Ġusè Gatt quoting NLM, Ms 94.



unfamiliar, written type of music, which included pieces like waltzes and quadrilles. An anonymous mid-nineteenth century poem entitled *Il Caulata* captures this moment in time, poking fun at this very important turning point in band history.¹⁷

'Idoqqu bhal professuri / fuq il-karti ta' Binet /

Xi valz, xi sinfonia / Xi kwadrilja u xi terzett'.

From these humble beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, wind, brass and percussion bands very soon mushroomed in every town and village of the Maltese Islands. They have since made great strides and flourished over the years, and are now entirely embraced as an integral part of our cultural identity. ◆

¹⁷ *Il Caulata – ossia canti guerrieri, per la Militia Maltese*. Albert Ganado Collection. See Anna Borg Cardona *Musical Instruments of the Maltese Islands* (2014) 16-17.

Programm Muzikali Banda Cittadina King's Own

Pjazza San Ġorġ

Is-Sibt 16 ta' Lulju 2016

Surmast Direttur: Dr John Galea

Lill-Kbir Martri San Ġorġ	Vincenzo Ciappara
Standard of St George	Kenneth Alford
Giovanna d'Arco	Giuseppe Verdi
Kaiser-Walzer	Johann Strauss Jr
Procession of the Nobles	Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov
St George's Cross Medley	Trad. (arr. E. Spiteri)
Prince of Egypt	Hans Zimmer
Tom and Jerry	Steve Bradley
Beauty and the Beast	Alan Menken
Orpheus in the Underworld	Jacques Offenbach
Omaggio alla King's Own	Francesco Gobet