



Martin on his First Holy Communion.



George Martin and Maria Concetta Coleiro on their wedding day.

George Martin – Senglea's prolific musician, composer, bandmaster

Fabian Mangion

Music is considered by the erudite in art and literature as the innate language of any nation. This is because music, like language, demonstrates and explains the thoughts of the mind, the feelings of the heart and the spirit of the soul of every human being.

Since it exerts such power on the brain, the heart and the soul, music reigns supreme among the so-called *belle arte* (fine arts), which encompass music, poetry, painting and sculpture. Music can evoke and encourage joy and sorrow. It is capable of filling a person with excitement, just as much as it can sadden and make another person shed tears.

Malta has its musical history. Like many other countries throughout the world, it has given birth to composers of a high calibre, revered musicians and famously accomplished conductors. Many of these have contributed to church music, to the establishment of musical organisations and to philanthropic associations. Their compositions today form part of the large musical heritage preserved in the archives of churches, of musical societies and in private collections. No doubt, one of the people who have contributed to this musical treasury is George Martin.

The son of Alfred Martin and Maria Assunta Vella, George was born in Senglea, on March 2, 1920. Five days later, on March 7, he was baptised by Senglea archpriest Can. Joseph Adami. At the baptismal font, together with the name George, he was also named Rozarius, Joseph and Victor. His godparents were William Martin and his wife Catherine.

Martin obtained his primary education at the Garrison School, Verdala. Ever since he was very young, he showed a clear inclination towards music. He started attending music lessons at the

Queen's Own Band Club of Senglea. Thus, Martin began his musical career in this musical society.

From early childhood, he rapidly established himself as one of the leading contemporary musicians. In fact, he was regularly called upon to perform solo parts even with leading bands. Martin was giving strong indications that he would move steadily ahead.

In that period of Maltese cultural life, most bands were made up of about 80 bandmen, all coming from the same town or village. Many of these bands were led by a non-Maltese, most often an Italian or German bandmaster.

In Senglea, since 1928, the Queen's Own Band had been directed by Reginaldo Caffarelli, a leading musician. There was also a Maltese assistant bandmaster who had the role of giving music lessons. Nonetheless, the club committee decided that Martin should be placed under Caffarelli's guidance so that he could steadily advance in his studies.

Caffarelli himself offered to guide and encourage the youngster to help him mature in his musical talent. It was here that Martin emerged as one of the best performers, who apart from other musical instruments, specialised in the French horn.

When World War II broke out, the Martin family evacuated from Senglea and found refuge in Birkirkara. Here, on July 24, 1943, Martin married Maria Concetta née Coleiro from Żabbar.

Initially, George and Concetta's new family lived in Gżira. Later, towards the end of the 1950s, the family set up residence in Tarxien. From this union of love, four children were born: Joyce, Norman, Charles and Alfred.

Martin was employed as a civilian clerk with the Royal Air Force. He was also an internal auditor of a large hotel and at Bank of Valletta.

Shortly after his marriage, he resumed his studies, this time

under Carmelo Pace. Martin himself described Pace as *maestro per eccellenza*. He undertook an intensive course in harmony, counterpoint, fugue, orchestration and composition. This led him to obtain the diploma of associate of the London College of Music in 1950.

Martin himself narrates that during his youth, he was often invited to perform with various bands as a 'foreign' musician as there were very few who were able to play the *cornu*.

“
Martin emerged as one of the best performers, who apart from other musical instruments, specialised in the French horn
”

Martin was also asked to be the musical director of a number of bands. Moreover, he was chosen to direct the national band on three different occasions. His career as bandmaster began in 1952, with St Leonard Band of Kirkop. For this band, Martin penned two admirably composed hymns: the band anthem and the *Hymn to St Leonard*, composed in 1960, for baritone, tenor and choir. This hymn is still greeted with immense appreciation when it is performed every year for the feast of St Leonard in Kirkop. Martin completed his duties with this band in 1972.

While he was leading St Leonard Band, Martin was also the bandmaster of Senglea's Queen's Own Band between 1969 and 1973. During this time, and particularly in 1971, splendid celebrations were held in Senglea to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the coronation of the statue of Maria Bambina. Naturally, the town's band, under the baton of Martin, fully participated in the festivities. The celebrations also coincided with the centenary commemorating the Queen's Own Band's foundation.

Since their foundation, the three Cottonera bands, namely Duke of Edinburgh Band of Vittoriosa, St George Band of Cospicua and Queen's Own Band of Senglea, had never had the occasion to perform together. This occasion occurred in Senglea on September 6, 1971, when the town took part in the annual commemoration of the two sieges of Malta, that is, that of the Great Siege of 1565, and that during World War II.

The three bands started to march from three different points until they met in Francesco Zahra Square, next to the church of Our Lady of Porto Salvo. From there a manifestation *a la Veneziana* started in which a number of lit placards depicting Senglea's history were carried. The three bands' committees did everything possible to ensure the success of the display, just two days before the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady.

The beautiful allegorical statue of Malta, made out of papier-mâché by the renowned Senglea-born statuary Carlo Darmanin (1825-1909), was carried shoulder-high, breaking through the crowds that gathered along Victory Street, to the place where it was to be hoisted on a high plinth.

Following a commemorative speech by the honorary canon Michael Cefai, the statue of Malta was raised to the top of the pedestal while the three bands joined together as one band and played the national anthem under the

direction of Martin, as musical director of the Queen's Own Band.

After completing his duties with the band of his native town Martin spent a year as bandmaster of Vilhena Band of Floriana in 1974.

That year marked the centenary of that band's foundation and Martin successfully directed it in a memorable musico-literary concert organised as part of the anniversary celebrations held on April 21, 1974, at St Publius parish church, Floriana.

While Martin was bandmaster of the Kirkop, Senglea and Floriana bands, he was simultaneously musical director of King George V Band of Mqabba. Here he followed in the footsteps of his predecessor Leonard Spiteri by becoming its bandmaster in 1956, a position he retained until his death in 1991.

For this band he wrote a hymn in honour of Holy Mary's Assumption, the *Innu lil Santa Marija Mtellgha s-Sema*. This hymn, of which King George V Musical Society is still enormously proud, was performed for the first time in 1966, 50 years ago.

Martin was also a member of a number of government boards, including the National Festivities Committee. He was among the first Maltese accepted as a member of The Performing Rights Society for Music of London.

On March 4, 1974, Martin was invested as a *Cavaliere di Grazia* in the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem for his ability in and contribution to the field of music. He also had the great privilege of having his biography included in the *Dictionary of International Biography*, a world famous reference book and a much-cited source.

The list of compositions written by Martin is a long one and includes 80 festive marches and a considerable number of funeral marches. The first march he wrote, when he was still at a very young age, was named *Vive le Sengle*, and



Martin in a portrait at the former Queen's Own Band Club, Senglea.



George and Concetta Martin's family: Joyce (right), Norman and Alfred (standing), and Charles (seated on the floor).

among those closest to his heart were *Friendship*, *Mother Mary*, *Day of Joy* and *Romero*.

Martin also wrote the musical score for a number of sacred hymns. These include *Ave Maria* and *To Jesus the Redeemer* (Senglea), which was composed in 1970. Together with these, he composed the two hymns for band, soloists, and choir mentioned earlier, as well as a Mass composed and performed on November 1, 1969, during the marriage celebration of his daughter Joyce.

The list also includes four concert overtures, comprising the one named *Santa Cecilia* and the musical fantasy *Moments Romantique*. Interestingly Martin wrote two musical compositions that he named *Dawn* and *Dusk* respectively. Classified as descriptive music, they were created during a period that he had spent at St Luke's Hospital in the early 1980s due to a very serious operation he had to undergo.

Between 1970 and 1986, Martin was in charge of a programme that was broadcast on both Maltese radio

stations. Acclaimed and enjoyed by many, during these broadcasts he aired a varied selection of classical and operatic music as well as band marches.

Martin's last composition was a *Salve Regina* for organ and choir which he presented to Senglea's basilica. Treasured with affection and pride, it used to be performed during the novena held in preparation for the titular feast of the Nativity of Our Lady.

Martin died on February 24, 1991, at his home in Tarxien. King George V Band performed funeral marches during the funeral cortege in Mqabba, until it reached the parish church, where the sorely missed bandmaster was given a last farewell.

Among the congregation at the funeral Mass were musicians, members and supporters of the band club, members of Mqabba's civil and religious societies and distinguished personalities. It was one of the most beautiful funerals the village had ever seen.

Martin's mortal remains were laid to rest at Santa Maria Addolorata Cemetery. Six years later, on April 16, 1997, they were transferred to the Jesus of Nazareth Cemetery of Mqabba where they were reinterred in one of the graves owned by St Mary and King George V Band Club of Mqabba.

Martin's death at the age of 70 took admirers of Maltese musical societies by surprise, particularly the villagers of Mqabba, who admired him as a man whose work in the musical arena had augmented the village's musical culture.

He was esteemed for being very meticulous and disciplined in his work. His honesty towards everyone and everything was a characteristic that stood out, dimming any human defect he might have had.

Today, as we come to terms with the fact that a quarter of a century has elapsed since the demise of Martin, we can at least say with satisfaction that he still dwells among us through the musical compositions he has bequeathed to us.

Acknowledgement

My thanks to George Martin's daughter Joyce Guillaumer for her invaluable help.

Martin (first from left) as a civilian clerk with the Royal Air Force, with other colleagues. Below: Being invested as a *Cavaliere di Grazia* in the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem.