
A new look at maltese high pitched folk singing

"*La Bormliża*"

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Maltese folk singing or "*ghana*" is sung by folk singers from Malta and Gozo, as well as Maltese emigrants in Australia. The music and folk singing is the work of semi-literate or illiterate singers and musicians and musically untrained composers, rather than self-taught, which means by ear and hand (rather than by score and teacher)¹. Their age ranges between ten and eighty-six, and includes children, young men and women who are constantly encouraged to perform in the various *ghana* programmes on the media and *seratas* organised by the *ghannejja* themselves or by the various local councils. They sing in wine shops and restaurants and village/town celebrations, as in the *Lejla Maltija* (Maltese Night).

La Bormliża is one of the four sub-types of *ghana*², better known in Maltese as *ghana la Bormliża* or *ghana fil-gholi* (lit. « singing in high

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¹ M. A. Herndon, *Singing and Politics. Maltese Folk Music and Musicians*, Ph.D. thesis, USA, 1971, pp. 180-81; P. Sant-Cassia, 'L-Ghana: Bejn il-Folklor u l-Ħabi' [*Ghana: Between Folklore and Concealment*], in T. Cortis, ed., *L-Identità Kulturali ta' Malta* [Maltese Cultural Identity], (Malta, 1989), p. 89.

² The other three sub-types are: *l-ghana tal-banju* (traditional *ghana* stanzas; lit. « singing at the washing fountain »), *l-ghana spirtu pront* (extemporised singing), and *l-ghana tal-fatt* (ballad singing). See, Mifsud-Chircop, *Il-Folklor Malti I* [Maltese Folklore I], *Kullana Kulturali* [Cultural Series] n. 56, Malta, 2003, pp. 188-212, *Il-Folklor Malti II*, *Kullana Kulturali* n. 57, Malta, 2003, pp. 323-350, and "Malta's *Ghana*: The Folk Music of the Maltese", *Malta. Roots of a Nation*, K. Gambin, ed., Malta: Heritage Malta 2004, 149-162.

A recent off-shoot of *ghana* is the *makkjetta* (humorous song). It has developed since the 1960s due to the merits and persistence of young Fredu Spiteri *l-Everest* who died tragically in 1965. His worthy successor is the late Fredu Abela *Il-Bamboċċu* who has a good number of compact discs to his name.

register »), *ghana tan-nisa* (lit. « women's song/singing »), or *la nisa* (lit. « singing like women/in women's way »), or *ghana bit-tkaxkira* (« dragged song »), implying that men either find it very hard to sing or must sing it in the female vocal register.

This is contrary to the improvised (*spirtu pront*) or ballad (*fatt*). It is imperative that the *La Bormliża* singer have great vocal and lung power, breath and vocal control, and a magnificent full voice to sustain the melismatic intricacies of the presentation of its inherently long phrases. In spite of its simple diction, *La Bormliża* singing demands a sound knowledge of its intricate rules.

Historical references

George P. Badger refers to *ghana* singing in the cities and villages of his times:

I have often stood and listened to individuals seated upon two opposite trees, or engaged in some kind of labour, singing answers to each other on rhyme, without any previous meditation. This the natives call *taqbeel*. The subjects vary according to circumstances, sometimes partaking of the nature of epic poetry, and sometimes of satire upon the faults or character of each³.

Godfrey Wettinger, as quoted by Ġuzè Cassar-Pullicino (1921-2005), furnishes documentation going as far back as the second half of the fifteenth century when folk singing is already associated at least with nobility wedding feasts. Performers faced direct competition by others in the neighbourhood and were remunerated in their dual role of musicians and singers. Musical instruments included the trumpet, the viole and the lute.

There are no relevant historical sources on *La Bormliża*, though a few tape recordings date back to the 1960s and 70s. In post-war Malta *La Bormliża* was on the decline and on the verge of extinction. However, as Paul Sant-Cassia aptly remarks: « *ghana* has always formed a resistant and resilient part [of 'traditional culture'] »⁴ Relying on her informants, American musicologist Marcia Herndon contends that one of the contributing factors for the decline was « the lack of excellent voices. »⁵

³ G. P. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*. Malta, 1838, p. 84.

⁴ See, "Tradition as 'Discovery' of 'Marginality': *Ghana* and Folklore Mark II," part 7, *Exoticizing Discoveries and Extraordinary Experiences: 'Traditional' Music, Modernity, and Nostalgia in Malta and Other Mediterranean Societies*. January 1991. <http://www.maltese-ghana.ndirect.co.uk>.

⁵ Herndon, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

Yet there must have been various other factors, as Herndon intuitively concludes⁶. The major factor might be the dominance of *spirtu pront* singers in any *ghana* discourse, where others' interests, including those of musicians and ballad and *La Bormliża* singers, as well as the wine shop proprietor are ignored by *spirtu pront* singers.

La Bormliża seratas are never organized in Malta, except on the sole initiative of the present writer. This is the case of our recorded session in May 2001 at Ta' Ġanna Bar, Żejtun. Here performance is characterised by absolute silence by the members of the audience who listen in awe and enjoy the melismas of the singers, the harsh sounds, glissandi, ornamentation, and the sliding from a higher pitch to a lower one. No attempt is made by anyone to catch the meaning of the lines. This genre is hardly ever heard in Gozo, except in a few isolated instances, the more so as *ghana* on the sister island has lost its best performers and the remaining handful are not crowd pullers. Various *ghana* sessions in Gozo are generally well attended when Maltese singers are invited to participate.

La Bormliża is performed solo or by two, in which case the singers must alternate phrases of music. A song is only one verse long, but it is divided in two parts: the first is generally one of many fixed or standard traditional texts thematically having much in common with the traditional *banju* verses, the second is known as *kadenza* (cadence), at times improvised by the singer. It is here in the improvised *kadenza* where the performer can comment concisely on a particular theme. *La Bormliża* may be sung in either of three forms, the first two applicable for a duo, the third for a solo.

In the first form singer A has the right to choose a traditional text. Then each of the two singers alternately perform twice his line of this first part with the poetic rhyme scheme a-b-a-b; in the *kadenza* each singer has his two lines of an improvised comment to sing, although there are times, as with the case of Mikiel Cumbo *L-Iżgej*, that his *kadenzi* have also become fixed for him with much repetition and use. The rhyme scheme of the form becomes a-b-a-b-c-d-e-d.

The second *Bormliża* type is simpler: as with the first form, singer A has the right to choose the traditional text, but each singer now sings the same two lines *en bloc* and not one, then repeats them. In all, these same two lines are heard four times, to be followed by the *kadenza* when each singer performs two lines of his own. The rhyme scheme of this form is: a-b-a-b-a-b-a-b-c-b-d-b, as in the following excerpts sung by two

⁶ Ibid.

contemporary singers Ċensu Abela « *Tal-Pitrolju* » and Salvu Cassar « *Il-Hamra* »⁷.

1 –

Ċensu: W erġa' semmaghli l-helu
lehnok,

Dak li għandek il-hanin.

Salvu: W erġa' semmaghli l-helu
lehnok,

Dak li għandek il-hanin.

Ċensu: W erġa' semmaghli l-helu
lehnok,

Dak li għandek il-hanin.

Salvu: W erġa' semmaghli l-helu
lehnok,

Dak li għandek il-hanin.

Ċensu: Meta nisma' d-daq q u l-ghana
U ma narax għaddej il-hin.

Salvu: Ghax kulma naghmlu kollu
sewwa,

U kulma naghmlu kollox bnin.

2–

Ċensu: U ghalkemm ahna kumpanija
Bhal qaçoċċa mdawrin –

Salvu: U ghalkemm ahna kumpanija
Bhal qaçoċċa magħqudin –

Ċensu: And let me listen to your
sweet voice once more,

That kindly voice of yours.

Salvu: And let me listen to your sweet
voice once more,

That kindly voice of yours.

Ċensu: And let me listen to your
Sweet voice once more,

That kindly voice of yours.

Salvu: And let me listen to your sweet
voice once more,

That kindly voice of yours.

Ċensu: When I hear music and song
I don't notice the time pass.

Salvu: Because all we do is right

And all we do is wholesome.

Ċensu: And although we are a pair
Close together like an rtichoke –

Salvu: And although we are a pair
Close together like an artichoke –

⁷ Recordings in the author's possession.

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| <p>Ċensu: U għalkemm ahna kumpanija Bhal qaqoċċa magħqudin –</p> <p>Salvu: U għalkemm ahna kumpanija Bhal qaqoċċa magħqudin –</p> <p>Ċensu: U din il-mewt trid tkun għalina</p> <p>Biex tifridna minn xulxin.</p> <p>Salvu: ???</p> | <p>Ċensu: And although we are a pair Close together like an artichoke –</p> <p>Salvu: And although we are a pair Close together like an artichoke –</p> <p>Ċensu: Only death can draw us</p> <p>Apart from each other.</p> <p>Salvu: ???</p> |
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The third *La Bormliża* form is performed solo, and the singer may opt for either of the two forms mentioned above, where the scheme of the second would be a-b-a-b-c-b. Three prominent singers Ċensu Abela « *Tal-Pitrolju* », Mikiel Cumbo « *L-Iżgej* » and Ċikku Degiorgio « *Tal-Fjuri* » prefer singing according to the second rhyme scheme.

Here are typical *La Bormliża* verses, five (1-5) by « *L-Iżgej* », our foremost *Bormliża* singer, followed by two verses (6-7) lately sung by Ċikku « *tal-Fjuri* »⁸ :

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| <p>1 Kemm ili għanja ma nghanni</p> <p>Ghax ilsieni rabba' s-sadid, Kemm ili għanja ma nghanni,</p> <p>Ghax ilsieni rabba' s-sadid. Ommi habbet lil missieri, U jjena nhobb lil min irrid.</p> | <p>It has been such a long time since I last sang a stanza</p> <p>Because my tongue has grown rusty, It has been such a long time since I last sang a stanza</p> <p>Because my tongue has grown rusty, My mother has loved my father, And I love whomever I want.</p> |
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⁸ Recordings in the author's possession.

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| <p>2 Fejn hu lehni ta' dari?!</p> <p>Kemm kelli lehni sabih!</p> <p>Fejn hu lehni ta' dari</p> <p>Kemm kelli lehni sabih!</p> <p>Fejn hu qieghed ġibuhuli</p> <p>Ghax nahseb hadhuli r-rih.</p> | <p>Where is my voice of past times?!</p> <p>How beautiful my voice was.</p> <p>Where is my voice of past times?!</p> <p>How beautiful my voice was.</p> <p>Wherever it is bring it back to me</p> <p>Because I believe the wind has taken it away from me.</p> |
| <p>3 Jekk timradli kemm nithassrek,</p> <p>Jekk itmutli kemm nibkik,</p> <p>Jekk timradli kemm nithassrek,</p> <p>Jekk itmutli kemm nibkik,</p> <p>Jien niġik iċ-ċimiterju,</p> <p>Fuq qabrek nitlob għalik.</p> | <p>If you get sick I'll pity you,</p> <p>If you die I'll cry your loss,</p> <p>If you get sick I'll pity you,</p> <p>If you die I'll cry your loss,</p> <p>I will visit you at the cemetery,</p> <p>And pray for you on your tomb.</p> |
| <p>4 Xitla sbejha ġol-ġnien għandi,</p> <p>Kemm ilma ġerrejt għalik,</p> <p>Xitla sbejha ġol-ġnien għandi,</p> <p>Kemm ilma ġerrejt għalik,</p> <p>Meta ġejt biex il-frott tagħmel,</p> <p>U ... haddiehor qed igawdik.</p> | <p>I've a beautiful plant in my garden,</p> <p>I've carried so much water to water you,</p> <p>I've a beautiful plant in my garden,</p> <p>I've carried so much water to water you,</p> <p>When time was ripe to mature</p> <p>Oh ... someone else is enjoying you.</p> |

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| <p>5 Jiena u inti żewġt igriedel, Fuq siġra nghanu qeghdin, Jiena u inti żewġt igriedel, Fuq siġra nghanu qeghdin, Daqskemm qed niehu pjaċir miegħek Ma nixtieqx isir il-hin.</p> | <p>You and I are two goldfinches, Singing on a tree, You and I are two goldfinches Singing on a tree, I'm enjoying so much myself with you I wish time would not pass.</p> |
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| <p>6 Wiċċ ta' warda bellusija Mistohbija qalb il-weraq. Wiċċ ta' warda bellusija Mistohbija qalb il-weraq. Jien għalik nidhol f'tempesta Waqt ix-xita, ragħad u beraq.</p> | <p>You have a face of a velvety flower Hidden among the leaves. You have a face of a velvety flower Hidden among the leaves. For you I would plunge in a storm In the rain, thunder and lightning.</p> |
| <p>7 Rajtek tielgħa fuq is-Saqqajja, Handbeg iswed fuq spallejk. Rajtek tielgħa fuq is-Saqqajja, Handbeg iswed fuq spallejk. Ir-raġel keċċiek 'il barra, Id-dmugh niezel minn għajnejk.</p> | <p>I saw you going up to Saqqajja hill With a black handbag hanging from your shoulders. I saw you going up to Saqqajja hill With a black handbag hanging from your shoulders. Your husband has chased you away, With tears streaming from your eyes.</p> |

As remarked by Annette Erler of Denmark, « *La Bormliża* is a loose term for performing words with forced and tense voice, over long melodic lines and stretched and distorted across long ornamental passages

covered in a limited melodic repertoire and with a strong emphasis on textual content related to a local audience »⁹.

Different theories

No particularly reliable study or analysis has as yet been undertaken to discuss comprehensively the immanent nature of this sub-type of *għana* (or of the other sub-types) in Malta, Gozo, and Australia. So far three theories have focused on the origin of *La Bormliża*: (1) the Spanish-Sicilian origin (assuming that any other Maltese folk music is non-existent); (2) the Arabic-European symbiosis; (3) the indigenous origin.

Joseph Vella, in his study "*L-Identità Kulturali Maltija – Il-Mużika*" [Maltese Cultural Identity – Music] (1989)¹⁰ outrightly does away with the possibility of the existence of any indigenous folk music, defining the existing motifs as « pseudo-folk tunes »:

Contrary to what has been and is still being insisted upon, indigenous folk music is rare, almost non-existent, I would say. The appearance in certain almost phenomenal aspects of a large number of pseudo-folk tunes in Malta in the last 30/40 years, is the result of completely different exigencies to those from which pure form is formed and created. This phenomenon can be attributed to personal/national interests, as a result, for example of the development of the tourist industry, whose local food and indigenous music are considered an integral part of his stay in our islands¹¹.

Vella is here defining post-war Maltese folk music as folklorismus. He contends that due to the small geographical size of the Maltese islands, our forefathers (including those of the pre-war period) felt no need to create their own music¹². Their constant cultural contacts with

⁹ Personal communication, April, 2004.

¹⁰ J. Vella, *L-Identità Kulturali Maltija – Il-Mużika* [Maltese Cultural Identity – Music], "L-Identità Kulturali ta' Malta" [Maltese Cultural Identity], T. Cortis, ed., Malta, 1989, pp. 35-58.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 37. [Original: « (...) Kuntrarjament għal dak li sostnew u forsi għadhom isostnu xi whud, mużika 'folk' [sic] indiġena fit li xejn għandna, anzi ngħid li hija kwazi inezistenti. Id-dehra taht ċerti aspetti kwazi fenomenali ta' numru kbir ta' psegwdo folk tunes hawn Malta fl-aħħar 30/40 sena hija prodott ta' esigjenzi differenti għal kollox minn dawk li minnhom tingħagen u tissawwar il-mużika folk pura. Dan il-fenomena jista' jiġi attribwit għal interessi personali/nazzjonali kawża, per eżempju, ta' l-iżvilupp ta' l-industrija tat-turiżmu, fejn, għat-turist, ikla u daqqa indiġena huma kkunsidrati bħal parti integrali mill-mawra tiegħu f'pajjiżna. »].

¹² Original: « (...) Matul il-minijiet fit kienu dawk il-Maltin li jassewhom tant kompletament i'volati li nibtet fihom ix-xewqa li jikkreaw espressjoni mużikali tagħhom

artistic (religious) music neutralised any internal music energy and made of them passive and not active performers¹³. Moreover, *ghana* as the strongest, true expression of Maltese folk music, is predominantly textual and not musical, the “spiritual” origin of which is Spanish-Sicilian¹⁴.

infushom. » (Ibid.) [« (...) Along the ages few were those Maltese who felt so totally isolated that they felt the urge to create their own musical expression. »].

¹³ Original: « (...) Il-knejjes f'Malta dejjem servew ta' swali tal-kun`erti fejn il-poplu kollu sata' jattendi ming]ajr]las, g]al servizzi reli[ju\i/mu\ikali ta' livell g]oli: dawn is-servizzi setg]u jitqiesu b]ala kun`erti regolari. Dan g]all-Maltin kien ta' vanta[[u fl-istess]in ta' \vanta[[. Kien ta' vanta[[g]aliex il-livell ta' konoxxenza u apprezzamnet mu\ikali kien dejjem jikber u jikkonsolida ru]u. (Dari ma kinitx]a[a rari li mastrudaxxa, bajjad, jew nies o]ra tas-seng]a manwali, waqt xog]olhom ikantaw jew isaffru arja minn xi opra Taljana flok xi melodija 'folk'.) L-ivanta[[[ie g]aliex din is-sitwazzjoni [[enerat udjenza konoxxenti imma passiva. » (Ibid.) [« (...) Churches in Malta always doubled up as concert halls where everybody could attend, for free, religious/musical services of a high level: these services may be considered as regular concerts. For the Maltese people this was an advantage and a disadvantage simultaneously. It was an advantage because musical knowledge and appreciation kept rising and consolidating itself. (In the past it was not a rarity for a carpenter, a whitewasher, or other skilled manual workers while at work to be heard singing or whistling some tune from an Italian opera rather than a folk tune.) The disadvantage stems from the fact that this situation generated a knowing but a passive audience. »].

¹⁴ Original: « L-g]ana huwa l-akbar espressjoni (u f`]afna aspetti forsi l-unika vera espressjoni) ta' mu\ika 'folk' [sic] Maltija. I'da minkejja dan, l-interest artistiku prin`ipali ta' l-g]ana m`huw iex mu\ikali i\da letterarju. Fl-ambjent ta' l-g]ana niltaqg]u ma' numru]g]ir ta' melodiji, jew a]jar forum melodi`i, u dawn iservu biex bihom l-g]annej jew jimprovi]a r-rimi tieg]u (l-hekk imsejja] g]ana spirtu pront), jew inkella jirakkonta f`taqbila storja di[à e]sistenti (g]ana tal-fatt).

“Kif wie]ed jista' jinnota, fi\ew[ka]vijiet l-element mu\ikali huwa dejjem sekondarju, filwaqt li t-test g]andu l-importanza prin`ipali...

“G]alkemm g]ad irid isir studju sew fuq dan is-su[[ett, jien nissu[[erixxi li l-ori[ni spiritwali ta' l-g]ana kif nafuh a]na nsibuh fix-xtajta t`isfel ta' Spanja u din l-influwenza waslet g]andna minn Sqallija. Min sama' kant tradizzjonali minn dawn l-in]awi mill-ewwel jinduna bix-xebh ta' kostruzzjoni u e]ekuzzjoni tieg]u, u l-u\u sa mill-bidu nett ta' kitarra b]ala strument akkompjanatur, huwa wkoll dettall rilevanti]afna f`dan ir-rigward. » (Ibid., p. 38) [« Folk singing is the best (and from many aspects the only real) expression of Maltese folk music. However, in spite of this, the main artistic interest of g]ana is not musical but literary. In g]ana we come across a small number of melodies, or better still melodic forms, and these serve the singer to improvise his rhymed lines (the so called g]ana spirtu pront), or else narrate in a rhyming pattern an already existing narrative (ballad).

“As may be noted, in both cases the musical element is always secondary, whereas the text takes first place.

“Although this field still has to be researched, I would suggest that the spiritual origin of *g]ana* as we know it is to be found in the southern coast of Spain and this influence reached us from Sicily. Whoever has heard traditional singing from these areas, would notice immediately the similarity in construction and performance, and the use of the accompanying guitar from the very first, is also a very relevant detail to this regard. »].

Vella's three-pronged theory is diachronic: whereas there is still room to discuss and investigate his Spanish-Sicilian origin for *ghana*, the sparse published documentation by George Percy Badger¹⁵ in 1838 (Vella wrote 151 years later!) and Cassar-Pullicino¹⁶ proves him wrong on the first and second score.

As I have argued elsewhere, « *Ghana* justifiably was part and parcel of Maltese culture at more than one level of society, females not excluded. Sections of the people in seventeenth-century Malta ignored the objections of the Authorities, and lute players and others continued and were permitted only to accompany the bridal couple to the church door »¹⁷ not to mention the people's persistent behaviour in gathering in large numbers to listen to the guitar accompanied singing and watch the dancing.

The predominant theory is that *ghana*, particularly the *La Bormliża*, is a unique symbiosis of Arabic and European characteristics.¹⁸ I will quote Charles Camilleri, himself a Maltese composer, in his recent publication jointly with Cassar-Pullicino:

The singing style of the *Bormliża* is one of the oldest examples of musical form of the Maltese Islands. It is akin to Arabic music and its style of singing possibly developed during the Arab occupation of the Maltese Islands between the ninth and eleventh century.

The guitar accompaniment was probably added much later and led to the death of the original concept.

Its main musical features are:

- (a) Melismatic type – the use of several types of pitches to one syllable of the text.
- (b) A wide variety of non-Western pitches, harsh and loud sounds, glissandi and ornamentation.
- (c) Melodic type of motives (melody) which generally slides from a higher pitch to a low one.
- (d) The avoidance of landing on the “tonic” (head-note) until a considerable time has passed by landing a tone higher.¹⁹

¹⁵ G. P. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, Malta, 1838, pp. 82-92.

¹⁶ Cassar-Pullicino and Ch. Camilleri, *Maltese Oral Poetry and Folk Music*, Malta, 1998, pp. 1-3.

¹⁷ Mifsud-Chircop, *G]ana: A Living Culture in Malta*, p. 85.

¹⁸ See, Herndon, op. cit., pp. 16, 308.

¹⁹ Cassar-Pullicino and Camilleri, *Maltese Oral Poetry and Folk Music*, p. 87.

These comments are in full agreement with musicologist Marcia A. Herndon's. For example, « The *Bormliża*, a melismatic impromptu haiku-like sung poem, is one of the oldest forms of Maltese music, according to informants. Its antiquity is further supported by its clearly Arabic aspects, such as melisma, melodic contour, and voice type,

However, other scholars, particularly Paul Sant-Cassia and Paolo Scarnecchia, do not consider any possibility of this Arab/Muslim relation and are in favour of an indigenous origin of *ghana* as with other Mediterranean islands or a vocal Mediterranean *koine* respectively.

There is no reason in order to believe that *ghana* is in fact Arab/Muslim. In fact it may be a genuine local creation and this form of singing is found in many other places in the Mediterranean, in islands such as Sardinia, Crete and Cyprus²⁰.

Alcuni studiosi, Cassar-Pullicino e Camilleri, per spiegare il suo carattere eccentrico hanno ipotizzato un'influenza araba, anche se i suoi tratti appaiono riconducibili ad una koiné vocale che abbraccia una più ampia fascia mediterranea....²¹.

La Bormliża and prostitution

Marcia Herndon and Norma McLeod were the first and the only scholars to associate *La Bormliża* and *ghana* in general with prostitution²².

Indeed, few women who are not prostitutes or former prostitutes sing at all, although this may not have been the situation twenty-five years ago or more²³.

This [*la Bormliża*] ... is the type of song used by those women who sing in the public arena in Malta. The women who sing *Bormliża* are "prostitutes." They sing with men or with other women in the bars and houses of "prostitution"²⁴.

This statement has always intrigued me. Their research in the early seventies happened to coincide with various clashes between two groups of folk singers, dominated by the figures of two performers, connected with prostitutes, one of the latter was the best *La Bormliża* performer at

suggesting that this is a tradition which possibly dates from the Arab occupation of the islands. » (op. cit., p. 78; see also, pp. 307-308) Same remarks are found in N. McLeod and M. Herndon, "The *Bormliża*. Maltese Folksong Style and Women", *Journal of American Folklore*, 1975, p. 87.

For a musical example of *la Bormliża* transcribed by Camilleri, see op. cit., pp. 87-89.

²⁰ P. Sant-Cassia, "L-Ghana: Bejn il-Folklor u l-Ħabi" p. 87. [Original: « (...) M'hemm l-ebda raġuni biex wiehed jemmen li l-ghana fil-fatt huwa Gharbi jew Musulman; fil-fatt jista' jkun li huwa hoġqien ġenwin lokali u dis-sura ta' kant jinsab [sic] f'ħafna nħawi oħra fil-Mediterran, fi għejjer bħal Sardinja, Kreta u f'Ċipru. »]

²¹ P. Scarnecchia, L-Ghana, *il canto a chiterra di Malta*, "Ittitirmi '99 – il canto delle isole, la voce del mare", P. Scarnecchia, ed., Ittiri 4-7 agosto 1999, p. 20.

²² Herndon, op. cit., p. 18.

²³ Ibid., p. 202.

²⁴ McLeod and Herndon, op. cit., p. 90.

the time,²⁵ and the other « a novice singer and ardent supporter »²⁶ of the second male singer. Reference is also made to a *La Bormliża* specialist and a « madame [*sic*] of genteel house ... and proprietress of the bar »²⁷ where the best *La Bormliża* singer worked.

Though one cannot overlook these connections of the two top *ghana* performers, the allegation that Maltese folk singing in general and *La Bormliża* in particular is the domain of prostitutes and that folk singers live with prostitutes was, and still is, far from the truth. Through my long years of ethnographic research since the early seventies I have repeatedly interviewed many *ghannejja* on different occasions, including prominent ones of the time, notably the late Fredu Abela « *l-Bamboċċu* » who features so often in Herndon's work,²⁸ and Zeppi Meli « *Ta' Sika* ». Both have refuted Herndon's contention that *La Bormliża* implies a prostitute as a performer – Meli himself is a *La Bormliża* singer! In particular *Bamboċċu*'s blunt statement needs to be quoted verbatim:

[Herndon's informant, one of the two top folk singers,] ... made Marcia believe many a tall story to endear himself to her, even passed off bottles of the adulterated wine he gave her as pure wine. This one of folk singing and prostitutes you're telling me about must be one of his tall stories²⁹.

With the exception of four younger ones who have taken to this genre as a result of the Singing Festival,³⁰ the present *La Bormliża* singers are among the « few remain[ing] who know the intricate rules [of *La Bormliża*] and possess the magnificent voice required by the form »³¹ who were already flourishing at the time and none of them ever lived with a prostitute.

To conclude: though Herndon's conclusions on prostitution and *ghana* are interesting to follow and to study with reference to the five singers implied, they are biased. Same goes for her remark with Norma McLeod that

²⁵ Various references to my radio programme series *Mill-Prejjem sal-Kadenza*, broadcast on Radio Malta in the mid-nineties. See also, Herndon, op. cit., p. 283.

²⁶ Herndon, op. cit., p. 249; see also, p. 199.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 259.

²⁸ See, amongst many instances, ibid., pp. 66, 145-150, 162-163, 164, 193-196, 200-201, 232, 240, 241, 278, 289.

²⁹ Personal communication, July 2003. [« [L-ghannej] kien ibellghalha hafna affarijiet lil Marcia biex jinhabb maghha, anki fliexken ta' l-inbid li ma jkunux inbid kien jaghtiha. Din ta' l-ghana u l-qhab li qed issemmli ohra minn tieghu! »]

³⁰ These are Frans Mifsud « *Ta' Żaren ta' Vestru* », Janice Spagnol « *Ta' Zeppi ż-Żejtuni* », Neil Vassallo « *Tar-Ronnie* », and Kalcidon Vella « *d-Danny* ».

³¹ Herndon, pp. 79-80

It is common to find two men holding hands and kissing in one corner [in a singing bar], while singers battle out a fine philosophical subject and a prostitute meets a customer in the back room³².

La Bormliża and the present ghana revival

The present revival of Maltese high-pitched singing falls within my proactive cultural project of injecting new life in various aspects of Maltese folk culture, mainly folk singing, folk narrative and material culture. He started his research on *ghana* in the late 1970s.³³ Women and high-pitched performers proved to be a hard nut to crack, refusing to collaborate due to family pressure. This was the first phase of an arduous and slow, though continuous cultural project, demanding perseverance, dedication and disregard of the various pecuniary interests of individual who regarded his initiative as a threat.

I have been locally criticised for giving prominence to high-pitched singing during the eight editions of the festival. Other factors causing the decline include the tremendous vocal power, control, agility and endurance, lung power and breath control needed.

It was only in 1999 that unaccompanied *ghana* was introduced in the Second National Folk Singing Festival on the initiative of the adjudicating board of the previous year's Festival and on mine as artistic director of the festival. The former suggested in their short report that unaccompanied singing should be introduced for high-pitched singing (*l-ghana La Bormliża*). The latter dared take the opportunity to present all types of *ghana*, resulting in the best moments of the whole event³⁴.

The first results were reaped in 1998 when the First National Folk Singing Festival was held in Argotti Gardens.³⁵ To date seven editions of the festival have been held, with the participation of various local and foreign folk singers and musicians, mainly from the Mediterranean area. Whereas in 1998 high-pitched singers had to be practically pushed on the stage to perform and were practically ignored by a large section of the audience. Nowadays, through broadcasting and wider publicity of the previous editions of the festival and the installation of a monitor for

³² Norma McLeod and Marcia Herndon, op. cit., p. 86.

³³ Male and female folk singers and folk musicians were repeatedly interviewed to the extent that they were eventually convinced that their sub-culture restricted to wine shops, should be projected in public through close collaboration and trust.

³⁴ R. Fsadni, "Second National *Ghana* Festival: A Success – But the Judges Risk Being Immortalised ... in Pungent Song", *The Sunday Times* [of Malta], 30 May 1999.

³⁵ I found the full support of the then parliamentary secretary Joe Cilia, and director of the Department of Culture, Joseph J. Mifsud.

simultaneous and/or consecutive translation and transcription (Maltese-English), we see the majority of our audiences enjoying these performances.³⁶ A concurrent strategy of recording and broadcasting performers' life biographies and *ghana* programmes on two local radio stations have helped me in gaining the trust of many singers and musicians. This led to the founding of *Kadenzi* in October 2002, followed by the official opening of its club in Qormi on March 14, 2004. *Kadenzi* is the only society of Maltese folk singers and musicians in contemporary Malta.

In spite of its geographical size it is not correct to draw one common line for the whole musical discourse of folk singing in Malta. The more so when, to quote Herndon, « the music of Malta is basically an intervillage activity, and not a village-oriented phenomenon. The mobility of musicians » and, we would add, folk singers, « as they go from bar to bar across the island, is constant, and seemingly almost random. »³⁷.

Moreover, in the past eight years the situation has been changing, at times at a rapid pace. There still exists "popular culture" which Paul Sant-Cassia in his in-depth analysis of Maltese folk music has recently defined « *de rigueur* »³⁸ for intellectuals and students. Hundreds of *ghana* aficionados attend the annual Folk Singing Festival as *ghana* is part of

³⁶ As the originator and artistic director of the National Folk Singing Festival, it has always been my topmost priority to involve talented female performers and promising elements of the younger generation in *ghana*. For the first edition (May 1998) only ten-year-old Jesmar Bezzina « *l-Artist iż-Żgħir* » participated as an accompanying guitarist; for the second edition (April-May, 1999) one also finds twelve-year-old and seven-year-old sisters Melissa and Mirabelle Caruana « *Tal-Mellieha* », twenty-one-year-old Charmaine Catania « *Tal-Ballu* », nine-year-old Jean-Vic Cutajar « *Tal-Mellieha* », eight-year-old Rebecca Dalli « *Ta' Birżebbuġa* », thirteen-year-old Jean Paul Gauci « *Ta' Seba' Rġiel* », ten-year-old Julia Grima « *Tal-Mellieha* », and nine-year-old Jean Claude Zahra « *Ta' Gawdura* » as new folk singers, and twelve-year-old Kevin Spagnol « *iż-Żejtuni iż-Żgħir* » as a new accompanying guitarist. In 1998 there were only two practising female *ghannejja* in Malta and Gozo, Fidiela Carabott « *Ta' Ċikku tal-Madum* » and Lordes Mifsud « *Ta' Nazju* ». In the seventh edition other female singers will be participating: Susann Agius « *Ta' Hat-Tarxien* », Rita Pace « *Ta' H'Attard* », Katerina Saliba « *Tar-Rabat* », and Marisa Sammut « *Tal-Mellieha* ».

³⁷ Herndon, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

Other examples of generalizations are to be found in Herndon's work, as with nursery rhymes and children's songs: « In Malta, there are no nursery rhymes or children's songs directed against the present government or any former occupation forces ... » (Ibid., p. 310) Various political songs and rhymes related to the prominent political personalities in the sixties, including Duminku Mintoff, Giorgio Borg-Olivier, Archbishop Mikiel Gonzi and Mabel Strickland, were and still are common knowledge to forty- and fifty-year olds.

³⁸ See, "Tradition as 'Discovery' of 'Marginality,'" part 7.

their life and they thus come into personal contact with the singers. For other levels of society the festival has been an enculturative experience, the catalyst towards a constant operative process of enculturation, making *ghana* part of Maltese culture and society. Since the second edition (1999) of the Festival Mediterranean folk groups and musicians have been participating and the programme is purposely formulated in such a way as to alternate foreign folk singing and music with Maltese folk singing and music. Hundreds of middle class Maltese as well as tourists attend. The three-day festival, edited and serialised by the present writer, is broadcast on the national television station thus enjoying the largest percentage of viewership. The situation, as partly described by Sant-Cassia in 1991, namely, « (...) a process of 'discovery' and 'marginalization' as occurred with the Gozo carnival »³⁹ has been changing eventually, due to diffusion and cultural transmission in process. Here we quote Sant-Cassia again,

n]owadays *ghana* has become *an* other (rather than *the* other) like all other othernesses, and therefore acceptable. It becomes an ordinary otherness rather than an extraordinary otherness, and just another vehicle to generate metaphors of difference.... To a great extent *ghana* has been disinvested of the sharpness of (coded) class commentary, as indeed have many other traditional markers of social distinction...⁴⁰

A critical eye at the cultural situation in Malta can easily identify examples of voluntary acceptance of *ghana* at various levels. In this process *La Bormliża* stands to gain a new crop of *La Bormliża* singers in the near future.

In 1991 Sant-Cassia wrote:

(...) [M]odern appreciation of *ghana* concentrates much more on the voice, even on the 'pain' of the singer, rather than on the uneasy laughter that greets the singers' riposte. Contemporary appreciation of *ghana* is thus very different to that in the past, and it seeks different experiences.⁴¹

Since then *ghana* has come a long way and *La Bormliża* stands to gain, even if at the expense of, as Sant-Cassia concludes after Harvey (1996), becoming a « hybrid of modernity. »

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See "Revitalised rituals, or Reperceived rituals ?" part 8, Exoticizing Discoveries and Extraordinary Experiences: 'Traditional' Music, Modernity, and Nostalgia in Malta and Other Mediterranean Societies. January 1991. <http://www.maltese-ghana.ndirect.co.uk>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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