

BIRTH OF A BAND CLUB IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A CASE STUDY*

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Band-playing in Malta is usually associated with participation in the local titular village and town feasts and also in the Holy Week processions. However, some kind of music-playing was present in religious festivities long before the advent of clubs. In fact, music-playing is recorded at the Valletta Good Friday procession of 1673¹ whilst, by 1761, *tamborlini e fifera* and *violincello e violini* seemed to have become regular features in the Naxxar Good Friday manifestation.² In 1770, there is record of the payment of 30 *scudi per la musica di Pascua Grande* of Naxxar³ whilst in 1804, two bands used to accompany the Vittoriosa Easter Sunday procession right into the church.⁴

However, this participation does not mean that in Malta there existed organised band clubs which started to come into existence around the middle of the nineteenth century, influenced by the presence in Malta of a number of Italian refugees who showed interest not only in spreading their political ideas but also education and culture. One such refugee was Tommaso Zauli Sajani (1802-1872) who lived in Malta between 1836 and 1847.⁵ His activities in Malta included the founding and direction of *La Speranza* and intimate collaboration with *Il Mediterraneo*⁶ in which he complained of the lack of a spirit of association in the Maltese islands. He proposed the setting up of *le basi di un'associazione vasta, non dispendiosa,*

* I am indebted to Mr Vince Peresso for putting at my disposal a number of references quoted in this paper.

1 G. Aquilina, *Il-Gimgha l-Kbira tal-Belt* (Malta, 1986) 31.

2 P.F. Catania, "Holy Week Procession at Naxxar: Its Origins and Early Development in the 18th Century", *The Democrat* (11.iv.1987).

3 *Ibid.*, (18.iv.1987).

4 A. Zammit Gabarretta, *Il-Birgu fil-Gimghatal-Ghid* (Malta, 1973) 16.

5 For a brief pen portrait of Zauli Sajani, L. Schiavone, "Esuli Italiani a Malta", *Echi Del Risorgimento A Malta*, 2nd Edition (Milan, 1982) 217-218.

6 B. Fiorentini, "Il Giornalismo a Malta", *Echi del Risorgimento op. cit.*, 34-35 and 78-79.

di fac[il]e esecuzione e proficua a tutti i rami dell'umano sapere which would also include philharmonic societies.⁷

It is a moot point whether organized band clubs in Malta came into being as a result of Zauli Sajani's 1838 plea but it is a fact that their existence is traceable to the middle of the nineteenth century. To quote a few examples,

in 1851 the St Philip Band Club of Żebbuġ (Malta) presented its first musical programme,⁸ the Pinto Band Club was formed at Qormi in 1862⁹ whilst the La Vittoriosa Band (known as Banda Leone) of Vittoriosa was set up in 1863.¹⁰

It is an unfortunate fact that, on various occasions, the real reason which prompted the setting-up of a band club has remained unknown, mainly through the loss of the relevant records or, quite simply, because no records were kept. However, one of the reasons which prompted the formation of a second band club in a village or town was usually disagreement between the members, known as *Socii*, of the senior organization.¹¹ This, in fact, was the main reason which led to the formation of St George M. Band Club at Qormi in 1893.

A New Club in 1872?

However, it is a curious fact that, twenty-one years previously, a band club with a similar name was apparently set up in the same village. What seems to be a 'book' of minutes, dated 1872 and presently in a private collection, records two meetings held on 7 and 15 April to set up and organize a new band at Qormi.¹² A third meeting was presumably held on 20 April because the minutes of the meeting of 15 April were signed and dated on that day.

7 B. Fiorentini, *Malta Rifugio di Esuli e Focolare Ardente di Cospirazione Durante il Risorgimento Italiano* (Malta, 1966) 62.

8 M. Attard, *Haż-Żebbuġ u l-Festa ta' San Filep* (Malta, 1985) 36.

9 R. Mifsud Bonnici, *Rikordju tal-Festi Centinarjitas-Socjeta' Filarmonika Pinto, Qormi* (Malta, 1962) 7.

10 L. Zahra, *Ġrajjet il-Banda Vittoriosana San Lawrenz 1883-1983* (Malta, 1983) 12.

11 Such an example is found in the setting-up of the De Rohan Band in Żebbuġ. Cf. Attard 36-37.

12 A facsimile copy of these minutes are in the possession of the author.

No reason whatsoever is given for the formation of this new club and, although there is mention of club premises, there is no indication of their location. The first meeting elected the officials, took steps to secure the services of a band-master and agreed to decorate the club for the village feast of St George, which was celebrated on 23 April in those days, though it was acknowledged that the fledgling club was not in a position to take an active "musical" part in the village festivities.

Two important points were the choice of the new club's name and emblem which are also significant in relation to future events in 1893. The chosen name was *Societa' Musicale San Giorgio Martire* whilst the emblem was to be made up as follows: two branches of olives and palm surrounding a vine leaf on which would be superimposed a representation of St George on horseback and with the whole surmounted by a crown. The elected president was Giorgio Bonnici whilst Pietro Paolo Cardona and Mario Psaila were the chosen Secretary and Treasurer.

In the second meeting, it was decided that members were to pay a subscription fee of three pence per month and an anonymous donation of five pounds was received and accepted. An English army sergeant, named John Brian West, was introduced to the committee and engaged as band-master to the newly-formed band which 'boasted' of ten member bandmen.

This is the sum total of what is known of this 'new' band; the rest is silence. However, one of the committee members was Giuseppe Farrugia. It is also a fact that the acknowledged founder of the present day St George M. Band Club was also named Giuseppe Farrugia. Was he the same person?

Marriage Legacies Affair

However, one thing is certainly known: the reason for the formation of a new band club in 1893 which had a politico - religious flavour. In 1893, Dr Goffredo Adami moved a radical ordinance in the Council of Government to control what were termed as the "scandalous abuses" which permeated the Episcopal Curia's administration of marriage legacies. This raised a storm in the island with vociferous factions backing or attacking the Bishop who, on his part, threatened interdiction on those members of the Council who supported Adami. The question was further aggravated by a despatch sent by Lord Ripon, Secretary of State for the Colonies, who

made it clear that any interference by the Church in the legislature was intolerable.¹³ The same "religious" fervour was present at Qormi.

On 8 October 1893, a demonstration and solidarity meeting by Rev. Salvatore Chircop, secretary to Bishop Mgr Pietro Pace, took place at Qormi. The committee of the local Pinto Band Club decided to reject an offer to take part, a decision which ran counter to the feelings of a number of bandsmen. The upshot was that some bandsmen and club members resigned and set up a new club under the name of *Società Filarmonica San Giorgio*.¹⁴

A report in a local newspaper entitled "*X'giara f'Hal Kormi*" (what happened at Qormi) four days later, was quite categorical in stating that the speech of the priest in question was a 'fire and brimstone' affair in which all opponents to the Bishop's stand were warned that there would be all sorts of religious repercussions if the Government was allowed to have its way. The anonymous reporter was of the opinion that the speaker had mixed up the issues and put them into one melting-pot.¹⁵ On the other hand, it was later alleged that the band club had refused to support the bishop because a number of the committee members were Government employees and were therefore unwilling to oppose their employer.¹⁶

Date of Formation

Although the motive, or rather the immediate cause, which prompted the formation of the new band club is known, the exact date of its formation has so far eluded the researcher, though it can be narrowed down to between 8 October and 20 December 1893. The former date records the disagreement in the ranks of the Pinto Band Club whilst the latter is the publication date of a letter in a local newspaper which states unequivocally that in Qormi there existed two bands, the *Filarmonica Pinto* and the *Filarmonica San*

13 H. Frendo, *Party politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Malta, 1979) 79; H. Frendo, *Ir-Rieda Għall-Helsien* (Malta, 1980) 103-104.

14 V. Peresso, "Is-Socjeta' Filarmonika Pinto - L-Ewwel Hamsin Sena Tagħha", *Socjeta' Filarmonika Pinto Feast Programme 1991*, 47; *Il Habbar* (II.iv.1894) 3.

15 *Il Habbar* (12.x.1893) 2-3.

16 *Malta Tagħna* (10.vii.1895).

Giorgio, and goes on to give a racy account of the Rev. Salvatore Chircop affair over two months before.¹⁷

But here, another difficulty presents itself. It has always been traditionally held at Qormi that the St George M. Band performed on the main platform on the occasion of the titular feast of St George on 23 April 1893 when a new street statue representing Grand Master Pinto, the work of the well-known Maltese statuary Carlo Darmanin, was inaugurated.¹⁸ If this is true, then the band was organized during the first months of 1893 and not at its end. There is no doubt whatsoever that the Pinto statue was in existence and in use by 1893 as clearly stated in a local newspaper which, when commenting on that year's feast, stated that "everyone was pleased with the performance of the bands, especially that of the Ġużeppini which performed on the principal platform near the church where there is the well-known statue representing Grand Master Pinto, a statue which is a credit to its statuary, Mr. C. Darmanin."¹⁹

No mention is made of a new band but only of the "Ġużeppini". Was this a band named after St Joseph hired from another village? A possible explanation was that the new St George M. Band was called the "Ġużeppini" because the founder was Giuseppe Farrugia.²⁰ However, a letter dated 8 January 1894 carried in another local newspaper puts matters in a clearer perspective. The anonymous author stated unequivocally that "Last Sunday, at Qormi, the new band which has been formed in the lauded

17 *Il Habbar* (20.xii.1893) 2, entitled "Il Banded ta' Hal-Kormi". The first part of this article runs thus: "Aun Hal-Kormi daż-żmien għandna żewġ banded, li nixtieku Alla iċompli maħhom halli icollna fiex niddevertu. Dawn il-Banded kienu sa f'it ilu, Banda uahda, iżda mindu chien ġie aun ir-Raħal uihed Kassis jagħmel priedca barra contra il Gvern u mux Gvern, u fuk Cnisja u mux Cnisja, u chienet saret die ir-reuixta colla, u dimostrazioni u mux dimostrazioni lil istess Kassis - bceijec li illum jafom cullhatt, - daun iż zeuġ Banded inkasmu fi tnein imħabba xi partiti. Il uahda, l'antica, li ia scola ta b'xein għal cullmin irid juġħalle, bakgħet bl'isem taħha ta Filarmonika Pinto, u l'ohra, li saret issa, imlakkta minn aun u minn inn, hadet l'isem ta Filarmonika San Giorgio."

18 P. Sammut, "Il-Palk Principali", *Bejnietna*, 21 (Festa 1984).

19 *Malta Tagħna* (6.v.1893). My free translation from Maltese.

20 J.F. Grima, "Mill-Istorja tal-Banda San Ġorg M - Is-Snin 1893-1894", *Il-Banda San Ġorg Martri - Qormi Issellem...1988*, 13.

St George's Club performed for the first time."²¹ The Sunday referred to was 7 January 1894. This letter indicates quite strongly that the St George M. Band Club was organized towards the end of 1893, as outlined above, and consequently could not take part in the feast of 1893.

The January letter gives us more information. We are told that the band was directed by two band-masters: Giuseppe Portelli, who was also band-master of the Senglea Band, and Ġorg Zarb.²² Another letter, carried in another newspaper a couple of weeks later, recounts the part played by this new band in the secondary feast of St Sebastian on 19 January 1894 and also states that the band was led by Maestro Giuseppe Portelli.²³ But this information poses another problem.

It has always been traditionally held and acknowledged that the first band-master was Carmelo Abela who held the post between 1893 and 1898. So how does Mro Portelli fit in the picture? Unfortunately, no satisfactory answer can be given though it could be that Mro Portelli was simply giving a helping hand to a new organization. A letter dated 12 February records the new band's participation at the feast of St Paul in Valletta two days previously, where it executed a musical programme at the square facing St John's Co-Cathedral but, unfortunately, the bandmaster's name is not included in the report.²⁴ However, the band seemed to have become quite popular at Valletta because it was invited to take part in the city's two other feasts: Our Lady of Mount Carmel on 16 July and St Dominic's on 4 August.²⁵ To round up its Valletta participations in their first year of existence, the St George M. bandmen also took part in the "Otto Settembre" celebrations by performing a musical programme on Sunday, 2 September at Piazza Tesoreria in the morning.²⁶

21 *Il Verita'* (13.i.1894) 2, under the nom-de-plume Kormi. My free translation from Maltese.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Malta Tagħna* (27.i.1894) 3.

24 *Il Verita'* (17.ii.1894) 2, under the nom-de-plume Kormi.

25 *Malta* (16.vii.1894 and 6.viii.1894); *Il Verita'* (4.viii.1894) 2.

26 *Malta* (1.ix.1894).

Stormy Aftermath

The formation of the new band club understandably created a lot of bad blood as is quite evident from letters and reports in various local newspapers. It seems to have contributed also to a musical rivalry which resulted in musical programmes being organized at the Qormi squares, a case in point being January 1894.²⁷ It is quite evident though that, because the new band favoured the bishop's stand on the marriage legacies affair, it was also being preferred to the senior band by the Qormi titular feast procurator, Rev. Joseph Mifsud. An anonymous letter in the local press even alleged that Fr. Mifsud went so far as to dash to the ground a bouquet presented to the altar of Baby Jesus, it being Christmastide, by the band-master of the Pinto Club and uttered words to the effect that "Here we want nothing from freemasons."²⁸

That the Pinto Band Club was excluded from commissions during the external celebrations of the titular feasts of 1894 and 1895 is also borne out by letters to *Il Habbar*. In February 1894, the editor of this newspaper, Antonio Muscat Fenech, a writer of Maltese and President of the Pinto Band Club between 1878 and 1906,²⁹ commented that both sides had supporters who wanted to exacerbate matters, though it has to be noted that the only letters printed in "his" newspaper were those in favour of "his" club.³⁰

For the feast of 1894, collections were bigger than usual and bigger celebrations were expected. However, the Pinto Band Club was completely excluded by the procurator and the writer of a letter in the local press pleaded that both bands be utilized.³¹ Although both bands were present in the Good Friday procession of 1895 and no incidents were reported,³² Fr Mifsud again excluded the Pinto Band Club from the titular festivities of

27 *Il Habbar* (13.i.1894) 3, letter by G.A.M., and (1.ii.1894) 3.

28 *Il Habbar* (13.i.1894) 3. My free translation from Maltese, the exact words being, "Aun ma irridu xein minn tal Mazuni."

29 Mifsud Bonnici, 22. For a brief biography of Antonio Muscat Fenech, J. Schembri, "Muscat Azzopardi u Muscat Fenech", *Bejnietna*, 36 (Festa 1987) 20-21; u J.F. Grima, "X'Jisimha t-Triq Tiegħek (4)?" *Lehen Hal Qormi*, N.ru 12 (December 1989) 11.

30 *Il Habbar* (20.ii.1894) 3.

31 *Ibid.*, (11.iv.1894) 3.

32 *Ibid.*, (20.iv.1895) 3.

1895, allegedly in defiance of episcopal orders.³³ Eventually, things returned to normal after even more trouble reared its head,³⁴ with both bands being utilized on the titular feast and playing on specific occasions in the case of secondary celebrations.

But the formation of the new band club also had its political overtones. In our case, its beginning goes back to the already-mentioned proposed ordinance by Dr Goffredo Adami with regard to the administration of marriage legacies by the Curia. It is not the intention of this paper to delve into the whys and wherefores, rights and wrongs or whatever of the matter in question which was further aggravated and complicated by Lord Ripon's despatch.³⁵ A result of this dispute was that Sigismondo Savona, aided by Canon Ignazio Panzavecchia, became the foremost "lay defender" of episcopal rights and thus acquired a new lease of political life.

As is to be expected, the new club backed Savona. Nothing has been found so far to indicate a political background behind the formation of the new club. Actually, before a detailed analysis of its founders is made - a seemingly impossible process so far - to understand not only their professed motives but also the real impetus behind their actions, one has to accept the view that the "religious" question brought about the schism in the Pinto Band Club and that the new association which was formed showed its open support for the political movement backing the bishop and the Curia.

That a band club should so openly support such a movement was not the exception in those times. To quote one example, it has been reported that the La Vincitrice band of Senglea, Panzavecchia's home town, was always present at the series of public meetings which took place as a result of the legacies affair.³⁶ Likewise, we have reports of the St George M. Band Club greeting, helping and hosting Savona in the meeting he held at Qormi on 7 July 1895.³⁷ The same band, with about 50 to 60 bandsmen, also took part in an electoral meeting held at Valletta on 11 August 1895.

33 *Ibid.*, (1.v.1895) 3.

34 *Malta Tagħna* (3.viii.1895; 10.viii.1895; 21.ix.1895; 29.iv.1896; 2.v.1896).

35 *Frendo, Ir-Rieda*, 104.

36 *Ibid.*, 107.

37 *Il Risorgimento* (8.vii.1895); *La Gazzetta di Malta* (8.vii.1895); *Public Opinion* (9.viii.1895); *Malta Tagħna* (10.vii.1895).

It was, in fact, at the Qormi meeting, held at Victory Square, that Savona accused the Committee of the Pinto Band of having endorsed the Ripon despatch because some members were Government employees.³⁸ It is difficult, however, to establish which of the two clubs had the larger following. The elections held on 26 and 27 August 1895 returned a Savona candidate from Qormi³⁹ but this is not indicative enough, especially when it seems clear that, by the next year, the "new" club was at loggerheads with the Qormi parish priest.⁴⁰

One last point. The similarity of the names of the clubs established in 1872 and 1893 is understandable since both would try to take the name of the village's patron saint, St George.⁴¹ But the 1893 club was immediately given the nickname "Tal-Werqa"⁴² (literally meaning "of the leaf") and this quickly recalls the emblem of the 1872 club which had as its focal point a vine leaf to serve as a background to St George slaying the dragon. However, although this seems to indicate a continuity of sorts, anything else said now would only be mere speculation.

Comment

This, then, is the case history of the setting-up of a band club a century ago, by which time there already were no less than 33 bands in existence in the Maltese islands, three of them in Gozo. A cursory look at a report of a meeting of the Council of Government also confirms that they were all quite active and performed musical programmes regularly. In fact, during the fifteen months preceding the middle of April 1894, no less than 722 programmes were performed by 32 clubs. Of these, eight were carried out by the St George M. Band Club of Qormi⁴³ in a period of less than six months of existence, thus indicating the popularity of band clubs in Malta of those days.

38 *Malta Tagħna* (10.vii.1895)1.

39 *Frendo, Ir-Rieda*, 109. For the result see the *Malta Government Gazette* (29.viii.1895) 715-6.

40 *Malta Tagħna* (3.viii.1895; 10.viii.1895; 29.iv.1896).

41 There was only one parish at Qormi at the time. The parish of St Sebastian came into being in 1936.

42 *Il Verita'* (17.ii.1894); *Il Habbar* (13.i.1894)

43 *Il Verita'* (28.iv.1894), report signed by Police Superintendent C.L. Primaudaye.

The stormy history of the St George's Band Club in its first two years of existence was not something peculiar to this organization only. The same type of troubles beset other new and similar organizations in Malta who tried to find their feet after seceding from the mother club, something which is still happening in our own times. Such events are a reflection of the mentality of Maltese society of those times which, in certain respects, has remained unchanged after a century.