

# The Ides of marches (with apologies to William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar)

*Geoff Thomas*  
Għalliem



Malta is rich. This country has a wealth of riches, so why do we not care enough about them? I'm not talking here about the multi-storey monstrosities which are being built, or the green belt or old buildings which are being destroyed, but the artistic heritage of the Maltese islands. The Maltese culture is a rich one, with writings, bindings, paintings, buildings, and compositions going back many centuries. So why are they not being properly protected and preserved? To be fair, the situation is improving but I want to discuss the richness of our band marches.

*...the good is oft interred with their bones.* It's probably impossible to estimate the number of band marches that have been written over the last one and a half centuries. Some composers have over a hundred to their names, some just a few. The vast majority of these marches are hand-written, the originals in many cases have been lost and frequently bands play on dimly-lit streets from copies of copies which are now indistinct, illegible and even incomplete. To exacerbate matters:

- some of the originals contain mistakes and each band who plays them makes their own 'corrections';
- percussionists often improvise their parts;
- even people who 'remember' the original disagree;
- when scores and parts are corrected, these corrections are ignored because people 'know how it should go';
- some are written to a formula with little regard for the underlying harmony;
- many marches are written out in parts from a short score and are not checked;
- in the days before composition software, copying from one voice to another sometimes led to mistakes in transposition;
- the marches are 'performed from memory' during feasts;

- today's bands have different instruments and/or a different balance to the bands of fifty, hundred and a hundred and fifty years ago; and
- people do not want to touch the marches which mean so much to them – they are almost sacred.

The result is that bands now play music which is sometimes far removed from the composers' intentions in rhythm, or melody, or harmony. So why am I interested or bothered? What right do I have, as a 'barrani', to pass comment? I meddle with no tradesmen's matters ... I am, indeed, a surgeon to old music and marches; when they are in great danger, I recover them.

*There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.*

On a recent trip to my cultural home of Wales, I was reminded how important it is to protect your heritage. I was delighted that the efforts of my contemporaries of forty years ago have borne fruit and flourished. Malta could learn from Wales in some key areas. Why? Wales and Malta have many similarities. Both are small countries with a language spoken by fewer than six hundred thousand people worldwide. The languages from both are, or have been, under threat by other languages; many people think that they 'belong' to other countries; the Maltese and Welsh are fiercely proud of their country and language.

There are new traffic and road signs in Maltese, there are several television and radio channels in Maltese, new books are still published in Maltese, there are many things which are intrinsically Maltese. So, what doesn't Malta have? It doesn't have a mainstream publisher of Maltese music. Why not? Maltese is spoken by the majority of the residents of Malta; Welsh is only spoken by about 25% of those living in Wales, and only about 12%

speaking it fluently. It is time to protect the culture of Malta, especially its music.

*I come to praise the marches, not to bury them.*

So, back to the marches. On a scale of 1 to 10, there are marches right across the spectrum, but every band player knows a 10. Why not produce an edition of the best of Maltese marches, which stand up against the best in the world, and publish this music? Let's edit these marches so that there is a definitive version which can be played not only

by Maltese bands, but also that we may 'bestride the narrow world'. Let the heavens speed us in this enterprise: it's time for the Għaqda Kazini tal-Banda to act in collaboration with the band clubs, their players, conductors and committees, and celebrate the centuries-old tradition of bands in Malta with a tangible record of our priceless musical history. So, this is my answer: - not that I loved marches less, but that I loved Maltese music more.

*Speak bands for me...*

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