

# The Fusion of Tradition and Innovation in Carmel Muscat's Funeral Marches

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## **Rationale**

The rationale behind this article is to increase appreciation towards the Maltese musical heritage and to uncover some of its neglected music. Firstly, this research aims to highlight the music of Carmel Muscat, in particular his funeral marches. A second aspect of this research is to analyse what motivated Muscat to compose this style of music so extensively.

## **Biography**

Carmel Muscat (1928-2012), more commonly known to the locals as 'Il-Kaptin', was born on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1928 in Melliċha to a typical local family. From a young age, he was keen to learn music and by the age of ten he had started playing both the mandolin and the guitar. At the age of fourteen, Muscat commenced studying the violin. Muscat lived a remarkably simple life, earning his living solely from music.

After the Second World War, he started giving music lessons to students, mainly from Melliċha and nearby villages. In the early fifties, il-Kaptin formed his own orchestra which played at parties, weddings, and dances for the British servicemen. At the same time, he was the Musical Director of 'The Mġarr Dramatic Company' which was one of the leading dramatic companies on the island at the time. Later, he spent over a decade playing violin and guitar in one of the top local restaurants.

Carmel Muscat was a founder member of the 'Għaqda Korali u Orkestrali Maria Bambina' of Melliċha, which was established in 1947. Within this society, he held the post of Orchestra Leader for several years. Throughout the eighties, he held the post of Musical Director within the same Society. Muscat served also as the Leader of the 'Malta Cultural Institute' led by Mro Carmelo Pace. He was invited to join the 'Toronto Symphony Orchestra' as a violinist, but he turned down the offer for personal reasons.

As well as playing instruments, Carmel Muscat started composing music at a young age. He composed different types of music such as marches, overtures, dances, polkas, waltzes, folk music, concertos, musica da camera, and sacred music. His works were performed locally, mainly by the local orchestral society and by the two Melliċha wind bands, and overseas including Austria, UK, Germany, Australia, and Canada. Muscat met world famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin during the latter's visit to Malta. Menuhin went on to play a composition by Muscat at a competition in the UK.

Author and environmentalist Paul P. Borg published an interview with Muscat in his book, *Quest for Identity – the Melliċha Experience*. After interviewing Muscat, Borg described him as follows:

*'Il-Kaptin has the rare ability of understanding more than one asks, he absorbs more than one tells him, he gulps attentively even the unspoken, frequently hidden peripherals of the question.'*

Il-Kaptin was a popular figure amongst the Melleħin. Paul P. Borg in the same book also wrote this:

*'I was to understand why so many people in the village speak highly of him and consider his views as some kind of reference'.*

In January 2000, The Melliċha Local Council awarded Carmel Muscat with 'Ġieħ il-Melliċha', the community's recognition for his contribution in the field of music.

I first met Carmel Muscat in 1980 when I joined the Għaqda Korali u Orkestrali Maria Bambina as a trumpet player. At that time, he was the Musical Director. We immediately developed a mutual respect towards each other and we frequently had long conversations about music. Over the years, Muscat gave me several copies of his original works such as festive marches, preludes, waltzes, and the funeral marches on which we are focusing in this project. To mark our long friendship, Carmel Muscat



**Carmel Muscat (right) with guitarist Joe S. Grech (Source: taken from the inside cover of CD, The Captain Album, produced and recorded by Joe S. Grech, 2006)**

presented me with his work, 'Missa in D No. 5 Op. III' written for two voices and harmonium.

### Carmel Muscat's Funeral Marches – A General Overview

Between 1954 and 1993, Carmel Muscat composed sixteen funeral marches. However, they were not composed evenly over these years. The first two funeral marches were composed in the fifties (1954 and 1957) and the third one in the mid-sixties (1965). Then, twenty three years later, in 1988, Muscat composed another six funeral marches within the same year, followed by another one the following year. Then, between December 1992 and December 1993, the composer wrote another set of six funeral marches. It is interesting to note that most of Muscat's funeral marches were composed at the time when he was in his sixties.

For the purpose of this research, I am taking into consideration only the funeral marches which Muscat composed for wind band. In this respect I am not including his first two funeral marches - *March Funebre No. 1 in A* (1954) and *March Funebre No. 2 in B minor* (1957) because they were scored for orchestra.

Most of Muscat's funeral marches are written in the traditional form of the military march although there are some exceptions. They consist of an introduction, first subject, second subject and trio (ABC), for example, *March Funebre No. 4 'Niket'* (1988) and *Funeral March No. 11 'Into the Unknown'* (Dec. 1992). In five others the second subject (B) is followed by the first subject (ABAC), for example, *March Funebre No. 3 'Mourning Day'* (1965) and *March Funebre No. 9* (1988). It is interesting to note that his first eight marches, except *Funeral March No.5* (1988), all finish with a coda. Of the remaining marches, all finish immediately after the trio with the exception of *Funeral March No.13 'Ċensa'* (1993). Surprisingly this march ends with a recapitulation of the second subject (ABCB).



**The first five-bars of the second subject of Funeral March No. 13 'Ċensa'**

As in many of his other works, the melodies in Muscat's marches are simple, lyrical, and ear catching. Most of his melodies consist of four-bar phrases. However, there are some exceptions. Two typical examples are *Funeral March No. 4 'Niket'* in which the melody consists of three four-bar phrases, where the second phrase is being repeated. In *Funeral March No. 13 'Ċensa'* (1993), the second subject theme is made up of two almost identical five bar (3+2) phrases.

Many of these melodies are conjunct, generally moving up and down by step, using accented and unaccented passing note. The melody is nearly always doubled, mainly in thirds and/or in sixths, and the overall melodic range is an octave and a half.

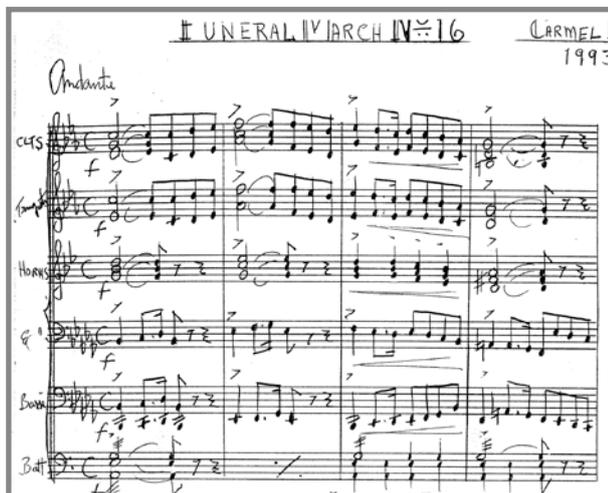


**The last two phrases of the first subject of March Funebre No. 8**

A distinctive common feature in many of Muscat's funeral marches is the quaver arpeggio accompaniment, or *Alberti Bass*, in the Euphonium part. In many instances, the arpeggio pattern falls into two-bar phrases with a quaver rest on the first quaver of the first beat and on the first quaver of the third beat in the first bar and only of the first quaver of the second bar, the bass filling up the quaver rests, which together sound as one continuous pattern. Muscat writes counter-melodies in the same way he writes melodies. They are simple, diatonic, largely moving into intervals of 2nds and 3rds. The first subject of *March Funebre No. 8* is an example of Muscat's counter-melody.

As expected, all Muscat's funeral marches are in the minor key. Although the composer has an orchestral background, these marches are written in tonalities suitable for wind band. It transpires that Muscat's favourite key for this genre of music is B flat minor. Half of them are written in this key, followed by A flat minor and C minor respectively. Harmonically, Muscat keeps to the standard harmonic progression using mainly the tonic, sub-dominant and dominant (primary) chords and, less frequently, the supertonic and sub-mediant (secondary) chords and only on rare occasions a different chord.

The scores of the funeral marches are written out on a condensed six line transposed score. It is very economical, showing only Bb clarinets, Bb trumpets, Eb horns, euphonium, tuba, and percussion (consisting of side drum, cymbals, and bass drum parts). The clarinets and trumpets represent mainly the melody and its doubling, the Eb horns represent harmony and rhythm, and in most instances the euphonium plays the counter melody. The tuba represents the bass part and the percussion instruments underpin the rhythm. It is interesting to note that Muscat keeps writing for Eb Horns even after the Eb Horns were replaced by the F Horn in Maltese wind bands.



Going through the scores, one can see that, generally, Muscat was better acquainted with instruments which also formed part of the orchestra. In some instances, scores show that he was less familiar with, for example, the euphonium. There are quite a few instances where the euphonium part is written in a very low register and some notes can be attained only if the instrument has the fourth valve, for example the introduction of *Funeral March No. 11 'Into the Unknown'*, especially bars 4 and 5 and also bars 8 and 9. A reason for this could be that Muscat had an orchestral background and he treated the euphonium in the wind band the same as the cello in the orchestra. Another example is the introduction of *March Funebre No. 9*, in which the composer wants to add trombones parts in the opening bars. Although ideal for bass trombone, it does not produce the desired effect on tenor trombones due to awkward slide positions in the low registers.



**Bars 6 to 10 of Funeral March No. 11 'Into the Unknown'**



**The introduction of Funeral March Funebre No. 9**

Having such a basic score can lead to different variations in texture if the same work is arranged by different arrangers for concert band. I have no knowledge whether any of these marches were ever

arranged for wind band or whether any of them were ever performed, except for *Funeral March No. 11 'Into the Unknown'* which I arranged for concert band. This funeral march was performed by the Imperial Band during the Holy Week Concert in 2019. The opening nine bars are shown below.

**The opening nine bars of Funeral March No. 11 'Into the Unknown'**

### What motivated Muscat to compose such genre of music?

Before arriving at my conclusion about what motivated Muscat to compose this genre of music, I think it is important to understand the environment in which the composer lived in. At the time, Mellieħa's population consisted of a few hundred people mainly living off the sea and the land. After the war until the late sixties, many young men emigrated to other countries seeking a better living. The only two cultural organisations in the village at the time were the two band clubs. The Għaqda Korali u Orkestrali Maria Bambina participated only in liturgical services in church.

Holy Week traditions were non-existent except for liturgical services. It was in this scenario that Muscat started composing this genre of music for the first time. It is interesting to note that the first two funeral marches he composed were scored for typical local orchestra. The remaining fourteen were scored for wind band, perhaps at one point he realized that local wind bands were the only media

available to perform his works. Interesting to note that contrary to the local norm, nine marches have no names at all, thus confirming that he was not commissioned to compose such works. Five others have general not specific names, for example, *March No.3 'Mourning Day'*, *March No. 5. 'Amici Miei'* and *March No. 11 'Into the Unknown'*. The only two which have a specific name or attribute are *March No. 13 'Ċensa'*, the Maltese name for Vincenza, and *March No. 14 'Ta' Doru'*, which is a family nickname in the village. From research I did, I could not trace any relationship between this family and the composer.

From the above and through many discussions I had with the composer, I believe that Carmel Muscat composed this type of music for three reasons. The first one, as an expression of his faith; the second is to express his grief for the loss of someone close to him; and the third reason is to satisfy his own musical needs. In fact, he was very proud that he was able to compose such a varied range of music.

### Conclusion

For the last century and a half, funeral marches were and still are a very popular genre of music in the Maltese wind band repertoire. Many Maltese composers composed this genre of music mainly for the following reasons:

1. the strong Holy Week tradition in many parts of the island, especially the Good Friday processions;
2. others were commissioned to do so by friends or Holy Week tradition enthusiasts;
3. to express grief for the loss of family members, close friends or important personalities; and
4. as an expression of the composer's religious faith.

Many of these funeral marches have been forgotten, others have never been performed. Many others are still uncovered. Through this research we have now a better understanding of Carmel Muscat funeral marches. The lyrical melodies, bold passages, traditional harmony and simple instrumentation mirror Muscat's personal feelings, religious beliefs and the simple life he lived throughout his life.

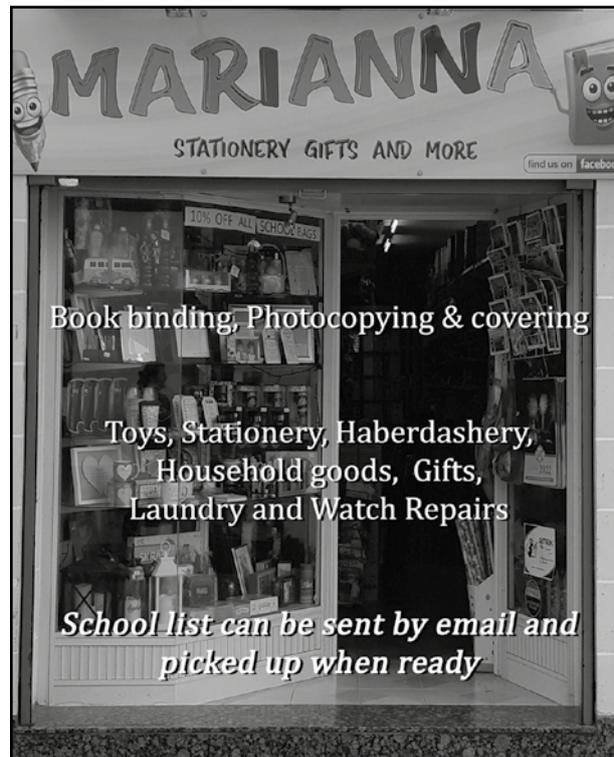
His funeral marches reflect the Maltese traditional style of this genre of music. There is large element of tradition in Muscat's marches, however there are also some innovations in his works. The long introduction in some of his marches sounds more similar to a subject rather than an introduction. The repetition of the whole second subject after the trio in *Funeral March No. 13 'Ċensa'* is also an innovation. In my forty years career as a trumpet

player, I have played hundreds of funeral marches with several local wind bands, but to date, I have never come across of any funeral march with a similar structure.

This research serves as a motivation to study in detail other genres of Muscat compositions. I hope that this research creates interest and stimulates appreciation for Muscat compositions and those of other Maltese composers and also creates awareness of our hidden and forgotten Maltese musical heritage.

#### References

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