



The Coexistence of the ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ in the Maltese Wind Band Tradition

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The tradition of banding in Malta goes back a long time and music has always had an important and recognised place in Maltese festivities. During the rule of the Knights of St John, for example, a small ensemble of musicians would take part in feast processions and alongside this, there were also established military bands such as the Grandmaster’s Band and the Band of the Maltese Militia (id-Dejma). With the onset of British rule, came British Military Bands and the Maltese soon became eager to set up their own bands. Band Clubs, as we know them today, were established in the mid to late 19th century as a result of this.

After more than 150 years, the wind band tradition remains strong in Malta and the presence of band clubs in almost every town and village confirms that banding continues to be an important and valued institution within Maltese society.

To mitigate the past and the present whilst looking to the future is not an easy task and the process of retaining the ‘old’ traditions whilst embracing change and ‘new’ traditions is a continuous and evolving process which may often go unnoticed. For some, the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ are opposing elements, but the reality is that both complement each other and keeping this complimentary and healthy balance is an essential aspect of contemporary banding in Malta. The

coexistence of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ can perhaps be explained further by looking at three different aspects of banding:

- physical space – the band club
- club members – people
- music – instrumentation and repertoire

The band club

Every band has its own club and in some towns and villages there is more than one band club. Most societies own their band club, but others rent the premises from a third party. “Il-Każin” (the Maltese word for band club) is an important place for the local community and most clubs are situated in a prominent place, usually the parish square or in the town’s main street.

Some clubs have also invested heavily in infrastructural projects in order to generate income. For example, the La Stella Philharmonic Society and the Leone Philharmonic Society in Victoria, Gozo, each own an opera theatre as part of their band club complex. Other band clubs, such as the Żejtun Band Club and the Maria Mater Gratiae of Żabbar also have their own theatre, the Pandora and the Blue Arena respectively.

“Il-bottegin” (the Maltese word for bar) is the first place you see when entering a club. The bar is the most frequented part of the club and it is a



Aurora Theatre, Gozo



Astra Theatre, Gozo

place for members, non-members and visiting tourists to meet and to socialise. For many band clubs, the bar is also the main source of revenue. Traditionally, bars would serve a range of drinks (alcoholic and mineral), as well as teas, coffee and cakes. Nowadays, many band clubs also serve food.

Other facilities within the club include a hall (used for social, cultural and fundraising events), teaching rooms and the music room.



The Imperial Band Club Music Room

Importantly, the room most treasured in all band clubs, is the Committee Room. Besides being the place where committee meetings are held, the Committee Room is also the room where important guests and visitors are welcomed and where artefacts detailing the club's history can be

seen. There are many interesting and important items which can be seen in the display cabinets in a Committee Room, including memorabilia, gifts given by supporters and members, old and obsolete musical instruments, photographs of key events in the club's history and portraits of founding members and former presidents and bandmasters.

There is a huge sense of pride when band club members show visitors around their club and this sense of pride remains especially strong amongst those emigrants who left Malta in the third quarter of the 20th century to live in the USA, Australia and Canada. Often, these emigrants return to Malta at festa time and showing their children and grandchildren around 'their' band club is an important - and often very poignant - part of their holiday in Malta.

The People

Band clubs are run by a committee elected by members, and elected committee members serve on a voluntary basis for a term of one or two years, depending on the club's statute. The committee is responsible for the day-to-day running of the club with the main positions being those of President, General Secretary, Treasurer, Club Director and Band Delegate. There is usually an assistant to each post and in many instances, there is also a Spiritual



The Imperial Band Club Committee Room

Director, a Roman Catholic priest or monk, who looks after the spiritual needs of members.

Within a band club structure, there are also sub-committees. The Youth Section (Kummissjoni Żgħażaġh) is responsible for organising innovative activities which encourage new young people to join the club whilst the Band Sub-Committee (Kummissjoni Banda) looks after everything which is needed in order to ensure the smooth running of all musical activities within the band club. Traditionally, some clubs would also have what was known as a 'Ladies Circle' (Kummissjoni Nisa) where women would come together to organise fundraising activities for the club. Whilst these sub-committees do still exist in some band clubs in Malta, there is an increasing trend for responsibilities that were traditionally seen as being the role of women, to be integrated into the main committee and other sub-committees.



A fundraising activity at the Imperial Band Club

Inevitably, as is the case in many organisations, there are different managerial styles within a band club. On the one hand, there is the typically more 'conservative' style of management, often attributed to the main committee, especially when many of the committee members have been serving for a

long time. Whilst on the other hand, there can be seen a pro-active and a seemingly open style of management, as in the Youth Section for example.

Band club members come from all walks of life and to become a member, one has to pay an annual fee to the club. In some clubs, a prospective new member has to obtain committee approval prior to being accepted as well. Standing for a few minutes at a band club bar in Malta will give the observer a very good insight into the contrasting differences between members of the same club.

In a typical band club bar, the observer might see someone sitting alone at a table with a coffee going through a daily newspaper. At the same time, a group of younger people might be seen chatting, taking 'selfies' and catching up on social media. The observer might also see a group of people playing cards or snooker and retired members sitting having a drink and catching up on the latest village news. Younger people will nearly always mention the tradition of banding within their family and previous generations are spoken of with admiration and respect. The band club bar remains an integral part of Maltese banding and the bar is very much a fusion of the 'old' and the 'new'.

Another group of people who attend band clubs are the musicians and the students. Since their inception, band clubs have often been the first place where a local person could learn music. Most band clubs offer free music lessons and provide musical instruments and learning material at no cost to the student, and despite increasing financial constraints, clubs continue to provide this important 'social' service to this day. Music teaching has improved significantly over the years through the hiring of more competent teachers and through the use of more modern methodology and technology.

Musicians - just like club members - come from



The Imperial Band and Choir during the Festa Annual Concert

a range of different backgrounds and often their connection as a musician with a band goes back three or four generations. Male musicians still outnumber female musicians in banding but it is encouraging to see that this is changing and at the Imperial Band Club in Mellieħa, we are committed to ensuring that more women and girls take up music and go on to play an active role within the band.

The preferred musical repertoire of musicians varies greatly especially between different age groups. Older musicians in a band, for example, often tend to prefer the operatic works of Verdi, Puccini, Mascagni and Wagner, whilst younger musicians may lean more towards pop music, musicals and music from soundtracks. As banding evolves, it is important that all preferred repertoires are taken into account.

Instrumentation and Repertoire

Although band clubs were formed when Malta was under the British Rule, the significance of Italian refugees to Malta in the last quarter of the 19th century should be acknowledged because this had a huge impact on the Maltese wind band tradition. Some of these Italian refugees were Maestri who very much left their mark on the wind band tradition. Instruments were referred to by their

Italian name and the sound of the Maltese wind band was much closer to that of an Italian band than a British band. Instrumentation continued to evolve during this time and some instruments disappeared altogether, such as the Contrabasso D'Ancia and the Tromba. Other instruments were replaced. For example, the Flicorno Tenore and the Trombone Cantabile were replaced by the Althorns.

During the 1960s, the saxophone family was included in the Maltese wind band and during the latter part of the 1970s and the 1980s, further instruments were included such as the drum set, the bass guitar, keyboards and various percussion instruments. This was largely due to the influence of the brass bands that came to Malta for the Maltafest Festival.

The Maltese wind band repertoire also saw significant change over the years. Taking into account the concert repertoire and the first 100 years of the Maltese repertoire, the music performed during concerts was only classical and operatic, namely overtures, fantasias and selections. By the mid-1970s, the Armed Forces Band of Malta under the then Director of Music, Lt Anthony Chircop, started to introduce music from sound tracks and pop music.

This innovative introduction, backed by the



*Selection from Bizet's Opera Carmen transcribed by E. Bartoli August 1880
Music Library - Imperial Band Club Mellieħa*

Festa 2023

Ghaqda Muzikali Imperial il-Melieha

Raymond Mahoney

GENSNA
Highlights from the Rock Opera

Paul Abela
arr. Anthony Borg

♩ = 84 Flute

Piccolo

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet in E♭

Clarinet in B♭ 1

Clarinet in B♭ 2

Clarinet in B♭ 3

Bass Clarinet

Bassoon

Soprano Saxophone

Alto Saxophone 1

Alto Saxophone 2

Tenor Saxophone

Baritone Saxophone

Horn in F 1

Horn in F 2

Horn in F 3

Trumpet in B♭ 1

Trumpet in B♭ 2

Trumpet in B♭ 3

Baritone

Trombone 1

Trombone 2

Bass Trombone

Euphonium

Tuba

Bass Guitar

Soprano

Baritone

Voice 1

Voice 2

Electric Piano

Timpani

Drum Kit

Percussion

Percussion

Percussion

Xylophone

participation of British brass bands in the Maltafest Festival, left its mark on the Maltese wind band repertoire. Increasingly, Maltese bands are adapting more easily to change, and this is being complimented by easier access to new music by publishing houses and an increase in local musicians composing and making arrangements for their own band. Another important development in recent times is that non-Maltese residents are also joining local bands and thus contributing to a changing repertoire. Currently, there are several non-Maltese musicians who play with the Imperial Band of Mellieħa, and both the current and previous musical directors of the Imperial Ladies Choir are not Maltese.

Today, Maltese wind bands produce concerts with a variety of musical styles, ranging from classical to soundtracks, music for instrument solo and for band, and pop music whereby a pop singer will often join the band to perform. It remains though, that probably the most popular music amongst locals is the Maltese march, especially during the festa period. As with everything else, the Maltese march has also evolved over time. Marches written

in the first half of the 20th century, such as those by Adeodato Gatt and Vincenzo Ciappara, have more musical complexity than the popular marches of today. Most of the latter have a simple melody that is easily grasped and recognised by people in the street, and this is accompanied by strong, and at times repetitive, rhythmic structures, as in for example, Andrew Colerio's march 'Agrigento'. The foreign influence on the Maltese march is manifested largely in the marches of Anthony Aquilina and Joseph Azzopardi.

In summary, it is evident that the coexistence of the 'old' and the 'new' does not pose a risk to our wind band tradition. The huge sense of pride and the sense of belonging that are often associated with the 'old', is still evident today and this, alongside the need for change and innovation, often associated with the 'new', will strike the balance which will ensure the successful continuation of a healthy wind band tradition within the Maltese Islands. Going forward, it is essential that we retain the traditional aspects of Maltese banding whilst embracing the new.



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