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## From the Bar to the Stage: Socio-musical Processes in the Maltese Spirtu Pront

The term *ghana* ('singing', pronounced *aana*) (1) refers to a genre of Maltese traditional folk singing, which in itself incorporates three main sub-genres: *la bormliza* (2), *tal-fatt* (3) and the *spirtu pront* (4). All *ghana* singing involves a tight voice type with the straining of throat muscles and controlled use of diaphragm muscles to produce a loud sound (5). The most practised nowadays is the *spirtu pront* (literally 'quick witted'): a style of improvised rhymed-singing, which in its contemporary form is performed by either four or six *ghannejja* ('singers', pronounced *amneyia*), accompanied on guitars. In the *spirtu pront*, two to three song-duels (depending on the number of participating *ghannejja*) unfold simultaneously on the basis of a riposte (*botta*) and counter-riposte (*risposta*).

The *spirtu pront* is performed by urban working class men mainly in village bars and clubs; almost no women sing it (6). *Spirtu pront* sessions are also organized on popular feasts such as *Imnarja* (a Maltese folk festival) and during Maltese 'traditional evenings' (the latter are very popular in summer especially during the week preceding the village or town  *festa*). One can also listen to the *spirtu pront* on radio and television especially on Sunday mornings. Due to the popularity of the *spirtu pront*, the term *ghana* is sometimes used as to refer specifically to this kind of singing by both the *ghannejja* and the Maltese public in general.

The present essay attempts to show how during a *spirtu pront* performance, the type of audience and the various kinds of pre-existing social ties that may exist both among the performers themselves and between performers and members of the audience can influence, and in certain cases determine, the execution of this kind of event. This essay will focus on these social relationships, considering them as active agents behind a series of socio-musical processes that can vary from one context to another, making out of every *spirtu pront* session a unique experience for both the performers and audience. The arguments brought together here will be based on ethnographic descriptions of two contrasting sessions. A number of musical examples elicited from the same sessions will also be analyzed. The performances occurred in the summer of 1995 in two quite distinct contexts: one in a small village bar with an audience mainly composed of *ghana* dilettanti, while the second session took place on *Imnarja* eve in a much more formal context in the presence of an audience having a variety of interests in what they were listening to and watching (7). The situations examined in this paper will continue to shed light on the fascinating quality of the *spirtu pront*. The latter, apart from having the dual quality of being rooted both in history and in contemporary social realities, is a clear index of people's ancient traditions and, interestingly enough, of the same people's current tastes (cf. Nettl 1973: 5).

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## 1. Ghana in Maltese Culture and Society

Throughout the years, both *ghana* (as a genre) and the role of the *ghannejja* in Maltese culture and society have frequently been presented by both Maltese and foreign scholars as representatives of old time Maltese peasant life, as the sweetness of The Folk (*il-hlewwa tal-poplu*) and 'of a way of life that was rapidly disappearing with post-war economic development' (Fsadni 1992: 32). In this framework, *ghana* becomes one of the elements that characterize the simple (if not also romantic) life of the working class. Aquilina (1931: 8), for instance, provides the following description:

How lovely it is, to hear from a remote and abandoned village amidst our island's hills, during a moonlit evening, while the cricket is hidden among the tomato plants, breaking the evening's silence, a handsome and healthy young man, swarthy as our country makes him, singing his *ghana* ceaselessly. His soul would seemingly burst open with his singing! [My translation]

In the description above, Aquilina attempts to relate *ghana* to the 'purity' and 'simplicity' inherent in traditional Maltese villages to the extent that *ghana* becomes synonymous with the 'tranquil' life led by villagers. Later on, in the same article, Aquilina evokes the roots of Maltese poetry, attributing the earliest efforts in the formation of a nation's literature to the simple *ghana* verses of the humble people who were able to say in song what probably could not say in speech (cf. Netti 1983: 182). These early poetical attempts were for Aquilina an anticipation of that which later on had to be considered as art/written poetry (8). The Rev. Karm Psaila (1960: 2-3), Malta's national poet, in an article on the origin of Maltese poetry, links *ghana* to the modest recreation and aspirations of the common people. Like Aquilina, Psaila places *ghana* in the 'intact' natural environment of the island:

... one could listen to *ghana* songs, accompanied by a guitar or an accordion, sung by men and women on sea costs and during popular feasts such as Lapsi (Ascension Day). Youths used to sing *ghana* love-songs in the open country, or the streets, or in houses during work-time. [My translation]

*Ghana* was as a means of whiling away the hours of recreation. Its vibrant nature was sometimes exploited in order to attract the attention of a loved one. "The emphasis was on the quality of the voice, not on originality, and the music was exuberant rather than rigorously played" (Fsadni: *ibid.*). The concept of *ghana* as being not only representative of the aspirations of the common people but also of the musical idiom of the working class has been emphasized by the Austrian linguist Hans Stumme in an introduction to a 1909 publication of four hundred Maltese *ghana* songs collected by Bertha Ilg. Although Stumme was mainly interested in the poetical text of *ghana* he also provided a socio-cultural background for the poetic material included in this same publication. The following intuitive description not only sheds light on the functional role of *ghana* among the working class sector, mainly that of 'singing while you work', but also reveals the early performance practices associated with the *spirtu pront*:

Be he a ... farmer or fisherman, some kind of melody or some song must always be hummed while he is working. The soft humming will turn into real singing if the individual in question can really sing, or at least entertains such a belief ... The improvised song will grow louder as soon as the male or female singer notices that others are paying attention to these little extemporised stanzas; the voice of the singer will swell to its utmost, however, when somewhere over there - on the neighbour's roof,

in the neighbour's field, or on the fishing *dghajsa* [boat] near by ... someone will answer these improvisations, himself or herself extemporising. Then a song-exchange between the singers and his/her counterpart will develop in which stanza will follow stanza far in excess of a hundred... (as translated in Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri 1998: 18).

Similar descriptions as the ones stated above are still current in circulating local literature. They are presented in the form of nostalgia for old time Maltese rustic life, when *ghana* was much more diffused than it is nowadays:

... folk-singing – *ghana* - one of the aspects especially of country life, which in the past when mobility was [seen] along dirt roads by horse-drawn cart, had a strong following ... In time, it went into its death throes (Cocks 1993: 17)

For several years, *ghana* has been, and still is, marginalized by both the middle class and the majority of Maltese. Sant Cassia (1989) has attributed the marginalization of *ghana* in Maltese society to a complex series of factors. Here we will only accentuate two main reasons: (a) for most Maltese, *ghana* represents a - at best - reluctantly embraced Arabic past and (b) since the language used in *ghana* is Maltese it does not travel well. The idea of *ghana* as being 'vulgar' singing has induced many Maltese to think of it as a remnant of more than two hundred years of Arabic dominance of the island – the 'sound' of *ghana* suggests a link to an Arabic, middle-Eastern culture. The implication is that this is a time in the nation's history which should be forgotten and its traces wiped out in order to preserve the official version of what 'is' the cultural identity of Malta: the Maltese have been Christians and Europeans for thousands of years (Sant Cassia 1989: 87). The reluctance to accept *ghana* as a 'souvenir' of the island's Arabic dominance may achieve a much deeper significance when examined in the context of the current political efforts towards a full membership of Malta in the European Union. In this context, *ghana* is generally looked at as symbolizing a kind of 'Arabic' music that predates Maltese romance culture (see also Sant Cassia 1998). The other factor, which leads to the marginalization of *ghana*, is the language used in this kind of singing. In this regard, Sant Cassia (1989: 89) notes that the advantage with, for instance, Maltese folk dancing, *festa* fireworks displays and with many other cultural forms, which can be 'exported' abroad (mainly through the tourist industry), is that they do not rely on a direct use of language. An interesting aspect about Maltese 'official' culture is that it leans in an almost absolute way on *material* symbols and it makes nearly no use of the Maltese language (ibid.). *Ghana* is seen as contradicting the island's official policy of cultural exportation; it creates tension between what should be internationally projected and what should be kept localized if not also hidden. Maltese, as the language used in *ghana*, continuous adding tension to this 'cultural-export' discretion. This is all easier to grasp in the context of the wider debates concerning language use in Malta. For certain Maltese who use English rather than Maltese (even if they are native Maltese themselves), the use of Maltese language in *ghana* led to a sort of 'natural' abhorrence. In Malta, English has hierarchical connotations in the sense that choosing to speak English rather than Maltese, sprinkling one's Maltese with English words, or insisting on speaking Maltese when English would be more conventional, "affects personal and social relationships" (Fsadni 1989: 4). It is as if by singing in Maltese the *ghannejja* would be instantly self-categorized as citizens of low social status. For this sector of society, the marginalization of Maltese language is synonymous with the marginalization of *ghana* itself. The tension between language and the exportation of the official culture had its overtones, for instance, in the decision taken by the Maltese Cultural authorities to participate in the Eurovision Song Contest with a song in English rather than in Maltese. Although the official reason brought forward was mainly related to the understanding of the song, one

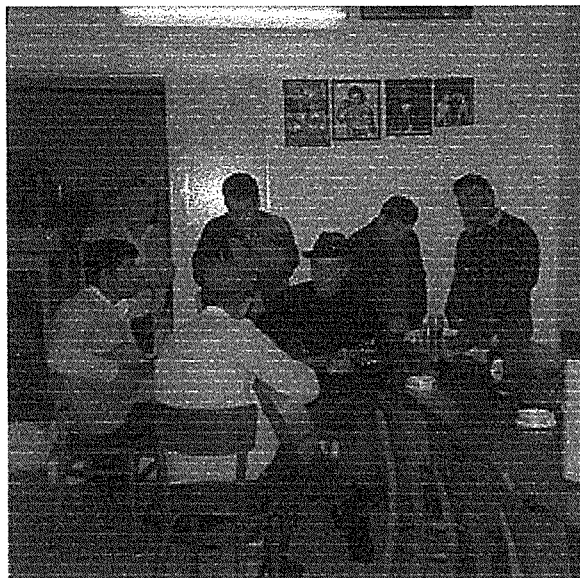
cannot exclude other possible political reasons discussed above. All that has been said about *ghana* in general applies to the *spirtu pront*. The next section will focus on particular aspects of the *spirtu pront* with special emphasis on its style, performance practice and context.

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## 2. The Spirtu Pront: Style, Performance Practice and Context

The *spirtu pront* is an extemporized song contest that develops round a series of arguments created by the *ghannejja* themselves in the course of the session. Each session consists of two to six *ghannejja*, but this depends on how many *ghannejja* will show interest in participating in that particular session. The arguments develop in turn in the form of duets and on the basis of a riposte and counter-riposte. In a session composed of four *ghannejja*, the first *ghannej* ('singer', pronounced 'amney') would be matched against the third and the second against the fourth. As soon as the session starts, no one of the *ghannejja* can leave or make space for another *ghannej*; but he has to stay there till the end of the session. From this perspective, the *spirtu pront* has a closed form in the sense that an *ghannej* cannot join in or leave an on-going session whenever he wants to (9).



*A spirtu pront session at Fgura*

When a number of *ghannejja* shows interest in participating in a session, the number of participants will increase from four to six *ghannejja*. In such cases, the first *ghannej* is matched against the fourth, the second against the fifth and the third against the sixth. The way they stand indicates who will be arguing with whom. Apart from the *ghannejja* one will also find from two to three guitarists (10).

A *spirtu pront* session will take around about an hour irrespective of the number of participants. There are other occasions in which a *spirtu pront* session would only take half-an-hour or less such as on television, radio or during *ghana* festivals.

As mentioned above, the *spirtu pront* is normally performed in village bars and clubs especially on Sunday mornings. A popular village for the *spirtu pront* is Zejtun, a village situated in the South of Malta. Zejtun is considered by the *ghannejja* as the 'cradle' of *ghana* due to the many *ghannejja* who originated from it. Every Sunday morning at Zejtun, one will find bars and clubs (mainly political and band clubs) packed with men listening to the *spirtu pront*. The scene in such bars matches almost precisely the description provided by McLeod and Herndon (1975: 86):

From the inside ... a singing bar is a coterie of friends who join together in comfortable surroundings to enlarge themselves artistically with song. Because of their fame as improvisers of clever verses, they bring into the bars a group of admirers (dilettanti) who drink quietly and enjoy heavy doses of folk music.

The *spirtu pront* is also associated with traditional feasts the most prominent being *Imnarja* celebrated annually on the 29<sup>th</sup> June. *Imnarja* is essentially a traditional folk-festival in which the farmers demonstrate their agricultural products at Buskett Gardens. On *Imnarja* eve, *spirtu pront* sessions are nowadays being incorporated in a local talent show that would also

include band marches, folk dancing and Maltese pop songs. In bars and clubs one will normally find blue-collar male workers either being *ghannejja* themselves or *ghana* dilettanti. In more formal public contexts, such as that of *Imnarja*, *spirtu pront* sessions will take place in front of mixed audiences composed of people of any age and social class. Women, due to the presence of men, very rarely frequent sessions in bars and clubs. A woman can damage her personal reputation, for instance, by attending to *spirtu pront* sessions in bars. Maltese society is rigidly segregated along gender lines and therefore, such segregation affects the audience in *spirtu pront*. Women in bars listening to *ghana* have in many cases been considered as prostitutes. On the other hand, no one will make such a judgement in more public presentations where sessions are attended by mixed audiences such as during the traditional Maltese feasts of *Imnarja* or *San Gwann* (11). The venue in which a *spirtu pront* session develops is strongly linked to a subtle code about who is likely or unlikely to be present for that session, and consequently the subject of dispute.

A *spirtu pront* session can be divided into three main sections and a coda (12). The first section serves as a prelude for the session. In it, the lead guitarist starts improvising along a motive that he chooses from a 'restricted' repertory of *ghana* motives (Vella 1989: 38). These motives are popular, not only among the dilettanti of *ghana* but also with the entire Maltese public. The lead guitarist plays his introductory section accompanied by the strumming of triadic chords provided by the other guitarists. As soon as the former finishes-off with his improvisation he joins the other guitarists on the accompaniment based on the tonic and dominant of the established key. The function of this introductory section is to establish the tonality and tempo for the session. Tonality changes from one session to another, depending on what suits the *ghannejja*. In the most frequently used 'La accompaniment' (*akkumpanjament fuq il-La*) the strings of the lead guitar will be tuned to e a d' g' b' e<sup>2</sup> while those of the second accompanying guitars will be tuned a minor third lower (e f# b e' g#<sup>1</sup> c#<sup>2</sup>) except for the bottom string (13). Such tuning is intended to facilitate the technical exigencies imposed on the lead guitarist in his creation of new motifs and variations. In the introductory section a series of rhythmical and intervallic structures are created and developed; this same rhythmical and melodic material is then reiterated in the second section by both the *ghannejja* and the lead guitarist. The frequent use of syncopation and descent melodic movements, for instance, form part of the formal structure of both the singing and instrumental soloing in the *spirtu pront*; these are structural elements announced in the introductory section as to establish the style of both *ghana* singing and playing.

The second section develops round a series of alternations between the vocal stanzas of the *ghannejja* and the instrumental improvisatory four-phrase interludes of the lead guitarist in between each quatrain. Each interlude is known as *qalba* (literally, 'the turning'). In this section, each *ghannejj* sings a quatrain that in the context of the *spirtu pront* is known as *ghanja* (pronounced 'anya' literally 'a song') and then waits till another round. The *ghannejja* rhyme their quatrains on the rhyming scheme of a-b-c-b. Ideally they should follow the syllabic scheme of 8-7-8-7, but as an *ghannejj* told me: "Nowadays, we give more importance to the rhyme and to the content of the song rather than to the number of syllables in the line". Sometimes it happens that an *ghannejj* opts to intervene immediately with his *ghanja* as soon as the preceding *ghannejj* finishes-off with his quatrain. This will leave no chance for the lead guitarist to improvise his *qalba*. This happens due to the urgency of the *ghannejj* to give an immediate reply to his 'opponent'. During the development of the quatrains the lead guitarist may also include light and short bass passages (known as *burdumi*) in order to elaborate on the continuous strumming of the other guitarists. Some *ghannejja* claim that the *burdumi* put them

off. On the other hand, lead guitarists insist that they cannot be creative as much as they wish to be in their improvisations claiming that too much elaborate improvisations will put the *ghannejja* off. However, instrumental improvisations develop within a restricted framework of more or less 'conventional' unfolding, otherwise the '*ghannejja* will look for other guitarists to accompany them' as a renowned lead guitarist told me.

The first few lines of each participating *ghannej* must be general and introductory in nature (Herndon and McLeod 1980: 149) (14). Such lines will normally explain why and how the *ghannej* has found himself in the place where the performance is taking place. According to Fsadni (1992: 32) the need to introduce a session in this manner evolved in the Sixties as a result of the increasing tendency to tape *spirtu pront* sessions. Through the introductory lines of the *ghannejja* the recording could be internally distinguished from other recordings made on the same tape (15). The following are the introductory quatrains of four *ghannejja* participating in the same session in a bar at Fgura (another southern Maltese village) in 1994:

### *Ghannej A*

W ahn'ghax ta' Ganni gewwa Malta bija ghamiltu plejtu kbir. Illum gabuni fil-Fgura u l-bierah kont ix-Xandir	(And) because we (Ganni's) are here in Malta you made a great fuss because of my presence Today they brought me to Fgura (and) yesterday I was at the radio station
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### *Ghannej B*

Da' d-delizzju dimonju tieghi Ghalkemm ghalih noqghod attent. U ghax dal-ghodu ghamilhieli U giegheini nikser il-gurament	This personal evil pastime although I'm on the lookout for it. (And) its fault that I'm here this morning (and) it compelled me to break my oath
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### *Ghannej C*

'k tkun hafna t'affari tieghek ma' l-udjenza kemm tkun stmat. Jiena gejt m'habba persuna ghax mieghu hafna obligat	If you are reliable You'll be highly esteemed by the audience I came here because of a person (because) towards him I feel very much obliged
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### *Ghannej D*

U se nkanta l-ewwel ghanja u mall-hbieb tieghi ma noqghodx lura Ara din tieghi - soltu, dejjem li nhar ta' Hadd nitla' gol-Fgura	(And) I'm going to sing my first <i>ghanja</i> (and) with my friends I don't hold back It is commonplace for me that on Sundays I come to Fgura
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In more public contexts the first introductory stanzas might also include comments both about the present audience and the significance of the occasion.

As the session progresses the build-up of a subject will start to take shape (normally towards the sixth turn) with each pair of *ghannejja* focusing on a particular subject, adhering to it as much as possible. Renowned *ghannejja* are able to embellish their quatrains by the use of metaphors, archaic words, proverbs and switching from Maltese to English – such elements

make the best *ghana*. Most of the subjects deal with the *ghana* environment itself, such as: how many times a particular *ghannej* has been invited to sing during the past week; the voice quality of the *ghannej*; his social rapport with the other *ghannejja*; the endurance of his voice; and how clever and experienced he is in rhyming his quatrains. Nowadays, most of the subjects taken up by the *ghannejja* are frivolous in nature, more intended to tease the opponent than to harm him, such as in the following lines (taken from the above-mentioned session):

### *Ghannej B*

Ghandek mohhok ta' tarbija (u) ghall-ghana tieghi ta' professur. Meta tara certu ghannejja (w) int issefsef int tigli tmur	Your mind is like a baby's (and) for my professional <i>ghana</i> When you see certain <i>ghannejja</i> (and) you immediately run to them to whisper in their ears
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### *Ghannej D*

U int li ghidtili l-gurament ksirtu u dan ix-xoghol kemm jinkwetani. U jien immur fejn irrid jiena Ghax lili hadd ma jikmandani	(And) you the one who told me that I've broken the oath (and) this thing worries me. (And) I go were I wish because no one will order me around
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As well as gentle frivolity, such texts might also symbolize problems in the process of social communication. In this sense, "the meaning of the performance is no longer to state that communication is possible and gratifying, but rather to show in some way that communication is impossible and that the communicative act is frustrating" (Magrini 1989: 63). In more public presentations, such teasing is normally less 'intimate' and more discreet and superficial. The mini environment of the bar is in itself a means of protection to all that discourse which should only be known among friends. The spatial openness in which public performances are held offer no similar protection to that of the bar, with the consequence that members of the audience are normally looked upon by the performers as curious 'strangers', and therefore should not be trusted.

The third section of the session is known as the *kadenza*. In this section each *ghannej* will 'wind up' his argument with two or more quatrains. *Ghannejja* of ample talent can extend their *kadenza* to four and even six quatrains. This might happen either to finish-off their arguments and/or to show bravura. The longer the *kadenza* the more admiration the *ghannej* will achieve from his supporters. As performers, the *ghannejja* seek popularity and prestige with both the public and their fellow *ghana* dilettanti to the extent that some *ghannejja* also have their respective supporters. Ample *ghannejja* will be in demand to sing on television, hotels and other traditional soirées; they get paid for that. Others have been selected to represent Malta in international folk music festivals. Recent directions are the involvement of renowned *ghannejja* in locally produced musicals, folk operas, CDs together with established Maltese pop singers and even as actors in television plays. Such opportunities have induced certain *ghannejja* to start disassociating themselves from the environments associated with the *spirtu prout* in their ventures for new directions where they can better refine and negotiate more acceptable forms of popularity and reputation. They no longer frequent bars and places from where they have received their initial training in *ghana*, their 'natural' places from where they have attracted the admiration of so many followers. Such situations will continue to confirm Stokes's (1994: 97) assertion that "performance is a vital tool in the hands of performers



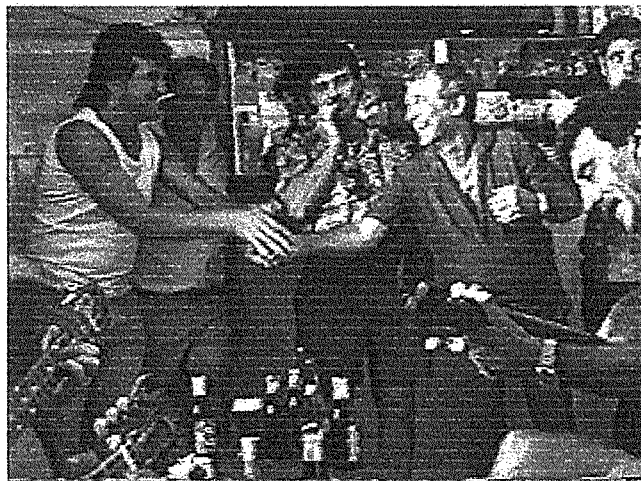
themselves in socially acknowledged games of prestige and power".

A *kadenza* should make reference to the fact that the argument was not serious, or that the singers were only joking. From the musical point of view, the *kadenza* is characterized by an increase in the rate of harmonic change (I-IV-V7-I). The following is an example of a *kadenza* taken from the above session:

### Ghannej A

Jien se nibdielkom il-kadenza Nispera ma ttawluhiex. `Il ghaliex, ghanja inqas, biex ikla ma nitlifthiex.	I will start for you the <i>kadenza</i> I hope you will not extend it Because with one less <i>ghanja</i> I won't miss my lunch.
Hbieb tieghi hawn jien gejtlikom u talli dak niringrazzjakom Darb'ohra nerga' nigikom u hbieb tieghi nammirakom	My friends, here I came as you wished and for this I thank you Next time I come again (and), my friends, I admire you

The *kadenza* is then followed by a short instrumental coda (I7-iv-I). As soon as the coda starts the *ghannejja* shake hands as if to show that what has been said should not be taken seriously by neither the participating *ghannejja* nor the audience.



*The ghannejja shaking hands at the end of the session*

The *ghannejja* should be able to rhyme their quatrains. A well-constructed quatrain, sung in the right time, should always achieve the appreciation of the listeners. While singing his *ghanja* the *ghannej* should be careful to keep with the tempo of the accompanying guitars. Among the various session I came across there was a particular one in which one of the participating *ghannejja* was a young *ghannej* who seemed to be in his apprenticeship. He had problems keeping within the established tempo whilst at the same time rhyming his quatrains. Both the lead guitarist and one of the performing *ghannejja* drew the trainee's attention to this fact at several moments of the performance; singing in time with the established tempo was an important factor for the success of the session and therefore it had to be tackled seriously and with urgency. Similar cases may shed more light on the importance of the learning process as a useful source of musical theories and concepts. Although these are unwritten, they will still be regulating the music of the oral musical culture under investigation.

### 3. Towards an Ethnography of Spirtu Pront Performance

A musical performance is related to a series of socio-musical (if not also extra-musical) processes that not only can influence the growth of the music being performed but can even determine the same performance intrinsically. To give a simple example, one can say that the way in which a singer performs his song and the audience perceives it depends, among other things, on the practical and theoretical musical training of the singer; his psycho-physical state at the moment of the performance; his popularity with the audience; the musical and textual structure of the song; the feedback of the audience; comparisons of the present audience with past interpretations either of the same singer or of other singers; if not also on the general acoustics of the place, the latter being the result of a social decision rather than an arbitrary one. All this may urge the singer, for example, to give importance to certain words rather than others; or in the case of improvised music such as jazz, to repeat certain motives that s/he thinks had been well received by either the present audience or past audiences. In this quite complex framework a series of socio-musical processes amalgamated with, or imposed on, other processes and factors which in themselves might seem to be 'purely' musical would emerge. One of the ways in which one can identify some of these processes present in a musical performance, such as that of the *spirtu pront*, is through the ethnography of musical performance. The events which I describe here present two quite contrasting *spirtu pront* sessions: the first in a bar at Zejtun in which the context is very familiar for both the audience and the *ghannejja*, while the second session took place in a more formal public context on *Imnarja* eve. At first, the following accounts will avoid academic rhetoric in order to get the reader closer to the world from which the elicited musical examples have originated.

#### *a. A spirtu pront session in a bar at Zejtun on Sunday morning.*

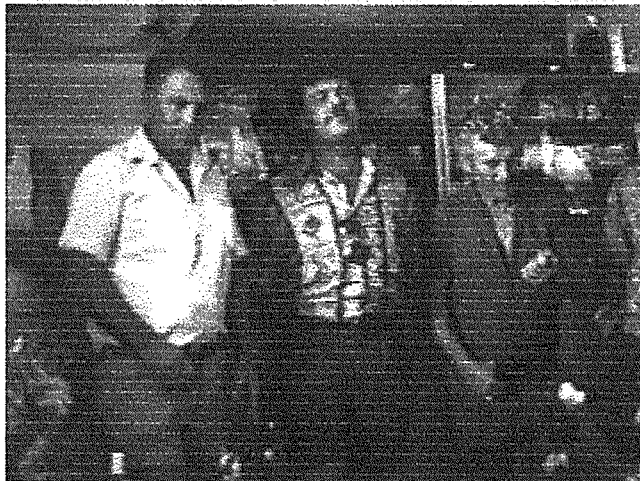
The bar was crowded with men drinking beer, eating appetisers, chatting and listening to sessions of the *spirtu pront*. The place was quite noisy if one was trying to follow the ongoing sessions. This has occasionally urged certain participating *ghannejja* to ask those drinking by the bar to lower their voices. Some of those present preferred to sit by the bar, more interested in having a word with their friends rather than following the sessions. Others could be seen seated on low stools, drinking while following the sessions. The participating *ghannejja* were standing in the inner part of the bar. The number of *ghannejja* who wished to participate in one session or another was quite great so much that the sessions were composed of six *ghannejja*. The sessions took place one after the other with a short break of seven minutes or so in-between each session. During these intervals the guitarists had the opportunity to drink something, exchange a word with those present and release their fingers from the continuous pressure of the strings. The only two women present in the bar were members of the owner's family who were giving a helping hand in the serving of drinks.





*The spiritu pront session at Zejtun*

The session, which the present study will focus on, started at about twenty past eleven. After an agreement among the present *ghannejja* about who would be participating, the lead guitarist accompanied by the other two guitarists began playing a popular folk tune in waltz tempo so as to announce the beginning of another session. Till then the *ghannejja* had taken their standing position and ordered some fizzy drinks to drink during the one-hour session. Their age ranged from twenty-six to forty-six. The youngest one sung his first *ghanja* in a standing position but then he sat for the remaining session (singing in a sitting position is a very uncommon practice in *ghana*). Between one session and another the *ghannejja* took a sip of their drinks which were laid down for them on tables. Their singing was quite loud for the small place they were singing in, but as Lortat-Jacob (1995: 2) has noticed: "In Mediterranean countries things seem to acquire a reality when they are debated out loud".

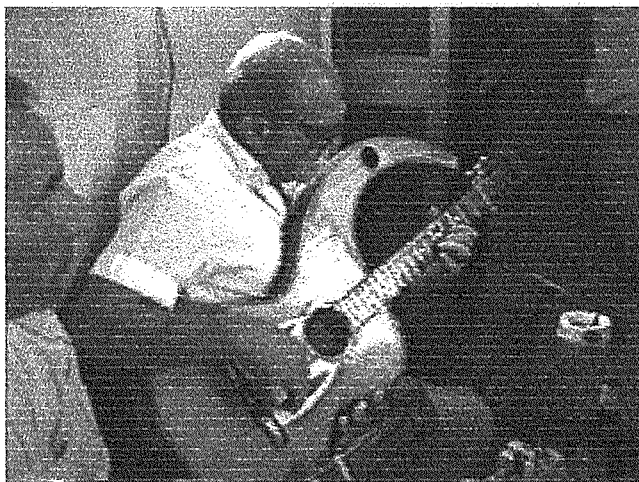


*The ghannejja thinking up their reply and counter-reply*



*One of the ghannejja singing his ghanja*

During the session I was able to observe that the guitar improvisations played in between the stanzas were being almost ignored by the present audience. All this was demonstrated through the movement that took place as soon as the lead guitarist started improvising, varying from the barman serving appetisers and drinks, to members of the audience crossing the bar.



*The lead guitarist improvising a qalba*

This lack of importance accorded to the instrumental interludes was confirmed by an incident in which I was involved while preparing my video camera to film the session. While preparing my camera I realized that I had to change the videotape in the middle of the session (16). One member of the audience, on noticing that I was engaged in this task, suggested to the lead guitarist that he extend one of his interludes to double the length in order for me to have enough time to change the tape without, as he put it, "missing any *ghanja*". The first example shows a normal *qalba* (or interlude) composed of eight measures extracted from the same session under investigation. One can compare ex. 1 to ex. 2; the latter consisting of the extended *qalba* made up of sixteen measures.

Ex. 1: *A qalba from Zejtun*


Ex. 2: *The extended qalba*


At this stage it is worth mentioning the fact that during the performance this same *ghana* dilettante has insisted that I shouldn't move my camera away from the *ghannej* who happened to be in the process of putting his *ghanja* together. According to him I could only do this during the improvisations of the lead guitarist.

The listeners present also had their part in the formation of some of the *kadenzi* (the plural of *kadenza*) which took place in the third section of the session. At this point it is worth remembering that the longer the *kadenza* the more the bravura of the *ghannej* will be. Some encouragement from those present may motivate the *ghannej* to extend his *kadenza* to one of more than two quatrains. The third example demonstrates a *kadenza* of two quatrains sung by the youngest of the participating *ghannejja*. Due to his young age this *ghannej* had not yet cultivated an entourage big enough to give him the necessary support for an extended *kadenza*. At that particular moment the support seemed to be as important as the inspiration itself. Ex. 4 is an example of a *kadenza* of three quatrains performed by one of the *ghannejja* who was encouraged to do so by a fellow *ghannej* who was taking part in the same session.


Ex. 5 includes the *kadenza* of the *ghannej* who brought the session to its end.

Ex. 3: *A two-stanza kadenza*


 [audio file](#) (mp3 file, 105 kb, 0.53 min)


 [video file](#) (asf file, 254 kb, 0.53 min)

Ex. 4: *A kadenza of three quatrains*

 [audio file](#) (mp3 file, 182 kb, 1.31 min)

Ex. 5: *A kadenza of four quatrains*

 [audio file](#) (mp3 file, 226 kb, 1.53 min)

 [video file](#) (asf file, 539 kb, 1.53 min)

This example includes a *kadenza* of four quatrains motivated by two factors: the encouragement by a member of the audience who has indexed the number three with his fingers for this *ghannej* to extend the *kadenza* to three quatrains; and the necessity that the last *ghannej* felt to give a 'grand finale' to the session. The encouragement given to him has motivated him to stretch his *kadenza* to four quatrains, more than expected from him. In such a small place as the bar in question both the aspirations of the audience and the various kinds of friendships were in their natural context and could easily be negotiated and transformed.

#### ***b. The spirtu pront on Imnarja eve (1995)***

I arrived at Buskett at about 9 p.m. The place was so crowded with Maltese and foreigners that it was almost impossible to move. The atmosphere was typically Maltese on *Imnarja* eve: some families were sitting under the Greenwood trees ready to have their meals. Others were ready from their meal and were lying on the ground. The youths that were next to the vendors of fast foods were almost blocking the narrow passages of the garden. Others were visiting the Agricultural Show organised by the Maltese Agrarian Society. With no small effort I succeeded in getting close to a stage on which a show of local artistic talent was in progress. The programme included, among other things, Maltese folk dancing, wind-band playing, Maltese pop song singing and two *spirtu pront* sessions. The first session began at around 11 p.m. whilst the second group of *ghannejja* appeared on stage at about midnight (for the purpose of the present study only the first session has been considered). The sessions were of half-an-hour each with a different item in between; as if the organisers were aware of the fact that an-hour-long *spirtu pront* session could have been too much for certain members of the audience unfamiliar with this style of singing. As soon as the *ghannejja* and guitarists went on stage, they were introduced one by one to the audience by the evening's *compaire*. He introduced them by both their names and nicknames. In the context of *ghana*, the nickname is of important significance because it contributes considerably to the identity formation of a *ghannej*. The components of such identity vary: from the character quality of the *ghannej* himself to his popularity with the general public and from his superb ability to rhyme his

quatrains to his often used melodic motive from one session to another; from his vocal timbre to his life story and the many experiences that he has had as a result of emigration. From the MC's interview with the *ghannejja* I could sense a feeling of nervousness from their trembling voices. And this is understandable! The context was quite formal for them: on a stage, with a microphone in their hands, with the strong lights of the spotlights directed in their eyes and above all performing in the presence of a mixed audience with various expectations if not also outsiders to the world of *ghana*. In bars things take a different shape: the audience sits close to the performers; the bar is relatively a small place in which the loud singing is more a means of persuasion rather than an acoustic exigency and above all the bar as an environment is less formal as is evident by the liberties the *ghannejja* take in drinking between one quatrain and another. All this was missing from the session at Buskett.



*The group of ghannejja at Buskett*


As soon as the first *ghannej* started singing, the reaction of the audience was quite mixed. Some applauded as soon as this same *ghannej* finished-off his first *ghanja*. Others, who were very close to the stage, walked away to avoid the loud volume that was coming out of the speakers, caused by an inappropriate use of the microphone by the same *ghannejja*. Other members of the audience, especially the women, continued with their chatting as if nothing was happening on stage. I took the impression that these remained there for honoring another relic of the past rather than to listen to *ghana*. For these, the nostalgia that *ghana* brings with it on *Imnarja* eve was more important than the same *ghana*. As Blacking puts it: "people's interest may be less in the music itself than in its associated social activities" (1973: 43). The *ghannejja* did their best to minimize the pressures that normally accompany such a context. For instance, one of them lit up a cigarette as soon as he finished singing his first *ghanja*. Other *ghannejja* tried to minimize, however superficially, their detachment from the public by waving their hands at some members of the audience. More than that, one of the *ghannejja* felt that he would be doing nothing wrong if he exchanges a word with the lead guitarist while the latter was improvising his *qalba*. The lead guitarist continued with his improvisation while at the same time talked to the same *ghannej*. Both the *ghannej* and the guitarist were aware of the fact that the majority of the audience not actively involved what was happening on stage. All this dovetails neatly with Blacking's assertion that "musicians know that it is possible to get away with a bad or inaccurate performance with an audience that looks but does not listen" (1973: 10).


Ex. 6: *A complete qalba from Buskett*

Ex. 6 shows a *qalba* derived from the session at Buskett. One can notice a more rhythmically coherent and dense musical structure when comparing this *qalba* to the one transcribed in ex. 7. The latter includes a transcription of the improvisation as played by the lead guitarist while he was chatting with the *ghannej*. Ex. 7 also indicates a particular moment (in rectangular frame) of interruption in the melodic of the lead guitarist caused by the situation already described. I got the impression that the effort that was being done to create a more informal atmosphere was more important than the musical material that was being presented that evening; as if the only imposition accepted by the *ghannejja* was that of the *spirtu pront* style itself.

Ex. 7:

*An area of melodic discontinuity (in rectangular frame)*

 [audio file](#) (mp3 file, 43 kb, 0.22 min)

 [video file](#) (asf file, 107 kb, 0.21 min)

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The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Qalba" from Zejtun. The score is written on three staves of music, all in a 9/8 time signature and a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The first staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature, followed by a key signature change to three flats. It contains three measures, each marked with a Roman numeral "I". The second staff also starts with a treble clef and a common time signature, followed by a key signature change to three flats. It contains six measures: the first is marked "I", the second and third are marked "V7", and the fourth, fifth, and sixth are marked "V7". A triplet of eighth notes is indicated by a "3" above a bracket in the fifth measure. The third staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature, followed by a key signature change to three flats. It contains six measures: the first and second are marked "V7", the third and fourth are marked "V7", and the fifth and sixth are marked "I". The piece concludes with a double bar line and the abbreviation "f.c." (fine).

**Example 1 A "Qalba" from Zejtun**



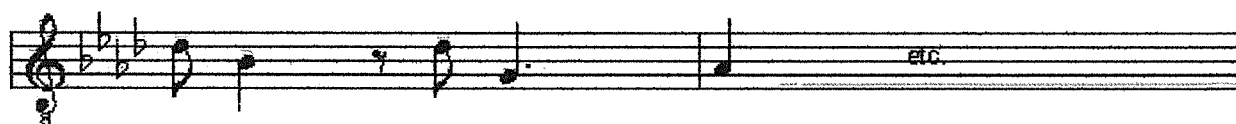
I I I  
 I V7 V7 (3)  
 V7 V7 I  
 I I I  
 V7 V7 V7  
 V7 I

**Example 2** An extended "Qalba" from Zejtun

First Ghanja



Second Ghanja



Example 3 A two-stanza "kadenza" from Zejtun

First Ghanja

Unapprehended Text

Second Ghanja

Ga - lad - ar - - ba lward of - rej - thi Mlux sej - jer nof - fri - lek

Unapprehended Text

zewk

u la thal - lik in - nies jim -

Third Ghanja

lewk lien go fi - ja ghan - di lgha - na go moh - hi ghan - di

mar - da minjip - pro - va jis - ser - va bi - ja lil dan dej - jem naq - tagh - hi

etc.

bar - fa

Example 4 A three-stanza "kadenza" from Zajtun

First Ghanja

Unapprehended Text

In - du - najt se tip - pru - va-ni B'hekk il - sie-ni xtaqt li

Second Ghanja

nholl Se ni - gi ghal li ghidt qa-bel ha mu-rik kemm jien ghan -

nej In - ti kont lan - ghu kus - tod-ju iz - Zej-tu-ni il - fed -

Third Ghanja

dej A - ra din x'se nghid - lek is-sa Jew nis-ta' nghid li mtu -

rejtx Dawn gham - lu sie - gha u xe-bghu = Jie - na ghad-ni lan = qas

Fourth Ghanja

bdejtx Fre - du naf 'lmt ghan - nej taj-jeb Li in - sir bha - lek nix -

tieq Ghal-kemm fil bi - du leh = ni bat-ta Im-ma nis = so-da bdejtx mat -

etc.

triq

Example 5 A "kadenza" of four quatrains

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Qalba" from Buskett. It consists of three staves of music, all written in a single system. The music is in a 2/4 time signature and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. Chord symbols are placed below the staves: the first staff has 'I' above the first two measures and 'V7' above the last two; the second staff has 'I' above the first measure, 'V7' above the fourth and sixth measures, and 'I' above the eighth measure; the third staff has 'V7' above the first and third measures, and 'I' above the fifth measure. The piece concludes with the word "etc." written at the end of the third staff.

Example 6 A "Qalba" from Buskett

The image displays a musical score for Example 7, consisting of five staves of music in G minor. The first four staves contain melodic lines with various chords (I, V7) and triplets. The fifth staff is mostly empty with "etc." written in the center, indicating a continuation of the piece.

**Example 7** An area of melodic discontinuity

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show how in a *spirtu pront* session the type of audience and pre-existing social ties could develop a number of socio-musical processes which may affect the course of performance. In the session at Buskett the resulting socio-musical processes were the consequence of an unfamiliar audience different to the one the performers were used to in bars. The protection offered by the environment of the bar was missing from the evening at Buskett. The whole situation had to be in some way normalized by creating, even if superficially, some kind of socialization which in itself was uncommon to the context of the bar. All this was encapsulated in a momentary musical span characterized by an interrupted melodic movement and lack of rhythmical density when compared to similar musical endeavours within the same session. On the other hand, the closeness of the audience to the performers in the bar at Zejtun has generated a series of socio-musical processes which resulted in a somewhat more elaborate musical product. In the context of the present study the extended *qalba* and *kadenzi* signified both a strong and well-knit pre-existent social setup as well as a context in which the audience has much more direct access to the development of the session. The socio-musical processes discussed in this essay took place in the context of a musical form that has remained alive due to its capacity to satisfy the various social and cultural exigencies of all those involved in the practice of such singing. The socio-musical processes in action during the above performances functioned within a musical form that in itself offered all the necessary 'liberties' for these same processes to evolve and give rise to something unique. Socio-musical processes generated from one session to another not only make of each session a unique experience but can also urge change. Like any other living music, the *spirtu pront* is in a constant state of flux. Change is not necessarily reflected in what the *ghannejja* and guitarists sing and play, although changes in that direction are not lacking. In this sense, the term 'change' can be expanded to include aspects of stage and media presentation confronting performers today, as mediated by the world of spectacle, the recording industry and various social and cultural pressures. These are challenges and pressures that all those involved in the performance and presentation of the *spirtu pront* should find the ways and means to deal with in order to safeguard its survival.

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## 6. Endnotes

1. The *gh* is silent in Maltese.

2. *La bormliza* (after the city of Bormla) is sometimes referred to as both *ghana fil-gholi* (*ghana* in high register) and as *ghana bil-ksur* (*ghana* with inflexions). The last two names shed light on the outstanding features of this singing: mainly that it is highly-melismatic, making it both very difficult to sing and to understand, and that it requires a high-pitched voice capable of singing in a female vocal register. The latter feature shows a strong possibility that this kind of *ghana* was generally sung by women and that throughout the years it was picked up by men while, at the same time, women were disappearing from the world of *ghana*. *La bormliza* can either be sung by two singers or as solo

3. The *ghana tal-fatt* is Malta's basic stanzaic ballad form; a story narrated by one singer. The subject of a *fatt* can be either tragic or comic, although *fattijiet* (plural of *fatt*) recounting the deeds of passed away well-known *ghannejja* are becoming also very popular. A recent development in the *ghana tal-fatt* is the inclusion of the refrain sung by the accompanying guitarists.

4. Some of the material included in this paper has already appeared in my MA thesis, "Styles of Transcription in Ethnomusicology" (University of Durham, 1996)

5. For more information and resources concerning *ghana* in general see Mifsud-Chircop 1999.

6. Although it would be an overgeneralization to state that no Maltese women sing the *spirtu pront*, the likelihood is that very few women participate in such musical endeavors. In 1998 the Maltese Culture Department organized the first national *ghana* festival. One of the efforts done by the organizers was that of involving women *ghannejja* in such an endeavor. In 1998 only one woman participated. This number increased to three in the following year (See Mifsud-Chircop 1998, 1999).

7. The approach adopted in the third section of this work leans heavily on what is known as the ethnography of music, defined by Anthony Seeger (1992: 89) as "the writing down of how sounds are conceived, made, appreciated and influence other individuals, groups, and social and musical processes".

8. For a more detailed discussion about the history of Maltese poetry see Friggieri 1979.

9. Lortat-Jacob (1995: 74) refers to a style of Sardinian singing which is known as a 'guitar song'. This is a semiopen style of singing mainly performed in bars, and like the *spirtu pront* it unfolds in cycles. In a 'guitar song' session, a singer can join the group already formed for one or two musical cycles and leaves the way he entered. But one can only enter in his turn and can only leave once his turn is over.

10. *Ghana* guitarists can be divided into three categories. The top category includes semi-professional guitarists who normally assume the leading part in most of the sessions they will be participating in; they normally get paid for services rendered during profit-making activities that usually take place out of bar environment. These guitarists have their own group of accompanists who get paid accordingly. Guitarists in this category had even left the *ghana* environment to dedicate more time playing in hotels with a varied repertoire, not necessarily restricted to *ghana* tunes. The second group is that composed of accompanying guitarists that a lead guitarist can rely on for a successful session, mainly for their ability to resume a constant strumming throughout the session. Sometimes they also are assumed the role of leading guitarists. The third group is that composed of accompanists who occasionally join in one session or another just to keep in touch with the few chords they have learned to play on the guitar. As regards the making of a *ghana* guitarist this might go through several stages. A top category guitarist, with twenty-five years experience in *ghana*

described his learning process in the following way: 'At first I used to sing *ghana* alone at home with no accompaniment. One day I was approached by a neighbor guitarist who heard my singing and offered to accompanying me. After three rehearsals he gave me one of his guitars and proposed that I should go home and try some guitar playing myself. He showed me the fingering for the D major chord because that was the tonality that best suited my voice. I then started going to bars to observe the fingering of accompanying guitarists and I used to practice those fingerings at home. One day I was practicing on our doorstep when some *ghannejja* came out of a nearby bar and asked me to accompanying them because they had no one to accompaniment. Things went well and that was my official debut in *ghana* guitar playing. Then from the strumming I progressed to soloing.'

11. For a more information regarding aspects of gender issues in *ghana* see Erler 1998 and Herndon/McLeod 1975

12. Of the *spirtu pront* one should mention at this stage the changes that brought with it the 1953 Folklore Festival. Some of the established criteria for *spirtu pront* competitions held during the festival continued to be adopted by the *ghannejja* themselves in bars (See Fsadni 1992).

13. *Ghana* guitars are produced locally. The sound produced by these guitars can be described as very 'compact' with very low base resonance. Only steel strings are fixed to these guitars.

14. Herndon and McLeod (1980) had identified a number of "commonly mentioned rules of the *spirtu pront*" which have almost the same function to what Magrini (1998) refers to as the "group plan". Magrini (1998: 173) defines the "group plan" as "a collective mental product related to the entire community, acquired rather than consciously learned, and it is the point of reference for anybody who wants to take part in group singing".

15. *Spirtu pront* sessions in bars are normally recorded on tapes by *ghana aficionados*. The first time *ghana* was professionally recorded was in Italy in the 1930s by G. D'Amoto, a company which till the present day still leads a music shop which brings the same name in the capital city Valletta. The first ever released CD of *ghana* was produced in France in 1992 and commissioned by French organizers of a folk festival held in France and to which a group of *ghana* singers and guitarists were invited to participate. A recent development is an *ghana* CD commissioned by *Sedqa* an organization for the prevention of drug abuse. The *ghana* subjects dealt with in this CD are all related to the problem drugs.

16. This was due to a lack of personal technical experience in fieldwork.