

Gender Differences in Maltese Ballad Singing

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The Republic of Malta consists of the two main islands Malta and Gozo (*Għawdex*), located in a wide cultural environment almost at the geographical centre of the Mediterranean. On both islands there is a gradual transition from open countryside to compact communities; some half of the 330,000 inhabitants live in urban areas, the other half in smaller villages and towns. The musical tradition of the islanders flourished until the 1960s, and traces of the tradition can still be found in the countryside, especially in the south of Malta and on Gozo.

During several fieldwork sessions on the islands and in my current research on the vocal and instrumental traditions since the 1980s, I found that there were differences in the extent to which traditional music genres were available to public audiences: lullabies, children's songs and pious songs, games, folk dances and music accompanying manual work are hardly ever heard; in contrast, it is easier to experience extemporised and improvised songs performed by one or more singers in alternation, and ballads.¹ A few kinds of folk music serve new functions in connection with activities related to tourism.

This article gives an introduction to solo ballad singing on the Maltese islands.² Some texts and narrative structures in storytelling have already been described.³ In this article, the socio-musical applications of the ballad genre will be investigated. The essential points will be the evident differences between female and male ballad singing and the ways in which these vary with the social context. Gendered aspects include terminology, musical style characteristics and performance practices.

¹ For vocal traditions on the Maltese islands see the following publications by the author: "Musik ist der Malteser Hauptvergnügen? Über historische Quellen und heutige Musikpraxis auf Malta"; Doris Stockmann & Annette Erler (eds.): *Historische Volksmusikforschung* (Orbis Musicarum 10), Göttingen 1994, pp. 304-19; "Inedit Malte'", *World of Music* 3 (1994) pp. 117-21; "Rivetrovrommer og vekselsang", *Sfinx* XVIII (1995) [special issue on Malta] pp. 81-86. Detailed references by the author in "Malta: Historischer Abriß, Volksmusik, Kunstmusik", *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* V (1996) cols. 1620-24.

² The text is an abridged version of the paper "Ballad Singing on the Maltese Islands: Women's Repertoire and Men's Performance" presented at a study group meeting on *Music and Gender* by the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) in Turku (Åbo), August 4th to 7th, 1994. Financial support from the University of Turku, Finland, and the Danish Music Council (Statens Musikråd) is appreciatively acknowledged. My warmest thanks to Beverly Diamond, Jane Mink Rossen and Christel Braae for fruitful comments.

³ Joseph Cassar Pullicino: "Maltese Ballads", *The Sundial* IV (1944) pp. 23-30. Joseph Cassar Pullicino: "200 Maltese Folk-Songs", *Maltese Folklore Review* I (1962) pp. 8-39. Joseph Cassar Pullicino & Micheline Galley: *Femmes de Malte dans les chants traditionnels* (Éditions du Centre National de Recherche Scientifique), Paris 1981.

The ballad singing tradition, terminology and musical style

The ballad genre is part of the wide spectrum of Maltese and Gozitan sung poetry, which has an established oral tradition.⁴ Its special repertoire consists of a relatively fixed text corpus with tales of the past or topical events, often with a tragic background. From an emic point of view ballad singing is not regarded as *music*, although ballad performers sing and do not just recite, and are occasionally accompanied on instruments. People speak in terms of ballad singing, and the singers name the songs according to their main point of reference, the subject of the song or its textual form.

The local term *għana* includes lyrical performance in general, but female singers do not use this term. The term for performers is *għannej*; this word again indicates an exclusively male domain. Thus the use of *għannej* (sg.) or *għannejja* (pl.) in the literature – for female and male singers in general and for ballad singers in particular – is inaccurate, but has been adopted by scholars as a pragmatic term.⁵

In the ballad tradition, two other lyrical terms are used more specifically among local singers. Women call their ballad singing *poezija*, while men speak of *tal-fatt*, characterising ballad singing as the narration of stories of a melancholy type. Moreover, men often refer to *għana tal-fatt*, which means “an actual *għana*” i.e. an actual story. This label is used as the official term.

The following three music examples (Exx. 1, 2a and 2b) were selected from a female and a male singer of nearly the same age and equal social standing.⁶ Both sang in traditional circumstances, among a gathering of friends and singing their ballads over an extended period of time.

Example 1.

Second double stanza of *Żgugina mara għawdxija* ([the] Gozitan woman [named] Żgugina). It was sung by a woman, Ċetta Buħaġiar Tal-Makkaw (b. 1940), in Victoria on April 3rd 1986.⁷ The singer was sitting inside a friend's house in the company of other women while doing handicraft work. The ballad tells the story of the poor Gozitan widow, Żgugina, who lost her only son Matthew to Turkish pirates; but Saint Dimitrius, riding on a horse, brought him back to her for a moment.

⁴ The Maltese language is related to North African Arabic but draws much of its vocabulary, syntax and idiom from Sicilian. Dialects vary extensively from one village to another and between both islands.

⁵ Maltese authors use to assign the particular ballad singing tradition to the *għana* subject; cf. for example the current discussion by Ranier Fsadni and Paul Sant Cassia, by Manuel Casha, Charles Coleiro and Manwel Mifsud; see also the current classified catalogue of Maltese singing by Anita Ragonesi (Audio-Visual Library at the University of Malta, Mdina); and the Internet homepage on Maltese singing established in 1998 (www.maltese-ghana.ndirect.co.uk).

⁶ The basis for this ballad singing research is the author's sound recording collection with a total of around a thousand items, compiled on the Maltese islands between 1986 and 1995. It includes ballad items with the author's registration nos. 54, 58, 61-64, 67, 90, 91, 105, 110, 125, 126, 129-131, 133, 136, 141, 177, 422-432, 604, 607, 609, 612, 676, 678.

⁷ Collection and transcription by the author, No. 90.

♩ = 110

Din l-im-sejkn-na ta' Zgu-gi-na, tib-ki tib-ki lej l u nhar, dej-jem tit-lob lil San Mitri,
biex jer-ġa' ġgi-bhu-lha d-dar:

7/8

*O San Mit-ri, ġib-li 'l ib-ni. u nix għel-hie-lek minn fil-għo-du
Ħa' nix-għel-lek qas-ba żejt, u dđum tix-għel sa bil-lejl.*

Din l-imsejkn-na ta' Żgugina,
tibki tibki lej l u nhar,
dejjem titlob lil San Mitri,
biex jerġa' ġgibhulha d-dar:
"O San Mitri, ġibli 'l ibni.
Ħa' nixgħellek qasba żejt,
u nix għelhielek minn filgħodu
u dđum tixgħel sa bil-lejl."

This poor woman, our Żgugina,
cried bitterly all day and all night,
praying to Saint [Di]mitrius,
asking him to bring him back home:
"Oh, Saint [Di]mitrius, bring me back my son.
I'll burn a litre of oil in your honour,
I light it up from early morning
and let it burn until late at night."

Example 2a.

First double stanza of *Tal-fatt* (About an actual [story]), sung by a man, Toni Gauci Il-Molla (b. 1944), in Victoria on June 27th 1988.⁸ The singer sat in a small public square in his neighbourhood in the company of a few male friends. He accompanied himself on his Spanish-type guitar. The ballad describes the unlucky life of a young Gozitan woman who has had to marry a rich bridegroom chosen by her father, although she loves a poor man (continues in Ex. 2b).

♩ = 110

Kemm fid-din-ja jkollok tba-ti Mħux min b'mod is-si-bu b'ie-ħor
u kun-tent fi-ha ma tkun qatt. u b'xi sa-lib mġhob-bi kul-ħadd.

3

U ar-raw stess minn din it-fjaġ-ja. Kul-ma għad-da minn għa-li-ha
li kejl-hom daw-na l-ġe-ni-tu-ri. jien bič-čar lil-kom se nu-ri.

Kemm fid-dinja jkollok tba ti
u kuntent fiha ma tkun qatt.
Mħux min b'mod issibu b'ieħor
u b'xi salib mġhobbi kulħadd.
U arraw stess minn din it-fajla,
li kellhom dawna l-ġenituri.
Kulma għadda minn għaliha
jien bič-čar lilkom se nuri.

Oh how much you must suffer in this world
where you can never be happy.
In one way or in another
for everyone must bear his cross.
See for yourselves from this young girl,
that had these parents.
All that she had to endure
I am to show you clearly.

⁸ Collection and transcription by the author, No. 425.

Example 2b.

Second double stanza of *Tal-fatt* by Toni Gauci Il-Molla.⁹ The singer continued his ballad with guitar accompaniment (see Ex. 2a) after a sudden interruption when some neighbours and visitors from abroad joined the party.

♩ = 125

Il-gha-lix mis-sier-ha ġuv-ni mar li kel-lu l-flus, qal-lu: "Għan-dekx ta'bin-tek in-kun l-gha-rus?"
dar-ba għand pja-ċir bi -ja

"U me-la le", il-mis-sier qal-lu, Dan, ta'ra-ġel ħad-lu b'i -du, qa-l-lu: "Il bini-nżew-wġ-ħie-lek".
"ġgur li ħadd ma jtel-li-ħie-lek".

Il-ghalix darba għand missierha
ġuvni mar li kellu l-flus,
qallu: "Għandekx pjaċir bija
ta' bintek inkun l-għarus?"
"U mela le", il-missier qallu,
"ġgur li ħadd ma jtellifħielek."
Dan ta' raġel ħadlu b'idu,
qallu: "Il binti nżewwġħielek."

For one day to her father
went a young man who had wealth,
told him: "Would you be pleased
to have me as her future spouse?"
"Why not?" the father answered,
"nobody will take her from you."
He shook his hand in a gentlemanly manner,
told him: "You can marry my daughter."

Ballad texts include special types of subject development with artistic expression and are organised according to definite rules. All examples have the common double strophic form with two quatrains extended to eight lines, and often built up as four verses, but single lines or three lines of text are possible too. A stanza is usually organised with an 8-7-8-7-syllabic structure and the rhyme scheme *a-b-c-b*, *a-a-b-b* or *a-b-a-b*.

The ballad genre is associated with dipodic rhythm in 2/4- or 4/4-measures, and with specific modes and melodies.¹⁰ The first two music examples (Exx. 1 and 2a) are based on the same melody, while the second stanza by the male singer (Ex. 2b) differs from them. Examples 1 and 2a are in a minor mode, with the tonic as the final and frequent use of the third; this shows the influence of the Italian-Sicilian tradition. Other characteristics such as tetrachord structure, stepwise motion, phrase-specific interval frames and the syllabic structure reveal Greek influence. In Example 2b the major scale, leading notes, and quick 4/4-metre predominate. These derive from English-American popular melodies.

Although Examples 1 and 2a belong to the same melody type, the singing, exemplified by a woman or by a man, shows similarities and differences. Both

⁹ Collection and transcription by the author, No. 426.

¹⁰ Compare the only two published examples of ballad music in Cassar Pullicino (1962) p. 13, and in Martine Vanhove: "Des Għana dans la vie quotidienne à Gozo", *Cahiers de littérature orale* XXIII (1988) pp. 109-26.

singers use the same pitch level, so the woman sings in a deep range while the man uses a countertenor range. The dynamic level differs, although informants sometimes sing as loudly as possible or with a tense voice. Occasionally the male singer includes miming and special gestures. The woman's singing is less pronounced, with accents on the beats, while the male singer uses a characteristic form of quick melismatic accentuation on the first and third beats. The female performance is regular in metre, but phrasing follows the text line divisions with pauses for breath, while the male singer shows strong metre. The ballad by the female singer is unaccompanied, while the male singer uses his own guitar; his singing is in tune with the melodic contour of the instrument and keeps the established tempo.

It can be concluded that the female singer, and the male singer in his first item (Exx. 1 and 2a), use an older kind of musical style, while the continuation of the male singer's ballad (Ex. 2b) includes some more recent musical material. Furthermore, guitar accompaniment affects the mode of singing; it involves singing much more in tune and metre, and this results in further differences between female and male singers.

Subject and performance practice

As described above, the ballad singing exhibits several differences in musical style. The same is true of subject and performance practice, which are governed by social factors. In the following I will describe the social aspects of this vocal genre and the music examples presented.

1. Singing is partly associated with social outings in the company of family members and friends of the singers' own sex, and partly with work. The ballad texts can also be incorporated in improvised sung performances by women or men, or may appear in women's lullabies. Women's ballad singing is associated with home visiting and easy manual work; their singing can be observed as they walk, pick crops or tend animals. Several female informants sang ballads while working in hotels or knitting pullovers for sale to tourists (see Ex. 1). Their ballad singing may go on for a long time and involve breaks, while men sing for fixed periods. Men mainly sing in a *ħanut*, which is a kind of wine shop or bar, outside other specific houses or on special corners or squares (see Ex. 2). Otherwise they provide public entertainment during the feasts of patron saints. It can be observed that women prefer ballad singing in the course of daily activities, and this gives them many opportunities for singing. Men prefer to sing ballads at more planned events, and they say that the rarity of their ballad singing is due to lack of time for such arrangements.

2. In the closed Maltese and Gozitan society, in which public opinion tends to encourage strong conformity, people try to make use of other codes for certain kinds of communication. Singers use commentary and interpretation, knowing

that the hearers will evaluate their performance.¹¹ Thus ballad texts giving an account of current events, people, customs, or political and social ideas may serve as a vehicle for the expression of a singer's opinion. The female singer Ċetta Buñaġiar, known for her extensive repertoire, uses the historical ballad text to remind the audience of the missing son of her friend's family (Ex. 1, reference to the lost son in the ballad). The male singer Toni Gauci, a highly respected member of his community and acknowledged by his music colleagues to be one of the best performers, combines personal stories with locally-based moral statements in his introductory stanza (Ex. 2a). To underline the "actuality" of his tale, this ballad has no specific title besides the single term. Obviously, preferences for ballad texts are gendered; while women tend to prefer historical topics with indirect reference to current circumstances, men give more direct accounts of current events.

3. Devout Roman Catholic inhabitants of Malta and Gozo traditionally draw no line between religious and secular subjects. While women sit together, ballad singing often alternates with rosary praying, hymn singing or songs in honour of saints; and this also happened while I was recording the female informant (Ex. 1). She prefers to sing about her strong religious beliefs – advising people to rely on the support of a saint – rather than other subjects. Men often sing ballads on street corners beside a religious statue (Ex. 2), in front of the church, or beside the statue of the Madonna in the local wine shop. During parish feasts men sing ballads at the secular part of the feast, which is held outside the church, while the religious ceremonies with liturgical music take place inside. Thus both sexes take due account of the content of the text and the circumstances of their singing, and particularly of the religious connotations. While ballad singers traditionally moved unconsciously between the religious and secular realms, in more recent performance contexts the sacred and the secular are more distinct and pious elements are rarely used.

4. There are differences in the instrumental accompaniment of ballad singing: a female singer usually performs solo, while a man will perform a ballad with guitar accompaniment. Women rarely sing with instrumental accompaniment, since the frame drum is the only instrument women play, so accompanied ballad singing would require a male companion. Male singers are always accompanied either by other men or by themselves; in fact they only feel prepared to sing when a guitar is available. The instrument chosen has differed historically, but at present one or two guitars of Spanish type, called *kiterra*, are used.¹² The guitar accompaniment affects the possibilities and the variety of the singing; solo female singing can be

¹¹ Marcia Herndon & Norma McLeod: *Music as Culture*, Darby 1982, pp. 112f. See also Jeremy Boissevain: *A Village in Malta*, New York 1980; and Marcia Herndon & Norma McLeod: "The Interrelationship of Style and Occasion in the Maltese Spiritu Pront", *The Ethnography of Musical Performance* (1980) pp. 147-66.

¹² Cf. Annette Erler: "Instrumental Accompaniment to Maltese Vocal Music", *Studia instrumentorum musicae popularis* XII, Leipzig, in print.

much more spontaneous and individual than male singing with the obligatory instrumental accompaniment. One result of this is a much more extensive female than male repertoire.

5. Society is rigidly segregated along sex lines. Women and men are spatially separated within and outside the village, since men congregate around the parish church, outside the home and at the seashore, while women gather away from the centre, around their homes and in the fields.¹³ Women transmit their ballads to close female relatives and friends, while male singers learn to sing in the company of male singing enthusiasts. Men are hardly ever present at the private sessions where only women sing. Thus the sexual segregation affects the audience for the ballad singing. Female singers listen to the male singing at public presentations; in contrast, male singers rarely hear women's ballads, and usually have no knowledge of the existence of female ballad singing.

6. Ballad singing correlates with class distinctions, since most singers come from the lower classes, partly from agricultural professions and partly from other occupations. The income of both women and men may also come from tourist-related activities. Female singers engage in home crafts, work as maids in hotels (Ex. 1), keep animals or work in the fields. Male singers earn their income as farmers, drivers, mechanics, government employees (Ex. 2), or as industrial or construction workers. Some famous male singers are social outsiders who work as street cleaners or sellers of fruit and vegetables or paraffin. A very small number of them occasionally earn money from singing. While women enjoy ballad singing in a closed circle, male singers focus their ballad singing on special public meetings.

7. Music informants with a wide traditional singing repertoire are locally referred to as a *thobb il-ghana* (she/he likes *ghana*). This term refers to the oral transmission of the local poetry; many of the singers are in fact more or less functionally illiterate. While until the 1950s some ballad texts were printed as unbound pamphlets (see illustration below) and are today written down in books, no written versions of the items presented above are known. Female informants in general do not care for such printed sources and continue to learn ballad texts orally, while some male singers have learned a few ballad texts from these printed versions; for example, the male singer presented here got some textual ideas with the help of his wife, who read published ballad texts to him. Since the musical part of ballads continues to be a purely oral tradition, these publications may present a ballad without any of its traditional contextual features.

¹³ Studied in the case of village life on Malta by Boissevain (1980). The Maltese singing tradition *bormliza* is described in relation to private and public performance by Norma McLeod & Marcia Herndon: "The Bormliza. Maltese Folksong Style and Women", *Journal of American Folklore* LXXXVIII (1975) pp. 81-100.

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Ghalchem dan ma riedx mill-euvel
izda f'ahhar iccumentah
ghax f'nofs il Piazza tal Birgu
imghallak ma riedx jarah.

Hecc bil mohbi tah pistola,
fejn Arturo ferah bigha
il ghalix permess minn tahha
ried li hajtu inebhigha.

U hecc ghamel dan l'imseichen
fart imcapps collu dmija
issigilla dik l'imbabba
li chien halef lil Marija

Ohif talbitu hia spiccia
u strieh minn cull hsbijiet
ghalix patta listess meuta
ta Marija bint is-Sajjed.

T M I E M.



— 8 —

Da 'd-diskors qaluh taljani
Li kien hemm mal prigionieri,
Imi dawn qaluh minn qalbon,
U sgar lilhom hatt ma imieri:-

"Il ftehim bejna u 't-tedeski
Sar liss bejn zeng kapijiet,
U mhux kif qghed tishbu intom:
Sar bejn zeng nazzionijiet."

Dan ifisser li 't-taljani
Mat-tedeski mhumiex hbieb,
Ma riedux jidhlu fil gwerra,
Izda Musso kum ma gieb.

Il giornali tat-taljani
Qalu cjar "li ma kienux
Ghal dil gwerra ippreparati;
Ghalhekk rebh ghad ma kisbux".

Mela Musso minn rajh gwerra
Id-dikiara 'ill-Ingilterra,
X'hin kien jaf illi l'Italia
M'ghandiex biex tgamel il gwerra.

Dana Musso fuq dil biccin
Huwa 'l vera traditur;
It-taljani ha dmir tahom
Li jeqirdu id-Dittatur!

T M I E M.

MUSSOLINI

jaqlahha minn kullmkien!

Rvellijiet kbar fl'Italia



LUPI PRESS
36 ZACHARY STREET, VALLETTA.

Two different printed ballad texts (from the author's collection). For a few coins these unbound pamphlets, composed by professional writers, were once distributed by male singers to the audience.

8. More recently, singing performance with stage presentations has also involved the ballad tradition, and some of these arrangements involve payment for the actors. A woman singer will very rarely go on stage at local parish feasts; however, the presentation there does not differ from the common practice. A small group of male singers, well known on both islands when they come through all the villages, perform as entertainers in a range of styles; their ballad singing occasionally has some special characteristics. During the ballad singing of the male informant presented here (Ex. 2) the situation suddenly altered because of the arrival of unexpected listeners. As a result, the character and expectations of the audience changed from those of a private to those of a public performance context. As a consequence, the singer shifted directly into a public “stage presentation” mode, evident from a different tune and timbre (see the musical analysis above). Men sing in the traditional way for local audiences, but in public performances they occasionally present different musical material; in contrast, women do not alter their ballad style. Thus in the male ballad tradition the audience determines the musical differences in the singing of a ballad.

The characteristic social aspects mentioned above also influence one another of course: for example sex segregation affects the instrumental accompaniment, social contexts provide the opportunity for ballad singing, textual preferences determine the function of ballad singing, and differences between the sacred and secular are reinforced by gender distinctions. In sum, it can be concluded that social differences affect ballad performance practice, and this in turn results in different musical practices.

Gender differences

As demonstrated above, the musical and social aspects cannot be observed separately. Social differences apply to all aspects and the differences are mostly between women’s and men’s singing practice. Table 1 below summarises the differences in female and male ballad singing.

The differences relate to traditional circumstances with the exception of a few recently observed aspects (italicized in the table) which are now affecting the ballad singing genre too. The latter aspects are mostly found in male singers’ ballad practice, in a small group of less than five male singers in the whole republic. They can be regarded as semi-professionals with a traditional local background, since they seek payment for musical performance, and occasionally make recordings.¹⁴

¹⁴ Some local music cassette productions include ballad singing and are distributed through tourist shops. The earliest international publication of a ballad appeared in 1964 (edited by the record label Folkways Records, New York; Reg. No. FM 4047, Item B3), and a first compact disc from 1992 with Maltese folk music also includes two ballads (edited by the Maison des Cultures du Monde, Paris; Reg. No. W 260 040, Items 2 and 4; resp. W 260 000, Item 13); all examples are sung by men. Another relatively recent double compact disc from 1998, dealing with Maltese immigrants in Australia (edited by the Europe-Australian Institute at the Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne; no registration number) includes no ballad items.

While this special kind of male stage presentation can be traced back to the 1970s, the ballad tradition has been influenced by stage presentation since the 1980s, when some singers – beside their regular working salary – started to earn money by singing ballads at special arranged events.

Table 1. Differences in ballad singing by women and by men.

	WOMEN	MEN
CONTEXTS FOR LEARNING	among female singers from men's public singing	among male singers <i>a few ballad texts from print</i>
REPERTOIRE	extensive includes ballads by both women and men	limited ballads by men only
MUSICAL MATERIAL	exclusively in traditional mode solo performance	traditional mode and <i>recent models</i> with instrumental accompaniment
PREFERRED TEXT SUBJECTS	historically-based themes	current issues
SOCIAL CONTEXTS	during leisure time with other women during manual work	<i>on some kind of stage</i> <i>for seasonal income</i>
AUDIENCES	close female relatives and friends private occasions	formal male groups public events
PERFORMANCE SEASONS	all year	<i>mostly in summer</i>

In contrast, women still sing in traditional contexts like manual work, either on their own or with other women, at afternoon gatherings or meetings with religious practices. A recently observed female ballad presentation on a kind of stage was evidence of a change in female public life too, as women performing traditional music in public would formerly have been categorized as prostitutes.¹⁵ Apparently, such behaviour is now gaining social acceptance; at any rate, the conditions among female singers are still different from men's.

Even in traditional circumstances, there are two gender-dependent performance practices in ballad singing. The musical part of ballad singing continues to be purely orally transmitted, since women's singing follows tradition, while some male singers have quite recently begun to practice a different musical style. In addition, ballad singing is no longer restricted to a closed local milieu but is also found at open recreational events. Since these are increasingly becoming institutionalised,

¹⁵ McLeod & Herndon (1975) pp. 90ff.

women may in future also sing at such events. The characteristics of ballad singing depend on the singer's sex, but male ballad singing may also depend on the audience.

Male singers who give stage presentations often declare that they are now much better off and more open-minded than earlier, when people were poor and ignorant. For them, being less ignorant means using traditional subjects and forms of textual organisation, which they call *tradizzjonali*, in conjunction with other and occasionally more modern vocal and instrumental musical styles. Consequently, local melodies are transformed according to certain models which can involve the use of instrumental interludes between stanzas and/or accompaniment by other instruments, e.g. the local friction drum. These were not formerly used in ballad contexts, but originally belonged to other types of local folk music.

The differences between traditional events and the newer venues for ballad singing are recognised in the terminology applied to the different occasions. In particular, older and primarily female informants coming from a traditional musical background describe their singing as *antika*, while men in general speak of *għana antika* independently of the specific vocal genre. In contrast, an arranged concert performance in public can be called (*Maltese*) *folk music*. Table 2 gives evaluations by informants of the different styles of ballad singing. The list of terms is not exhaustive but includes the most common designations. In non-musical performance practice a few pairs differ from those identified below.¹⁶

Table 2. Structurally opposite evaluations of ballad singing.

<i>poeżija</i>	(<i>għana</i>) <i>tal-fatt</i>
female	male
low prestige	high prestige
religious	secular
indoors	outdoors
private	public
(<i>għana</i>) <i>antika</i>	(<i>Maltese</i>) <i>folk music</i>
old	young
weak	powerful
traditional practice	stage style
static	movement

People's evaluations include high rankings of the ballad singing practice, shown in Table 2 by indented lines. The table shows that positive values are assigned to public and stage performance (right side of the table); this refers to the male singing tradition. In contrast, traditional singing practice (left side of the table) belongs more to the female singing tradition, which is less highly esteemed both within the singers' family circles and by listeners; many informants also say that this ballad tradition is less varied in sound.

¹⁶ In the case of Maltese church processions, investigated by Boissevain (1980) p. 76, three of the listed attributes – female, weak and low prestige – belong to the opposite side.

However, each pair of opposites is best regarded as a continuum. There are evaluative scales depending for example on how much prestige is assigned to the singer in relation to the performance context, or how expressive the textual organisation and subject matter are thought to be. In recent performance contexts there is also a sharper distinction between sacred and secular. It can be concluded that the increase in new concert venues for male singers has changed the practice and the evaluation of the genre; informants' evaluations in turn affect the social occasions.

This shift has consequences for the singer's own tradition. Women sing less and less, because their singing appears to be less adequate than the male tradition and stage presentation. Only men's singing influences the public opinion of the ballad tradition, since female singing is not open to public evaluation. Consequently, the actual shift in the ballad genre towards staged performance and its positive evaluation explains why ballad singing is associated with men in public perception today. The proportion of female to male opportunities for ballad performance has changed, and as a result the ballad tradition has come to be seen as a male tradition.

Conclusion

The content and performance style of ballad singing vary with social context and function. Moreover, female and male singers perform ballads in different ways. Since half the population lives in the urban areas, the cultural division between town and country is much less pronounced today than in the past; this also applies to the ballad tradition. Famous male singers are invited to perform all over the islands, where they sing on stage and are seen on video and other media. In contrast, traditional ballad singing at home, on public squares or on musical outings is nowadays quite rare and hidden from public gaze.

Aspects such as the singing in closed social circles, a repertoire mostly transmitted by members of the lower classes, subjects unrelated to normal daily events and lower prestige in general have increasingly given traditional ballad singing a kind of "female" image. But recently, since ballad singing has become part of the stage performance practice on both islands, it has acquired other valued features such as contemporary subject matter, the new prestige accorded to a less tense vocal style, public performance in competitive situations and the consistent use of guitar accompaniment. Ballad singing is therefore being perceived more and more as a "male" tradition.

The once dominant female ballad singing tradition has in public perception changed into a male tradition which has in turn affected female practice. Moreover, in public only the men's tradition is presented in and supported by the mass media, and men are beginning to adapt their ballad singing to newer models. This results in differences between traditional and contemporary staged performance styles. But it is still only the combination of both the men's and the women's traditions that can fully represent the special character of ballad singing on the Maltese islands.

SUMMARY

Gender Differences in Maltese Ballad Singing

Diversity in social contexts and performance practices is investigated in the ballad singing tradition on the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Gozo. The vocal genre is analysed on the basis of recordings from the late 1980s and exemplified in this article by three representative musical transcriptions.

Ballad singing is gendered female or male and the two are distinguished by the terminology. Ballad singing among female singers is usually called *poeżija*, while male singers call it *tal-fatt*. The musical practice of both sexes is the same insofar as they use the same pitch compass for singing, but the two differ in the use of dynamic levels, pronunciation, and recently the melodic material too. Whether there is instrumental accompaniment depends on the singer's sex too, since female singing is solo and male singers are accompanied by the guitar. The accompaniment affects the mode of singing in terms of much stronger adherence to key and metre. Other social differences affect ballad performance practices, since sex segregation establishes the opportunities for ballad tradition and textual preferences condition the function of ballad singing.

The traditional contexts and styles are associated with old-fashioned ideas and are less valued than contemporary staged performances. The latter involve men only and incorporate new influences. Ballad singing is therefore becoming a formalised kind of male performance for the public since traditional ballad singing is falling into disuse and has almost disappeared.

The tradition of ballad singing on the Maltese islands indicates how social differences affect practice, resulting in distinct musical practices.