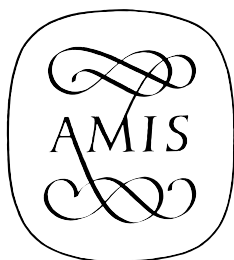


*Journal of the
American Musical
Instrument Society*

VOLUME XXVIII • 2002



Copyright by the [American Musical Instrument Society](#).
Content may be used in accordance with the principles of fair
use under [Section 107 of the United States Copyright Act](#).
Content may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.

The Maltese Friction Drum*

Anna Borg-Cardona

The Maltese islands are situated in the central Mediterranean between Sicily and North Africa. Throughout history, their strategic position has made them a port of call for people of various cultures and religions. The islands, whose earliest settlers were Neolithic people followed by the Megalithic Temple builders, underwent successive occupations by the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Aragonese, Knights of St. John, French, and finally the British. Each group of settlers, to a greater or lesser extent, left some mark on the islands' musical development.

Among the more important instruments of the Maltese we find an early type of bagpipe of very simple construction, a tambourine, and a friction drum. Our focus here will be on the friction drum, which has generally been associated with the festivities known as Carnival that take place during the pre-Lenten period, especially on the four days immediately preceding Ash Wednesday. In the past, in some areas, it also used to be played at Christmastime. Now, we find it still very much in use during Carnival in scattered areas of the smaller island of Gozo, and only occasionally on mainland Malta.

It is somewhat curious that, within such a relatively small area,¹ the instrument should be known by two totally different names. In some places it is known as *rabbaba* or variants such as *ramboba*, *rumboba*, *rabbuba*, *rubbaba*, or *zabbaba*,² while in other areas it is known as *zavzafa* or variants including

*The author would like to thank the following persons who graciously facilitated this research: Joaquin Diaz, Centro Etnografico, Valladolid, Spain, who kindly gave me much information regarding the *Zambomba* exemplars in the museum; the owner of the fine painting by Favray, for allowing me to photograph it and publish a detail showing an eighteenth-century friction drum; Dr. Marie Azzopardi-Alexander of the University of Malta for transcribing Maltese words into phonetic script; and especially the instrumentalists who had infinite patience with me and always proved to be extremely helpful: Frenc Ċini and Pietru from Nadur, Ġienju Portelli of Ġħarb, Ċensu Falzon (*in-Naw*) and Toni Cachia (*il-Ħammarun*) from Naxxar, and Frans Farrugia (*il-Buzzu*) from Hal Ġhaxaq.

1. The Maltese Islands consist of Malta (246 sq. km), Gozo (67 sq. km), and the much smaller island of Comino (6 sq. km).

2. This latter term is quoted by Guido Lanfranco in "Dwar is zafzafa f'Hal Ġhaxaq" [About the zafzafa in Hal Ġhaxaq], *L-Imnara* [*The Oil Lamp*, Journal of Maltese Folklore] 20 (1996): 70. The word *zabbaba* carries connotations of the male sexual organ.

żuvżufa, *żafżufa*, *żavżova*, etc. (Vowels in Maltese, as in other Semitic languages, are frequently interchangeable depending very much on dialectal inflections.³)

The following study is based on fieldwork carried out between 1995 and 2001 in Malta (Naxxar, *Hal Għaxaq*) and in Gozo (Nadur, *Għarb*, *Xagħra*, *San Lawrenz*, and *Xewkija*). Friction drum makers were found to be still active in Nadur and *Hal Għaxaq* and to a lesser extent in *Għarb* and Naxxar. These have been interviewed, photographed, and recorded on either video or audio tape. An attempt has also been made at gathering iconography and documented evidence, in order to throw some light on the history of the instrument on the islands.

General Description

Friction drums, which have been classified by Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs under the Membranophone group of instruments,⁴ are to be found in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. There are two distinct types of instrument: those taking direct friction on the membrane, and those taking indirect friction. In the former the membrane is rubbed either with wet or rosined fingers, or with a stick or horse hair which is pushed up and down through a hole in the membrane. Smaller versions may also be swung in the air to cause friction against the membrane. Malta's present-day instrument produces its sound by indirect friction. This type consists of a vessel covered with animal skin at its single open end. In the center of the skin a cane stick is attached in an upright position, which the player rubs with wet hands.

The vessels vary in size and material depending on whatever happens to be most easily accessible. A small vessel may be no more than 11 cm high, while a larger one may reach 30 cm or even more. It can be made of clay, wood, enamel, tin, or anything possessing the potential of a good soundbox.

The skin of a male cat (*qattus*) seems to be the material generally considered best for the membrane of these drums. Kid-skin (*gidi*), however,

3. The basic vocabulary and structure of the Maltese language is Semitic. On top of this there is an accumulation of Romance influences.

4. Erich M. Hornbostel and Curt Sachs, "Systematik der Musikinstrumente. Ein Versuch," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 46 (1914): 553–590; English translation by Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann as "Classification of Musical Instruments," *The Galpin Society Journal* 14 (1961): 3–29, at p. 22.

is also acceptable and has become the most commonly used. Sheepskin, though it has frequently been used, seems to be looked on rather unfavorably.

The cane stick generally comes from the plant *Arundo donax*, known on the islands as *qasba* (pl. *qasab*). This reed is common in most Mediterranean countries and grows plentifully in damp areas, particularly in valleys. It has also long been used in Malta for making bird whistles, cane flutes, and components of the Maltese bagpipe (reeds, chanter pipes, and blow pipe).⁵

Rubbing the cane stick with wet fingers sets off vibrations which travel down to the stretched skin and enter the sound box, where they are amplified to produce one raucous note. Repeating the rubbing action with the same pressure causes the same note to sound, while varying the pressure on the stick modifies the pitch.

Although the friction drum was widely distributed until the 1950s, there are now very few areas of the Maltese islands in which it is still used. Today it is found in healthy abundance on the island of Gozo, particularly in the village of Nadur and to a lesser extent also in Ġharb. On the main island of Malta it is now limited to the villages of ̄Hal Ġħaxaq and Naxxar (see figure 1). Within these areas there actually now exist two slightly varying constructions of the same type of friction drum. Interestingly enough, these are known to their makers by different names, one as *rabbuba* or *rumbaba*, the other as *żavżova*.

Nadur; Gozo

In the village of Nadur, on the eastern side of Gozo, the friction drum is known as *rabbuba* (*rʌbʷvʷbʌ*),⁶ and still plays an important part in Carnival festivities.⁷ It is considered very much the Carnival instrument, to the extent that a *rabbuba* maker by the name of Frenċ Ċini, a most

5. The Maltese bagpipe known as *zaqq* consists of a complete animal skin, fur side up, and has a double chanter terminating in one cattle horn. Chanter pipe finger-holes are L.5, R.1(V). See J. K. Partridge and Frank Jeal, "The Maltese Żaqq," *The Galpin Society Journal* 30 (1977): 112–144; Anna Borg-Cardona, "The Maltese Bagpipe and Tambourine—19th Century Iconography," *Treasures of Malta*, 5/3 (Summer 1999): 57–63.

6. I have used a broad phonetic transcription of the names for the Maltese friction drum, in order to give an idea of pronunciation. See Albert Borg and Marie Azzopardi-Alexander, *Maltese* (London: Routledge, 1997).

7. Anna Borg-Cardona, "Ir-Rabbaba f'Ġħawdex illum" [The *Rabbaba* in Gozo today], *L-Imnara* [*The Oil Lamp*, *Journal of Maltese Folklore*] 20 (1996): 65–69.



Figure 1. Map of the Maltese islands.

helpful informant aged fifty in 1995, insists that it is not proper to play the friction drum at any other time of the year. Frenč, who comes from a line of friction drum makers, reports that in his family the instrument has always been made exclusively for use during the pre-Lenten period, and is then discarded or put away until the following year. Frenč's father traditionally made friction drums out of earthenware vessels, but Frenč recalls that he sometimes also made them out of old enamel chamber pots. The drums generally had a cat-skin membrane to which a cane stick was attached. Frenč habitually makes five or more instruments every year, in much the same way his father made them before him. However, he now uses an old paint can as a vessel, and kid-skin instead of cat-skin. The vessel is usually 21 cm high by 21 cm in diameter. A cane stick about 76 cm long and 1 cm wide is carefully chosen with a thick notch or node at one end. The skin is cured by soaking it in salted water and drying it for six months. It is then soaked again in water, and while still wet, the notched tip of the cane stick is placed on the center of the fur side, without piercing the membrane. Approximately 3–5 cm of the notched end of the stick are then enveloped and tied firmly from the furless side (fig. 2). Enclosing the notched end within a pouch prevents it from slipping out when the instrument is being played. While still wet, the skin (fur side up), with stick now attached in an upright position, is stretched as tightly as possible over the conveniently-lipped paint can and is centered and tied firmly into place. This usually requires the strength of two or three men in order for the skin to be stretched sufficiently and tied firmly. At this stage the instrument is left to dry for about fifteen days. Finally, the paint can is covered with fancy material and the tip of the stick decorated with tassels of colored ribbon (fig. 3). Curiously enough, though Frenč makes several instruments a year, he himself does not play the friction drum but prefers to play the tambourine.

In addition to Frenč Ćini there are still several other friction drum makers in Nadur who make the instruments in much the same way, and it is encouraging to see even the younger generation taking an interest in both playing and making the *rabbuba*.

Another maker, by the name of Pietru, utilizes his mother's old tin kitchen pots or enamel chamber pots. In this area, any vessel of whatever nature is deemed acceptable for the purpose of the friction drum. The instrument was, and still is, improvised out of objects found in the home. To add to this improvisatory nature, we find that not all instrument makers will take the trouble to prepare the skin meticulously or to cover the

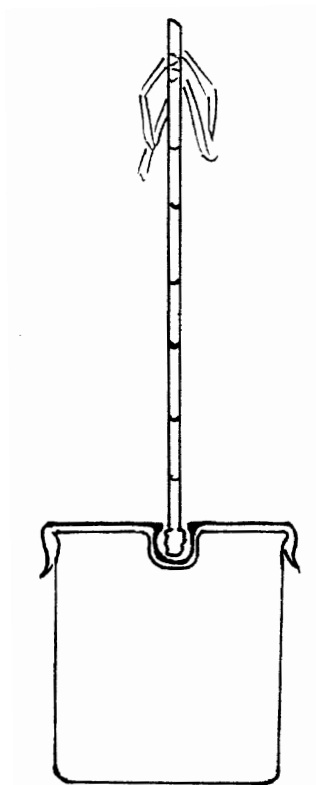


Figure 2. Cross section of the friction drum as constructed today in Nadur, Gozo (drawing by the author).



Figure 3. *Rabbuba* from Nadur, Gozo (1995), made from paint can, goat skin, *Arundo donax* reed (author's collection).

vessel with fancy material. Pietru himself does not care to cover his instruments, though colored lengths of wool or ribbon are always added to the end of the stick. Neither is he too particular about curing the skin. An instrument made at shorter notice, with a barely treated skin, is naturally used only for a few days and is then unceremoniously discarded or dismantled. One instrument given to me by Pietru in Carnival of 1996 soon after became worm-infested and began to lose its fur. Very often an instrument ends its life as a decorative element hanging on the wall of a bar.

Though present-day Nadur *rabbuba* makers all leave the fur side of the skin visible, Pietru informed me that their predecessors preferred to place the fur side beneath. No instruments of this kind were met with anywhere in Gozo.

Instrumental Combinations. The friction drum is not usually played as a solo instrument but in conjunction with other instruments such as accordion, tambourines, castanets, and triangle. In all the combinations that I heard, rhythm instruments strongly predominated, with melody instruments often being drowned out by the percussive sound. It is the noise and rhythmic beating which is of utmost importance in creating the atmosphere required in the pre-Lenten celebrations. One will frequently find one single, barely-audible melody instrument accompanied by several tambourines, castanets, and friction drums. Combinations of instruments vary from year to year and even from evening to evening in the same Carnival, depending very much on which instruments happen to be readily available. A few of the combinations encountered are listed in table 1 to give some idea of the proportional representations.

A cursory look at these combinations reveals an outstanding predominance of rhythm instruments as a typical feature of Carnival music among all groups. The instruments invariably present in Nadur are accordion, tambourines, and friction drums. All other instruments seem to be variables depending on availability. It should also be mentioned that two types of castanets are encountered, one with a central wooden handle between the two parts and the other without. In each case the pair of castanets is held in the right hand and struck against the palm of the left hand.

Performance practices. Whereas some ten years ago performers used to play out in the streets as well as inside bars, today they usually play inside one of the local coffee/tea shops, wine bars, or clubs in the evenings of the few days before Ash Wednesday. The reason for this change of venue is that modern disco groups with amplifiers have now taken their place outdoors. In Nadur the traditional music-making tends to start a full week before Carnival.

The friction drums seen in Nadur are held horizontally beneath the left arm and the cane stick is rubbed downwards with the fingers of the right hand. A damp sponge is held in the palm of the right hand in order to wet the stick at the moment the fingers are sliding down it.

Table 1. Instrumental combinations in Carnival, Nadur.

	Saturday, Feb. 25, 1995	Friday, Feb. 16, 1996	Saturday, Feb. 17, 1996
	Nadur Youngsters Football Club	Nadur Youngsters Football Club	<i>Mnarja</i> Band Club, Nadur
Accordion	1	1	1
Guitar			1
Friction Drum	2	1	4
Tambourine	2	1	3
Bass Drum			1
Castanets	2	1	2
Triangle			1
Maracas			1

Pressure is applied only in the downward movement. During performance, the sponge is constantly being wetted from supply bottles close at hand. Frenč instructs performers playing on his instruments to be very careful not to allow water to drip onto the skin, since this will easily damage and rip it, rendering the instrument useless.

Friction drum players generally prefer to stand while playing in order to feel free to dance and gyrate around their audience, thereby attracting much attention (fig. 4). Like most carnival instruments, friction drums are frequently passed from one player to another throughout the evening. Though there is usually a nucleus of permanent musicians, several other people feel free to join the group and take part in the music-making for short stretches, if an instrument is available. It must be stressed that performers are exclusively male. No woman is likely to be seen playing any of the Carnival instruments, though men dressed as women are frequently seen temporarily joining the band. Women's part in Carnival festivities is restricted to that of spectators. Many older women do not even deem it fit to be seen out in the streets, and prefer to stay home watching passers-by from their balcony. In some places, such as inside the *Mnarja* Band club, the audience, including women, is very particular about sitting by the walls of the room (*dawra mejt*) and viewing the musicians only from a distance. Disguised male individuals may enter the room and gyrate in the center in some semblance of improvised dance. In the bars, however, the musicians stay huddled in a corner and the room is usually jam-packed with individuals drinking beer and generally having a good time.



Figure 4. *Rabbuba* player, Nadur Carnival, 1997.

Performers also appear out on the streets of Nadur during the day-time celebrations, usually preceding or following the large papier-mâché floats. This part of the Carnival is meticulously organized by the local council and therefore does not leave much room for the spontaneity found in the evening celebrations. One friction drum player in the musician group of Sunday morning in February 1997 was embarrassed to take his unclad instrument, made from a can of emulsion paint, out in broad daylight and therefore thought it more fit to hide it inside a plastic bag.

The music heard in Nadur was all played at an average of 106–126 beats per minute. Slower pulses seem to be highly uncomfortable for friction drum players, and they usually drop out if the pulse gets much slower. Melodies are very often British or Italian popular tunes of the twentieth century, such as *You are my Sunshine* and *Marina* (see example 1). They also include some present-day tunes such as *Viva l-Karnival*, and

Marina

Rocco Granata, 1962

♩ = 126

Accordion

Friction drum

Example 1. *Marina*.

occasionally the traditional Maltese (not Gozitan) *Il-Maltija* (example 2).⁸ One may also hear some local band melodies (example 3).⁹

Għarb, Gozo

In the village of Għarb the friction drum has always been known as *zavzufa* (zAV'zVVA). It was previously very popular, as was most instrumental playing and folk singing known as *għana*.¹⁰ The process of transmission of traditional music from the older generation to the younger one was, unfortunately, greatly disrupted owing to the mass emigration that

8. *Il-Maltija* is a Maltese dance which survives in two forms: one performed in full eighteenth-century court dress in the Magistral Palace since at least 1844, and the other as a peasant dance in Maltese costume. *Il-Maltija* is one of the most popular tunes heard in Malta over the Carnival period, but it is not as frequently heard in Gozo.

9. Almost every village in Malta and Gozo has its own wind and brass band, each having its own club. The band is often named after the patron saint or saints of the village. Nadur honors Saints Peter and Paul, whose feast falls on June 29, known as *Mnarja*. In all wind and brass band clubs, older band members usually train the younger students interested in joining them. The band master himself composes marches, which are performed, together with other established band repertoire, in the many village feasts on the islands. The friction drum is not among the instruments used in these village bands.

10. *Għana* (pronounced "ana") is the term used for the traditional song of the Maltese. This can be divided into *għana spirtu pront*, which consists of improvised quatrains with an abcb rhyme; *għana tal-fatt*, which is story telling or ballad recitation in rhyme; and *għana fil-gholi*, a high-pitched melismatic singing also known as *la Bormliza*.

Il-Maltija

Traditional

♩ = 120

Accordion



Friction drum




1 2



Example 2. *Il-Maltija*.

March of the Mnarja Band

♩ = 120

Accordion



Friction drum




Example 3. March of the *Mnarja* Band.

took place after the Second World War. This was also the cause of the gradual closing down of all the wine and coffee/tea shops which existed in the village. Traditional music making on the Maltese Islands has always centered around such coffee shops, bars, and clubs, which as a rule are attended only by the men of the village. Without these recreational areas the village loses its vital pulse. Owing to these factors, music in Għarb had therefore been silent for a number of years. When young musicians recently became interested in reviving the old tradition, they began by procuring friction drums from Nadur, where they are called *rab-buba*. However, it seems that the method of construction in Għarb was previously similar to that of Nadur. This was confirmed by one informant, Ġienju Portelli, who is now making his own friction drums and tambourines with some guidance from his elderly uncle, who was renowned for making them in his younger days.

The essential clubs and coffee shops in Għarb are still lacking. In this quiet agricultural village only one day of Carnival is officially celebrated, usually Monday. Decorated tractors carrying placards and masked youngsters clad in sheets or coveralls and hideous masks may, however, be seen going through the village streets occasionally on all four days of Carnival, often blowing old car horns and twirling wooden ratchets. Music-making was encountered in the parish hall on Monday night, February 19, in the Carnival of 1996. The friction drums used were made from empty food cans and paint cans, with a goatskin membrane and a fixed *Arundo donax* stick. The cans were not covered or decorated in any way. The instrumental combinations in Għarb consisted of one accordion, one concertina, two friction drums, two tambourines, and one pair of maracas.

Once again, as in Nadur, one notices the vital presence of the accordion, tambourines, and friction drums. Melodies were almost all taken from popular Italian or English tunes of the twentieth century, very similar to those heard in Nadur. The traditional Maltese (not Gozitan) slow, lilting *Dgħajsa ġejja* was heard on one occasion, but this proved very unsuccessful, and was immediately abandoned.

Groups of men from Għarb have in recent years joined up to recreate traditional music and to perform on folk nights all over the islands. The friction drum is always included in these groups. According to Ġienju, in Għarb the *zavżufa* was always a member of the group at all times of the year. He particularly emphasized that in his younger days the harvest

merriment used to be danced to the sound of the accordion, tambourines, triangle, and friction drum.

On Għarb Day, on August 26, 1996, one of these newly-formed groups was performing in the village square, while people from the village displayed old crafts and trades (fig. 5). The instrumental group consisted of an accordion, two tambourines, castanets with a central handle, a triangle, and a friction drum. The friction drum player, wearing the typical Maltese waistcoat and cap, was seated while playing. He held a sponge in the palm of his right hand, and kept a bottle of water nearby in order to wet the sponge when necessary. On this particular evening, several traditional *għana* melodies were also being played.

San Lawrenz and Xagħra, Gozo

In the villages of San Lawrenz and Xagħra the friction drum is known as *zavżufa* (zAV 'zvʋfʌ). Though several people from these areas previously made their own instruments, now they are no longer active, and instrumentalists tend to be imported from nearby villages.

In both villages there had always been a close association between music and dance, which persisted up to very recent years. Carnival was the time for the performance of a series of dances known collectively as the *kumitiva*. In Xagħra these were, in latter years, generally accompanied by musicians playing accordion, guitar, mandolin, tambourines, castanets, triangle, and friction drum.

According to a group of old men who were very keen on the dances and had actually taken part in them as boys of fifteen, the *kumitiva* had always been danced by men together with boys of puberty age. The boys wore women's clothing and represented the female sex. Women had always been excluded from the actual dancing, though they did gather round as spectators. The dances included circular formations and linear rows of male and "female" dancers. One particularly attractive dance involved couples in circular formation, around a high maypole, each person holding the end of a red or white ribbon the other end of which was fixed to the pole. The movements were very carefully planned so that the ribbons were intricately woven and then slowly unravelled by repeating the same steps backwards. The elderly informants recalled that musicians in the past used to perform in the center of the circle.

In Carnival 2001, the *kumitiva* was being danced once again in Xagħra. In one of the dances in linear formation (fig. 6), couples raised



Figure 5. *Żavżufa* player, Għarb Day, August 26, 1996.

their arms to form a tunnel. Each couple from the rear then passed beneath the tunnel (men first) and moved to the front of the formation. One of the dancers always acted as leader throughout, and blew a whistle every time there was a change of step or formation. A decorated pole was erected in the center of the *piazza* and a basket of flowers was placed on the ground beside it. A very young boy and girl were also in the arena together with an older man who danced with them in circles (fig. 7). Another old man wearing a dark suit and hat and carrying a walking stick was strutting around the dancers amusing the spectators with his antics all the while the dances were underway.

Whereas previously these dances took place in a relatively secluded part of the village, they are now being danced in the central *piazza* in front of the parish church in the early afternoon, and again later in the



Figure 6. Dancing the *Kunitiva* in Xaghra, Gozo, Carnival 2001: linear formations.



Figure 7. Dancing the *Kunitiva* in Xaghra, Gozo, Carnival 2001: circular formations around pole and young children in center.

evening. The evening dances showed much less formality and more freedom among the dancers. "Females" did not wear identical costumes as they did in the early afternoon, but were all clad differently, in clothing which boldly over-emphasized femininity. The evening performance was probably more in keeping with the spirit of the old traditional dances. In both cases, the dancers were accompanied by a band of instrumentalists placed on a podium on the side of the square, playing accordion, guitar, tambourines, and friction drum. In 2001, the Neapolitan *triccaballacca* was also added.¹¹ When I asked the instrumentalists about this particular instrument, I was told that it had been seen on television, struck their fancy, and was duly imitated.

Over the years the dances have lost their original significance, but maypole dances and tunnel formations, which are widely distributed in Europe, are considered to have originally been ritual dances associated with fertility and nature cycles. The pole erected in the center symbolizes fecundity. The basket of flowers represents the bountiful produce of the spring season. Recent research has placed the *kumitiva* dances firmly in the framework of fertility rites, and also established their similarity to dances in Southern Italy.¹² These dances of a basically agricultural people, with close ties to the land, are ritualistic manifestations that have been carried down from generations past. Melodies accompanying the dances recently, as in Nadur, are mostly well-known popular English or Italian melodies from the twentieth century. Musicians were not all from Xaghra; some were imported from Għarb and other villages.

Xewkija, Gozo

It came as somewhat of a surprise to find that although a very lively, vibrant music was taking place in Xewkija, this never, on any occasion that I witnessed it, included the friction drum that was so much a part of music played in Carnival elsewhere in Gozo. In this village instruments were found to be more of the improvised sort. The traditional type of music-making was seen on several nights in one of the bars known as "Glory of

11. The *triccaballacca* is a type of wooden clapper which is typical of Naples. It is made up of three or more long wooden sticks or hammers that hit against each other when shaken. This particular shape of instrument is foreign to Malta, though several other forms of wooden clappers and ratchets are traditionally used during Holy Week.

12. Vicki Ann Cremona, "Carnival in Gozo: Waning Traditions and Thriving Celebrations," *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 5/1 (1995): 68-95. See also Carmelina Naselli, "Aspects de la danse rituelle en Italie," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 6 (1954): 15-17.

England," and another time in a garage which was given a special permit to be turned into a bar over the Carnival period. In 1996 and 1997 a large drum (*tanbur*) was made from an old oil drum with imitation leather stretched tightly over it. It was struck from above with a wooden mallet, which one year had a tennis ball pierced into the end of it. Another instrument was a farmer's metal hoe held by a string and struck with a small hammer (1996) or a large nail (1997). This produced a penetrating tinkling sound somewhat similar to a triangle. Tambourines in this area were also home-made, some with membranes stretched over wooden frames, others with imitation leather over aluminium frames. Tambourines were considered to be common property of the bar and were passed round to anyone wishing to play them. The hoe, however, was jealously clung to by the farmer who owned it (fig. 8).

Instruments in Xewkija are a perfect example of the improvisatory element of Carnival and reflect an old custom of making use of any implement in the home that is likely to produce noise. Kitchen pots and wooden spoons used to be likely candidates until the 1960s in many areas of Malta and Gozo. The friction drum, however, has not found its place among the musical instruments of these people. But the improvised drum, not often present in other villages, can be heard booming its regular beats, very often completely drowning the melody.

While groups of musicians perform, spectators (mostly men but including a few women) sit on the sides of the room watching. Men drink bottle after bottle of beer and some will also dance in the center, frequently giving out a high-pitched shriek to demonstrate their participation and enjoyment of the music. One evening, disguised male individuals who were seen out in the street were invited into the "Glory of England" bar. On the inmates' insistence, they entered, danced around the room in a gyrating, contorting fashion for some time, and then left without ever uttering a word or disclosing their identity. The instruments used in the "Glory of England" bar on Monday, February 19, 1996, were one accordion, three tambourines, one drum, and one hoe played with a hammer. On Saturday, February 8, 1997, in the garage/bar there were one accordion alternating with a mouth organ, five tambourines, one drum, and one hoe played with a nail.

Melody versus Rhythm

A curious incongruity was found to prevail in most of the music heard in Gozo. Though the rhythm instruments used are a continuation of a



Figure 8. Some of the musicians in Xewkija, 1997: accordion (right), tambourines (left), and hoe (center).

primitive tradition, the same cannot be said of the melody instruments and their melodies. Only rarely is there a recognizable “traditional” Maltese or Gozitan tune among them. Almost all melodies are taken from the period of World War II and the post-war years, many from Italian, Neapolitan, or British popular melodies of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Some of those heard were *Never on a Sunday*, *If you knew Suzie*, *Lilly the Pink*, *You are my Sunshine*, Kenneth Alford’s 1914 *March* (later the signature tune of the film *The Bridge over the River Kwai*), *Marina*, *O Marie*, and *Angiolina*. The melodies being played thus seem totally incongruous with the type of instruments used. Concertinas and accordions are a relatively recent addition, probably in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. What, therefore, was the music like before they found their permanent place in the band? Was there another type of melody instrument such as bagpipe or fiddle? Or was the music a totally rhythmic, percussive sound? When I asked in Nadur what sort of music is usually expected in Carnival, after much searching the reply was “noise” (*ħoss*). No particular melodies could be mentioned. On the other hand, the friction drum was, without hesitation, quoted to me as “*id-daqqa tal-Karnival*” (the Carnival sound). This seems to imply that percussion and

rhythm are all that constitutes the expected sound of Carnival, and that the friction drum, generally beating at roughly 120–126 beats per minute, is foremost among the instruments expected.

The eighteenth-century Jesuit, Filippo Bonanni, offers an interesting description of Italian peasants dancing to the pulse of a similar friction drum accompanied by the sound of a bovine horn, during grape harvesting (*vendemmia*).¹³ No melody instruments were deemed necessary for this festivity. It is very likely that this type of sound was also typical of Carnival on the Maltese islands. One British traveler who was in Malta in the early nineteenth century recorded that Carnival festivities invariably opened with the blowing of bull horns.¹⁴ This ancient custom was still prevalent up to the early twentieth century. Natural bull horns were soon replaced by tin and later by plastic instruments, which are still in use today.

Naxxar, Malta

In Naxxar the friction drum is known as *rumbaba* (*rvm'baaba*). The instrument has traditionally always been made out of earthenware or wooden vessels. The paint cans (and worse still the chamber pots) used in Gozo are looked down on and derided as totally unworthy and disgraceful. In this area, old wooden wine casks were often used for the purpose when they were easily obtainable from the nearby wine factory. The membrane is usually either kid or calf. One such instrument that I saw belongs to Censu Falzon, known as *in-Naw*. It was made by another musician, Toni *il-Ħammarun*, a well-known bagpiper renowned for being adept at making folk instruments, especially his own bagpipes. This particular friction drum is 30 cm high by 23 cm wide and has a furless goat-skin that is neatly trimmed and stretched tautly over the wooden cask (fig. 9). When it was made, the skin was first soaked for three days until the fur fell off. While the skin was still wet, a cane stick was attached to its center and tied from beneath to form a pouch, known in Naxxar as *zokra* (belly button). The skin was then firmly stretched over the cask and a whole row of pellet bells strung like a necklace around the top outer rim.

13. Filippo Bonanni, *Gabinetto armonico* (Rome, 1722), 121; see also illustration LXXXIII in Frank L. Harrison and Joan Rimmer, *Filippo Bonanni, The Showcase of Musical Instruments* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964).

14. See Samuel Sheridan Wilson, *16 years in Malta and Greece* (London: John Snow, 1839), 43.

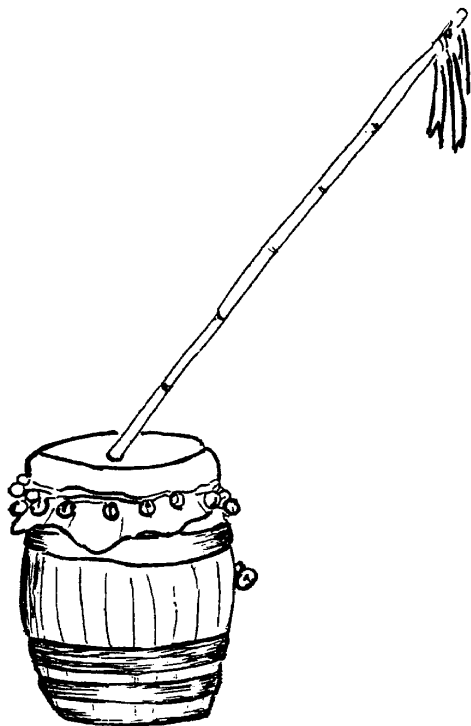


Figure 9. *Rumbaba*, Naxxar, Malta, made from wooden barrel, goatskin, and *Arundo donax* reed; the upper rim is strung with pellet bells (drawing by the author).

Finally, the end of the cane stick was decorated with red and white ribbons. Ćensu's instrument is one previously used repeatedly by his group of musicians in tourist folklore nights. The group usually included Toni *il-Ħammarun* on *zaqq* (bagpipe), Ćensu *in-Naw* on *rumbaba*, and his brother, Karmenu, on *tanbur* (tambourine). Prior to this wooden *rumbaba*, Ćensu had used an instrument made from an earthenware vessel ordered for the purpose to his own specifications from a local potter. The vessel was some 30 cm high, had a goatskin membrane, an *Arundo donax* stick about 55 cm long, and was strapped around the neck with a length of Malta weave.

Performance Practices. The village of Naxxar, situated in the center of Malta, is an area in which traditional music-making was still very popular

up to recent years. Several people from this area were regularly invited to play in upscale restaurants and nightclubs during the tourist boom of the 1960s and 70s. The result of this was perhaps not always totally beneficial to traditional music practices, since some alterations were bound to take place in order to fit the new situation. This is when the *rumbaba* was pulled out of its Carnival context and began to habitually accompany the Maltese *zaqq* and *tanbur* on any occasion for tourist purposes. The *rumbaba* in the Naxxar area was previously associated solely with Carnival, as has been confirmed by elderly inhabitants of the village with whom I spoke.

In the Naxxar area the friction drum is held under the left arm as is customary in other areas, but here it is often supported by being hung around the neck. It is played with wet fingers, but no sponge is used. A plastic bottle filled with water is usually carried around to moisten the hand.

Today these ancient instruments are played only by older members on occasions when requested by the local council. The younger generation, sons and grandsons of previously very active musicians in this area, do not relate to their traditional instruments any more and are more than happy to discard them.

It is interesting to find documented records dating back to the fifteenth century that show that Carnival was already being celebrated in Naxxar, in some form or another, as far back as 1400. In a militia list of 1419–20¹⁵ we find that it had then become customary for *Carnivali* to be given as a Christian name. Three individuals with such names hailed from Naxxar.

Hal Għaxaq, Malta

In the village of Hal Għaxaq, on the southeastern side of Malta, the friction drum is known as *žavžova* (ŽAV'ŽOČVA). In this village the instrument, though basically of the same kind, has traditionally been made in a conspicuously different way. A maker known as Frans Farrugia, nicknamed *il-Bužžu*, is now following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps and makes friction drums to this day, not only for himself, but also for his grandchildren. Frans says that earthenware vessels were used in the past, but strong metal paint pots known as *patalotti* took their place when they came into common use in his father's time. Cat-skin used to be considered the best type of membrane, but it is now no longer used,

15. Godfrey Wettinger, "The Militia List of 1419–20," *Melita Historica* 5/2 (1969): 80–106.

having been replaced by either kid-skin or even rabbit-skin. Sheepskin, on the other hand, is never used. The fur side of the skin is here traditionally placed on the underside, and friction drums are still made this way today. Instead of the cane stick being carefully chosen with a notch or node at one end, as it is in Nadur and Naxxar, it is retained in place by a different method (fig. 10). A piece of wood about 12–15 cm long is shaped in such a way as to serve the same purpose as the notch. This wooden construction, tapering to a point at one end and widening at the other, is known as *seffut* (funnel). About 2.5 cm above the wider section a narrowing neck is carved into the wood. The wider, bulbous part is enclosed firmly within the central area of the skin (furless side), and tied with hemp from beneath at the narrowing neck. The remaining tapering part is left protruding from the center of the membrane (fig. 11). The hollow cane stick is then simply fitted over the protruding narrow piece of wood only when required for performance. In this way, according to Frans, the drum is less cumbersome to carry around. With this method of construction the cane stick is not actually in direct contact with the membrane but is only an added extension. Vibrations are therefore passed from the rubbed cane to the wooden fixture and from there to the stretched skin. The cane stick is also adorned in a strikingly different manner. At the top end several layers of metal discs, made out of flattened bottle tops, are attached to horizontally placed strips of wire. These produce a jangling simultaneously with the pulsating raucous sound. This external addition makes the instrument look strikingly different from the other friction drums on the islands.

Performance practice. The *žavžova* in Hal Għaxaq was traditionally played as a solo instrument out in the streets during Carnival. Children used to follow the friction drum player down the streets singing along with him the following verses (see example 4):

The first month!
 The second month!
 The third month!
 The fourth month!
 The *bùffu* is my younger brother
 Whatever has he done to his woman (/wife)?
 La la la la li la
 La la li la la la la.¹⁶

16. There are several minor variations in both rhythmic accompaniment as well as words of these verses. A slightly different version adds the word “help!” (*ajjut*) after each month:

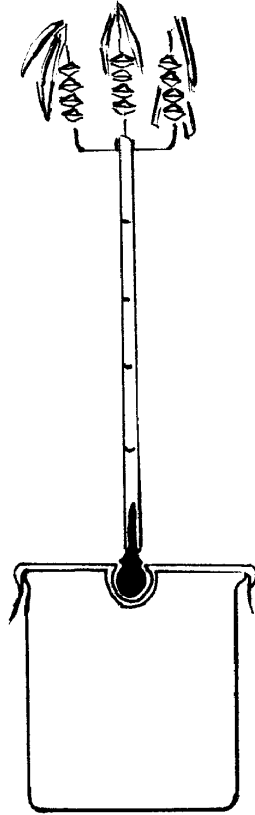


Figure 10. Cross section of *zavzova* as constructed today in Ħal Ġhaxaq, Malta (drawing by the author).

These words, seeming like a riddle to us today, are still recalled by some, but nobody was able to explain their meaning to me. They were simply quoted as “Carnival nonsense.” Considering the mention of months,

L-ewwel xahar—ajjut! (help)

It-tieni xahar—ajjut

It-tielet xahar—ajjut! . . .

Il- buġfu ħija ż-żgħir

X'għamillha l-mara tiegħu?

Frans informed me that when his father, Ġuzeppi, used to go down the street singing these verses, the family nickname *Buzzu* was sometimes teasingly substituted for *Buġfu* by other revellers because Ġuzeppi had a very large family. It is also interesting to note that in Campobasso, Italy, the friction drum is known as *bufù*, which may indicate some correlation with the *būffu* in the Maltese verses.



Figure 11. *Żavżova* from Hal Għaxaq, showing paint can (*patalott*) and goat skin with fixed wooden attachment, over which the detachable *Arundo donax* stick will be inserted.

they may well stem from some ancient rhymes associated with the nature cycle and fertility, or more specifically with pregnancy. Frans well recalls his father, Ġuzeppi, playing the friction drum out in the street followed by several children singing the above verses. Village children following him usually had their own smaller versions of the friction drum, with rabbit-skin for a membrane.

Frans also recalls his father singing (*jgħanni*) in the local bars and accompanying himself on the instrument during the Carnival period. He was known to improvise rhyming quatrains on the subject of hunting or bird trapping, which were his favorite pastimes. Ġuzeppi was accustomed to carrying an extra stick with all its appendages with him, just in case the one in use broke during performance. Frans today does the same.

It is interesting to find that older Hal Għaxaq folk recall the friction drum being played not only in Carnival, but also at Christmastime, by young boys inside the church. There it accompanied the bellows-organ, the triangle, and a tambourine with jingles. The old church sacristan,

Carnival tune -
Hal-Ghaxaq

The musical score consists of two parts: a vocal line and a Friction drum line. The vocal line is written on a single treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes. The Friction drum line is represented by a single staff with a horizontal line, where vertical stems indicate drum hits. The lyrics for the drum part are placed below the staff.

Vocal lyrics:
 L-ew - wel (tax?) - xahar
 It- tie - ni xahar It- tie - let xahar
 Ir - ra - ba' xahar Il - Buffu
 hi - ja z-zghir x'gha - mil - lha l - ma - ra tie - ghu
 la lal la lal la li la
 lal la li la lal la la

Friction drum

Example 4. Carnival tune, Hal-Ghaxaq.

Karmnu Agius, aged 82 in 2001, remembers Ġuzeppi himself playing the friction drum in the parish church, as a boy of about ten, in the above-mentioned combination of instruments. This seems to be the only area in which there is recollection of the friction drum's association with Christmas.

Length of Musical Celebrations

Since Carnival is the time of year in which the friction drum is predominantly used, it would be of some interest to mention the duration of the musical activities associated with Carnival. In both Malta and Gozo, Carnival officially spans four days, namely the Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday (*Ras ir-Randan*). This is the general case in Malta, where Carnival is totally organized and centralized in the capital, Valletta. A similarly organized Carnival also takes place in Victoria, Gozo's capital. In some areas of Gozo, however, long before any disguises or masks have appeared on the streets, the musicians are already building up the spirit of festivity. This period seems to differ with every village.

It is interesting that evidence has been found in Santo Spirito Hospital records (Malta), suggesting that in 1520 there was an extended period of pre-Lenten relaxation for a full four weeks before Carnival time proper.¹⁷ This record does not include evidence of musical celebrations, but it does indicate a relatively lengthy extension of the period, which would have also been mirrored outside the hospital premises.

In Nadur, Gozo, the Carnival celebrations start out in the streets on Friday night, thus encompassing five full days. The music-making within the bars may commence a further full week prior to this. It must be pointed out that the Carnival in Nadur has become by far the most popular, perhaps to the detriment of festivities in other villages in Gozo.

In Xewkija, it was stated to me in no unclear terms that immediately after Christmas festivities are over, the Carnival music commences. This therefore encompasses some five or six weeks of vigorous playing. By the final days of Carnival, the instruments in Xewkija are visibly battered. Drum and tambourine membranes are burst, patched, and repatched, in order to be still usable right up to the last night.

17. Stanley Fiorini, "Carnj per lu Carnivalj," *Melita Historica* 9/4 (1987): 311-314.

On Tuesday, the final night of Carnival, all music-making everywhere stops promptly (occasionally not quite so promptly) at midnight. Traditionally the feasting used to end with a mock funeral procession in which Carnival was carried off in a coffin, symbolizing that all pleasures must come to an end. The *kumitiva* dancers also traditionally wore black on Tuesday night, as a sign of mourning. The Lenten period of fasting and abstinence is now not as rigorously adhered to as it used to be in the past, but the abrupt end to music and revelry immediately brings on the solemn mood of the time. Most of the instruments are then put down—some, like the friction drum, not to be picked up again till the same time the following year.

Earliest Evidence of the Friction Drum in Malta

The first mention of the friction drum in Europe appears in a work by Marin Mersenne in 1636.¹⁸ Iconographically, the instrument also appears in several seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish paintings by artists such as Pieter Breughel (c. 1564–1638), Frans Hals (1580–1660), Jan Molenaar (1609–1668), Jan Steen (1626–1679), and Adriaen van de Velde (1636–1672).

Dutch merchants traded constantly with Malta between 1580 and 1600, but no iconographic or written records of friction drums in this period have surfaced on the islands. The earliest known portrayal of the instrument in Malta features in an eighteenth-century painting (fig. 12) by Antoine Favray (1706–1798). This portrays a dwarf Pulcinella in a Carnival context, playing a notably small friction drum with a very short stick. The first known mention of the instrument in the Maltese islands dates from the mid-eighteenth century (c. 1759), and is found in a dictionary by the Gozitan scholar Canon Gianpietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis (1712–1770). Worth noting is the fact that he mentions only the name *rbaba* for friction drum. No mention whatsoever is made of *żuvżafa* (or any of its variants). He describes the eighteenth-century friction drum as

a peasant instrument made out of a large earthenware pot, full of water. It is covered with skin, like a drum, but has a hole in the middle into which is

18. Marin Mersenne, *Harmonicorum instrumentorum libri IV* (Paris, 1636, reprinted in 1648 as part of *Harmonicorum libri XII*; facs. ed. Geneva: Minkoff, 1972), 111.



Figure 12. Detail from painting by Antoine Favray (1706–1798) showing Pulcinella (far right) playing a small friction drum in Carnival (private collection, Malta).

placed a piece of cane or a slim stick which is pushed up and down with the palm of the hand, making a loud and sonorous, but not unpleasant sound.¹⁹

The same description of the *rbaba* appears in a later version of the dictionary by the same author.²⁰ In both definitions Agius De Soldanis says that the instrument was filled with water and that the skin was pierced in the center. Similar characteristics are mentioned a few decades later in the work of another Maltese writer, Mikiel Anton Vassalli, in his *Lexicon* of 1796.²¹ Vassalli calls the friction drum *rabbaba* and likewise makes no mention of *zuvzafa* as a musical instrument. Vassalli, however, does significantly mention that *rabbaba* also signifies “penis,” thereby indicating a definite association in the Maltese term between the musical instrument and the male sexual organ. Yet another meaning for *rabbaba* denotes a type of fishing tackle, shaped much like the musical instrument, which was used to make vibrations in the water to attract particular fish. This method of fishing was banned by the authorities in 1804 and is now obsolete.²² Another reference to the *rabbaba* being made by filling a jar with water is found in an 1845 dictionary by Giovanni Battista Falzon.²³

In 1838 a British traveller, George Percy Badger, in his *Description of Malta and Gozo*, defines the friction drum as

a hollow tube about half a foot in diameter with a distended skin over one surface, and a round stick tied to the centre of it which is rubbed up and down with the hand, causing a most monotonous sound. . . . This instrument is called by the natives *rabbâba* or *zuvzâva*.²⁴

19. Gianpietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis, “Dizionario Maltese Italiano Latino,” Malta National Library Ms. Libr. 143, 469v (my translation). This is a roughly handwritten initial version of De Soldanis’s dictionary; see the following note for information on a later version.

20. Gianpietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis, “Damma tal-kliem kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghawcin” [A collection of Carthaginian words used by Maltese and Gozitans], Malta National Library Ms. 143, vol. 1, 416v. This second version of De Soldanis’s dictionary was neatly rewritten and amended in preparation for publication but was never published. It is divided into four volumes: 1) Maltese-Italian-Latin, 2) and 3) Italian-Latin-Maltese, and 4) Latin-Italian-Maltese.

21. Mikiel Anton Vassalli, *Ktyb jil klym Malti mfysser byl-Latin u byt-Talyan . . . Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum* (Rome, 1796). Malta National Library Bq b4, 560.

22. On February 4, 1804, the British authorities issued an official ban stating “*si proibisce la pesca cogli stromenti volgarmente detti Gangamo e Rabbaba*” [fishing with instruments known as *Gangamo* and *Rabbaba* is hereby forbidden] under penalty of confiscation of the instruments and the fishing boat, and also the penalty of a year of forced labor.

23. Giovanni Battista Falzon, *Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Inglese* (Malta, 1845), s.v. *Rabbaba*.

24. George Percy Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo* (Malta: M. Weiss, 1838), 83.

Badger describes it as a “hollow” tube, which therefore does not contain water; if taken literally, the description means that the instrument had no bottom. Though Badger’s book contains several lithographs, the friction drum unfortunately does not feature among them. This description gives us the first mention of the term *žuvžava* and the first mention of a tied stick. After Badger we find frequent references to the friction drum, but depictions of it remain extremely rare.

Nomenclature

Nomenclatures encountered today in the Maltese islands—*rabbuba* (Nadur, Gozo), *rumbaba* (Naxxar) and *žavžova* (Ħal Ghaxaq, Malta), *žavžufa* (Għarb, San Lawrenz, Xagħra, Gozo)—are all clearly onomatopoeic, suggesting the repetitive pulsating sound made by the friction drum. The two highly differing names suggest the possibility that the instrument may have entered Malta via separate sources.

The word *žavžafa* (with any vowel variants) is Semitic. *Žavžaf* in Maltese is not only onomatopoeic but also carries the meaning of “to bubble” or “to squelch,” which is related to the instrument’s mode of sound production with wet fingers. It may be of some relevance that one 83-year-old gentleman mentioned to me that he recalls a particular type of earthenware pitcher sold in Gozo that was also known by the name *žavžaf*. This may well have been the earthenware pitcher previously used for the friction drum in Gozo.²⁵

Organologically, the name *rabbaba* immediately brings to mind a totally different instrument of the string type, well known all around the Mediterranean basin.²⁶ The Maltese islands once did have a type of folk

25. It is interesting that the name for the Neapolitan friction drum, *caccavella*, originating from the Latin word *cacabus*, is also used for a type of large earthenware cooking pot.

26. From the earliest times, the Maltese traveled all over the Mediterranean. Malta always had strong commercial ties with North Africa, particularly with Tunisia. A Tunisian legend relates that there were once two brothers who quarrelled and went their separate ways. One chose to stay in Tunisia, the other travelled across the sea and settled permanently on the island of Malta. In Tunisia, people today still firmly believe that the Maltese and Tunisian people are blood brothers. Throughout the period of the Knights of St. John (1530–1798), Malta also had large numbers of slaves of Muslim origin on the islands, who certainly brought their own customs with them and left some influence on the local population.

fiddle,²⁷ now long forgotten, which was also known by this name. The same Gozitan eighteenth-century source which described the friction drum (*rbaba*) also defined the Maltese *rabbaba* as the Italian *ribeba* and the Latin *cithara*.²⁸ In pronunciation there is, in fact, little or no difference between *rabbaba* and *rbaba*. At one time there were therefore two distinctly differing instruments coexisting with the same name, one a friction drum and the other a fiddle. The name for the fiddle was evidently imported together with the instrument from North Africa, or possibly from the Middle East. The name for friction drum, albeit the same, carries with it a crude association with the male sexual organ, coming from the Arabic *zibaba* (phallus).²⁹ The consonantal roots of the word are z-b-b. The Maltese word *rbaba* or *rabbaba* has simply substituted an r for the z, possibly to diminish its vulgarity and make it more acceptable. The meaning, however remains the same. Occasionally the instrument is actually called *zabbaba*, a word that is generally considered highly vulgar, and is in fact not frequently heard. This phallic connection may carry some correlation with that which Curt Sachs describes as the ritual functions of the instrument in Africa, where it is used in girls' and boys' initiations as a preparation for sexual life.³⁰ Though the phallic association is certainly present in the Maltese friction drum, there is no specific evidence of past initiation rituals of the African type. However, use of the instrument in Xaghra and San Lawrenz to accompany the ancient fertility dances does certainly indicate a general previous connection with some form of fertility rites, as also may be indicated in the verses sung to the accompaniment of the friction drum in Hal Għaxaq.

Context of Use

Henry Balfour, who in 1907 was first to seriously discuss the friction drum in detail, revealed some of Africa's different uses of the instrument, varying from a celebration for the return of a successful lion hunt to funerals. Balfour believed the instrument to be indigenous to Africa,

27. Malta had several shapes and sizes of bowed instruments known by different names, including *ribeba*, *rabbaba*, *rebec*, *lira*. What exactly the *rabbaba* was, is not as yet entirely clear. Further research is required before any definite conclusions can be drawn.

28. Agius De Soldanis, "Dizionario," 461v.

29. Handi A. Qafisheh, *NTC's Gulf Arabic-English Dictionary* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: NTC Publishing Group, 1997).

30. Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (London: Dent & Sons, 1942), 40.

probably originating from the blacksmith's bellows commonly used there. In Europe, he says,

it appears chiefly at fairs and at other times of rejoicing, and, although in some districts its use appears to be restricted to certain religious festivals, these latter are associated with a joyful ebullition of feeling which manifests itself in the creation of noise, and to this the friction drum lends itself readily. Hence, possibly, the association with ceremonials, even with those of a religious character.³¹

Balfour does not come across any specifically ceremonial significance associated with the instrument in Europe.

Sachs, however, emphasizes that the instrument is characteristic at boys' and girls' initiations in Africa. The connection of the friction drum with fertility and initiation rites, he says, is preserved in European traditions, particularly in festivals that the Christians substituted for the rites of winter solstice. James Blades also echoes this interpretation.³²

In Malta the instrument is particularly associated with Carnival, which is doubtless "a time for the creation of noise." It is also a time which heralds the arrival of spring, the renewal of life, the birth of a new nature cycle in the calendar of simple folk. The instrument certainly once had deeper associations which have now been lost. A glimpse of this past can still be gleaned in Nadur, where one informant described the friction drum as "the sound of Carnival," and insisted that the instrument should be reserved only for this period. His insistence probably denotes the friction drum's strong association with unspoken sexual liberties which are considered permissible only throughout the pre-Lenten celebrations, when licentiousness has always been prevalent.

In the Nadur Carnival one notices very definite echoes of celebrations of the cycle of life, with themes of fertility, sex, birth, and death pervading the whole celebration. Live animals (goats, donkeys, birds, rats, etc.) also form an important part of the improvised Carnival and are often seen being led or carried down the streets. All participants in the Carnival are masked and totally disguised. People from the village go to

31. Henry Balfour, "The Friction Drum," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 37 (1907): 67-91, at p. 86. It should be pointed out that when Balfour and Sachs refer to Africa, they do not include North Africa. I have so far not been able to trace use of the friction drum in North Africa.

32. James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History* (rev. ed. Westport, Conn.: The Bold Strummer Ltd., 1992), 54, 196.

great lengths to avoid recognition. It is actually only the men who disguise themselves, some as women, others in simple improvised sheet and sack coverings that do not represent anything particular. Self-respecting women tend to keep aloof or limit their participation to watching. Not a word is uttered by disguised participants in order to further preserve their anonymity. For this reason there is no embarrassment in the shockingly blatant displays of normally taboo subjects such as sex, birth, etc.

The traditional musical instruments played during this period have a predominantly percussive rhythmic sound. Hearing them pulsating in the wild and strange atmosphere of Nadur, one cannot but feel that this society has managed to preserve something totally primeval within the Carnival taking place today. This occurs only because the Nadur Carnival has retained much of its ancient spontaneity and has not conformed to the organization imposed elsewhere.

In several European countries we find the friction drum also associated with Christmas. The instrument is played in Christmas time in the streets of Belgium and Germany, as well as Spain. In Catholic Malta it was sometimes also played during this period in the streets of the village of Hal Għaxaq. Here, the *žavžova* actually managed to succeed one step further, finding its way from the streets into the holy place of Christian worship, and was allowed to accompany the ever-sacred Christian instrument, the organ, surprisingly with the blessing of the parish authorities.

It will be noticed that Hal Għaxaq has a somewhat different traditional use of the instrument out in the streets. This is the only village in which the friction drum is accompanied, not by other instruments, but by song. No evidence of song has surfaced in other areas of Malta and Gozo, though one cannot exclude the possibility of previous similar customs elsewhere.

Another noticeable point of difference is the use of the friction drum in Għarb, Gozo. Here we find that the instrument is not restricted to a seasonal use, as it is in other areas, but has long been played during harvesting and in other musical celebrations all the year round.

Affinities with other Stick Friction Drums

The Maltese friction drum is clearly of the same European type found in Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, and Holland. In all these areas, variations in construction and/or nomenclature do occur, but the instruments remain basically of the same kind. Logically speaking, it would seem most likely that the friction drum entered Malta

through Spain or Italy, with which there was constant contact throughout history. However, there was also repeated contact with Dutch and French merchants who were trading with Malta and the Levant in the latter part of the sixteenth century.

Very close affinities are definitely to be seen between Malta's present-day friction drum and that of Italy, particularly that from around the Campania region of Naples. One such instrument, known as *caccavella* or *putipù*, is to be seen in the Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari in Rome (Inv. 81510).³³ The stick is taken from an *Arundo donax* plant and was originally fixed to the membrane rather than piercing through it. The sound box is a recycled large tin previously containing preserves. As in Nadur, the Neapolitan instrument forms part of a larger band of musical instruments including the *fischietto*, *scetavaiasse* (scraper), *scacciapensieri* (Jew's harp), *castagnelle*, and *triccheballacche*. Here again we find a predominance of noise-producing rather than melody instruments. In Campania the *caccavella* is used not only in Carnival, but also in other festivities such as that of the Madonna of Piedigrotta, which takes place in September and coincides with grape harvesting. Other instruments exhibited in the Rome Museo also have the same characteristics, even if made as toys for children. One example, made out of a clay flower pot, has the stick decorated with tassels of colored paper in much the same way as those found in Gozo. The instrument from the Naples area thus shows similarities in construction, in the custom of its use in Carnival, and in a similar combination of predominantly rhythmic and percussive instruments.

Going back in time, however, Badger's description of 1838 indicates a "hollow" instrument with a distended membrane on one end. If his description is presumed correct and is taken literally, then we have an instrument which has no bottom to it. This is very much an African characteristic, though other details differ substantially. This African characteristic is, however, also to be found in the Spanish instrument, known as *Zambomba*.³⁴ Friction drums from the Northern Castille/Leon region frequently have the bottom carefully hollowed out. They are generally

33. See Paola Elisabetta Simeoni, "Strumenti musicali, cerimonie, feste . . .," in Paola Elisabetta Simeoni and Roberta Tucci, eds., *Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, Roma. La Collezione degli Strumenti Musicali* (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1991), 15–37.

34. Brazil also has a friction drum of similar construction, the *cuica*, which was imported into South America by African slaves. This instrument uses both direct and indirect friction on the membrane.

made of an earthenware pot or an old tin canister, with its bottom carefully removed, and a membrane with a stick firmly attached. Badger's description suggests this Spanish type of instrument. The name *zambomba* also shows a notable resemblance to the Maltese name *ramboba*, or even more to *zabboba*.

Moving yet further back in time, the *rabbaba* described by Agius De Soldanis in the eighteenth century was of a very different kind. The pierced membrane in this case is a detail commonly found in the African instruments such as the *morupas* or *wupu-wupu* from South Africa, and the friction drums of Zambia, the Congo, and Angola.³⁵ The African instrument is usually an open wooden cylinder with a pierced membrane stretched over one end. The stick is inserted into the opening, and suspended within. It often has transverse pegs on the outside and is held and rubbed from the inside of the drum. Though some Maltese friction drums seem to have been similarly pierced there is no indication that the stick was actually ever rubbed from the inside of the drum in the African way. A few European stick friction drums are sometimes to be found with a perforated membrane, as opposed to the more typically European method of a firmly attached stick. Malta's eighteenth-century friction drum would have been one of these. The stick in this case produced direct friction on the membrane, unlike the other friction drums described by Badger, or the type seen today. It is particularly interesting to discover that an instrument very similar to the one described by Agius De Soldanis previously also existed in Bailleul, in the so-called Flemish part of France. Here the membrane was perforated, and it is said that in former days (c. 1870) the friction drum was also partly filled with water.³⁶

Though finger-beaten drums containing water are known to exist in South Africa,³⁷ I have not come across any other friction drums that contain water. This particular example from Bailleul is, at present, the only available description which is close to Malta's eighteenth-century *rabbaba* containing water. In Bailleul the friction drum accompanies song, and in some places it is also played together with other home-made instruments. However, it does not have any particular association

35. See Balfour, "The Friction Drum," 73–76. Malta historically had no direct contact either with central or southern Africa. However, Prof. Godfrey Wettinger of the University of Malta informs me that a number of Muslims from these areas did end up as slaves on the Maltese islands as early as the Middle Ages.

36. Fred J. De Hen, "Folk Instruments of Belgium: Part I," *The Galpin Society Journal* 25 (1972): 87–132, at p. 107.

37. Blades, *Percussion Instruments*, 64.

with Carnival, but rather with Christmas, the New Year, and the Lenten period.

Malta's earliest-described friction drum (1759) therefore shows possible connections with the Franco-Flemish instrument. On top of this there seem to be superimposed Spanish influences, and finally, the present-day instrument displays very clear Southern Italian characteristics. Some African influences may also be detected in the ritualistic connotations associated with the instrument.

Some Conclusions

From the evidence presently available to us, we can sum up a number of points. Though it is very likely that some form of friction drum was used in Malta much earlier than the eighteenth century, no definite proof of this has so far come to light. By at least the mid-eighteenth century, a type of friction drum known as *rbaba* or *rabbaba* was clearly well established on the islands. The first description we have shows Franco-Flemish similarities. This type of instrument is now no longer in use and there is no recollection of it in folk memory. The early nineteenth-century description by Badger shows Spanish affinities. Of this type there is also no recollection in folk memory. The present-day friction drum, the only one still in use today, shows closest resemblance to the Neapolitan instrument, not only in construction, but also in its context of use, and in the type of instruments accompanying it.

One must therefore conclude that the friction drum either succumbed to striking changes throughout its history or, alternatively, that different friction drums entered the islands via different sources. These could have coexisted for a length of time, with one form eventually taking prevalence over the others.

It is of some significance that the first Maltese name by which the friction drum is referred to is *rbaba* or *rabbaba*, clearly suggesting that the instrument originally became established on the islands with this nomenclature. The fact that the name is of Semitic rather than Romance origin indicates the friction drum's probable adoption at a relatively early stage in the island's history. The Maltese name originates from the Arab name for phallus (*zibaba*). The instrument had clear phallic associations in the eighteenth century, and it is still used today to accompany dances once associated with ancient fertility rites. The Spanish name *zambomba* seems also to have the same Arab roots. Both the Maltese and the Spanish

instrument therefore carry identical phallic associations in their nomenclature, indicating that they had the same direct parentage or influences. This Arab root does not appear in the Dutch *rommelpot*, Italian *caccavella* or *putipu*, Portuguese *sarronca*, etc.

By around 1800 we begin to find two names for the drum, *rabbaba* and *žuvžafa*, co-existing in Malta. To this day, in some areas it remains known exclusively by the name *rabbaba*, while in other areas it is referred to solely by the alternative name *žuvžafa*.

The friction drum in both Malta and Gozo has always predominantly, though not exclusively, been used over the Carnival period. Owing to the tourist industry in the 1960s and 1970s, the instrument in Malta was taken out of its original Carnival context and played in hotel dining rooms and entertainment areas, together with the bagpipe and tambourine, on a regular basis. The meanings associated with it were therefore totally eliminated. They are, however, to some extent still preserved on the island of Gozo and in *Hal Għaxaq*, on Malta.

Also worth noting is the fact that Carnival celebrations as a whole have always been male dominated. All musicians are male, all disguised participants in the Nadur evening Carnival are male, and dancers taking part in the *kumitiva* in Xagħra are also solely male. In places where the friction drum is played outside the Carnival context, it is likewise regarded as an instrument exclusively of the male domain. Though women now play all instruments of the orchestral type (in both orchestras and wind and brass bands), they still have not made attempts to cross the ancient boundaries into this particular traditional instrumental playing. To this day, this area continues to retain its ancestral male domination.