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EMMANUELE CILIA

Complete Studio Recordings 1931 & 31

Foreword

This compilation, Emmanuele Cilia - The Complete Studio Recordings (1931-32), is being released on the 50th anniversary since the demise of the renowned folk singer Emmanuele Cilia, endearingly referred to as *Leli ta' Żabett*.

These songs were digitised as part of the Malta's Lost Voices collection in the year 2010. They now sit alongside approximately three hundred and sixty audio tracks in the Lost Voices database, housed at the Malta National Archives. Originally published by Anthony D'Amato on HMV records, the full set of recordings made by Cilia, and captured on disc in Milan in June 1931 and August 1932, were transferred from the original 78 rpm and 45 rpm records to digital format for their preservation. With this publication, Filfla Records aims to make these original recordings accessible to new audiences, hopefully generating a renewed awareness of the singer and his songs, whilst preserving the content for posterity.

Since their recording in the interwar period, these songs have found their place in the collective memory and lore of the Maltese. Songs like '*X'Ahna Sbieh Min Jaf Jarana*', '*Xalata Ghal San Pawl*' and others were aired on the local Rediffusion (cable radio) in the pre- and post-war years. Since their first release they have been passed on, decade after decade, in a variety of audio formats. They have migrated with the changing technology, sealing Cilia's fame as an *ghannej* and storyteller for many generations.

Today, the name Emmanuele Cilia has become synonymous with the memory of many of these songs as they constitute the earliest recordings of Maltese folk chant. The recordings are also a testament of a living tradition, *ghana*, which due to the economic well-being and developing technology of the interwar period, was documented on shellac discs. As a novel product, these local discs were consumed by the local population and the Maltese diaspora as souvenirs of an island and its people, in an ever-changing climate of sound technology.

In today's digital age these documents portray a unique, sonar snapshot of Maltese society and the world at the time. These electrical recordings were made using the state-of-the-art technology of the day, signals pressed onto wax masters, which were subsequently stamped onto plastic discs. Curiously, this technology allowed for little, if any, post-production with one or two studio takes of each song. Impressed into the original discs were three-minute live recordings of raw and unadulterated signals, etched onto the plastic medium in a distant past; sonic-sculptures encapsulating the studio in which the Maltese artistes recorded.

Owing to the fashionable *dischi mania* which gripped the country in the early decades of the twentieth century, Cilia and his contemporaries; singers, musicians, poets and composers, had the unique opportunity of creating a musical repertoire specifically for these discs, even if for a very brief spate of recording activity that lasted only two years. These songs have survived eighty odd years, bearing witness to a unique time in history for Maltese music, as well as providing amusement and entertainment as they did in the past.

Now for the first time, the complete set of recordings consisting of Cilia's thirty-eight tracks, is available on CD, in digital download and on vinyl LP format, securing continuity of this music for many decades to come.

The Making of a Bard

Little is known of Cilia's early beginnings as a singer and any information about the person has been gleaned through family members, sources who remember Cilia in his hometown, interviews with members of the folk-singing tradition, as well as archival documents which have provided details relating to his working life.

The name Emmanuele Cilia is closely associated with the the parish of *San Filep* in *Haż-Żebbug*, where he was born in April 1898 to parents, Francesco and Elizabetta, and raised along with his siblings Ġuzeppi, Antonia and Rosanna. In June 1910, he married Anna Caruana and a year later had a daughter, Maria Carmela. Cilia was endearingly referred to as *Leli Ta' Żabett* or *Leli Żabett* (son of Elizabeth) though he was also known as *Ta' Napuljun* (*Napoleon-like*), due to the fact that he was always well-groomed.

Cilia began his early career as a recruit with the Royal Malta Artillery, which he registered with at the age of eighteen and where he worked until his retirement in 1935. He joined the expeditionary force and formed part of the Medical Orderly, where his duties included basic nursing and assistance to a doctor stationed in Fort St.Elmo.

Family members recall that he would jealously guard over his guitar, which hung in the house alongside his military uniform and pith helmet. Many villagers remember that his house overlooked an area referred to as *il-pjazzetta* at 29, St. Anthony Street, where from the street he could occasionally be seen having a shave whilst leaning out of the window. He was an active member of the community with a passion for the village feast decorations (*l-armar*) and the band-club activities, affiliated to the patron saint of *San Filep*, even joining his neighbours in song during the village *xalata* the day after the feast.

By the 1950's and 60's, Cilia's songs and lyrics were well-known to the locals, and it is said that many village women sang his songs as they went about their daily chores. Many have memories of Cilia during this later stage of his life as an upright, well-dressed and grey-haired elderly man, who was often seen sitting and singing on a bench in the village square. By then his songs were well-known to the local population and were aired regularly on the local radio, especially on Sunday morning *ghana* programmes.

To the villagers, Cilia was a local hero as his voice resounded through the streets of his hometown. His renown exceeded the confines of his village and earned him a reputation across the island as a *ghannej* who sang in a clear, crisp and at times haunting voice. Like many of the balladeers of his

time and before him, he captured the imagination of many with his *fatti* and *makkjetti* (ballads and humorous songs).

Cilia and his contemporaries, Manuel Mercieca *Is-Semenza* and Gużepi Xuereb *Ix-Xudi*, were considered to be amongst the finest exponents of the singing tradition. They were popular heroes, troubadours who embodied the singing tradition, entertaining on guitar, playing songs in octosyllabic rhyme. The *ghannejja*, just like singers from other traditions, were considered folk-heroes who sang of beauty, love and sorrow in memorised poetic quatrains and improvised words to the accompaniment of chords on guitar.

At the time, the offer to travel to record their voices and songs on disc was a unique opportunity for the local artistes, and an unprecedented boost for folk-music and its singers. For the first time, Cilia and his peers would venture beyond the confines of the island, to have their voices documented on shellac records on the continent. The members of this first visiting party included Giuseppe Cefai, Michele Smith, Ruggieru Falzon, Carlo Satariano, Domenico Busuttill and Emmanuele Cilia. As British subjects, the artistes applied for passports and readied themselves for travel.

On the 6th of June 1931, after two months of writing and rehearsal, Cilia and his peers, led by Anthony D’Amato, traveled to Italy via Syracuse and headed for the His Master’s Voice Studios in 10, Via San Antonio, Milan.¹

The Recording Of Maltese Songs on the Continent

D’Amato’s enterprise (est.1885) had become a reputable wholesale and retail outlet in Malta, supplying HMV gramophones, their accessories and records of international titles in the late 1920’s. A new alliance with the Gramophone Company in Hayes, Middlesex would last many decades, ultimately benefiting both parties by enabling the production and sale of local records as well as gramophone players.

Archive documents indicate the Maltese entrepreneur’s interest in embarking on the venture of recording discs of local content for consumption by the local market. This activity allowed artistes like Cilia and many others to record their music and earn royalties from their sale and was facilitated by the fact that the conglomerate companies like HMV were expanding their recording houses across various continents. The musicians travelled from their island homes to Milan, made their recordings and returned. Masters were then shipped to England for processing and manufacture. The finished records, ready for sale, were then 'exported' back to the local agent.²

In spite of the size of the market it was eventually agreed by both parties that forty to fifty Maltese two-sided discs would be recorded on the HMV series with a specially designed disc centre label, as long as all artist costs including travel and lodging would be at D’Amato’s expense. Furthermore, it was agreed that all titles recorded would be original, as copyright expenses could not be afforded due to the limited market. For this reason, the content included on the discs was composed and arranged specifically for these recording sessions. The artistes signed a contract agreeing to a five percent commission which would be sent to them from the mother company, via D’Amato. It was normal

¹ Malta File Correspondence, (Hayes Middlesex, EMI Archive Trust Fund, 1931).

² For further reading view Andrew Alamango, *Malta’s Lost Voices: Recordings of Maltese Music from the Early 1930s*, (Valletta, Filfla Records, 2010).

practice for musicians to be paid on commission on sale of records, as this generally prevented artistes from signing up with other agents and labels.

*On contract, Mr. D'Amato had the responsibility and artistic license of finding and signing on the musicians, rehearsing them and organizing the recording trip to the Milan branch of HMV. D'Amato proceeded to contract the well-known composer and director Mro Vincenzo Ciappara for writing the musical scores [...] Emmanuele Cilia, with a repute of being one of the best ballad singers of the day, was contracted for the ghana singing. Carlo Satariano, comic entertainer and owner of the journal Dr. Brombos, was contracted to write the verses and lyrics for songs including many of those sung by Cilia.*³

A central figure in this recording venture was the satirist and eclectic character of Carlo Satariano (born 1889) from Ħamrun, who at that time was an active contributor to the local satirical journals *Il-Ħmara*, *Il-Berqa* and *Dr. Brombos*. Satariano was also active in writing lyrics for songs in local popular theatre and brass band marches for the parish of San Gaetan in Ħamrun.⁴ D'Amato contracted him to write the verses for all the songs to be recorded under HMV. Besides Cilia's tracks, he also penned the words for all the lyrical songs, composed by Vincenzo Ciappara and in a variety of styles prevalent in those times, including fox-trots, tangos and polkas.

In a mocking yet humorous tone, Satariano's verses and comments reveal a very conservative and traditionalist view of society and the woman's role in it. His rhyme in traditional octosyllabic structure was Satariano's characteristic style and had become a literary form of entertainment, evident even in Cilia's *makkjetti* and the other recorded *parlanti* (storytelling) put on record in those two years. In subsequent years, as owner and editor of the local satirical journal *Dr. Brombos*, Satariano published the lyrics he wrote for the Maltese records, including those sung by Cilia.

Local correspondence between D'Amato and the office in Hayes shows that Satariano had originally proposed the idea of recording Maltese records to D'Amato, who in turn proposed it to the HMV office. D'Amato, already in trading with the conglomerate company importing records of international titles for local consumption, saw this a lucrative commercial venture due to the potential markets of Maltese diaspora spread around the globe. Though HMV was initially skeptical of the proposal and the success of the local market, they clearly saw the potential demand from the 'Maltese colonies', as they referred to them in their correspondence. However, they stated that it was not possible for D'Amato to distribute beyond his local territory as each country had its own sole agent and distributor assigned. D'Amato, however, had the freedom to market and sell the records at retail prices to locals who wished to mail the records to relatives overseas, a marketing strategy he adopted in later years.

Meanwhile, upon agreement of the recording dates, the head office in Hayes informed the Milan studio of the arrival of the Maltese and instructed them to provide the instrumentation needed for execution of the records. It had already been agreed with HMV that the H.M. and H.J. catalogue series would be reserved for the Maltese records published in those two years.

This particular label design was created and chosen specifically for the Maltese discs recorded on this first recording trip. Correspondence states that the recording sessions were to commence immediately upon the artists arrival, as time was limited.

³ For further reading view Andrew Alamango, *Malta's Lost Voices: Recordings of Maltese Music from the Early 1930s*, (Valletta, Filfla Records, 2010)

⁴ Spiteri, Shanna, *Carlo Satariano u l-poeziji f' "Il-Ħmara" (1926-1928)*, (University of Malta, 2013)

On arrival on the 8th of June, they were greeted by an expectant Mro. Carlo Sabajno, who was the official musical director for the HMV studios. Sabajno had received communication from Hayes regarding the visiting Maltese musicians and had made preparations before their arrival.

Between the 8th and the 12th of June 1931, chief-engineer Edward Fowler⁶ recorded the music of these Maltese musicians and produced the first twenty tracks which would appear with an HM prefix and his signature matrix code 'OF'. The ten-inch H.M. series sported a white label with gold lettering and a splendid, red Maltese cross superimposed below the now famous HMV logo of Francis Barraud's Nipper, the dog, and the gramophone horn.⁵

D'Amato was informed that the studio would record eight titles a day with working hours from ten to noon in the morning and four to six in the afternoon. The studio explained that 10" discs allow a maximum of three minutes and fifteen seconds of recorded sound. This was a challenge might have presented a challenge for the artists who would have to execute and record a song without fault every half hour even though working in a studio constituted a completely new experience for them.

During the two recordings trips to Milan, Cilia recorded a total of thirty-eight, three-minute songs on record. The material was selected and arranged specifically for these sessions in a first-time opportunity to document the songs in Maltese dialect', as the head office referred to the language.

On the first session in June 1931, Cilia recorded eleven tracks, singing and accompanying himself on guitar. The first track recorded in the series was H.M1, featuring Cilia singing the ballad '*L'Istoria ta Arturo u Maria*'. With lyrics originally by Arturo Mifsud, Cilia sings this tragic love-poem in a low and melancholic tone on a minor key, narrating from memory the fateful words which were published in the early twentieth century. A similar ballad written by Carlo Satriano and sung by Cilia was H.M.2 '*Genoveffa*'. A style of singing and writing based on romantic love-tragedy which was so characteristic of the poetic verses that would be published by Valletta printing houses at the turn of the twentieth century, aptly called *fuljetti tal-ghana* (*ghana* folios). Included in this first series of recordings is '*Toni Bajada*', the story of a local swimmer and hero of tragic fate, with original lyrics penned by Satariano. A song typical of Satariano and his mocking satire of women is '*Il-Mara u ix-Xitan*', which incidentally is the first record the author picked up, spurring the research and discovery of the these records songs almost twenty years ago.

Other songs recorded by Cilia were '*Ix-Xhieh*', '*Ilbies Scullat*' and '*Il-Mara Halja*' all bearing traits of Satariano's tongue-in-cheek tone. The somewhat meek choral response in '*Ix-Xhieh*' and that on '*X'Ahna Sbieh Min Jaf Jarana*' features all the Maltese present in the recording studio in Milan, in 1931.

The success and popularity of these first twenty discs is evident as the arrival of these new records of Maltese music was advertised in the local newspapers, although some spurned the populist content recorded.

On completion of the recordings a few days later, the artists were shown around the record-pressing factory by the director Giulietti and the chief engineer Fowler. They were given a tour of the factory and were shown the processes involved in the pressing and manufacturing of records at Hayes. They

⁵ Andrew Alamango, *Malta's Lost Voices: Recordings of Maltese Music from the Early 1930s*, (Valletta, Filfla Records, 2010)

were then given a week off and taken on a brief tour of Italy, which included Milan, Como, Padova, Rome and Naples. All at D'Amato's expense.⁶

Some months later, in April 1932, D'Amato entered a second round of negotiations with the studio. They agreed that the remaining thirty titles would be produced on the blue label H.J. series and Zonophone label, in September 1932. The reasons for publishing under two separate labels (with different catalogue numbers) yet under the same company are not clear, although possibly the motivation behind it was related to marketing purposes.

The second recording session took place as planned, in September 1932, This time the visiting party included the renowned *prim* guitar player Carmelo Cardona, *It-Tapp* (shorty). Cardona, who hailed from Hamrun, had the reputation of being one of the first guitarists to develop the motifs and style of *ghana* guitar playing since the beginning of the twentieth century. A respected member of the *ghana* community, he had the ability to play, sing and improvise *ghana* verses.

During these recording sessions Cardona plays melodic motifs over Cilia's guitar accompaniment. He ornaments the songs with musical interludes, complementing in a style which would be documented for posterity. Cardona also provided a second voice to the songs, singing alternate stanzas in a contrasting tone to Cilia's voice. He can be heard singing with Cilia on tracks on a couple of tracks including 'Ghanja bejn tnejn' and 'Xalata ghal San Paul'. His elaborate playing can be heard on most tracks that Cilia recorded on the Zonophone and blue labelled H.J. series, including the story based on Donizetti's 'Lucia ta Lammermur', 'Edgardo fuk il kabar ta Elvira', 'Ghanja lin namrata' and 'Ghanja lis-sajf' amongst others.

Listening to the melodies of Cardona's playing, particularly the introductions on some of the tragic ballads (*fatti*) played in E minor or A minor keys, one hears echoes of the guitar style of Indri Brincat *Il-Pupa*, who was greatly influenced by Cardona through these records. *Il-Pupa* would develop into one of the most prominent and important *ghana* guitar players in later decades. He featured prominently on many programme openers and *ghana* programmes on the local cable radio *Rediffusion*, forging his melodies in the local audiences and much of what we recognise today as the motifs of the Maltese guitar.

The Relevance of Cilia's Songs

September 1932 was the last of the recording trips organised by D'Amato to Milan. By then a total of 50 two-sided records had been produced and the record listings were frequently advertised in many of the local newspapers until the latter years of the same decade.

The journals initially reported that the Maltese records had caused quite a stir amongst society. While some lauded the venture as groundbreaking, others spurned the quality of the content which was recorded and wished that they had never been done. However as promised, D'Amato's local HMV catalogue provided a variety of musical styles to suit everybody's taste. Besides Cilia's ballads the local artists recorded polkas, foxtrots and lyrical songs which were aimed at providing entertainment for the Maltese.

⁶ Andrew Alamango, *Malta's Lost Voices: Recordings of Maltese Music from the Early 1930s*, (Valletta, Filfla Records, 2010)

With the ongoing sale of records and gramophones the artists enjoyed royalties for decades to come, and their fame was sealed as the first Maltese artists to put music on record. The social impact of these records was also felt for decades as many of the songs were played and aired until the sixties. The economic return however was possibly not as lucrative as was initially envisioned by D'Amato. When the 'record-mania' caught on his profits were divided with his rivals and record producing competitors, Messrs. Carabott of *Strada Merkanti*, Valletta.

Selling the quantities of records agreed and ordered by the publisher was not as easy as had originally thought. In 1936 correspondence between D'Amato and the head office stated that the blue-labelled H.J. series and the Zonophone series, both recorded in 1932 by engineer C.C. Blyton, were more popular and in demand than the first white-labelled series. The main office in fact maintained that before idle stocks of the white series were consumed, they would not allow a drop in price of the H.J. series as D'Amato was demanding of two shillings and six pence to two shillings, as this would surely kill off sales of the first white labelled series.

Emmanuel Cilia's songs however, were favourites and it seems they kept selling quite well for many years. It has recently been ascertained that Cilia's records were probably amongst the most in demand from the whole catalogue, and that he continued to receive his five percent royalty on sale of records well into the 1960's. In around 1960, D'Amato, reproduced a selection of twenty-five of the most popular tracks and reproduced them on 45rpm vinyl discs. Through a sub-licensing agreement all Cilia's songs were released on the on their in-house label, *Damato Disc*, the 45-HJ series in blue or black plain labels, ensuring their legacy for another generation.

Of note is that due to the limitations of song reproduction that HMV had placed on D'Amato, the musicians were obliged to create a totally new repertoire which was free of any copyright. Once Cilia had completed the recording sessions in Milan he returned with a repertoire of thirty-eight songs to his name.

Many of these same songs have now passed the test of time and through the consent of previous generations they have become folk-songs: written, documented and passed on decade after decade. These live and intimate recordings, originally engraved in wax masters, reveal Cilia's mastery in storytelling in the truest sense of a bard. With limited musical accompaniment on guitar, the songs in themselves are forged by an awe inspiring story of local musicians, travelling overseas to record a brand new repertoire of sounds that would entertain audiences for almost a century after their making.

His works have also inspired generations of *ghannejja* who were brought up listening to Cilia's voice on record. The renowned and much-endearred singer Frans Baldacchino *Il-Budaj* would many a time make reference to Cilia's style and claimed to have been inspired by his ornamentation of melody, the clarity of his voice and his diction.

Now for the first time ever the works of Cilia are compiled in a new compilation and appear on 12" vinyl LP, CD and digital download, formats which Cilia never knew. On this 50th anniversary of Emmanuel Cilia's passing away and 87 years since the making of these recordings, the songs and their spirit will live on in this compilation series as a tribute to Cilia and the musicians who travelled out of their island-homes to forge their music on record.

In this collaboration between Filfla Records and the Friends of the National Archives, the value of this material and the importance of their continued access for posterity cannot be emphasised enough. The Complete Works is a tribute and a celebration of the singer and his music, serving as important

reference for future generations who will be able to access the complete set of recordings made in HMV's Milan studios.

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FILFLA RECORDS is a Malta based label set up with the aim and of making available local archival recordings for their preservation and access.

The Friends of the National Archives of Malta (FNAM) is a Voluntary Organisation set up by enthusiasts drawn from diverse backgrounds with a shared interest in the National Archives of Malta. FNAM members support the National Archives in the mission to preserve Maltese heritage, whilst raising the awareness of this resource in Malta and elsewhere.

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