

EXAMINING UNINTENTIONALITY AND INTENTIONALITY OF SOUND IN PREHISTORIC MALTA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to give an idea of the sonorous past of prehistoric Malta by presenting possible soundscape scenarios. It validates the importance of sound as auditory experience, because this was crucial in the history of humanity, while it attempts to trace the beginnings of organised sound.

This research is to introduce a number of findings that are connected to sound perception and distribution among the inhabitants of Malta. Specific emphasis is given to discussions of whether these sounds were essentially intentional or not. By going through the collected facts about the introduced findings, there are overlaps in functions and sound tools that indicate an early cultivation of music. In protecting the related findings, some of these early attempts can be hopefully reconstructed in the future.

Keywords

Malta, Prehistory, Sound Production, Soundscapes, Idiophones

It goes without saying that prehistoric man was surrounded by sounds from different sources. Such sounds were either a product of the immediate environment (such as the sounds of nature) or man-made ones. In other words, we can say that prehistoric man was surrounded by unintentional and intentional sounds. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that music is made out of intentional sounds and that arbitrary sounds only become music when these are organised by humans. Although the existence of music in prehistoric Malta cannot be ascertained, such prehistoric society experienced a number of processes related to organisations which are evident in their art and architecture. It could be argued that such processes imply an organisation of arbitrary sounds of which unfortunately we have no direct evidence.

UNINTENTIONAL SOUNDS

The Maltese Archipelago is made up of three islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino. An island is literally a piece of land surrounded by water. It is evident that the sound of water predominates as a result of the islands' geography. A place surrounded by water is comparable to a mother's womb, a place in which life begins. The testimony left by the early societies which inhabited the islands, mainly in the form of artistic and abstract representations, attests that those societies venerated all things, such as the land, the air, fire, and animals.

Early man was captivated by the sounds of nature, such as the wind, the sea, the echo effect in natural caves, the crackle of fire, and so on. Like us, he made sense of the world that surrounded him. As an animal symbolicum (Viik, 2011: 103), he explored and conferred meaning on the environment in accordance with his own experiences (Gibson, 1986). Then he realised that some sounds are not mere sounds, but meaningful sounds. The sense of hearing, that is, the act of listening, discloses information vis-à-vis external phenomena and data in the form of sound (Carter 2004). Thus, sound is an integral component of the ways in which people interact with the surrounding environment. Human history is marked by a constant struggle for survival,

wherein auditory experiences play an important role. For example, by attributing meaning to sounds, our ancestors recognised that these could signify danger (Scarre and Lawson, 2006). In Malta, early hunter-gatherer groups may have categorised and reproduced sound phenomena through sound mimesis or devices which serve as calls for animals and birds during hunting. The practice of using sound devices to attract animals is still ongoing in Malta. Devices known as *sfafar tal-pluvieri* or plover whistles are used to imitate bird calls and entice them towards a trap (Zahra, 2006; Figure 1).



FIGURE 1: Sfafar tal-Pluvieri, a Maltese hunting whistle or bird call (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Ruben Zahra).

Maltese prehistory began with the archipelago's colonisation, probably by farming groups from nearby Sicily in 5200 BC. Such early farming communities were evidently surrounded by unintentional and intentional sounds. Sounds of nature were part of the unintentional soundscape while the sounds of human voices, stone tools, and other devices were part of the intentional soundscape. Stone tools, in particular, may have been used as sound producing devices. Tool making itself involves a wide range of processes related to organisation and music. Whether there was music in prehistoric Malta is not clear, however, the production of artefacts, such as hand-axes or scrapers, attests that there was a conceptual thought associated with the production of these objects. This idea can be extended to validate the concept of production of objects that produce sound. Here, I am referring to objects that might or might not be manufactured with the aim of producing sound, yet nevertheless do produce sound.

'Environmental sounds influence the ways in which a society responds to the world, whether in terms of navigation, mimicry, memory, language or music' (Watson 2001: 180). The first settlers of the Maltese archipelago responded in terms of navigation therefore establishing contact with neighbouring lands (Bonanno 2000). Malta was connected through uninterrupted seafaring activity during the Neolithic period and this facilitated trade (Bonanno 2008). Maltese prehistoric man imported valuable materials, such as greenstone from the Italian mainland as well as flint and obsidian from the islands of Sicily, Lipari, and Pantelleria (Skeates 2010). These were imported as cores to be processed onsite by knapping. This process involves

repetitive movements and percussive strokes, which can be associated with music practices. Knapping is a pre-conceptualised and systematic skill. Perhaps, the knowledge in relation to this technique was attained by early man through auditory experiences. Consequently, we can say that the sound was a contributing factor in tool making. This is very likely since sound cannot be omitted from the whole process. The process of knapping requires constant awareness of the sound that the stone produces as it is struck, variations in sound provide clues as to where and how hard the stone is to be next struck.

It is very difficult to attest the existence of large lithophones or rock gongs in Prehistoric Malta. The problem arises when trying to assess damage to the stone. Evidently, the action of repetitive beating on stone leaves indentations which could possibly also be the result of natural processes such as weathering. Intentional modifications, on the other hand, are more promising in that they can be associated with the aim of producing different pitches from different sized stones. Usually, these stones are flaked and shaped in a particular manner. Nevertheless, one can never categorically establish if their original function was in fact to produce a particular sound. However, we can assume that early Maltese inhabitants struck stones in order to produce some sort of sound.

The term idiophonic is used to denote musical instruments in which the material itself produces sound (Abrashiev and Gadjev, 2006). However, it is also used for objects that played a double role in prehistoric Malta, such as jewellery. Personal ornaments, such as perforated hand-axes, shells, and bones were used for social display as well as sound producing devices, because these objects unintentionally produce sound through the movement of the individual who wears it. Idiophonic jewellery are all those objects whose design and structure permits the production of sound, especially, hanging perforated objects. A discovery was made at the Brochtorff Circle in Xagħra on Gozo, more specifically, in an area known as the central shrine or sacristy. The discovery consisted of an intact female body, namely, torso, pelvis, arms, and a head bearing a cowrie-shell headdress (Malone et al, 2009). Other substantial evidence was also collected from the same site. This included shells, stones, and bone pendants, beads and 'V'-perforated buttons (Figure 2). All this suggests that early Maltese inhabitants wore idiophonic jewellery.





FIGURE 2: (Above) Idiophonic jewellery from Brochtorff Circle, Xaghra, Gozo (3400- 2500 BC). (Below) stone pendants (Courtesy Gozo Museum of Archaeology, photographs by the author).

INTENTIONAL SOUNDS

Human activities are multi-sensual scenarios (Watson, 2001). In other words, any activity that is undertaken involves a number of senses. The activity of pounding, crushing, and grinding foods was practiced in prehistoric Malta. A number of saddle querns, mortars, and hand mills for grinding corn and other seeds were found at the Tarxien temples (3400-2500 BC) (Zammit, 1930; Figure 4). The rhythm of the grindstone as it moves back and forth, produces a sound comparable to a musician playing a scraper. When processing foods, some contemporary agropastoral communities, such as the Dassanach people in Ethiopia, still make use of stone querns; moreover, they perform the task in the ancient fashion.

A considerable number of sling stones were found in the immediate vicinity of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (Zammit, 1930: 83) (Figure 6). These implements were used to hunt down wild animals. The stone was put in the pouch section of the sling, which, when thrown, would free the stone and hit the target. The spinning motion of a sling stone produces vibrations in the air. In other words, sound is produced when the player whirls a stone through the air. This fact could not have passed unnoticed by early Maltese inhabitants. Probably, they also realised that the speed of rotation and length of the string affect volume and pitch. Perforated objects were potentially used as whirling objects or bull-roarers.



FIGURE 3: Saddle querns from Tarxien Temples (Figure reproduced from Zammit, 1930, Plate XXIII).

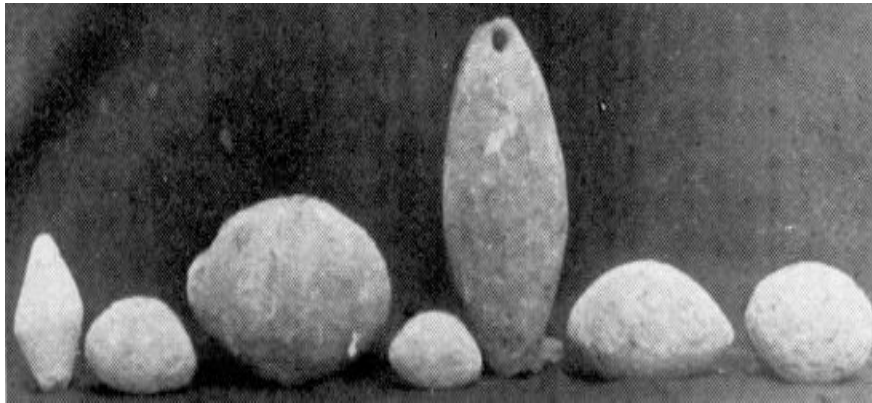


FIGURE 4: Sling-stones (Figure reproduced from Zammit, 1930, Plate XXIII).

Prior to stone tools early man used simple technologies, such as wooden sticks, bones, and other unmodified resources. These implements consisted of organic materials hence they left no trace at all in the archaeological record (Toth and Schick, 2005). As in contemporary societies, a pair of wooden sticks served the same functionality in the past, in other words, these were used as struck idiophones. This category of musical instruments is archaic so it can be traced to prehistoric times. In some societies, struck idiophones are improvised implements having no value at all and are simply discarded after use. These musical instruments are normally made out of readily available materials, such as wood, bamboo, cane, stone or bone. Sound is produced when both pieces are hit against each other, or against the ground. In the Maltese archipelago, prehistoric man found a wide range of readily available materials which can be categorised into organics and inorganics. The former category disintegrates quickly in some environments while the second is normally preserved in the archaeological record. In a Maltese prehistoric context, organic materials such as cane, bone, horn, and animal teeth were used for diverse purposes. Sound producing devices, such as struck idiophones could certainly have been made from organic materials. Perhaps a pair of sticks served to pound the ground and thus produced rhythmic sounds. In addition, they could have served to mark the beat or tempo of a dance, as well as a tool, support or wand (Rault, 2000). Rhythm sticks may have been hollowed out and served as resonators. In the Maltese archaeological record, animal bones are abundant. For instance, numerous cow toe bones were found with their proximal faces ground smooth

(Trump 2008: 43). These bones, no less than twenty, originate from Skorba (4500- 4100 BC) and were conveniently shaped to stand upright. However, they also fit well in the hands. This fact leads one to believe that perhaps these bones might have been designed to serve as concussion idiophones, that is, hand clappers. Furthermore, these artefacts allude to the period in which pre-instrumental music and practices, such as stamping, hand-clapping and body slapping were complemented by the sounds of these innovatory devices.

Most of the traditional instruments used in Maltese folk music, such as the Żaqq (bagpipe), Żummara (reedpipe), and Fleiguta (flute) are manufactured from organic materials but it is not possible to trace their entire history. Without hard evidence we are bound to make assumptions only. However, there is always the possibility that some traces of prehistoric sound tools could have survived in the oral tradition.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully the preceding paper has provided some indication that early Maltese inhabitants developed a number of activities related to music. Prehistory is undoubtedly a period which substantially differs from our own and, as a consequence, it is not an easy task to ascribe function to prehistoric artefacts. It is futile to impose contemporary thinking and practices on a historical context such as prehistory. The archaeological record, however, provides a considerable amount of evidence of intentionality of sound, that is, of artefacts that could have played a double role in the past. For example, domestic utensils, such as stone tools could have served as stone clappers. This notion evidently can be substantiated with ethnographic evidence from contemporary hunter-gatherer societies which provide a wide range of music related behaviours different to our own, facilitating our understanding of unintentionality and intentionality of sound, as well as suggesting new interpretations of the past.

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