

# Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri

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## Introduction

Meandering through the streets of Ta' Sannat one inevitably comes across the monument dedicated to the memory of Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri situated in Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri Street. This monument, created by sculptor Alfred Camilleri, was commissioned by the local council and was unveiled by His Excellency President Guido de Marco on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2003. It was blessed by the Archpriest Tarcisio Camilleri in a ceremony for which music was provided by the St Margaret Band Club of Ta' Sannat together with an orchestra, all under the direction of St Margaret's Band Club's then musical director, Josef Debrincat. At that memorable event some of Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri's many musical works were played.<sup>1</sup>

As a relative newcomer to the village, I had never heard of the Maestro before but it was obvious that he must have been a very important person in Ta' Sannat, so I carried out some research to try and find out as much as I could about him.<sup>2</sup>

I found out that the Maestro made a very large contribution to the village of Ta' Sannat both as an educator (he was the head teacher of the local primary school, between 1921-1932) and as a musician.

During his years as head teacher, he produced a number of musical compositions and taught musical instruments to local children (Sciberras, 1982; Grech, 1998). He certainly achieved a great deal during his very short life. This is his story.



Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri



Monument to Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri in the village of Ta' Sannat, Gozo

<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from (i) Archives, St Margaret's Band Club, Ta' Sannat, Gozo and (ii) Sunday Times of Malta, 02/03/2003.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the information in this article is derived from Sciberras (1982; 2011), Vella (1996), Bezzina (1989), Grech (1998) as well as from the Archives, St Margaret's Band Club, Ta' Sannat, Gozo

## Early Life

Caruana Spiteri was born in the village of Luqa, Malta on the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1896, the son of Giuseppe Caruana and of Carmela Spiteri. He was baptised the next day by Rev. Flavio Grima, then archpriest of the parish of the village of Luqa (Sciberras, 1982; Grech, 1998). He was the fourth child in a family of five, two girls and three boys. The father was a builder. It was a family of modest means (Vella, 1996). The children were brought up in a disciplined environment and the young Vincenzo was an intelligent lad who completed his primary and secondary education, coming first in all his exams; he then sat the examination to become a teacher, again coming first.

He continued his studies and sat yet a further examination for the post of head teacher, passing this test with flying colours and coming first yet again. Indeed, so impressive were his results that the authorities decided to appoint him without his having to undertake a preliminary course in England as was customary in those days. He was duly appointed a head teacher and sent, in October 1921, to exercise this role in the village of Ta'Sannat where he settled and lived until his sudden untimely death in 1932 at the early age of 35 years from consumption (tuberculosis).<sup>3</sup>

Vincenzo's musical legacy has naturally created a very strong bond between the villages of Luqa, where he was born and Ta' Sannat, where he died.<sup>4</sup>

## Music

Music was Vincenzo's abiding passion. He received his early musical education in his native village of Luqa, where, together with his brothers he attended music classes at the San Andrea (St Andrew's) Band Club.

One of his brothers Gio Batta played the clarinet, while the other, Andrea, played the flute. Vincenzo played the piano, violin, treble base and occasionally, the clarinet. His breathing problems

limited what he could do with the clarinet. He started his studies in harmony and counterpoint under the direction of Maestro Giuseppe Abdilla and studied violin and piano with Maestro Antonio Pace.

He sat for a number of music examinations and was eventually appointed maestro di capella in several churches in both Malta and Gozo. He composed some haunting melodies. After he arrived in Gozo, to take up his position as pedagogue, Vincenzo started playing in various churches, including the one at Ta' Sannat. He also gave a helping hand to the two 'city bands' of La Stella and Leone in Victoria. He sometimes actually directed and conducted concerts held by the Leone band. He was a first violin and from time to time also directed the orchestra set up by his great friend Maestro Giuseppe Gardini Vella.



Maestro Giardini Vella's Orchestra (1930). (Caruana Spiteri is the gentleman holding a violin, second on the right in the back row)

Travelling between Malta and Gozo in those days was no easy matter, so the new head teacher opted to live permanently in Ta' Sannat. He first lived at 194, Main Street, (now known as Papatya) where he rented two rooms above a shop there. There are memories in the village of his piano music floating gently out of the window onto the balcony.

He then moved to 21, Main Street (now known as Dar is-Surmast) where he lived virtually next door to the primary school. His house was separated from the school by the then police station. There is a memorial plaque affixed to the wall of Dar

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Rev. Mgr Lawrence Scibberas. The author is indebted to the Mgr for so generously giving him access to an extensive archive on the Maestro.

<sup>4</sup> Information available at the Banda San Andrea of Luqa website.



21, Main Street, Ta' Sannat, where the Maestro lived. Today known as Dar is-Surmast.

is-Surmast commemorating the fact that Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri once lived there.

While living in Ta' Sannat, the Maestro would take a daily constitutional together with Archpriest Joseph Cassar, starting around 4.15pm in the direction of Victoria.

Despite living for almost twelve years in Ta' Sannat, the Maestro never lost his love for Luqa, the Maltese village of his birth and he regularly visited his family there, especially during the summer months.

As regular as clockwork, whatever the weather, on the 29<sup>th</sup> November of every year, on the eve of the feast of St Andrew, the patron saint of Luqa, he would go there to take part in the celebrations. This feast is now celebrated during the summer months. He also never forgot the band of his native village of Luqa, the band of St Andrew, where he had learnt his music and had also played as a bandsman.

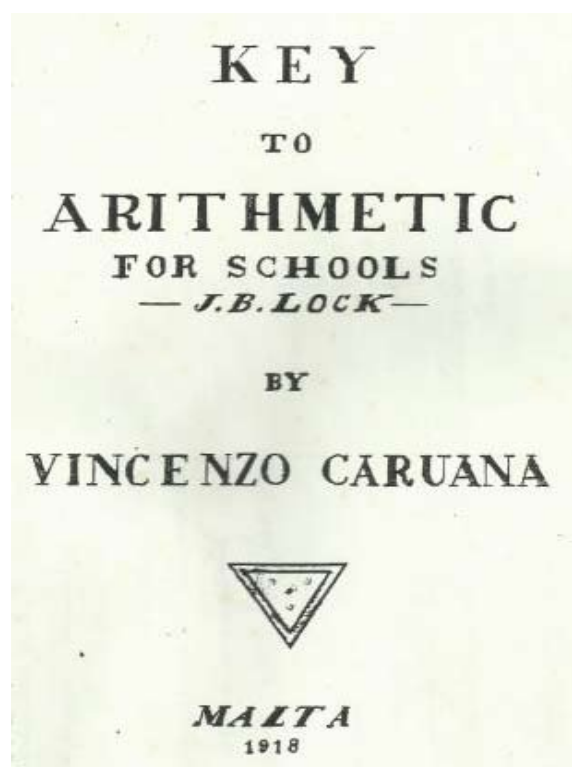
In September 1919, he bequeathed a band-march musical score to St Andrew's band club, entitled "Malta Gwerriera" (Malta the warrior). This popular band-march is still played by that band to this day. He composed a set of funeral marches dedicated to the fallen of the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1919 uprising against the British authorities (Sette Giugno), which he donated to the band club in March 1920. In 1924, he again donated to the band of St Andrew a Stabat Mater for instruments and children's choir. This piece is still played in Good Friday services.

The Rector of the Gozo seminary, Mgr Gius Debrincat asked Vincenzo to teach song and piano to his seminarians. In 1929, Vincenzo composed a long poem for carnival time, entitled "Una colazione indigesta" (an indigestible breakfast).

### Ta' Sannat's Gain

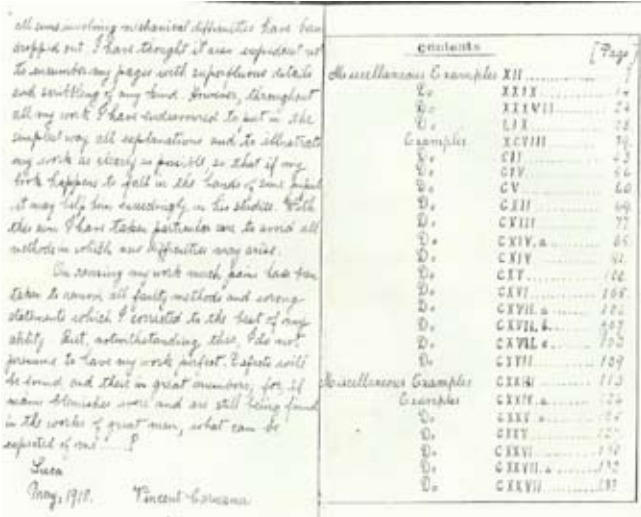
Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri lived in Ta' Sannat for just under twelve years while he was head teacher of the village primary school. One of his child pupils was Guzè Aquilina who in later life became Professor of Maltese and Oriental languages at the University of Malta, an eminent author and one of the doyens of the Maltese language. The young Guzè hailed from Munxar, which is next door to Ta' Sannat, and children from this village still receive their primary education in Ta' Sannat.

The Maestro was a disciplinarian, but very helpful, going out of his way to help people in general and his students and fellow teachers in particular. For example on one occasion he worked out all the problems from a text-book and collated all the work in the form of a reference work for his fellow teachers and for his students. He was fluent in English, Italian and French.



Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri formulated an answer book to the arithmetic textbook used in schools at the time.



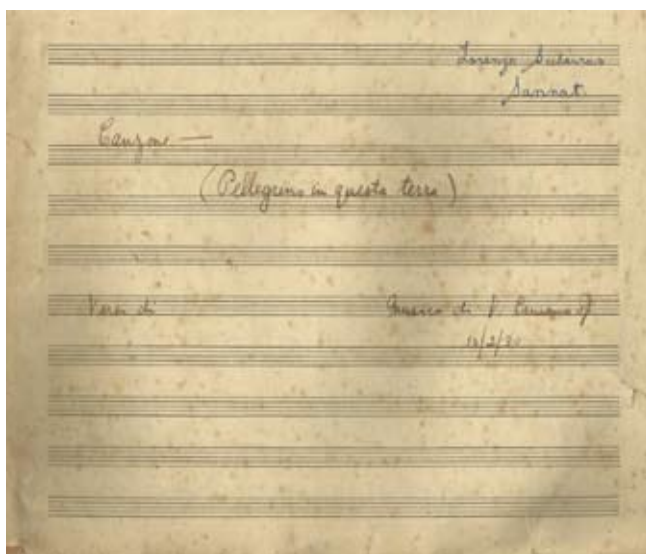


Internal pages of the arithmetic textbook.

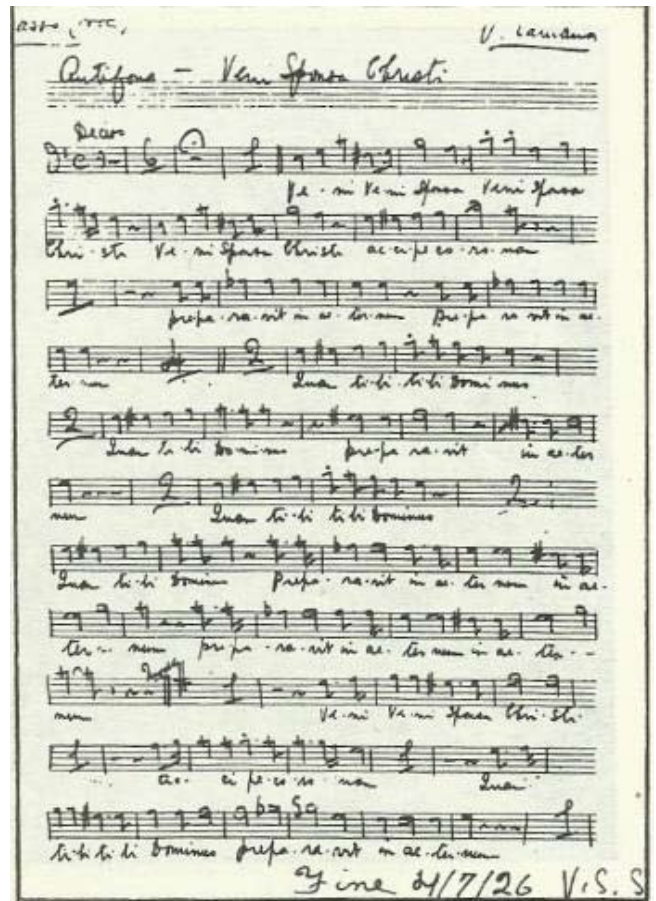
The best piece of music which the Maestro composed for the parish of Ta' Sannat is almost certainly, an antiphon, "Veni Sponsa Christi", (Come Christ's betrothed) which he finished on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1926 and which was premiered during the first feast of St Margaret held by the new Archpriest, Rev. Giuseppe Cassar (Bezzina, 1989).

Vincenzo composed a very large number of works exclusively dedicated to the parish of Ta' Sannat and which are duly conserved in the parish archives. An example, signed by the Maestro and donated to the archives by Mgr. L. Sciberras is shown below.

He regularly played the organ at Sunday High Mass, funerals and at various liturgical celebrations and services; he instructed a young girls' choir to sing the *Innu lil Santa Margerita* for the village



A composition by Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Spiteri donated to the archives by Mgr L. Sciberras



Veni Sponsa Christi

festa. He taught music to a number of young men, some of whom went on to play in Gozitan bands. He composed 31 musical litanies, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which he played on the church organ during the months of May and October.

In those far off days, there was no electricity in Ta' Sannat, so the church organ had to be pumped by hand; this task was entrusted to Mgr Lawrence Sciberras' great uncle Guzeppi Muscat, assisted by two local lads (Sciberras, 2011). The village of Ta' Sannat certainly gained a great deal by the presence of this man in their midst.

From 1927 onwards, with the encouragement of the village Archpriest, Rev. Giuseppe Cassar, the Maestro composed and took control of all the musical activities connected with the feast of St Margaret; this work is meticulously recorded in the parish archives. His music is still regularly played during the feast in celebration of St Margaret, patron saint of the village of Ta' Sannat. His memory therefore, lives on in the music he has left and not least in the unique tone of the village church bells.

The then Archpriest, Don Giuseppe Cassar decided to order a new set of bells for the parish church. To this end, at the beginning of 1932, he started to negotiate their purchase from the firm of Baricozzi in Milan. He turned to the Maestro for advice as to what tones the bells should have. It was the Maestro who decided that the bells should be toned in the key of La Maggiore (also known as La Grave) i.e. A-Major. This decision was readily agreed upon by Maestro Giardini Vella who was musical director of La Stella Band Club and who was also consulted on the matter. The bells which arrived in the village of Ta' Sannat in November 1932, are generally regarded as the most perfectly toned bells on the island of Gozo. The Maestro unfortunately never had the pleasure of seeing the bells in place as he died in April 1932.

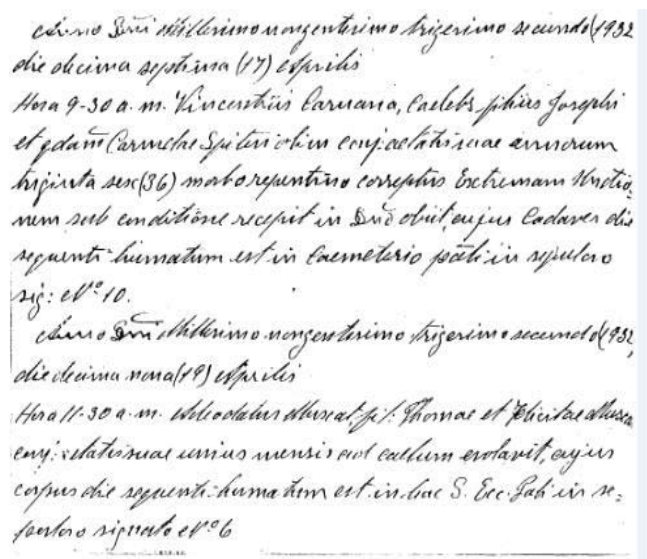
### Death of the Maestro

On Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> April 1932, while Maestro Caruana Spiteri was having a coffee with his friend Giardini Vella at a local coffee shop in Victoria, he suddenly felt very unwell and was taken to Victoria hospital. He died the next day at the young age of 35 years. A remarkable career was thus cut tragically short.

In view of the fact that he died from an infectious disease (tuberculosis), his house had to be fumigated under the supervision of the Department of Health (Sciberras, 2011). Present was Maestro Giardini Vella who retained a number of musical compositions written by Caruana Spiteri.



Funeral memento.



The death certificate

The funeral cortege left Victoria hospital on the 19<sup>th</sup> April and the Maestro was laid to rest in the cemetery on the parvis of the parish church at Ta' Sannat. A Ta' Sannat resident, fellow teacher and great friend of the Maestro kept a register between 1901 and 1948 where he recorded all the burials held at the parish of Ta' Sannat. This contemporary source gives witness to the fact that the funeral was both an imposing and solemn occasion, attended by the boys and girls of Ta' Sannat primary school and by their teachers as well as by teachers from other schools in Gozo. The band of La Stella took part playing funeral marches. There were also representatives of the Leone and St Andrew's Bands. The music for the high funeral





The funeral cortege.

Mass, *presentecadavere*, was conducted gratis by Maestro Giuseppe Giardini Vella, a great friend of the deceased.

During the festivities to mark the tricentenary of when Sannat became a parish in 1688, a concert was held in Ta' Sannat on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1988, when the St Julian's choir sang Maestro's Caruana Spiteri's major work "The European Conflagration" in the parish church. The centenary of the Maestro's birth was also celebrated in the parish of Ta' Sannat by means of a concert held at the parish church on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1996 under the auspices of the Cultural Council of the Ministry of Gozo and the local council of Ta' Sannat in the distinguished presence of His Excellency Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, President of the Republic of Malta. The musical director for the event was Rev Canon Martin Portelli and the entire musical repertoire for the evening consisted of Maestro Vincenzo



A concert was held in 1996 to celebrate the centenary of the Maestro's birth.

Caruana Spiteri's compositions. The tenor for the event was Andrew Sapiano while the Basso was Noel Galea.

There was an attempt to name the school of music, based in Sannat after the Maestro; however the school eventually moved to Xewkija and extended its activities to other activities besides music, so the attempt came to nothing.

Given the importance of this great man, it is only right and fitting that one of the new and more imposing streets in Ta' Sannat be named after

him and that the village also erects a monument to commemorate his time there. At a special ceremony held at St Margaret's Band Club Ta' Sannat on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 2010, the club's archivist, Joe Mifsud, presented a copy of the Maestro's portrait to the club where it hangs today as a reminder to all the villagers of a great man who once lived amongst them.



The letter by Mgr Lawrence Sciberras requesting the then Minister for Gozo for the naming of the school of music after the Maestro.



Presentation of the Maestro's portrait which hangs in St Margaret's Band Club today.

## Appendix

List of musical works by Maestro Vincenzo Caruana Scicluna, bequeathed as a musical legacy to the parish of Ta'Sannat, Gozo

- Tantum Ergo per Basso 14/11/14 Overture;
- The European Conflagration 24/7/15
- Tantum Ergo 1915
- Ave Mans Stella Beata Mater (voce edorgano) 13/6/20
- Introito 17/6/20 Vespro Semplice della B.M.V. June 1920
- Salve Regina pel Tenore 15/7/20
- Laudate Dominum 4/8/20
- Litanie della SS Vergine et Beata Mater 5/8/20
- Inno a S. Margerita (Jesu Corona) Veni Sponsa 18/7/20
- Sacerdos et Pontifex 19/4/25
- Veni Sponsa Christi 4/7/26
- Antifona (Voce Puerile) Minuistjeum Paulo, S.Luigi 16/2/27
- Responsori per Matutinto (Canto edOrgano) 5/5/27
- Credid/Laetatus Sum 16/5/27
- In Convertendo (a due Voci) (BeatiOmnes) 17/5/27
- Ave Mans Stella (InnopelTriduo) 7/6/27
- Domine Probasti Me (a due Voci) 11/7/27
- In Convertendo Dominus 16/7/27
- Deus in Adjutorum (in Re Magg.) (Solo Tenore e Coro) 22/9/27
- Alma Redemptoris 27/11/27
- Te Joseph Celebrent (Inno Semplice) 12/4/28
- Graduale No. I (Viderunt Ormnes) 20/4/28
- Responsori Pastoralis 8/12/29
- Deus In Adjutorium 24/5/30
- Laudate Pueri (Con Voci Bianche) 16/6/30
- Exultet Urbis Gaudiis (Voci Bianche) 17/6/31
- Tantum Ergo Corale

- 0 Salutaris Hostia
- Litanie della B.M.V.

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