The Egyptian Copts And Their Music

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FOREWORD

This recording of the complete Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil is the result of close cooperation between East and West. Having decided to further my study of Eastern church music during a sabbatical leave from the University of California (1964-1965), I laid the groundwork for the research by means of a year-long correspondence with Mr. Ragheb Moftah, head of the music department at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo and director of the Institute choir, a large group composed of young seminarians from all over Egypt.

Our exchange of letters, manuscripts, and music tapes introduced me to the beauty and purity of Coptic church music and convinced Mr. Moftah that he should enlist my help in his efforts to preserve this ancient music. Together we embarked on a project of recording an entire Liturgy--a service lasting from three to four hours, depending on the occasion--complete with appropriate hymns.

The present-day ritual of the Coptic Church, which is the official Christian church in Egypt, can be traced back to the beginnings of Christianity, and the music that accompanies this ritual, particularly that of the Liturgy, represents an ancient and unbroken sacred musical tradition. However, since Coptic music has never been adequately notated and has depended solely on oral transmission to come down through the centuries, Mr. Moftah, a dedicated Coptic scholar and musician, has devoted much of his life to the task of teaching and preserving it.

Aided by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, we began recording in Cairo in 1964, using Coptic priests to chant the part of the celebrant and the Institute choir to sing the roles of both choir and congregation. After the sabbatical year, Mr. Moftah and I continued our project long distance, and in 1967[1] returned to Egypt so that we could once more sit down together and review our work of recording, editing, and writing. The result of our long and mutually respectful association is this album, a tribute to Mr. Moftah and those other Egyptian Christians who adhere to a spiritual life and discipline that has remained almost unchanged for nineteen centuries.

[1] Eusebii, ***Chronicorum*** lib. 2 (Migne, P.G. XIX, 539).

THE EGYPTIAN COPTS AND THEIR MUSIC

The Copts are descendants of the ancient Egyptians, and are often referred to as modern sons of the Pharaohs. During Hellenistic times they were known by the Greek word ***Aigyptios*** (Egyptian), a Hellenized form of Ha-Ka-Ptah (abode of the double of Ptah), the city also known as Memphis and the religious capital of ancient Egypt. After the Arabs conquered Egypt in the seventh century A.D., the word ***Aigyptioswas*** shortened to Gypt and eventually became corrupted into Copt. Today Copt refers to the native Christian Egyptians, and because these people have traditionally married within their sect they represent a remarkably pure strain of a race that flourished thousands of years ago. At present there are about five million Egyptian Copts.

The Coptic Church is the official Christian church in Egypt (Ethiopian Christians also profess the Coptic faith), founded, according to tradition, by Mark the Evangelist. The great second-century church historian Eusebius recorded that Mark first went to Alexandria around 43-44 A.D.,[1] and it is generally believed that he was martyred in that city. Even now the head of the Coptic Church is called the Pope of Alexandria and the Patriarch of the See of St. Mark.

Coptic tradition also holds that forty years before Mark went to Egypt the Holy Family had taken refuge there (Matt. 2:13-15), and to the Copts this biblical flight is a cherished, living tradition nourished by numerous documents and legends. This tradition traces the travels of the Holy Family as far south as Qusiya, where in the fourth century the Copts built the monastery El Moharrak and dedicated it to the Holy Virgin. Thus Christianity has deep roots in Egypt.

Hermitages first appeared in the environs of Alexandria and spread far into Egypt's deserts and mountains. Christians practiced the ascetic life before the fourth century, but St. Anthony's (c. 250350 A.D.) long, solitary life in the Egyptian desert set the example for future religious hermits and established a hermitic tradition that still endures. "It is no overstatement to say that, apart from being the father of Christian monasticism, St. Anthony has remained the prototype of Coptic monasticism. He has served as an ideal for both the anchorite and the cenobitic monk. This double role is due to the fact that his life was divided into solitary as well as cenobitic activities."[2] A monk named Pachomius (d.. 349 A.D.) actively organized cenobitic monasteries-monks living and working together communallyand formulated certain monastic rules, orders, and disciplines that are still esteemed in monasteries throughout the world. Pachomius founded many monasteries in Upper Egypt, one of them being El Moharrak.

In the middle of the fifth century controversies regarding the Nature of Christ created the tragic schism that alienated the Egyptian Church from both the Byzantine Church and the Latin Church. From that time until the Arab conquest two centuries later, Egypt endured bloodshed, strife, and persecution. The Egyptian Church is truly called the martyred church, for its sufferings began in the early years of Christianity at the hands of the pagan Roman emperors, Diocletian alone having reputedly put to death countless Christian martyrs. The Coptic Church commemorates those who died for the faith by reckoning the official beginning of Coptic history from this so-called Era of the Martyrs (A.M.), which began on August 29, 284 A.D., the year in which Diocletian was chosen as emperor; thus the Coptic year-composed of thirteen months-begins on August 29 according to the Coptic calendar (by the Gregorian calendar September 11, or 12 in years preceding leap years).

In 640 A.D. the Arabs invaded Egypt, the following year they captured the fortress of Babylon (old Cairo), and thereafter Moslems and Copts coexisted in Egypt.

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[2] Otto Meinardus, ***Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*** (Cairo: The American University, 1961), pp. 16-17.

THE COPTIC LANGUAGE

Coptic, the authorized liturgical language of the Egyptian Church, derives from the last developmental stage of ancient Egyptian, a language that had existed for about thirty-five centuries. The earliest Egyptian writings so far discovered date from around 3000 B.C.; Coptic, the final form of this Egyptian language, came into use during the second and third centuries A.D. Written Coptic is based on the Greek alphabet supplemented with a few Egyptian characters held over from an earlier period.

Ancient Egyptians knew three different types of writing: hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic. Most familiar is the hieroglyphic picture writing found on tombs and temples. Hieratic, a cursive writing simpler and less pictorial than hieroglyphics, originally belonged only to the priests serving in the temples. Demotic, a simplified version of hieratic, emerged during the Greco-Roman period. During the early Christian centuries Egyptians gradually discarded these ancient systems based on syllables, phonetics, ideograms, and determinatives and adopted the Greek alphabet, retaining just seven demotic characters to represent sounds nonexistent in Greek. Historians attribute this momentous change to the fact that demotic writing had become overly complicated.

Greek prevailed as the governmental language of the knowledgeable Eastern world during the Roman and Byzantine eras, which may partially account for the fact that Egypt failed to recognize Coptic as the national Egyptian language. Native Egyptians spoke Coptic, of course, and some religious, scientific, and educational institutions used written Coptic until about three centuries after the Arab conquest.

By the eleventh century, perhaps earlier, Coptic literature had lost most of its vitality, yet the spoken language remained alive for a long time, particularly in the Christian villages of Upper Egypt. Today Coptic has almost disappeared; although it remains the authorized language of the Coptic Church, even there it is rapidly being displaced by Arabic. This ancient language now faces the threat of extinction.

At its peak (c. 700-1000 A.D.) Coptic extended to at least five dialects, three of which-Akhmimic, Subachmimic, and Fayumic-developed only local importance. Sahidic, the dialect of Upper Egypt, became the classical literary and spoken language, and most ancient documents now in existence are written in Sahidic. Bohairic, a dialect that flourished in Lower Egypt from the fifth through the tenth centuries, was adopted by the Coptic Church in the eleventh century and survives today in the Coptic Liturgy (Mass).

Coptic literature is almost exclusively devoted to biblical and ecclesiastical works, but there are some manuscripts and books-especially in the Sahidic dialect-on general Coptic literature, physiology, medicine, astronomy, law, astrology, and other subjects. The biblical and ecclesiastical literature consists mostly of translations from the Greek, for during the first four centuries of the Christian era Greek predominated as the international religious language and therefore many of the renowned theologians of the Church of Alexandria used it in their writings.

The main body of Coptic poetry lies in the great collections of hymns-like the beautiful and typical Theotokias (hymns to the Virgin)-whose texts are deeply spiritual and mystical.

The Coptic language includes numerous Greek words not because it lacks equivalents, but partly because the Copts wanted to purify their language by removing words associated with old heathen practices. For example, the Copts adopted the Greek word *paradeisos,* which has the Christian meaning of "abode of the blessed," despite having their own words *Sekhet Yarw,* meaning the "field of happy souls," because the latter had always applied in context to the pagan Egyptian religion. Also, many Greek words came into the Coptic language through repeated use in theological discussions at international religious conferences.

THE COPTIC CHURCH AND ITS LITURGY

Coptic dogmas and sacraments are identical with those of the Syrian Church and the Ethiopian Church and nearly identical with those of the other Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The Coptic Church recognizes seven Holy Orders: Reader, Subdeacon, Deacon, Archdeacon, Priest, Hegoumenos (Chief Priest), and Bishop.

Coptic Church music, like that of all the primitive churches, is largely vocal, and the voice is the only medium that can faithfully express its original nature and color. Furthermore, hardly any of this music adapts effectively to harmonization. According to the liturgical books, a percussion instrument called the Nakus originally accompanied the voice for some hymns, but the Nakus is no longer used and any accompaniment desired is supplied by cymbals or sometimes cymbals and triangles.

The typical Coptic liturgical day begins and ends at sundown, commencing with None, Vespers, Compline, the Psalmody, the Evening Offering of Incense, and continuing very early the next morning with Midnight Prayer, the Psalmody, Morning Prayer, the Psalmody, the Morning Offering of Incense, Terce, Sext, and the Divine Liturgy.

The Egyptian Coptic Church follows three Liturgies: those of St. Basil, St. Gregory, and St. Cyril (also known as that of St. Mark). St. Basil's is normally used throughout the year; St. Gregory's is reserved for the feasts of the Nativity, Epiphany, and Easter; and St. Mark's is rarely used. Following is a brief outline of the Liturgy of St. Basil as presently celebrated:

Preparation of the Elements

The priest chooses the bread to be consecrated.
Procession with the bread enveloped in a little veil.
Preparation of the elements (mixture of the water and wine).
Prayers of thanksgiving.
Covering of the elements.

Prayers of Absolution *(Censing)*

Instruction *(Lessons)*

Epistle of Saint Paul (Censing). Catholic Epistle (Censing). Acts of the Apostles (Censing).
Synaxaire (Commentary on the Saint of the Day). Trisagion (Holy is God).
Psalm versicle. Gospel and Sermon.

Prayers of Supplication *(For peace and for the Church)*

Credo *(Recited by all the faithful) Lavabo (Supplication for pardon).*

Kiss of Peace

The priest removes the veil covering the elements. Benediction with the chalice veil.

Preface

Consecration *(The priest gently breaks the bread.)*
Recitation of the Institution of the Liturgy.
Response of the faithful: We believe that this is *the truth.*
Epiclesis (Invocation of the Holy Spirit) The priest kneels.

Prayers of Supplication *(For the peace of the Church, for the Patriarch, priests and clergy, all the churches, for material well-being, for benefactors)*

Memorial *(For martyred saints and the dead)*

Fraction

Lord's Prayer *(Recited by all the faithful)*

Intinction and Mixture *(The priest soaks a small portion of the host in the precious blood, signs the consecrated bread with it, and lets the portion fall into the chalice.)*

Elevation *(The priest raises the paten and says: `I believe that this is the revived body. ")* Communion *(For the priest, the deacons, and the faithful) Thanksgiving*

Aspersion

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal

Coptic priests wear strikingly simple yet impressive vestments to celebrate the Liturgy: the Sticharion, a long-sleeved white robe reaching to the feet, has embroidered crosses and emblematic figures on the sleeves and breast; the Amice, a

hood of white linen or silk connected to a broad strip of the same fabric that hangs down the back to the floor, also has embroidered crosses and designs in color.

COPTIC MUSIC MANUSCRIPTS

Practically every branch of the Eastern Church has preserved some manuscripts bearing musical notation. The Byzantine (Greek) Church created an especially fine treasury of such manuscripts; the Syrian Church developed a notational system for the solemn reading of lessons; the early Armenian Church produced a notation but as yet it defies transcription; and the Ethiopian Church notated its liturgy even though in practice the music is taught and transmitted orally.

The Egyptian Coptic Church is unique in that it has neglected to devise a system of musical notation and consequently has no important music manuscripts. At the present time Coptic music remains an art that must be learned and handed down by oral tradition.

This lack of notation might imply that Coptic music has undergone numerous changes over the centuries; on the other hand, it might be logically argued that reliance on the highly trained memories required to transmit music orally promotes a more authentic and stable musical tradition than one dependent on written musical symbols. "An Egyptian legend relates that when the god Thoth revealed his discovery of the art of writing to King Thamos, the good King denounced it as an enemy of civilization. `Children and young people,' protested the monarch, `who had hitherto been forced to apply themselves diligently to learn and retain whatever was taught them, would cease to apply themselves and would neglect to exercise their memories.'"[3]

There is scant evidence of any attempt at musical notation in Egypt. The Oxyrhynchus Papyrus, a hymn fragment dating from the late third century A.D., employs a decipherable Greek notation and gives an idea of the type of music performed by Greek-speaking Christians in early Christian Egypt. To be noticed carefully are the several ornaments made up of two or three notes and used particularly on the word "amen," which occurs regularly throughout the text. However, the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus is an isolated fragment and adds little to our knowledge of early Coptic music.

We have, in-fact, few documents to indicate that any type of Coptic notation ever, existed. In his ***Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Collection of the John Rylands Library*** (Manchester, 1909), - Walter E. Crum reproduces a few tenth- and eleventh-century fragments that seemingly contain signs of a primitive notation. Some words contain from four to six acute accents set to the syllable with the tonic accent. There are other accent marks-single, double, triple, and even quintuple-that to an extent resemble what we know of Greek ekphonetic notation. The dot appears either above or below a note, alone, or in conjunction with other signs. In addition, these musical fragments include the circumflex accent and the letter S, which might be interpreted like the Latin *oriscus (a* sign for a particular type of sustained note).

These incomplete manuscripts clearly have some form of grammatical, phonetic, or musical indication. It may be a system similar to Byzantine ekphonetic notation, and both may have derived from the same source: the Greek scriptoria in Alexandria. Some texts in the Crum catalogue indicate which tone (mode) is to be used; that is, the tones of Adam, Watos, etc. Some texts contain what may be the names of known melodies: for example, one manuscript instructs that the music is "to be sung to the melody ***Tell Me the Secret, "*** and other manuscripts mention ***Consolation, See my Fate, Praise Him,*** and ***The Garden.***

Considering these few Coptic manuscripts against the substantial collections of old music manuscripts preserved by other Christian churches, we come to the conclusion that the Copts have never been seriously interested in writing down their melodies. Apparently they preferred to trust the superb memories of their blind cantors-a fixed tradition of the Coptic Church-rather than lifeless series of primitive notation symbols.

There is a necessary postscript to this inevitably meager account of Coptic notation. A 1952 brochure from the Parke-Bernet Galleries of New York City advertised for sale "An Early Christian Musical Manuscript of Six Leaves Originating in Egypt about the Fifth to the Seventh Century. Of Coptic Origin, Belonging to the Earliest Remnant of Christian Musical Notation. Property of H. Aram Gulezyan, Caldwell, N. Y." The brochure further describes the document as "a Cosmologico-Musical Manuscript of the 5th 6th 7th Century from Egypt."

In the brochure Mr. Gulezyan states that this manuscript, which is marked with circles of twelve different colors and dimensions, is a musical manuscript and he construes the twelve colors as the twelve sounds of our Western chromatic scale. Few scholars would agree with this attempt to interpret an old Eastern manuscript by means of a rather

[3] Will Durant, ***The Story of Civilization, I, Our Oriental Heritage*** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 76.

modern, basically Western scale system. Mr. Gulezyan's manuscript is generally recognized as a graphic representation of the ***Harmonia Mundi*** of the mathematician Ptolemy of Alexandria, and the circles are most likely an allusion to or a musical interpretation of the zodiac.[4]

[4] For further discussion of this see A. Machabey, ***La Notation Musicale*** (Paris, 1952), pp. 22-23 and E. Werner, ***The Philosophy and Theory of Music in Judaeo-Arabic Literature*** (Cincinnati, 1941), pp. 288-292.

MODERN TRANSCRIPTIONS OF COPTIC CHANT

Despite the paucity of Coptic musical manuscripts or perhaps because of it, several nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have tried to transfer the oral tradition to a written medium. Before the availability of phonographs and tape recorders, transcribers had to depend on the fallible procedure of writing their versions directly as the chant came from cantor and priest. For the Westerner, a more serious obstacle to notating Coptic chant arose from his misunderstanding of Eastern chant in general and Coptic chant in particular. In assuming that each note of a florid chant belonged to the true tradition of the given chant, many transcribers completely ignored the Eastern custom of improvisation and the prevalence of melodic formulas in Eastern music.

G. A. Villoteau, a member of the large scientific expedition sent by Napoleon to Egypt, made the first try at transcribing Coptic chant. In the section of his ***Description de l'Egypte*** entitled ***De 1'Etat actuel de 1'art musical en Egypte*** (Paris, 1809), Villoteau devoted more than a thousand pages to Egyptian music, basing his research on ancient authors and musical scenes depicted on walls, frescoes, and statuary.

Of all his pages on Egyptian music, Villoteau reserved about six for Coptic liturgical music, which he described as barbaric, boring, monotonous, and insipid. In view of his attitude it would be too much to expect that this author would have bothered to transcribe seriously, and apparently he was ill-equipped for the task. Villoteau wrote down one Alleluia which he fitted (artificially) into a vocalise of 110 measures *alla breve.* The excerpt has no value.

About eighty years later a Jesuit priest named Father Blin edited a collection of ***Chants liturgiques coptes*** (Cairo, 1888) which, though more complete and sympathetic, suffers from the weaknesses of any single direct transcription. L. Badet, another Jesuit father, published ***Chants liturgiques des Coptes*** (Cairo, 1899), but rather than improving Blin's work Badet merely succeeded in confusing the issue by stating in the preface to his collection that "one must avoid changing the sound i into *yd* and the sound *ou* into wo as the cantors do," thereby wholly disregarding a long-standing tradition of the Coptic Church (see the following section).

Kamel Ghobrial's ***Les reponses de 1'eglise St. Marc*** (Cairo, 1916) is an incomplete collection of the responses in the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. Unfortunately, in transcribing these responses he tried to accommodate them to the version used at St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo and simultaneously to please the taste of the ladies of that congregation, so the results are an incongruous mixture of religious rite and modern taste. Ghobrial's responses are harmonized, another difficulty in verifying their accuracy.

In 1929 Ernest Newlandsmith, an English musician and Egyptophile, undertook a major transcription project that eventually required seven years to complete. Ably assisted by Mr. Ragheb Moftah-at present the director of music at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo-Mr. Newlandsmith produced the most complete collection of Coptic chant ever assembled (15 manuscript volumes, available on microfilm from the Music Library, University of California, Santa Barbara). Because these chants were transcribed directly without the aid of a phonograph the listener will often receive only a general impression of their content; nevertheless, the unpublished collection is valuable to the Western musician, for it contains the texts (in both Coptic and phonetic letters) and musical outlines of practically every chant sung in the Coptic Church.

Two interesting transcriptions of Coptic chant made by Father Rent Me'nard and Dr. Hans Hickmann appear with Menard's article ***Koptische Musik*** in Volume 7 of ***Die Musik in Geschichte and Gegenwart*** (Barenreiter 1958). One transcription offers two comparative versions of the Trisagion; the other presents Psalm 150 preceded by the melodic formula on which the transcribers assert the psalm is fashioned. Menard and Hickmann, avid scholars and authors of numerous articles on ancient Egyptian and Coptic music, at one time expressed an interest in transcribing the Coptic Liturgy and hymns. Dr. Hickmann died in 1968, but if Father Menard proceeds with his Coptic transcriptions, he will bring much skill, knowledge, and understanding to his project.

Two Hungarian collaborators, Ilona Borsai and Margit Toth, are presently at work transcribing the Coptic Liturgy by means of transcription techniques successfully applied by Be1a Bartok.

THE INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SACRED MUSIC

Curt Sachs, Henry Farmer, Hans Hickmann, and others investigating pre-Christian Egyptian musik have gathered only a small amount of information about the actual music, but their efforts prove conclusively that this ancient music greatly influenced Coptic chant. Through their studies we have learned that music played a prominent part in Egyptian rituals: at daily services the temple priests and singers chanted prayers and glorified their various gods with appropriate hymns sung alternately by soloists and chorus, often supported by instrumental accompaniment.

Always ultraconservative in art and religion, the Egyptians maintained strict separation from Greek culture even during the Hellenistic period, thus steadfastly protecting the oriental characteristics of their own culture. This strong conservatism inherent in the race naturally affected Egyptian music. In the second book of *Laws* Plato relates that early in their history the Egyptians had recognized the value of training young men to know and appreciate beautiful forms and melodies. "Long ago they appear to have recognized the very principle of which we are now speaking-that their young citizens must be habituated to forms and strains of virtue. These they fixed, and exhibited the patterns of them in their temples; and no painter or artist is allowed to innovate upon them, or to leave the traditional forms and invent new ones. To this day, no alteration is allowed either in these arts, or in music at all."[5] Thus it is not impossible that some melodies have remained unchanged across the centuries.

Music is not the ephemeral art that it might seem; indeed, it can endure when architectural and artistic monuments remain only in memory or written description. Ethnomusicologists concur that through a chain of oral tradition melodies can live for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years, and this would seem to be highly probable in conservative Egypt. Other facts support the belief that Egypt's musical tradition has been continuous. In Book II of his famous *History,* the fifth-century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus singled out Egypt as the most religious country in the world. This ardent religion doubtlessly influenced and controlled Egyptian music.

Even the Christian Copts have kept something of the religious atmosphere of ancient Egypt by retaining such temple practices as the surplus and tonsure and solo and choral singing. Nearly all Coptic music handed down through the centuries is to some degree religious, which leads us to believe that many elements of ancient Egyptian music continue to survive in Coptic liturgical music.

More specifically we can point out two positive similarities between traditional Coptic and ancient Egyptian musical practices. The first and most readily confirmed is the use of chironomy (hand signals). In several publications[6] Dr. Hans Hickmann discusses the similarity between obvious chironomic signs on ancient Egyptian tombs and signs now used in teaching (and singing) Coptic chant. For example, a relief on the tomb of Nencheftka (c. 2700 B.C.) at Sakkara (now in the Cairo Museum) shows a group of seated musicians, some holding instruments and others with their hands in stylized positions: one cups a hand to his ear while partly extending his other arm with elbow bent and the hand held up parallel to the head; another musician uses this same extended arm-and-hand position but rests the opposite hand on one knee instead of cupping it to his ear. These same postures can be observed in the twentieth century, and I personally have seen the choirmaster at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo use exactly these same movements: slapping one hand to his knee to maintain a rhythmic pulse, he extended the other hand in
full view of the choir to indicate the general movement of the melodic line, obviously just as an *aide-memoir* From time to time the leader-or a choir member-would cup one hand over his ear to hear better. Not only Coptic singers but other singers as well commonly use this traditional gesture.

The other strong likeness between Coptic chant and ancient Egyptian music originates in their striking custom of singing vocalises on vowel sounds. A-treatise formerly attributed to Demetrius of Phalerum, the probable inspirer of the Alexandrian library in the third century B.C., said that "In Egypt the priests hymn the gods through the seven sounds (vowels) in direct succession." (The treatise *On Rhetorical Expression is* probably the work of a first-century A.D. Alexandrian of the same name.) The same practice is mentioned in Gnostic writings, and Egon Wellesz noted that "from Oriental mystery rites it is known that single vowels or groups of vowels were uttered by the initiate to

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[5] *The Dialogues of Plato,* translated by B. Jowett (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), Vol. IV, p. 1;

[6] For example, see Hans Hickmann, Observations sur lea survivances de la chironomie egyptienne dans le chant liturgique copte (Miscellanea Musicologica, Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut franc̦ais d'archeblo orientale, 1948).

intensify the effect of the incantation."[7]

In a hymn to the god Min, Hans Hickmann discovered a repeated sign that to him suggested a rhythmical repetition of a syllabic interjection.[8] Armand Machabey in an interesting study[9] listed the melisma as one of the two most significant elements of *bel canto,* supporting his theory with paintings found on a tomb at Beni-Hassan (Middle Empire), where signs designating ha, ha, ha, ha and i, i, i, i placed beside the singers seem to indicate vocalises.

To summarize:

1. Chironomy, a method used in pre-Christian Egypt and still being used today, has undoubtedly helped to preserve some fundamentals of ancient Egyptian music.
2. The fact that temple priests could strictly regulate musical forms and melodies implies that the ancient Egyptians knew about modal formulas, which currently exist not only in Coptic music but in other Near Eastern music as well.
3. During their mysterious rites the priests sang incantations on vowel sounds, an ancient custom still discernible in Coptic chant where long vocalises are sung on one vowel or vowel sound.

THE HEBREW INFLUENCE

The Jews have a long history in Egypt. As early as the seventh century B.C., a Jewish settlement existed at Elephantine on the Upper Nile. All through the third century more Jews arrived in Egypt, generally settling in Alexandria, and by the second century they had set up many colonies and built several synagogues. By the first century B.C. the Alexandrian Jews, constituted the largest Jewish community living outside of Judea. Shortly after the beginning of the Christian era, they occupied almost two of the five quarters located within the wall, but there was no ghetto and some lived in other quarters. In all Egypt there were then about one million Jews.

It follows that the native Alexandrians learned something about synagogue liturgy: scripture readings (cantillations) from the Pentateuch and the Prophets; the *Shema* (Hear, O Israel) framed in benedictions; prayers and hymns of adoration, including the *Kedushah* (Isaiah 6:3, the *Sanctus* of the Christian liturgy); special psalms for each day of the week and proper psalms for feasts. Since many early Christians came from the Jewish community, they naturally incorporated the function of the Jewish cantor into their new congregations. Christians also adopted the benediction *Baruh ata Adonaj* (Thanks be to Thee, O Lord).

Coptic Church psalm formulas-the melodies used for chanting the psalms-have their closest parallels in the liturgy of Eastern Jews. "Although no theory of Jewish music is ever known to have been committed to writing, the descendants of the Jews taken to Egypt in the fourth century B.C. to help people Alexandria played an important part in the development of Judaism and Christianity and in the formulation and perpetuation of materials which furthered the music of the early Christian Church."[10]

Even now Coptic chant reveals its liturgical heritage from the Jewish communities in ancient Egypt; indeed the early Christians borrowed heavily from Hebrew liturgy when forming their new rite:

1 . Psalmody, the singing of psalms, an important part of Coptic worship.

2. Responsorial singing, dialogue between priest or deacon and congregation (choir).

3. Melismatic (frequently wordless) chants, a tradition of all Near Eastern cultures.

4. Cantillation of the scripture, authentically perpetuated first by chironomy (hand signs) and. later by ekphonetic signs, the latter system being extensively used in the Byzantine Church.

5. Improvisation (usually by varying and ornamenting familiar melodic formulas). Musically and

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[7] Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography,* Second Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 65.

[8] Hans *Hickmann, Musicologie Pharaonique* (Kehl: Librairie Heitz, 19'56), pp. 52-53.

[9] Armand Machabey, *Le Bel Canto* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1948).

[10] *The Pelican History of Music,* edited by Alec Robertson and Denis Stevens (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), 1, p. 111.

emotionally the extent of improvisation conforms to the principles of musical ethics and aesthetics common to the peoples of the Near East.

THE GRECO-BYZANTINE INFLUENCE

By 200 B.C. Alexandria had become the greatest city of the known world. Yet "on Hellenism in general Egypt throws comparatively little light and but for the Museum and Library at Alexandria would hardly have affected the development ofGreek civilization. For the Greek in Egypt remained a stranger amid the dense mass of natives, who would ultimately have absorbed him, but for Rome's intervention."[11]

Ptolemy I founded the great Alexandrian library and museum, and whether or not Demetrius of Phalerum gave him the idea, the foundation reflected the Aristotelian spirit. Henceforth, although Athens kept her standing in philosophy, Alexandria eclipsed her as the center of science and literature.

"The vast empire of Alexander the Great had begun a Hellenizing of both East and West, which continued for centuries. Not only was Judaism profoundly affected by this change, which necessitated the Greek version of the ancient Scriptures, the Septuagint, but Christianity itself, under the providence of God, became a world religion through its contact with Hellenism. After the destruction of Jerusalem, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and Egypt became the burgeoning roots of its growth. For three hundred years Greek was the language of the youthful Church, even in Rome. Not till the middle of the third century did the use of Greek begin to die out in Italy, in Gaul, and in Africa."[12]

The Coptic Church and the Greek Church (later called the Byzantine Church) both drew on the rich musical tradition of the Jewish synagogue. Although the Greek Church in Egypt grew forceful enough to influence future Coptic congregations, this influence primarily affected theology and ritual. One exception, stemming from the Byzantine fondness for singing hymns, appears in the Theotokias (hymns to the Virgin) that figure so prominently in the Coptic religion. These hymns have been translated into Coptic and the music shows negligible Greek influence, yet it seems that Greek music must have made some impression on the Copts, if not directly through the Church perhaps through the Egyptians themselves.

The Greek historian Herodotus wrote in the fifth century B.C. that "the Egyptians adhere to their own national customs, and adopt no foreign usages. Many of these customs are worthy of note: among others their song, the Linus, which is sung under various names not only in Egypt but in Phoenicia, in Cyprus, and in other places; and which seems to be exactly the same as that in use among the Greeks, and by them called Linus. There were very many things in Egypt which filled me with astonishment, and this was one of them. Whence could the Egyptians have got the Linus?"[13]

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[11] W.W. Tam, *Hellenistic Civilization* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1930), p. 155.

[12] Winfred Douglas, *Church Music in History and Practice,* revised by L. Ellinwood (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 107

[13] *The History of Herodotus,* translated by George Rawlinson (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1932), p. 107.

COPTIC MUSIC AND ARABIC MUSIC

Copts descend in a direct line from the ancient Egyptians, and the sacred Coptic music they have so carefully protected through the centuries bears many traces of ancient music. It is possible too that some Egyptian folk music has come down through the ages comparatively unchanged. As an example, the text of a song now sung in Arabic by Nile crewmen is an exact translation of the original ancient Egyptian "0 bird, fly away and get me a kiss from my beloved." In their essence present-day Egyptian folk songs, especially those of Upper Egypt, and Coptic church music share more than one likeness.

The Coptic language (the demotic language of ancient Egypt) persevered throughout Egypt until around the beginning of the tenth century A.D. Then Arabic gradually spread over the country, taking several centuries to overtake Coptic and finally replace it. During these centuries the Copts translated their folk songs into Arabic but continued to compose music typical of their Egyptian background.

Since Christian Copts have lived in the Arabic world for many centuries, it is not surprising that Arabic and Coptic musical aesthetics are alike in some respects. Arabs and Copts improvise on similar formulas, use frequent and melodically similar vocalises, and seem to employ intervals smaller than the half tone, either intentionally or accidentally. Yet basically the two musics are different: Coptic music has fewer of the small intervals, more improvisation, and none of the Turkish and Persian influences noticeable in Egyptian Arabic music.

Remembering that Egypt is a tradition-bound country, we have reason to believe that Arabic musical traditions-like the Coptic-have persisted for centuries despite political and religious upheavals. Theoreticians agree that Arabic music-again like the Coptic-developed out of a system of already known formulas. In the same way the Benedictine monks at Solemnes have composed modern Gregorian music by taking melodic and modal formulas from an already existing repertoire and adapting them to new texts. This method, long practiced in Latin and Coptic rites, enables the people to participate immediately in the liturgy.

Is it possible then that Coptic chant may have been infiltrated by a good strain of Arabic music? Most likely not, but the two may share a common parent, for sacred Coptic music and popular Arabic music contain many elements traceable to the ritual and folk music of ancient Egypt.

Although in Egypt we find this similarity between the Arabic popular tradition and Coptic sacred tradition, vast differences separate the various Arabic traditions from each other. Arab unity exists only ethnically and certainly does not extend to sacred music. Some common modes and rhythms are in use among all Arab sects, but intervals and melodic forms vary considerably. For example, an Egyptian Arab reciting the Koran gives a rendition very different from that recited by an Arab from Maghreb; however, that same Egyptian recitation, full of ornate chant, closely resembles the long vocalises of the Copts.

Recognizing the inherent suspicion between Egyptian Arab and Egyptian Copt and the Copts' jealous preservation of their racial identity, it seems unlikely that the Coptic Church would have consciously adopted any of the Arabic musical traditions. There is a kinship between the two traditions, not because one has borrowed from the other but because together they share a musical heritage rooted in the folkloric and sacerdotal traditions of ancient Egypt.

THE ESSENCE OF COPTIC MUSIC

Theoretically Coptic church music is as old as the Egyptian Church itself, meaning that it dates from the early years of the Christian era. Historians believe that Christianity began in Egypt about the middle of the first century among Egyptians and Greeks in Alexandria and spread rapidly throughout the land. Supporting this theory is the fact that a small Christian community could not have provided for the many monasteries founded in Egypt during the early years of the fourth century. If the Church could have sustained this rather elaborate monastic system, it must have been firmly entrenched in Egypt well before that time.

Egyptian Christians seemingly borrowed from diverse sources to create their rituals: synagogue music (particularly for singing the psalms), temple music, and folk music. Since the Greek Liturgy dominated Egyptian Christianity during the first centuries, at least in urban centers, it is also possible that some elements of Greek music subtly melded into the body of future Coptic music. The Greek influence shows clearly in the hymns that came to prominence in the fourth century, first in the East and then in the West. Consider the rich hymn repertoire of the Byzantine Church and the great body of splendid hymns proudly maintained by the Coptic Church; many of the latter are translations from Greek originals.

Apart from these internal influences, Egyptian Christians were obviously sensitive to traditions alive in other parts of Eastern Christendom, for Coptic chant is very similar to Syrian chant and at the same time has many characteristics in common with Armenian chant. So Coptic chant is actually part of a widespread Near Eastern musical culture born of mixed elements taken from the Jewish' synagogues and Christian communities around the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. This cultural intermingling created a religious atmosphere and a musical aesthetic that have no counterpart in the West.

Many Coptic Offices are almost entirely sung. However, the Canonical Hours are never sung or chanted as, for example, Hesperinos and Orthros are sung in the Greek Church or solemn Lauds and Vespers in the Latin Church. The Coptic Liturgy, the Evening Offering of Incense, and the Morning Offering of Incense are invariably sung. The Copts also have three daily choral services (Psalmodia): (1) after Compline and immediately before the Evening Offering of Incense; (2) after Midnight Prayer; and (3) after Morning Prayer, immediately before the Morning Offering of Incense.

The corpus of Coptic chant is enormous: music for the Liturgy, including many extra hymns for special occasions; a vast collection of special hymns designated for the ecclesiastical seasons; the Saturday evening and midnight hymns; and alternate settings for the Liturgy. The known hymns, numbering about 300, are mostly in Coptic, and the few that remain in Greek have traditionally Coptic music. A hymn may take fifteen minutes to sing yet have only one or two words.

Some old Coptic hymn texts bear names of towns long since vanished. For instance, *Singari* refers to a town north of the delta in the time of Ramses II, and *Adribi* probably refers to the village of Adreba in Upper Egypt where the famous monk Shenute converted a pagan temple into a church. Another hymn, dating from 326 A.D. when the Feast of the Cross was initiated, begins by recalling Constantine's admonition to "shut the gates of the temples and open the doors of the churches."

Coptic hymns of adoration and supplication can be identified by their opening words, such as, for example, *Shere* (Hail). Some hymns are sung just once a year, like the Nativity hymn *Ouslon afshai:*

A star shone in the East,
A King was born in Bethlehem,
And Wise Men offered Him gifts,
And knelt and adored Him.

Rene Menard divides early Egyptian Christian music into three general periods.[14] During the first period-about two hundred years-when the cult was unorganized, religious practices varied from one community to another. Within this period Philo of Alexandria produced his works; Plutarch visited Egypt; and according to ancient biographical records, the last professional singers and instrumentalists still performing temple music in honor of the old gods disappeared.

A large Christian community developed in Alexandria within the second period (c. 200-300 A.D.). From this time we have the writings of church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 A.D.), abundant with references to contemporary music practice. The Oxyrhynchus hymn-that Greek hymn whose melody and structure

[14] Rend Menard, *Die Musik in Geschichte and Gegenwart* (Kassel: Barenreiter, 1958), Vol. VII, cols. 1619-1627.

place it in an oriental rather than an ancient Greek tradition-also belongs to this era. The *Kyrie Eleison,* another part of Christian ritual introduced about this time, is thought to have been adopted from an ancient sun cult.

Within the third period (4th to c. 7th c. A.D.) we find the writings of Zosimus of Panopolis *(fl.c.* 300 A.D.) and the Abbot Pambo (c. 317-367 A.D.), who reveals that not all Egyptian church fathers felt kindly disposed to music.

> "The oldest of these reports, referring to the practice of the fifth century, is that of Abbot Pambo, who had sent his disciple from the monastery in the desert to Alexandria to sell some of the products of their manual labour. The disciple returned after sixteen days, having spent his nights in the vestibule of the Church of St. Mark, where he saw the ceremonies and heard the singing of the Troparia. The abbot, observing that the disciple was troubled by something, asked the reason. The young monk answered that he felt they wasted so many days in the desert singing neither Kanons nor Troparia such as he had heard at Alexandria. To these complaints the abbot answered in despair that he saw the time coming when the monks would abandon their rigid discipline pronounced by the Holy Spirit, and would give themselves over to songs and melodies. What kind of contrition, what kind of tears could result from the Troparia ... , when the monk stands in his church or his cell and raises his voice like the oxen? . . . `The monks did not emigrate into this desert in order to perform before God, and to give themselves airs, and to sing songs, and to compose tunes, and to shake their hands and move from one foot to the other,' but we should offer our prayers to God in great fear and trembling, with tears and sighings, in reverence and in the spirit of contrition with moderate voice."[15]

Through the fourth and fifth centuries the Coptic Church regularized its Liturgy, so when it broke with the Byzantine Church in 451 the essentials of Coptic worship were well stabilized. By the time the Arabs invaded Egypt in 640 A.D., Coptic Liturgy and hymnology had sufficient strength to survive with undiminished fervor throughout the following centuries. A Coptic renaissance in music, art, and literature beginning about 1000 A.D. and lasting for several centuries turned out to be the final development of Coptic culture; at that time Coptic liturgical music reached its zenith in a splendid repertoire brimming with expressiveness and religious feeling.

From that time (c. 1200 A.D.) to the present Coptic music has held rigidly to a purely monodic style typical of the Orthodox musical aesthetic. Coptic music developed no further, and the Coptic language slowly and inevitably became a dead language understood only by priests and a few learned laymen. Arabic slowly invaded the Coptic Liturgy.

The sung Liturgy is a solemn drama involving at least four participants: celebrant, deacon, cantor, and choir. The celebrant-either priest, bishop, or patriarch-performs the Eucharist, the thanksgiving and sacrifice, with some freedom within fixed limits (see below). Often he will vocalize for minutes on one syllable, especially on feast days or when eminent guests are present.

Directly below the celebrant is the deacon who serves as intermediary between celebrant and congregation and frequently instructs the latter. The deacon's formal recitatives are lightly melismatic, with vocalises less florid than those of the celebrant or the cantor, and often he employs a syllabic recitative sometimes terminated by a cadence.

Ideally every Coptic Church should have a choir to help celebrate the Liturgy and assist at other services. Choir and cantor together represent the congregation. The cantor, vitally important in this liturgical drama, not only knows all the music destined for the choir (congregation) but that of celebrant and deacon as well.

The cantor is literally the teacher of church music. Following an enduring tradition that dates from Pharaonic times, the Coptic cantor is customarily blind and all chants are therefore committed to memory. Although cantor and choir generally speak for the congregation, the latter sometimes joins the choir in singing familiar hymns and responses (invocations, short doxologies).

Rhythmically the music divides into two types: chants for the congregation and choir normally have a measured rhythm; chants for the priest and deacon adhere to a more plastic, unmeasured rhythm.

The oriental ambience emanating from Coptic music derives from (1) the use of melodic formulas as a structural basis and (2) the practice of controlled improvisation. Linking melodic formulas together by varying short passages in the manner of a recitative is a basic compositional principle throughout the Near East. Even when creating new hymns composers take passages from the psalms or songs of praise and add new passages, or even just a few words. The new

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[15] Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography,* 2nd Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 172.

text is then sung to the melodic phrases of an old familiar chant. Adapting the music to the new text usually means adding a few notes or interpolating a cadence conforming to the structure of the chant.

This method of composing may be the reason why Eastern chant often becomes monotonous to the Westerner, but variety was not the objective of either the Church or the composers. Their prime concern has ever been to create music conveying the spiritual quality of the text and maintaining the devotional character of the celebration. The musical and emotional nuances in Eastern chant will in all probability escape the uninitiated Westerner, but they are there in abundance.

The extensive improvisation in Coptic liturgical music, an art that seems difficult as well as unusual, is controlled by such a precise limiting mechanism that even if two versions of a chant have many differences, their basic melodic patterns remain practically identical. The improvisatory effect is heightened by fioritures, melodic embellishments typical of nearly all Eastern chants. In chants like the Thrice Holy or Psalm 150, which require participation by choir or congregation, improvisation is limited. This is not true of chants interpreted by the celebrant and to a lesser degree those by the deacon; yet even when the celebrant seems carried away with spiritual jubilation; his chanting is basically an adroit application of known formulas. Herein lies the intriguing quality of Coptic music, a repertoire unique among the musical liturgies of the Christian faith.