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# ANCIENT MUSIC OF THE EAST

EGYPT'S TREASURES

## An English Scholar's Researches

9525

During the past few years, while the modern world has been welcoming the discoveries that have revealed so much of the material wealth and power of ancient Egypt, a laborious investigation has been carried out in another direction that is bringing to light something of the spiritual riches of that great civilization—the music through which its soul found expression.

This is because leading members of the Coptic Church, well aware of the great antiquity and distinctive qualities of the music that has been used in the service of the Church ever since the days of its first Partiarch, St. Mark, the Evengelist, invited Professor Ernest Newland Smith, the well-known musician and writer, to investigate its treasures. It was an excellent choice.

Professor Newland Smith gave a "Manchester Guardian" representative a brief account of his vast researches and of the results that seem to demolish the theory that "great" music is a comparatively modern art. He had come, he said, upon a rich musical treasure that was undreamed.

### Handed on Orally

Throughout the centuries, he said, the choral music used for the services of the Coptic Church had never been written down, but had been handed on orally by generations of singers. There is a great college of music entirely devoted to the Church where these singers devote years to studying the traditional music used in the cathedral.

Nearly all of them are blind, a fact that perhaps accounts for the extraordinary facility with which they learn and memorise music of an amazing complexity. "It would take many days," the Professor said, "to sing the hymns in their treasury, but the smallest error in the performance could at once be noticed."

In 1927 the Professor went to Egypt and spent a winter in a houseboat on the Nile studying the music that was sung to him daily by the director of all the church music [illegible] and other singers, and he went back for successive winters. Last winter he managed to transcribe on to paper for the first time in history seven huge volumes of music, including the Mass, a large collection of "extra" hymns for great occasions, hymns for all the Church seasons, Saturday night and midnight hymns, and special settings of the Liturgy, as, for instance the Mass of Gregorious, which is only used for great festivals.

*If your cook lets you down put some BOVRIL in the soup.*

### Enthralling Task

It was a matter not only of transcribing the complicated music sung to him, but of finding what lay beneath the elaborate ornamentation imposed on it by the Arabian influence that began in the seventh century and that has persisted to the present day. It was an enthralling task, for, digging down through what he called the debris of Arabic ornamentation, he came at last to the music that dates from thousands of years before the Christian Church. He came to the pure Egyptian idiom.

"The music," he said "is not Arabic, nor Turkish, nor Greek in origin, often as these elements appear. It seems impossible to doubt that it is ancient Egyptian. Perhaps this is what we ought to expect. It is almost certain that the Coptic Church took over many usages from the ancient Egyptian temple worship, such as the surplice and the tonsure, and seeing what a prominent part music played in the worship of the ancient Egyptians it is most unlikely that their music was not also taken over. In fact, it is almost certain that most of the Coptic music derives from great antiquity.

"Indeed, one or two hymns bear the names of ancient Egyptian cities that perished long age. Persumably they were sung in the vanished temples."

### Arabian Influence

Professor Newland Smith pointed out that it was part of the Egyptian tradition to cherish the art of past centuries and that one would expect to find in their temple music the spirituality that distinguishes the choral music of the Coptic Church. He said that the finest Coptic singers resent the degradation that centuries of Arabic influence have brought upon their music, and they are eager to see the pure gold brought to light. "It is like the work of restoring the picture by a great master," he added.

When asked what impression a solemn Mass in a Coptic cathedral would make upon a stranger, the Professor said, "You would find yourself caught up in an ornate pageantry of worship with ceremonial elaborate vestments and lights. The whole service is choral, and the priests' part is complexity itself. Save for an occasional clang of cymbals or triangles the music is entirely unaccompanied, and in many cases rises to the greatest heights of spiritual fervour. The hymns are hymns of adoration."

The Professor said that the visitor would find not only fervour but a certain fierceness in some of the music. In the hands of a technician the music would sound dull and unimpressive, but in the hands of a master it was most impressive and magnificent. "It is so extremely complicated that in many cases it would completely baffle a first-rate opera singer of today. Frequently many pages of transcribed music go to a single syllable of a word, minutes sometimes to a single vowel, and then with a crash comes the consonant.

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