

# THE MUSIC OF THE PHARAOHS

## COPTIC CONSERVATISM

By H. E. WORTHAM

The Coptic Church is the most conservative in Christendom. Its liturgy remains what it was in the days of Athanasius. The language used by the Pharaohs is still employed in its prayers. The music to which the mass is traditionally celebrated, the melodies of the hymns sung in the Coptic churches, are similarly survivals from the first centuries of our era. One can say more than that. The venerable Coptic Church, with its well-authenticated history stretching back to within ten years of the death of Christ, has probably preserved with less change the music of the ancient world than any other branch of the Church.

In the West, music traces its genealogy back to the Greeks, through the plain-song that Pope Gregory first edited. But the line of descent should be clearer in Coptic music, not only from the conservatism that has crystallised primitive Christian practice more completely in Egypt than elsewhere, but from the fact, too, that in the ancient world the Egyptians were recognised as the true masters of the art. The Greeks learnt from them, adapting their knowledge in the process. Thus, as Professor Newlandsmith points out in his pamphlet on the Ancient Music of the Coptic Church, which the New Life Movement has just published, it is almost certain that, in listening to some of the Coptic hymns, we are hearing the music to which the Pharaonic temples once resounded. Let lovers of "Aida" be aware of what musical archaeology can teach them!

### Subject Full of Difficulties

The Professor has been at considerable pains to investigate a subject that is full of difficulties, and one welcomes research in this little known and fruitful field. His present pamphlet is, of course, far too brief to cover more than a fringe of the subject. Since Coptic music is oral and handed down from singer to singer, he has had to transcribe it—but whether the melodic lines and the rhythms of the Coptic hymns can be taken down with any accuracy in staff notation (complete with bar divisions) is open to grave doubt.

Since Professor Newlandsmith does not claim to be an expert, it is perhaps ungracious to throw such doubts upon his work. His remark, however, that some of the themes in the music he has heard are greatly improved by harmonisation, and that "their very structure demands modern harmony," is so astonishing that he himself soon feels bound to qualify it. He says, therefore, that in the majority of cases "harmonisation would not only be unsuitable, but well-nigh impossible. It would be sheer vandalism." Which seems to show that his opinions on the subject are not so clear as they might be.