

## COPTIC CHANT

A SURVEY OF PAST RESEARCH AND A PROJECTION FOR THE FUTURE

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Before I set before you my thoughts on Coptic music, I would like briefly to describe my background and personal approach to this subject, for I believe it will help to explain the remarks that follow. I am not a professional Coptologist nor am I necessarily a specialist in Eastern musics. By profession I am a pianist, harpsichordist and musicologist, a professor at the University of California, where I teach courses in general music history, music appreciation, non-Western music and sacred music. My interest in Coptic music began around 1962 after purchasing the only available recording of Coptic chant, an album issued by Folkways Records. Later, through correspondence with Mr. Ragheb Moftah at the Institute of Coptic Studies, I broadened my appreciation of Coptic music, an appreciation further enhanced by studies at home and two visits to Egypt.

Briefly, then, my approach is this. As a music historian I see in Coptic music a repertoire of chant that is among the oldest in Christendom, a repertoire that has been handed down orally and thus preserved for century after century. As a teacher of sacred music classes I find the sung Coptic Liturgy to be the very embodiment of Christian praise. As a practising musician I find in Coptic music a corpus of melody that is like no other: compare, for example, typical soloistic passages from various liturgies of both East and West with one from the Coptic repertoire. Even a brief hearing of these excerpts discloses that, compared with the others, the impression, the sound of Coptic music is equally distinctive, expressive and intrinsically interesting.

Because I am convinced of the value and inherent beauty of Coptic church music, I should like to attempt to do all that I can (1) to preserve this great heritage, (2) to help to spread this musical gospel, and (3) to promote study of the music and secure its universal recognition as a true treasure of the Church.

Because Coptic chant has been preserved through an oral tradition, there are no historical data, not even many references to this music, in books printed before the middle of the 18th century. A certain

Dr. Hooker, a Moravian missionary who arrived in Cairo in 1752, did write a description of a church service that he attended there.<sup>1</sup> Rev. Hooker remarked on the cymbals and other percussion instruments used to accompany the chant. The use of cymbals was also briefly commented upon by Richard Dalton, who had visited Egypt in 1749 and later wrote some rather offhand descriptions of Egyptian art and musical instruments.<sup>2</sup>

Guillaume-André Villoteau (1759-1839), the man usually given credit as the first to attempt any extensive writing on Coptic music, is also the one who, paradoxically enough, may have discouraged further serious research for over 50 years. In 1807 Villoteau published a small book with a long and colorful title: *Mémoire sur la possibilité et l'utilité d'une Théorie exact des principes naturels de la Musique, où l'on explique la cause des effets différens que produisent les Sons et les diverses modifications de la Voix sur les corps et sur l'âme, et, par occasion, la nature des premiers Chants*.<sup>3</sup> In the preface to this book he stated that a larger more complete book on the subject will be forthcoming but that at the moment it must be put aside for "other more pressing works in which he is engaged as a member of the Commission of the sciences and arts of Egypt." And indeed Villoteau's only substantial claim to fame lies in the work he accomplished as a member of the scientific and cultural task force that accompanied Napoleon and his soldiers on their expedition to Egypt in 1798-1799.

The scientists and technicians recruited by Bonaparte form an impressive list for the most part. But in the arts, Bonaparte's recruiting was less than successful. He believed it would be helpful to take along eminent French poets and musicians, for what purpose it is difficult to say: Napoleon's own tastes in literature and music were notably limited and as for his troops, they were quite content with their regimental bands.

Louis Jean Népomucène Lemercier (1771-1840), an influential figure in French letters, declined Napoleon's invitation to join the expedition. Instead came Antoine Vincent Arnault (1766-1834), who never got further than Malta, and François-Auguste Parseval-Grandmaison, a poet with no reputation and less talent.

<sup>1</sup> In Andrew Watson, *The American Mission in Egypt 1854-1896*, 2nd Ed. (Pittsburg: United Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dalton, *A Short Dissertation on the Ancient Musical Instruments* (London: J. Nichols, 1790).

<sup>3</sup> A Paris, de l'Imprimerie Impériale, 1807. 88 pp.

In music, Napoleon tried to enlist Étienne Nicolas Méhul (1763-1817), an eminent and highly respected composer of French operas. Méhul, however, insisted that his services were more urgently needed at the Conservatoire and the Opera, so Napoleon ultimately obtained as his musical aides Guillaume-André Villoteau and an equally undistinguished musician, Henri-Jean Rigel (1772-1852).

Villoteau, one-time tonsured cleric, soldier and member of several choral groups in France, including that of the Cathédrale de Notre Dame de Paris and that of the Paris opera, would be totally unknown today except for the fact that he was a member of Napoleon's expedition and wrote extensively on the music of Egypt. He made a significant contribution to the great *Description of Egypt*, that series of volumes published by members of Napoleon's Commission and the Institut de l'Égypte.<sup>4</sup>

Villoteau contributed four lengthy essays to the *Description de l'Égypte*: "Mémoire sur la musique de l'antique Égypte"; "Dissertation sur les diverses espèces d'instruments de musique que l'on remarque parmi les sculptures qui décorent les antiques monuments de l'Égypte"; "De l'état actuel de l'art musical en Égypte"; and "Description historique, technique et littéraire des instruments de musique des Orientaux".

In his lengthy essays, Villoteau made a detailed study of ancient Egyptian music, of musical instruments and of Arabic music, but with Coptic music he showed a remarkable and consistent talent for misunderstanding. To begin with, he frankly remarks that since this music is so lacking in interest he placed it last in his discussion, allotting Coptic music the meager space of about five pages.

Although Villoteau described with some impartiality certain instruments used by the Copts, his remarks on the music itself would have discouraged any but the most intrepid reader from ever wanting to hear a note of Coptic music. In fact, he appears to have become almost paranoid on the subject. After a few pages of disparaging remarks about the Copts and what he calls their monotonous and boring music, he attempts to prove that he is impartial. This is how he continues his cynical, caustic narrative:

"We, who attended their services several times and who were obliged to lean our backs against a wall, never left without having our legs benumbed with fatigue and without being overcome with boredom.

<sup>4</sup> A Paris, de l'Imprimerie Impériale, 1809-1826.

“Nevertheless we do not believe this has influenced the opinion that we formed about their chants, nor that it would be unfair to say that nothing is more insignificant and more irksome than the melodies comprising these chants. Moreover, we did not stop at the first impression that we received; because, seeing that we could not succeed in understanding something of this savage and soporific melody, and persuaded that this came from several distractions caused by the painful situation where we found ourselves while listening to it, we summoned the zeal and the courage to the point of summoning to us one of the most skilful Coptic singers, to see if we could finally unravel something in the harsh and baroque modulation of these chants: but the experience only confirmed our first judgement; or rather the unpleasant and heavy manner in which our Copt sang, strengthened it even more.

“After having heard the first chant — it was an Alleluia — we had him repeat it, so we could copy it; but we could not define the nature of the effect it caused us. The chant of the Egyptians lacerated our ears; this one did even more; it spread over all our senses a kind of poison which nauseated our hearts and irritated our souls to an intolerable point.

“It was necessary to continue to the end, since we had undertaken it. When this first chant was finished, we asked the Copt if there was only one kind of chant in his church, for we believed it to be so: he replied that on the contrary there were ten different tones. We resigned ourselves to hearing him sing on all ten tones: but we were soon beyond any appreciation of them; he benumbed our ear drums, and wearied our attention to the point that we only heard him as one hears, when one is three-fourths asleep; and perhaps if the Copt had retired without saying anything to us, we would not even have noticed it, so great was the kind of stupor into which his chants had thrown us”.

Compare, if you will, this unscholarly and crude outburst with the statement made by the eminent musicologist Egon Wellesz in the 1955 *New Oxford History of Music*: “The present state of Coptic liturgical music is remarkable for its beauty and for the richness of its melodies”.<sup>5</sup> We can only assume that M. Villoteau was untutored and prejudiced.

After Villoteau’s blistering attack on Coptic music, more than fifty years passed before any further comments of substance appeared.

<sup>5</sup> *The New Oxford History of Music II. Early Medieval Music up to 1300* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 47.

Edward Lane's book, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*,<sup>6</sup> published in 1836 with many subsequent editions, includes a supplement of less than 25 pages on the Copts; however, it is of little value musically, for Lane was either ignorant of or not interested in Coptic music.

One might expect that when Carl Engel's now classic volume *The Music of the Most Ancient Nations*<sup>7</sup> was published in 1864, it would have included a thorough study of Coptic music. But Engel had little direct information available; all he offered was a quotation from Lane, a few paraphrased lines from Villoteau and a reproduction of the questionable Alleluia taken from Villoteau's supposed transcription.

About ten years later one of the landmarks of music historiography appeared: *Histoire Generale de la Musique*<sup>8</sup> (five volumes, 1869-1876), written by François Joseph Fétis (1784-1871). For the first time in almost 70 years, a musician seemed to make some attempt at understanding Coptic music. This is also, to my knowledge, the very first time that one finds an attempt to explore beneath the surface of Coptic music.

Fétis, an acquaintance of Villoteau from 1804, was somewhat influenced by the latter, although he does take exception to some of Villoteau's generalized comments. His work provides the first Western analysis of the modes or tones on which Coptic liturgical chant is theoretically based. He speaks rather disparagingly of the practice of vocalising on one syllable. With good intentions, he again reproduces Villoteau's Alleluia, which is distressing, for to my knowledge this Alleluia cannot be found in Coptic repertoire.

The first serious attempt at transcribing Coptic melodies appeared in 1888 with *Chants liturgiques des Coptes*,<sup>9</sup> a collection made by Jules Blin, a Jesuit priest. Father Blin may be lauded for his attempt but not necessarily for the results, which are notably inaccurate.

Unfortunately Blin's inaccuracies were memorialized and perpetuated for some years. In his article "Coptic Ecclesiastical Music" published in the *Scottish Review* in 1890, S. G. Hatherly discussed Blin's transcriptions and attempted to harmonize some of them. Louis Badet, a Jesuit missionary in Cairo, undertook the completion of Father Blin's

<sup>6</sup> London: John Murray, 1836.

<sup>7</sup> London: William Reeves, 1864.

<sup>8</sup> Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot Frères, 1869-76.

<sup>9</sup> Le Caire: Imprimerie Nationale.

transcriptions, and in 1899 published *Chants Liturgiques des Coptes notés et mis en ordre*.<sup>10</sup> While some Coptic melodic formulas are discernible, Badet's work is still far removed from the accurate transcriptions being achieved today.

Within a few years another French ecclesiastic, Abbé J. Du Poux, endeavored to compare various eastern liturgies with the Gregorian aesthetic. His study entitled "Les Chants de la Messe" appeared throughout 1903 in a series of articles in the *Tribune de Saint Gervais*. Although embryonic in its scope, this work was a precursor of later more expansive research.

By the early 20th century the general science of Coptology had become a well-developed discipline, and much research had been done in almost every field except music, an omission caused principally by the lack of a tradition of musical notation. Practically every other branch of the Eastern Church has preserved some manuscripts bearing musical notations. 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 Orthodox Church is unique in that it seemingly has neglected to devise a system of musical notation and consequently has no important music manuscripts. Up to the present time Coptic music has remained an art that must be learned and passed on by tradition.

This lack of notation could 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. Will Durant in his "Story of Civilization" tells the following. "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'".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Le Caire : Collège de la Sainte Famille.

<sup>11</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, I, Our Oriental Heritage* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 76.

There is scant evidence of any attempt at a system of 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. 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 systematic Coptic notation ever existed. In his *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Collection of the John Rylands Library* (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 ekphonic notation. The dot appears either above or below a syllable, 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 show some form of grammatical, phonetic, or musical indication. It may be a system similar to Byzantine ekphonic 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'.

Comparing these few Coptic manuscripts with 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.

The first 100 years of writings on Coptic music reveal a picture that is discouragingly unproductive, a situation that continued for some years. Neither the "essence" of the musical aesthetic nor the sung Liturgy were accessible to those outside Coptic circles. Some-

times the attempts bordered on the amusing — as, for example, in 1916 when a Coptic army officer Kāmil Ibrāhīm Ghubrīāl attempted to “popularize” Coptic chant by transcribing it for the piano.<sup>12</sup>

However, there was some serious research going on at about that same time. In 1910 an Anglican canon, W. H. T. Gairdner published a collection of “Egyptian” hymn tunes. A later 1930 posthumous edition<sup>13</sup> included the addition of Syrian hymn tunes together with introductory materials on the tune sources and Arabic music theory. Some of the tunes are titled Coptic, others are secular tunes to which sacred hymns are sung. Considering the early state of Coptic musical research, Gairdner’s collection is truly outstanding.

Egon Wellesz (1885-1974), composer, music historian, ethnomusicologist, devoted most of his research to Byzantine music, resulting in the publication of *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*<sup>14</sup> in 1948. Wellesz’ interest in Coptic liturgical music was only slight and his writings look to secondary sources. From a 1917 article written when he was 32, and titled *Die Kirchenmusik des Kopten und Abessinien*,<sup>15</sup> to a 1954 contribution to the *New Oxford History of Music*,<sup>16</sup> he reiterates the same ideas — the antiquity of the chant and need for notated music. He also quoted some of Badet’s transcriptions.

Most of the research that has been done in Coptic music has been carried out by non-Copts — German, French, and English. In 1917, in a published address, Tawfik Habib, a Copt, called for active Coptic participation in reform and revitalization. In his lecture *Alḥan al-kanisa al-ḳibtia* (The Tunes of the Coptic Church)<sup>17</sup> the author reviews early transcriptions of chant and comments on the inaccuracy of Father Blin’s work. He calls for a revival of pure tradition, for choir schools, for correct transcriptions of the chant.

Interest in Coptic music has grown steadily during this century, among professionals in other fields as well as trained musicians. Among the former, S. H. Leeder in *Modern Sons of the Pharaohs, A Study of the*

<sup>12</sup> *Musical Notations of the Responses of St. Mark’s Church*, Part I. Cairo: Al-maktaba al-maṣriya al-’ahliya.

<sup>13</sup> *Oriental Hymn Tunes: Egyptian and Syrian*. 2nd Ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge).

<sup>14</sup> Revised edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

<sup>15</sup> *Musica Divina* 10: 244-249.

<sup>16</sup> Oxford: Oxford University Press, II, pp. 45-47.

<sup>17</sup> Cairo: Ramses Press.

*Manners and Customs of the Copts of Egypt* (1918),<sup>18</sup> laces his text with musical references — instruments, hymn texts, vocal style. The anthropologist Winifred Blackmann speaks of music in various ceremonies in *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (1927).<sup>19</sup>

We find considerable information about Coptic musical instruments. The instruments are real, sometimes playable, and thus they provide physical evidence of this music that exists in an unnotated repertoire and has survived only through oral transmission. Leeder, Blackmann, Villoteau and others had all shown some interest in Coptic and Egyptian instruments. In 1921 the eminent musicologist Curt Sachs (1881-1959), who wrote two general books on instruments, made a special study of instruments from Northeast Africa: *Die Musikinstrumente des alten Aegyptens*,<sup>20</sup> the finest study of its kind to appear up to that time.

In 1929 Ernest Newlandsmith, an English musician and Egyptophile, undertook to transcribe the Coptic liturgical repertoire. It took him seven years to complete his project, and during that time Prof. Newlandsmith produced the most complete collection of Coptic chant ever assembled — 15 manuscript volumes. Because these chants were written down directly without the aid of a phonograph, the resulting transcriptions often give only a general impression of their content as heard in performance; 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 the principal chants sung in the Coptic Church.

The very first recordings of Coptic chant were produced in conjunction with the Arabic Music Congress held in Cairo in 1932. Nine records of Coptic church melodies were made under the direction of Erich von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs and pressed by His Master's Voice. These records, which may be heard at the Arabic Music Institute in Cairo, mark a major advance in Coptic music research, for they made it possible to study the chants more precisely and to transcribe them more accurately than before.

Scholarly interest in Coptic music began to increase in the mid-1940's and has continued to the present day, though not with the persistent zeal that one might wish for. Much of the credit for this inspiring burst of creativity belongs to Hans Hickmann and René Ménard, two men whose names are inextricably linked with Egypt and her music.

<sup>18</sup> London: Hodder and Stoughton.

<sup>19</sup> London: George Harrap.

<sup>20</sup> Berlin: Karl Kurtius.

For us, Hans Hickmann's (1908-1968) importance lies in his work on musical instruments and his many publications on Egyptian music history, including many articles relating directly and indirectly to Coptic music.

A bibliography of Hickmann's books, articles and reviews has been published in *Ethnomusicology*, the Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology, in two issues — January, 1965 and May, 1969. This bibliography lists 198 items; some 125 relate to Egyptian music; and of these about 26 contain specific information pertinent to Coptic music and musical instruments.

Musical instruments, Hickmann's great interest, predominate in his discussions of Coptic music, particularly the use of these instruments in times past. In various other articles he discusses musical chironomy and compares ancient Egyptian iconographical evidence with contemporary Coptic practice; he treats of Coptic musical characteristics and the possible influence of Coptic music on other musical cultures; he discusses the transcriptions of melodies, and the need for more transcriptions and more accurate ones; and he gives an overview of the comparatively few instances of musical notation discernible in Coptic manuscripts.

This man was indeed a devoted musical Egyptologist and his influence is a lasting one.

René Ménard, a French missionary, has spent a great deal of time in Africa, at least five years of it in Egypt. His writings on Coptic music span a 20-year period, although the actual number of his contributions is somewhat restricted.

Ménard is articulate, writes convincingly and stimulates interest in his subject matter. He has definite ideas concerning the scope of his field and even supplies his own definition of this subject: "Coptic music is that liturgical music which Egyptian Christians made use of, from the moment when — as the national conscience reawakened — the liturgy, Greek in character up to that time, 'Egyptianized'".

Ménard supplies information on Coptic hymns, problems of transcribing, comparison of Arabic and Coptic musics. A particularly valuable 1954 article, "Une étape de l'art musical Egyptien: La musique copte", appeared in the *Revue de Musicologie*. The author's basic assumption is that "Coptic music is not an imported commodity (such as a commodity from Byzantium, Syria or pre-Christian Palestine) but truly a stage in Egyptian musical art". In this article the author was perhaps the first to make a serious study of the structure of the

music comprising the Liturgy. For Ménard the Liturgy could be divided into three sections, each with its own distinctive scale structure, its tonic and reciting tones.

For example, the first part of the Liturgy, for Ménard, progresses basically within the range of a diminished fourth with, of course, numerous excursions to neighboring tones and the addition of numerous embellishments. This subject was taken up later and explored by Ilona Borsai.

Ménard was also interested in the so-called improvisation evidenced in Coptic chant. He felt that "the improvisations to which singers abandon themselves on certain occasions are only a skilful application of known melodic formulas". In his conclusions, the author questions the existence of outside influences on Coptic music and states that only by recording, transcribing and analyzing Coptic and neighboring musics can this question be resolved.

Another intriguing article on memorization and improvisation appeared in *Études Gregoriennes* in 1959. Finally, a fascinating but terse summing up of Ménard's thoughts on Coptic music appeared in 1969 in volume 2 of one of the great contemporary works of its kind, the four-volume *Encyclopédie des musiques sacrées*.

So far we have spoken primarily of the musical aspects of the Coptic repertoire. Yet some mention should be made of studies on hymnology, even though little information is usually given about the music. Here we can turn to both native and Western sources for informative material. The 1950's produced several interesting studies. A 1959 collection of Coptic and Arabic hymn texts is titled *Kitāb al-madā'ih al-rūhīa ḥasab tuḡūs al-kanīsa al-ḳibtīa* (The Book of Spiritual Praises According to the Rites of the Coptic Church). The compilers, Faradj 'Abd al-Massīḥ and Djamīl Tawfīḳ Ibrāhīm, discuss the various categories of Coptic hymns and arrange them according to the ecclesiastical year.

Yassā 'Abd al-Massīḥ compiled a little popular book *Mudhokrāt fī al-tuḡūs al-ḳibtīa : 'Iṣṭilāḥāt, kutub, al-taḡwīm* (Notes on the Rituals of the Coptic Church : Terms, Books and the Calendar). Among the various topics discussed, one finds information on hymn terminology, on categories of hymns, and on seasonal hymns. In 1958 the same author contributed an article to the *Bulletin de l'Institut des Études Coptes* titled "Remarks on the Psalis of the Coptic Church" where he discusses historical and textual aspects of this particular type of hymn.

The study of psali was also undertaken by Monseigneur Jacob

Muysier in a 1952 article "Le 'Psali' Copte pour la première heure du Samedi de la joie".<sup>21</sup> A year later the same author added a further article "Un 'Psali' Acrostiche Copte".<sup>22</sup>

In 1959 a German investigator, Maria Cramer, published a survey of Coptic culture. Titled *Das Christlich-Koptische Ägypten Einst und Heute*,<sup>23</sup> the book touches on all aspects of history, art, literature, theology, and includes a discussion of various Coptic hymn types. Ten years later the same author published a selection of Coptic hymn texts titled *Koptische Hymnologie in Deutscher Übersetzung: Eine Auswahl aus saidischen und bohairischen Antiphonarien vom 9 Jahrhundert bis zum Gegenwart*.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. O. H. Khs. Burmester, Professor at the Coptic Orthodox Seminary and Librarian of the Society for Coptic Archeology, has published many articles involving the study of hymns. Of particular interest, however, is his monumental volume *The Egyptian or Coptic Church. A Detailed Description of Her Liturgical Services and the Rites and Ceremonies Observed in the Administration of her Sacraments* (1967).<sup>25</sup> This book is extremely valuable in that it puts the various musical items of the Liturgy and other services — tones, hymns, psalis, odes — in their proper context. The author also briefly discusses the instruments — triangle and cymbals — used in contemporary services.

Returning to the more music-oriented researches, we come to the work of Ilona Borsai. A Hungarian ethnomusicologist, Miss Borsai came to Cairo during the winter of 1966-67 and during the next five years published a number of articles in various journals. Her research led her into two principal areas of investigation. She feels that the ancient music of Egypt survives in Coptic church music and in the musical traditions of rural areas — the music of the fellahin — and tries to demonstrate this by various means. Miss Borsai is also interested in the way Coptic chant is organized, the use of cadential formulas, quarter tones and microtones, melody types and the use of ornamentation and variation in performance practice. The article "Caractéristiques générales du chant de la messe Copte", appearing in 1971 in *Studia Orientalia Christiana* is one of the most lucid explanations of Coptic music to appear.

<sup>21</sup> *Revue d'Études Orientales* LXV 3-4 1952 (Louvain).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, LXVI, 1-2 1953.

<sup>23</sup> Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959.

<sup>24</sup> Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1969.

<sup>25</sup> Cairo: French Institute of Oriental Archeology.

Continuing the exploration of melodic formulae made initially by René Ménard, Miss Borsai studies here in detail two typical final formulas and details the musical schemes and their extensions that return periodically during one or several parts of the Liturgy. She gives the skeletal formula and shows how it is variously embellished in different musical sections. For example, the first formula or modal scheme is basically a turn or pivot around a principal tone. The second scheme is more expansive and allows the performer greater amplitude in his interpretation of various prayers and responses.

Another interesting study, "Variations ornamentales dans l'interprétation d'un hymne copte",<sup>26</sup> written in collaboration with Margit Tôth, explores in detail the various embellishments found in a particular version of the hymn Ten-w-osht.

If one were to coordinate all of the articles and researches that have appeared during the past 30 or 40 years, two lacunae are pointed up by most authors as most important: (1) the need for the Coptic musical repertoire to be recorded in as authentic a version as is obtainable and (2) the necessity of a really first-rate transcription of this repertoire into notation.

We can now say that these ideals are in the process of being achieved and here we arrive at the practical side of the picture. It is well and good to write of Coptic music, to describe it and analyze it. But unless this music is recorded and until it is transcribed and published, it will be next to inaccessible to anyone outside of Egypt.

These ideals are being realized by two people, Ragheb Moftah and Margit Tôth, two talented musicians with vision, persistence and a love for this music. For almost 50 years Ragheb Moftah has pursued his goal of preserving Coptic music so that it might be heard and studied by many. In the early 1930's he invited Ernest Newlandsmith to come to Cairo. The result was the first really successful transcription of a substantial part of Coptic musical repertoire. From that time on Prof. Moftah has been seriously concerned with the problem of notating and recording the melodies.

The Institute of Coptic Studies was established in 1955 and Mr. Moftah became the head of the Section of Coptic music. Under his guidance the great blind cantor Mikhail Girguis, who died in 1958 at an advanced age, recorded his repertoire on tape for the Institute. Then a gifted priest was selected in the person of Father Morkos of the church

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<sup>26</sup> *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 11, 1969.

of Matay in Middle Egypt. He joined a 15-voice student choir from the Coptic Orthodox Seminary in Cairo in recording St. Basil's Liturgy, from which Folkways Records published six excerpts. The seminary choir, working and constantly improving under the inspiration of Prof. Moftah, has been sponsored by the Institute in a continuously expanding recording project: a newer and more complete recording of St. Basil's Liturgy appeared in 1970.

Now Prof. Moftah is striving to record all the chant of the Coptic Church, so as to represent every ritual of any season complete and according to the best tradition. Some hymns and chants in remote regions of Egypt are seldom sung and are thus in danger of disappearing. These are now preserved for study on records and tape.

In addition to his preoccupation with the recording of the chant, Mr. Moftah has written several articles on various aspects of the music. His latest contributions are three essays in Arabic in the magazine of the Coptic Patriarchate about the life and work of the great cantor Mikhail Girguis.

So now we have set in motion the completion of a part of Prof. Moftah's life work. The second part — the expert transcription of St. Basil's Liturgy — is progressing nicely. Prof. Moftah brought Miss Margit Tôth of the Ethnographical Museum in Budapest to Cairo to undertake the transcription of St. Basil's Liturgy with all its hymns using the method of Béla Bartók, which permits notating even the most minute nuances. This transcribed Liturgy is ready for publication and it is hoped that UNESCO will assume this undertaking. The notations with the Coptic syllables and their transliteration under the music will be on the left page: on the right page will be three columns, the Coptic text in the first one, the English translation in the second, the Arabic version in the third.

In summing up for you the essence of my remarks on research in Coptic music, I can do this most effectively by bringing to your attention a recent and very pertinent document, a document that has been of extreme value to me. In 1975 Mrs. Salwa El-Shawan, a Coptic graduate student at Columbia University in New York City, completed her Master of Arts degree. Her master's thesis is titled *An Annotated Bibliography of Coptic Music*. Obviously fulfilling a great need, it lists over 110 books and articles containing information on Coptic music. Happily for us, this thesis has been accepted for publication by the Society for Asian Music (New York City) and will be available in the near future.

We are now well informed on numerous aspects of Coptic music. For example, we can be rather secure in the knowledge that Coptic music has an ancient heritage. Curt Sachs, Hans Hickmann, and others investigating pre-Christian Egyptian music have gathered only a relatively 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. He writes: "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. This 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".<sup>27</sup> Thus it is not impossible that some melodies have remained unchanged across the centuries. 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.

The tradition of oral transmission, of reliance on memory, strengthens the likelihood of Coptic music traditions being very old. 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.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), Vol. IV, p. 1.

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.

Chironomy, a method used in pre-Christian Egypt and still being used today, has undoubtedly helped to preserve some fundamentals of ancient Egyptian music. In several publications<sup>28</sup> 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 Nenchefka (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 20th 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-mémoire. 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.

Another 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, who probably inspired 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

<sup>28</sup> For example, see Hans Hickmann, *Observations sur les survivances de la chironomie égyptienne dans le chant liturgique copte* (*Miscellanea Musicologica*, Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1948).

that single vowels or groups of vowels were uttered by the initiate to intensify the effect of the incantation".<sup>29</sup>

In a hymn to the god Min, Hans Hickmann discovered a repeated sign that to him suggested a rhythmical repetition of a syllabic interjection.<sup>30</sup> Armand Machabey in an interesting study<sup>31</sup> 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.

This ancient custom of the Egyptians and others is still discernible in Coptic chant where long vocalises are sung by both choir and soloists on one vowel or vowel sound.

The apparent antiquity of Coptic chant is also evidenced in the preservation of certain terms and presumably the music that these terms relate to. For example, the early manuscripts cited by Crum in the Rylands catalogue specify that certain extended psalmi, hymns, theotokias, are to be sung to the tone or echos Adam, others to the tone or echos Watos. Today Coptic priests still chant hymns and great prayers to the same specified melodic prototypes: Adam on Monday through Wednesday, and Watos Thursday through Sunday.

What else can we say in summarizing our perception of this music? Despite the use of formulas and set melodies for the Liturgy and other services, we know, from studies by Ménard and Borsari and from first-hand observation, that there is much freedom in utilizing the basic structures, particularly in the prayers and responses of the soloists, i.e. priest, deacon and cantor.

We also know that, as regards musical form, those employed by the Coptic Orthodox Church are similar to those used in other liturgically-oriented Christian churches. One of these, the *Litany*, which goes back to Pharaonic times, is exemplified in several special services of the Coptic church.

*Responsorial* chant, i.e. dialogue between choir or congregation and soloist, a practice carried out by many other churches, is evident notably in the responses to the Gospel, certain hymns, the Communion psalm and all the brief responses scattered through the services.

*Antiphonal* form, dialogue between two choral groups, is illustrated

<sup>29</sup> Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, Second Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Hickmann, *Musicologie Pharaonique* (Kehl: Librairie Heitz, 1956), pp. 52-53.

<sup>31</sup> Armand Machabey, *Le Bel Canto* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1948).

by those great poetic works known under the name of psali. The Coptic poetic genius seems to have had a predilection for the acrostic and alphabetical psali: hundreds of examples of this poetico-musical form have been preserved.

*Hymnody* is represented by numerous Canons, Odes or Hôs, Troparia, Doxologies, Theotokias, as well as poems of various structure sung according to variable tones and timbres.

We have, particularly in the past 20 years, an active program of research by a few dedicated musicians. As a culmination we have in process a recording project for the complete Coptic repertoire in so far as it is possible. We have skilful transcriptions of the principal chants of the Coptic Orthodox Church which will, hopefully, be published soon. A great deal has been accomplished. But there is still much to do. We still have much to learn about certain aspects of Coptic music. By we, I mean of course those standing outside the Coptic ecclesiastical circle. These gaps in our grasp and understanding of the Coptic musical aesthetic were saliently pointed out by Miss Martha Roy in a paper "Studies on the Music and Hymns of the Coptic Orthodox Church" presented at the International Conference on Arabic Music held in Cairo in 1969.

Do we need more research? Yes, to be sure. Research into the rural traditions from all over Egypt, comparing those of Upper Egypt with those of Cairo, Alexandria, and other cities; research into the secular or non-liturgical music of the Copts and fellahin, both past and present.

But what I have in mind goes beyond the rather well-defined area of pure musical research. My ideas can be laid down as a result of what I feel must be done in a very practical way.

There are two suggestions I would leave with you. Both in a way are mostly concerned with education. And here I speak principally of the situation in the United States, with which I am best acquainted. Suppose we were to question music students from any first-rate music school or conservatory about Coptic music? The response would be in most cases a great blank. The music is ignored, is an unknown entity. Consult the general music history books — Oxford, Larousse, etc.: Coptic music is usually absent or receives only a paragraph or two of general discussion. Question students from any of the theological seminaries in the United States. The same situation obtains. The fact emerges that a great missionary venture is needed to bring the importance of Coptic music to the attention of musicians and scholars. After

all, how many Liturgies, Masses, Eucharists today are sung almost completely from beginning to end? We must make a concerted attempt to lift the status of Coptic music to that of the other great sacred repertoires in the eyes of those concerned with church music, both in the East and in the West. This can be done by recordings, by musical score, and by literature that will inform both the musical specialist and the musical amateur.

And this brings me to my second suggestion. In order that this literature — be it essays, books, lectures — become meaningful, it must be written and presented articulately and with utter clarity. Musical terms, theory, performance practice, must be explained in language that can be easily assimilated. Who are best equipped to do this? The Coptic clergy, of course. I should like to see a number of musically talented Coptic priests, deacons and cantors professionally trained in the art of music. Only they can articulately communicate the more subtle and elusive aspects of Coptic music. These include the following problems :

What are the limits of improvisation? Exactly how is one taught to do this? How far afield from the basic musical line can the singer venture? Questions like these can also lead into discussions of Coptic musical aesthetics : What constitutes good or effective singing? How does the text influence the melodic line in performance? And so on.

Musical terms must be clarified for the average reader. Tone, air, mode, lahn, echos, modal formula — how are these differentiated one from the other — if indeed they are different. Are there groups or classifications of model formulas — intonation formulas, cadential formulas, connecting formulas?

Or, again, consider the Adam and Watos tones or *echoi*. Are they two general modal formulas or are they complete melodic types? How are they fitted to the various *theotokias*, hymns and *psalis*?

There are, of course, other projects that could contribute to a universal appreciation of this music. One would be a color film of a Coptic Liturgy, an experience that would permit one simultaneously to hear and visualize the chant as it adjusts to its liturgical frame of reference.

I sincerely hope that Coptic music, this rich adornment of the Church, will continue to flourish, that its sound will be heard throughout the world, and that it may be appreciated for the beauty of its melodies and the persuasive dignity of its sacred character.