

# ERNEST NEWLANDSMITH'S TRANSCRIPTIONS OF COPTIC MUSIC

A Description and Critique

*by Marian Robertson*

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Music has been an integral part of the liturgical services in the Coptic (i.e., Egyptian Orthodox) Church since its beginning. There is good reason to believe that the officiant's prayers, the deacon's biddings, the congregation's responses, and the choir's hymns (Arabic: *al-Awshiyyah*, *al-Ubrūsāt*, *al-Maraddāt*, and *al-Alhān*, respectively) have always been sung. However, throughout their long history, these sacred melodies have not been written, but rather have been preserved by means of an oral tradition. Certain men – often blind – chosen and specially trained as master chanters (Arabic: *al-Mu'allim*, pl. *al-Mu'allimīn*), learned and taught this music by rote, and thus passed it on to others from generation to generation, century after century, even to the present day.<sup>1</sup> Not until the nineteenth century was any effort made to notate these ancient tunes, and this was done by Westerners using the Western system of notation.<sup>2</sup> During the twentieth century, other scholars have also continued this work, but for the most part, their efforts have been quite piecemeal, with only various melodies or sections thereof being transcribed.<sup>3</sup> However, during the early part of this century, British musician (violinist/composer), Ernest Newlandsmith labored some ten years (1926-36) notating many, many melodies of this venerable musical

tradition. At the invitation and sponsorship of Ragheb Moftah, he came to Cairo, where he lived in a houseboat on the Nile, and listened to the most capable master chanters of the Church as they sang to him hour after hour, day by day, year in and year out. There being no tape recorders in existence at this time, he had to take down the music "live," as it were. Thus if he needed to hear a song more than once in order to check his accuracy (which certainly must have been the case), the chanter would be obliged to repeat the melody many times, all of which could present a problem, for no Coptic singer ever sings any melody exactly the same way twice.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Corpus:*

Newlandsmith completed sixteen folio volumes of melodies with their accompanying texts (i.e., upwards of 700 pages). The work, as yet unpublished, is entitled "The Music of the Mass as Sung in the Coptic Church and Some Special Hymns in the Coptic Liturgy."<sup>5</sup> Volume I (about 100 pages) contains the music for the choir, congregation, and deacon of the Liturgy of Saint Basil,<sup>6</sup> while Volumes II-XV are devoted to hymns reserved for Feast days, Fast days, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Weddings, Funerals, etc. Volume XVI comprises the officiant's music for the Liturgy of Saint Basil.<sup>7</sup>

### *Problems of Notating this Music:*

Transcribing this music, especially the hymns, is no easy task. The melodies are quite long and complex in their structure, and to the unaccustomed ear, they seem filled with repetition, which, however, is never exact repetition. Many hymns are embellished with rapid, intricate ornamentation, and may include long vocalises and/or melismata.<sup>8</sup> There are numerous intervals foreign to Western music containing micro-tones (intervals less than one-half step) not reflected in the Western system of notation, which records music only to the nearest half-step, i.e., notes that can be played on the black and white keys of a keyboard instrument. In other words, there are many sounds that "fall between the cracks" of a keyboard. The rhythm likewise has nuances that do not fit into the rather simple Western organization of whole notes (  ), half notes (  ), quarter notes (  ), etc., wherein rhythmic relationship can be neatly divided by two or by three (e.g.,  ).<sup>9</sup>

*An Example of Newlandsmith's Notation:*<sup>10</sup>

*Example One* is a copy of some of Newlandsmith's notation (henceforth referred to as "N"). In copying this example, the author transposed the original down one-fourth solely to facilitate comparison with the author's transcription (which is at the pitch actually heard by the author);<sup>11</sup> needless to say, all the intervals and other details in "N" have been kept intact. It is the beginning of a well-known Coptic hymn, the *Trisagion*, as sung by the choir of deacons on Good Friday,<sup>12</sup> which starts with an extensive vocalise on the first syllable of the word *Agios* ("Holy").

*Example One:*
*Comments:*

As can be seen, Newlandsmith chose to solve the problems of notation by completely adapting this melody to our Western notation system. In addition to the clef and staff, he indicated the pitch and relationship of intervals by means of a key signature, with no indication whatever for micro-tones or any modulation that may occur in the melody. He noted the rhythm by means of a single time signature (2/4) and bar lines, thereby squeezing the melody into measures of equal length with no suggestion of rubato or flexibility in the duration of the beats. Further, he deliberately decided against notating the ornamentation in any intricate detail, for he felt that such embellishment was only "Arabic debris" that obscured the basic, "authentic" melody.<sup>14</sup>



*Comments:*

At this point, some observations should be made. Transcriptions often reveal more about the transcriber – his/her training, background, interests and purposes (not to mention problems) – than they tell about the music itself. Newlandsmith was concerned with notating what he felt was the basic melody. Further, given his background in classical music of the West and lack of ethnomusicological training, he saw no need to notate nuances of pitch and rhythm foreign to the Western ear. This author sought to make transcriptions that would show enough detail in pitch, rhythm, and ornamentation to indicate the intrinsic complexity of Coptic music, and that would yet be simple enough for anyone to identify and recognize at sight.<sup>17</sup> However, any transcription is but a visual approximation of the sound. Coptic music needs to be heard if one is to understand its beauty and spirituality.

The foregoing having been said, the following comparison between “N” and “R” may be made:

In “R”, where the pitch is transcribed to the nearest quarter-tone, there are differences from “N” which may concern a single note here and there (e.g., Line 1, measure/beat 2; Line 2., measure/beat 20ff.). However, on a larger scale, an interesting characteristic common throughout Coptic music becomes apparent in “R” that is not shown in “N”. As the melody proceeds, the general pitch of the entire melodic line gradually rises (e.g., “R”, Line 2, beats 20, 21ff.). Therefore, at measure twenty-three, where “N” simply has a repeat sign (  ), “R” continues the transcription noting the changes in pitch (Lines 2, 3, and 4, beats 21-24, 1a-24a).

As to rhythm, in “R” there are no bar lines, for the natural accents in the melodic line do not fall at equal intervals, nor are all of the beats of the same duration. Although the majority have the equivalent of four sixteenth notes (  ,  ,  or  ), some beats are shorter, having the equivalent of only three sixteenths (  ) (Line 1, beat 11; Line 4, beat 27), or one eighth note (  ) (Line 3, beat 11a). Conversely, other beats are longer, having the equivalent of three eighth notes (  ,  ) (Line 2, beat 20; Line 4, beat 20a). Note beats 23 and 23a, which equal respectively two measures and two and one-half measures in “N.”

Concerning ornamentation, it is evident that “R” has more detail throughout.

Nonetheless, despite the differences mentioned above, a close scrutiny reveals many similarities between these two transcriptions. Apart from those few notes altered by quarter-tones indicated above, the interval relationships are the same in both versions. Even those many notes altered by quarter-tones in "R" (Lines 3-4, beats 1a-28) still maintain the same basic intervals as "N" (Lines 1-3, measures 1-24). As to rhythm, both transcriptions indicate a steady pulse, with the stress falling at the beginning of the measure in "N" and on the beat in "R." Those notes carrying the stress are generally the same in both versions (measures/beats 1-4, etc.).

### *Conclusions:*

In summary, in that "R" is more detailed in depicting the various nuances of pitch, rhythm, and intricacies of ornamentation, it is probably more exact than "N." However, "N" shows the basic intervals and rhythm of this melody with remarkable precision. Indeed, the same may be said for the remainder of Newlandsmith's entire work, and therefore, his transcriptions have much merit and value on the whole. This large corpus – the most extensive notation of Coptic music made as yet – gives access to an enormous amount of material, and hence could become a standard research tool for musicologists, especially those interested in comparative work either within or without the Coptic musical tradition. It could serve as a base for (1) identifying the many Coptic melodies, (2) for comparing the melodies as they were heard in 1926 to the same ones as they are sung at present, and (3) for comparing the Coptic texts with their melodies to similar texts having melodies in other ancient traditions, viz., the Jewish, Byzantine, Roman Catholic, etc. Further, the straightforwardness and simplicity of these transcriptions make them a useful guide for analysis of form and structure in Coptic composition. In short, this voluminous record could be invaluable for history.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there are Coptic manuscripts in the John Rylands Library at Manchester and in the Insinger Collection at the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden bearing unusual accents which may be a rudimentary form of ekphonetic notation. But if these symbols do represent musical notation, they have not as yet been identified or deciphered. Concerning the oral tradition, see M. Robertson, "The Reliability of the Oral Tradition in Preserving Coptic Music, Part I and Part II . . .," *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*, 26 (1984) and 27 (1985), 83-93 and 73-85 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> These scholars and their works (listed in chronological order) were: G. A. Villoteau, *Description de l'Égypte, état moderne. II: De l'état actuel de l'art musical en Égypte* (Paris: 1809), 754 ff.; Jules Blin, *Chants liturgiques coptes* (Cairo: 1888); Louis Badet, *Chants liturgiques des Coptes* (Cairo: 1899).

<sup>3</sup> Some of these transcribers are Ilona Borsai, Kāmil Ibrāhīm Ghubriyāl, Hans Hickmann, René Ménard, Marian Robertson, and Margit Tóth.

<sup>4</sup> Ragheb Moftah, member of a prominent Coptic family, has devoted his life to preserving the music of his people. At present, he is head of the Music Department at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo, Egypt. Ernest Newlandsmith (1875-19--), son of a clergyman and graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, met Mr. Moftah during a stopover in Egypt while making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After a brief sojourn near Mount Carmel, he returned to Cairo to begin this monumental project.

<sup>5</sup> The manuscripts are now in the possession of Mr. Moftah in Cairo.

<sup>6</sup> Three liturgies have been established in the Coptic Church. These are: (1) the Liturgy of Saint Basil, celebrated throughout the year; (2) the Liturgy of Saint Gregory, used today for the four major feasts of Nativity, Epiphany, Resurrection, and Pentecost; and (3) the Liturgy of Saint Cyril, also known as the Liturgy of Saint Mark, characterized as the most Egyptian of the three, but from which only a few chants survive yet today.

<sup>7</sup> The complete Table of Contents is as follows:

Volume I: The Complete Liturgy of Saint Basil

Volume II: Special Hymns used in the Liturgy on Festivals or

## Special Occasions

Volume III: Three Hymns – A Hymn for the Fast of the Apostles, a Hymn for Holy Week and Funerals, a Hymn for Advent and Lent

Volume IV: Some Advent and Christmas Hymns

Volume V: Lent Hymns before Holy Week

Volume VI: Hymns for Holy Week (Part 1)

Volume VII: Hymns for Holy Week (Part 2)

Volume VIII: Midnight and Advent Hymns

Volume IX: Three Liturgy Hymns – A Hymn for the Feast of Baptism, a Hymn for the Marriage at Cana, and a Hymn for All the Saints

Volume X: Four Special Hymns for Advent

Volume XI: Hymns for the Saturday of Light, Easter, and Holy Thursday

Volume XII: Easter Eve Hymns

Volume XIII: Saturday Evening Hymns and Seven Midnight Hymns in Preparation for the Liturgy

Volume XIV: The Hymn of the Three Children in the Fire (*Hōs*\* Three)

Volume XV: The Big Alleluia and *Hōs* sung at Advent (Midnight), and an Extra Incantation sung by the priest after the Big Alleluia when the *Hōs* is sung

Volume XVI: The Priest's Melodies in the Liturgy of Saint Basil (from the Glory and Reverence to the Holy Trinity to the Consecration) \* A *Hōs* is a special song of praise, sometimes translated as "Ode."

<sup>8</sup> In both vocalises and melismata a single vowel is prolonged over several musical phrases. In Coptic music, vocalises are distinguished from melismata in that they are less florid and are sung to a regular steady pulse.

<sup>9</sup> René Ménéard estimated that in general it required thirty hours for him to notate three and one-half minutes of Coptic music (R. Ménéard, "La musique copte – problème insoluble?", *Les cahiers coptes*, Vol. I [1952], 39). That has been the experience of this author as well.

<sup>10</sup> Copied from Newlandsmith, *op. cit.*, Volume VII, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Without recordings there is no way to know what was the original pitch heard by Newlandsmith. It is interesting to note that throughout his entire corpus, he always notated the melodies so as to avoid writing ledger lines.

<sup>12</sup> The *Trisagion* is an important hymn in the Coptic Church, where it is sung throughout the year as a regular part of the liturgy just before the Psalm versicle. The music may vary according to the occasion, and on Good Friday, the melody is longer and more complicated than that usually heard. The text is that of the Greek *Trisagion*, and begins as follows: *Agios o Theos, Agios Ischyros, Agios Athanatos* . . . (Holy [is] God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal . . ."). See *Khidmat al-Shammās (Services of the Deacon)* (Cairo: The Patriarchate, 1965, p. 62).

<sup>13</sup> At this point, the general pitch of the melodic line has risen sufficiently in "R" so that the transposition of "N" is henceforth notated a major third (plus a quarter-tone) lower rather than a perfect fourth.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Newlandsmith, "The Ancient Music of the Coptic Church," a lecture delivered at the University Church Oxford (May 21, 1931), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Taken from M. Robertson, "The Good Friday Trisagion of the Coptic Church (A Musical Transcription and Analysis)," a communication presented at the 17th International Byzantine Congress (Washington D. C., 1986), now being published in *Miscellany in Memoriam of Academician Ivan Dujčev*, A. Djourova, Editor-in-Chief (Sophia, Bulgaria: University of Sophia). The tape recordings used for this transcription are part of an extensive collection given to the author by Mr. Moftah in Cairo, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> This interval comprises ten quarter-tones, i.e., a perfect fourth.

<sup>17</sup> Other transcribers, notably Ilona Borsai and Margit Tóth, have been very concerned about notating the ornamentation with as much precision as possible, even to the point of slowing the tape recorder so as to hear and distinguish the notes more clearly.

<sup>18</sup> At present Mr. Moftah has granted the author provisional permission to edit and publish Volumes II-XV (Instead of the Newlandsmith notation of Volume I, Mr. Moftah hopes to publish the transcriptions of the Liturgy of Saint Basil made by Margit Tóth). For the reasons noted above, the author is seeking to bring the project from mere planning stages to reality.