

THE ANCIENT MUSIC
OF THE COPTIC CHURCH

THE ANCIENT MUSIC OF THE COPTIC CHURCH

A NOTABLE addition to Oxford's list of lectures this Term was made last Thursday evening by Professor Ernest Newlandsmith, Friar of Mount Carmel, in the lecture-room over the Crypt of the University Church. Unlike a large number of lectures, though, this one, with "The Ancient Music of the Coptic Church" as its subject, had an audience packed to the point of discomfort. After a short introduction by the Chairman, Professor F. L. Griffiths, who hoped we would be a little less ignorant of the subject at 6.30 than we were an hour earlier, Professor Newlandsmith played a Hebrew Lament on his violin in memory of an Eastern scholar and friend who had recently died. Then, speaking from notes, the lecturer briefly described the nature and scope of the research work on which he and Mr. Ragheb Mofteh have been engaged for the last three years. Some idea of the profound beauty of this traditional music was obtained from a recital of several Coptic hymn tunes and melodies, very beautifully played on a piano by the Professor (though he had not touched a piano for so long, his execution required no apology.) Amongst this selection stood out the very lovely midnight hymn. The lecturer described the difficulty of stripping this new-found music, which had been handed down orally by blind musicians, of the Turkish, Arabic and other influences which had crept in. No less than seven volumes had been taken down already, including two Masses and about two hundred hymns with alternative tunes for the various occasions on which they are used. Often several pages of music would be devoted to the singing of a single syllable, and so intricate was some of it that it would prove extremely difficult, if not quite impossible, for the best Western operatic singers to sing. One singer, whose music Professor Newlandsmith was taking down in manuscript in a houseboat on the Nile, protested that it would be ruined by European singers. The reply was brief but painful: "No one in Europe could possibly sing it!" Regarding harmony, the lecturer said while in some cases it would be sheer vandalism to attempt to set harmony to the melody, in others it was almost demanded, and definitely enhanced its beauty. As illustrations he played two contrasting Coptic hymn tunes, first in melodic then in harmonised form, suggesting that the

first could quite easily pass for a Beethoven Andante and the second for work by Mozart.

One left with feelings of deep gratitude to Professor Newlandsmith and his collaborator for restoring to the world a priceless musical treasure, which opens up still wider fields for research and tends towards continued peace and a better understanding between East and West through the medium of the best of all international languages—Music.—*The Oxford Magazine*.

ANCIENT MUSIC OF THE EAST TREASURES FROM EGYPT AN ENGLISH SCHOLAR'S RESEARCHES

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, laborious investigation has been carried out in another direction that is bringing to light something of the spiritual riches of that great civilisation—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 Patriarch, St. Mark the Evangelist, invited Professor Ernest Newlandsmith, the well-known musician and writer, to investigate its treasures. It was an excellent choice.—*The Manchester Guardian*.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MUSIC

DURING the past three years, Professor Ernest Newlandsmith has been investigating the treasures of the Coptic Liturgy, and has discovered a rich musical treasure quite unknown to the Western world. He asserts that this music, beneath the veneer of Arab influences, is very probably derived from the music which was played and sung in the ancient Pharaonic temples.

Last week, in St. Mary's Church, Oxford, before a congregation which included Professor Einstein, Professor Griffiths (the eminent Egyptologist), Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, Professor Zimmer, Professor Lindman, and others, Professor Newlandsmith gave a lecture and recital of this ancient Coptic Liturgy.

In the absence of the Egyptian Minister, M. Georges Cattani, of the Egyptian Legation, paid tribute to this discovery, which must prove of the greatest interest.—*The Daily Telegraph*.

THE ANCIENT MUSIC OF THE COPTIC CHURCH

BY
ERNEST NEWLANDSMITH

*A lecture delivered at the University Church, Oxford,
on May 21, 1931*

THE last time I had the pleasure of speaking to you here in Oxford was when I gave my farewell message to England from the pulpit of this historic church on Advent Sunday, 1928, prior to my departure to the Holy Land. I am glad to be with you again during my present visit to this country, and to be giving this present lecture, under the same kindly roof, preparatory to a *Service of Musical Devotion* that I have been invited to hold at the Church of St. John-the-Evangelist, Ifley Road, next Sunday evening.

It has been said—perhaps a little too often—that “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” But if there is one medium through which I am sure they can and eventually will meet, it is that of Music.

Music, rightly enough, has been called the Universal Art. It has also been called the Divine Art. It is that Art which—as Carlyle tells us—“leads us to the edge of the Infinite and allows us for moments to gaze into that.” Or, as Browning says, it is “a flash of the will that can; existent behind all laws; which made them; and lo! they are”! And again: “There is no truer truth obtainable by man, than that which comes of music!”

It is true that in the schools of to-day music is called the *youngest* of the Arts. But for my part I would prefer to call it the *oldest* of the Arts—indeed, the Eternal Art: the Art through which the One Great Composer called the very creation into existence. For, as Shakespeare tells us, “there is not an orb around us, but each in his motion like an angel sings.”

Now, I fear that the ideas concerning music that usually obtain in the Western World are somewhat inade-

quate. If a young musician makes any enquiry as to the Music of the East he is usually told that it rests on a system of tonality widely divergent from our own, and that it is impossible to represent the sounds of the Oriental scales by the modern musical notation.

No doubt, to some extent, this is true. And when we remember that the diatonic genus, although based on the same natural scale, is differently applied in the East to what it is in the West; and when we come to realise that there is an ancient Oriental application of the chromatic genus which contains no less than two hundred and fifty-three untransposed octave scales, we may well tread with caution! For it is almost impossible to grasp the endless involutions of which such a vast array of scales is capable. Such a basis of Music opens up a vista quite undreamed of by the ordinary musicians of the Western world.

Bearing this in mind, we need not be at all surprised to read, in Holy Writ, that when the 120 Hebrew musicians began to sing "the glory of the Lord so filled the Temple, that the people could no longer continue to worship therein." For it was, no doubt, a transcendent example of the sacramental power of music to break down the barrier between the spiritual and the material. I have myself seen a Jewess converted to Christ through music without a word about religion being spoken.

And what of such music as the flute-playing of Midas, whom Pindar has immortalised in his Twelfth Ode? It was in the years 494 and 490 B.C. that Midas won his chief laurel crowns; and Pindar's Ode—written in his honour—was sung at Agrigentum when the victor entered the city in triumphal procession and the whole town poured out to meet him. It was, as you know, a period of history when great men abounded. There was Pindar—only second, perhaps, to Homer, because Homer was born first. There was Æschylus: at the prime of his powers. Sophocles had just been born; Phidias was a child of seven; and all were destined to become immortal.

Now we have every reason to believe that this glorious music—an art utterly lost to us to-day—had its origin in Ancient Egypt.

But, perhaps, I should utter, here, a word of warning. A few years ago it was my privilege to review, at some length, a masterly treatise on "The Brotherhood of the

Rosy Cross": that august "Order" whose members are as far removed from the ordinary person's world as the ordinary person is removed from the animal world. Mr. A. E. Waite—the author of this work—is one of the greatest English authorities on the Hebrew Kabala—and, indeed, on mysticism in general. So, in my review, I ventured to suggest that, on the subject of the Rosicrucians, the man in the street should henceforth be silent. And I feel that we may do well to bear such a caution in mind to-day, lest, perchance, we foolishly step in where angels fear to tread. Even so great an authority as Sir Hubert Parry (who formerly occupied the Chair of Music in this University) once ventured to say that, in his opinion, the magnificent Gregorian music of the Catholic Church was nothing but crude and negligible nonsense. What he would have thought of the more ancient music of the East I really cannot imagine!

Yet, a few years ago, when Mr. Haig Gudenian introduced Oriental music to Queen's Hall audiences, his ideas were subjected to considerable discussion, and under the title of "Exotic Music," they formed the theme for one of Mr. Fox-Strangway's weekly articles in "The Observer." And there is certainly no doubt but that the subject is of profound interest. Perhaps more especially is this so in view of ultra-modern art developments and the somewhat spiritually bankrupt state of much of our latter day music.

Be this as it may, I, for my part, after devoting several winters to first-hand research into the music of ancient Egypt, feel able to announce the discovery of rich art treasure. It is true that I have had to dig deep; for the original Egyptian element lies largely buried under an appalling debris of Arabic ornamentation. But after piercing through this unfortunate outer coat, the true Egyptian idiom has emerged. The music is not Arabic; it is not Turkish; and it is not Greek—often as these elements appear. It seems indeed impossible to doubt but that it is ancient Egyptian. Moreover, it is great music: grand, pathetic, noble and deeply spiritual.

Perhaps, after all, this is precisely what we ought to expect?

For seeing that this music is Coptic, that St. Mark-the-Evangelist was the first Patriarch of the Coptic Church, and that there has been an unbroken patriarchal succession from his day until now, it is practically certain that

this music not only *dates back* to the first days of the Christian Era but that it probably *derives* from a much earlier date. We know that the Coptic Church took over many usages from the ancient Egyptian temple worship—such as the surplice and the tonsure; and, in view of the deeply spiritual part that music played in the worship of the ancient Egyptians, it is almost certain that some of this music also must have been carried over. Indeed, as an indication of this, I may mention that one of the Coptic hymns at present in use bears (as its “title”) the name of an ancient Egyptian town.

But this Coptic music was never committed to paper. It was handed down *orally* for nearly twenty centuries by the blind musicians who sang the liturgy in the various Coptic churches and cathedrals. It is therefore a matter of little wonder that ever since the Arabic invasion it has been subjected to so many Arabic interpolations that the original Egyptian element in its pristine glory is to some extent lost. Nevertheless, much rich treasure is still at our disposal; and having collected in MS. no less than seven large volumes—including the Mass—I hope to give examples of some of the greater themes in a few moments.

These themes are in many cases extremely fine. In some instances they are magnificent. They compare favourably with those of the greatest masters in musical history. Moreover, as some of these themes are greatly improved by harmonisation (and by their very structure demand modern harmony), it seems probable that our present ideas of oriental music (and our customary teaching to the effect that all really great and emotional music is a comparatively “modern” art) will have to undergo considerable revision.

II

THIS ancient Coptic Church music is of very wide extent. It includes the music of the Liturgy, with many “extra” hymns for special occasions; a vast collection of special hymns for the Church’s seasons—Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Whitsun and Ascensiontide; the Saturday Evening and Midnight Hymns; and various alternate settings to the Liturgy—such as the Mass of Gregorius. And although, as we have said, this music has never until now been committed to paper, (but

has been handed down orally, all through the centuries), the memory of the blind musicians who sing it is so astounding that—vast as is the range of the music—the slightest error in its performance is at once detected. Such a feat of memory is little less than a miracle; for although purely melodic, some of the hymns are often so extremely complicated that they would completely baffle a first-rate opera singer.

Several of the larger hymns take as much as twenty minutes to sing, and frequently there are pages of music to a single syllable of a word!

In a brief lecture like this we can of course do little more than give a few short excerpts from some of the more notable themes. But even so, it is probable that even these few examples will convince the reader that the music which is usually considered “Oriental” must often be some more or less “modern perversion” of an earlier and nobler art. As we have already said, this older and greater music sometimes seems to imply modern harmonization; but in the majority of cases harmonization would not only be unsuitable, but well-nigh impossible. It would be sheer vandalism.

We will take for our first example the beautiful hymn “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches,”—the “Vay Aytay.”

VAY AYTAY*

Allegretto.

va e' te on on mady in
 mo f o sa - te - so - te in
 m - Je au pite pe - ma qu - en
 mo : o

* In this booklet all Coptic words are printed in phonetic English.

ni ek ek li si

And what could be more beautiful and pathetic than the "Estatheetee," sung at Mass by the deacon :

ESTATHEETEE

Allegro.

How gentle, sweet and full of pathos, also, is that soft, sad Lenten hymn, "Megharloo arshee arevs" :

MEGHARLOO

Adagio.

etc.

And how deeply solemn is the "Nee ethnos teero" :

NEE ETHNOS TEERO

Andante sostenuto.

etc.

Such themes as these seem to breathe forth the very Spirit of the Eternal : they seem rooted and grounded in the Infinite.

And what of an "Amen" such as this ?

AMEN



III

AFTER a careful study of these very simple themes we cannot but feel that much of the music of Western civilization must have its source in the Orient. There are many other reasons for so concluding. For instance, the Jewish Synagogue music is, without a doubt, Oriental. Yet, strange and unique as the Hebrew idiom usually sounds to modern ears, we find at least one famous hymn (for which the claim is made that it was composed by King David for use in the first Temple at Jerusalem) which might conceivably have been written by some of the more inspired Lutheran or Catholic hymn-writers of to-day. It runs as follows:—

HYMN OF DAVID



Again, Emil Naümann, in his well-known "History of Music," points to the remarkable similarity between much of the Eastern liturgical music and that of the Roman church. Another writer shows how, during the Moorish domination of Spain, the music of the Orient so penetrated into the Occident that the classical musicians of the West adopted it wholesale—even using such names as Giga, Sarabande and Chaconne. Moreover, the intensely

emotional music of the Hungarian Gypsies, also, has strong affinities with the music of the Orient, and some of our most "modern" music of to-day—Russian and otherwise—seems to hark back to the Oriental whole-tone scale.

Meanwhile, most of the Oriental music heard on the gramophone records is of an extremely undesirable type. No true artist could possibly tolerate it; for both the music itself and the method of singing employed in its rendering are pernicious to a degree.

But as has been well said: "Oriental music is like a real nobleman who, by misfortune, has been dragged into squalor. When it has been purified and clothed in suitable dress it can take its rightful place, and very little imagination will be required to divine its origin." It is only when it has been cleansed that it can claim recognition. But when this has been done it is possible that the many beautiful musical expressions and forms, and the harmonies they imply, will open up an entirely new and undreamed of vista to the Western musical world.

Perchance in this way a new bond of sympathy may arise between East and West, and—through music's appeal—Orient and Occident may at length unite in a new-found glory? In a thousand ways the Orient is becoming alert. And although, unfortunately, she is adopting many of those elements of Western civilization that she would do far better to avoid, there are still wise men to be found in her midst. For instance, the initiator of all these extensive musical researches in the Near East is Mr. Ragheb Moftah, a highly-cultured Coptic Effendi who is now on a visit to this country. He is a man of very remarkable gifts, a leading spirit in many of the higher reforms of Egypt, and a thinker whose work in the near future may count for much in establishing a happier understanding between Egypt and the people of England. Nor must we fail to mention the indefatigable labours of Mons. Michel—the eminent director of the music at the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo—who, morning after morning, for months on end, would come out to a house-boat on the Nile, and (with Mr. Latif and other of his colleagues), sing for hours on end while I took down the music in MS. On one occasion a singer who was helping in this work questioned the advisability of passing on one very remarkable and extremely complicated hymn, for fear it should be seized upon in Europe and become cheap. Upon which, Mons. Michel was heard to whisper back—"Do not fear, my brother, no one in Europe could possibly sing it!"

THE COPTIC MUSIC

SOME LECTURES HELD BY FRIAR NEWLANDSMITH DURING
MAY, 1931

CAMBRIDGE

- A LECTURE-RECITAL at Caius College: May 12th, at
5.15 p.m. *Chairman*: The Master of Selwyn.
- A DEVOTIONAL SERVICE at St. Michael's Church, May
12th, at 8.15 p.m.

AND

OXFORD

- A LECTURE-RECITAL at the University Church: May 21st,
at 5.30 p.m. *Chairman*: The Professor of Egyptology.
- A DEVOTIONAL SERVICE at the Church of St. John-the-
Evangelist, Whit Sunday, May 24th, at 8.30 p.m.

AND

LONDON

- A LECTURE-RECITAL at King's College, May 27th, at
5 p.m. *Chairman*: The Professor of Pastoral Theology.
- A DEVOTIONAL SERVICE at St. Peter's Church, Great
Windmill Street, W., Trinity Sunday, May 31st, at
7.30 p.m.

Printed by The New Temple Press,
Norbury Crescent, London, S.W., Great Britain.