

WESTERN MUSIC FROM EGYPT

ITS ORIGIN IN THE COPTIC CHURCH

EMOTIONAL APPEAL

Western music has its origin in ancient Egypt, according to Professor Ernest Newlandsmith, who has recently completed a three years' investigation in that country of the traditional music of the Coptic Church, the Church of the early Egyptian Christians, which split from the main body of the Church in A.D. 451 on a point of doctrine.

Many of its finer themes, Professor Newlandsmith considers, are of extreme antiquity, and like much of the ritual of the Church were probably derived from existing pre-Christian worship.

"The investigation," he explained to a "Morning Post" representative yesterday, "had its origin in the conviction of Mr. Ragheb Mostaf, a distinguished Egyptian Effendi, that beneath the veneer of Arabic and Turkish influences there was much in Coptic music both of aesthetic merit and profound emotional appeal. This opinion, though I was many times inclined to doubt it, has been amply justified.

"In a houseboat on the Nile I listened to Mr. Michel, the director of the great College of Church Music in Cairo, singing the traditional Coptic hymns and services in their purest and most accurately preserved form. Mr. Michel spent hours in minutely correcting the written version of each theme which he sang to me.

"Orthodox teaching says that great music is a thing of the last three or four centuries, but there is a tremendous emotional appeal in much of this Coptic music, and many of its deep-hidden themes not only admit of but demand harmonisation.

HISTORICAL CLUES

"In favour of its antiquity I would point out:

"(1) That many of the tunes bear the names of villages which are known to have been in ruins for very long periods. If these dates can be established by historical research, then Coptic music must be at least as old as the earliest of them.

"(2) There is reason to believe that the patriarchs of the Coptic Church stretch in unbroken succession from St. Mark the Evangelist. Much of its usage is undoubtedly of similar antiquity.

"(3) Ancient Egypt is the only possible source of this music, since the basic themes show no affinities to either Turkish or Arabic music. The early Coptic Church took over many features, including the surplice and tonsure, from pagan ritual, and it is at least probable that the same is true of their music.

"What I have brought back with me are seven manuscript volumes, containing the first written record of the music of this Church. I do not so much want to prove a case as to bring this music before the attention of Europe strictly on its merits.

"What we understand to-day as Oriental music appears to be simply a degradation of what was once a great art. This music, which has been handed down for untold centuries within the Coptic Church, should be a bridge between East and West, and place a new idiom at the disposal of Western musicians. It is a lofty, noble, and great art, especially rich in that element of the infinite which is lacking to-day."