

# Music of the Orient.

RECENT DISCOVERIES IN EGYPT,  
By Professor Ernest Newlandsmith.

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."

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, the present writer, after devoting several winters to first hand research into the music of ancient Egypt, is able to announce the discovery of rich art treasure. It is true that he has 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, we 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—the present writer hopes to give examples of some of the greater themes in his next article.

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.

(To be continued.)

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## 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 article 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.*

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

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.*

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

### NEE ETHNOS TEERO.

*Andante sostenuto.*

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.

A . . . . . men.

# Music of the Orient.

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## III.

**A**FTER 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 Naumann, 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!"