

# Preserving Pharaonic Psalms For Christ

Coptic Church Music Survives, Thanks Mainly to One Monkish Layman  
**Raymond Stock**

**T**he chants rise and flutter soothingly on the choir's fine voices, neither very high nor very low, in mezzo forte tone. As the thirty-three year old audio cassette whirls, the vowels of Coptic words, part of the liturgy of St. Basil, stretch on in constant melodic variation. The chants rise again, yet so effortlessly that they seem strangely poised and serene. They carry words for Christ on tunes once used to praise the gods of the pharaohs, in what remains of the pharaohs' language.

The liturgy of St. Basil, used in Coptic Masses for all but the four great feasts of the year, was recorded for the first time by the late Dr. Ragheb Moftah, then-head of the music and hymns department at Cairo's Institute of Higher Coptic Studies. For more than seven decades before his death in Alexandria at midnight on June 16, 2001, at nearly age 103, Moftah also recorded dozens of hours of Coptic chants, both on cassette tape and on old-fashioned paper reels, while supervising the transcription of the liturgy for publication.

Thanks mainly to Moftah, most of the musical heritage of the Coptic Church, which springs from perhaps the oldest musical tradition in the world, has finally been preserved.

A decade ago—a mere moment in the immense history of this heritage—the complete music of St. Basil's liturgy, accompanied by its words in Coptic and translation into English and Arabic, was published by the American University in Cairo (AUC) Press. Amassed in a manuscript of 1,200 pages, the words and music of the liturgy had before nev-

er been published in a standardized form in their entirety. Their publication was the symbolic culmination of Moftah's lifetime of work and a successful collaboration with Head of the Coptic Church Pope Shenouda III, Director of the AUC Press Mark Linz and two scholars who devoted many years to transcribing the musical notations of these chants and hymns with Moftah. Dr. Margit Toth, a Hungarian, did the actual transcription, while Dr. Martha Roy, an American, transliterated the Coptic and Arabic words in Roman letters under the music. Although all these people played important parts, the force that made all this possible was Moftah - though he, like the rest, would probably have credited a higher power.

Crucial as the publications are, Moftah--whom the Coptic patriarch has called "the father of hymnology"--left an even great legacy of recordings, for only these truly capture the soul of the music itself. He began doggedly gathering, recording and transcribing this ephemeral mass of material after meeting a young English ethnomusicologist named Ernest Newlandsmith, eighty-two years ago. His own extraordinary longevity is dwarfed only by the age of his subject. Indeed, Coptic Church chant is the oldest liturgical music in the world. As noted in articles that Moftah and others contributed to the Coptic Encyclopedia, the music's Christian origins are tied to those of the Coptic Church itself, which appeared with St. Mark in Alexandria in roughly 45 A.D. But at least some of the new church hymns are believed to be based on melodies used in odes to the Pharaonic-era deities of



Isis and Osiris in their temples.

A number of Pharaonic elements have remained in Coptic music. One of the most basic traditions in Coptic chant, for example, is that it is passed on orally by succeeding generations of blind cantors who are thought to hear more sensitively than sighted ones. The use of professional blind singers was apparently common in Pharaonic temples. The famous hymn "Kyrie Eleison" may have descended from prayers to Aton, the sun god. And the techniques of vocalise and melisma (drawing out the sound of a single vowel or syllable for long periods, with either regular or irregular rhythm) in Coptic chant may have come from the hymns of the Middle Kingdom.

In its early days, the church discouraged the use of most musical instruments, but the harp (the Greek kithara or lyra) was allowed. Gradually cymbals, drums, flutes and clarinets were used, as was the sistrum, a primitive rattle sacred to the goddesses Bastet, Hathor and Isis in former times. All these devices had been common in Ancient Egypt. New instruments appeared as well. A kind of bell, the naqus, struck with an iron rod, was a special Coptic invention and perhaps served as the prototype for the bells adopted by the Latin Church in Rome. Early in the Christian era, the Egyptian harp also appeared in Europe - first in Ireland, then Italy. Eventually, the harp became Ireland's national symbol and one of the most popular instruments on the continent. By the modern era, the Coptic liturgy had become almost entirely vocal. Today, only two instruments are (sparingly)

used - small hand cymbals called sagat, and the metal triangle, or muthallath. Percussion instruments such as these were frequently featured in certain basic rituals in Pharaonic temples.

In an undated pamphlet entitled, "The Music of the Coptic Church," Moftah explained:

*Coptic music is entirely vocal and must be sung without harmony, since the keys to this music cannot be adapted to the harmonic system.... It must, also, be strictly unaccompanied, because the vocal chords are the only instrument which can truly render the real character and special expression of this music.*

The music's Pharaonic roots are also found in the Coptic language, the last phase of the language of Ancient Egypt. Coptic was spoken widely in the country until at least the 11th century, but Coptic and Greco-Coptic liturgy survived even longer. And while Arabic began to replace the older tongues in recent centuries, the music's core has remained largely unchanged. A rival with Ancient Egyptian melodies, however, was early Jewish music, which in Egypt may have been influenced by the music in the pagan temples. The chant, "khouab, khouab, khouab" (Coptic for "holy, holy, holy"), among others, may have come from this heritage.

While Coptic chant predates Islam, the work of Coptic cantors and the recitation of the Holy Qur'an

1. Dr. Ragheb Moftah (1898-2001) at the pyramids of Giza.

2. Over the decades, Moftah labored quietly, discussing his recordings and findings with colleagues at the Institute of Higher Coptic Studies (photo circa. 1970).

“One of the most basic traditions in Coptic chant, for example, is that it is passed on orally by succeeding generations of blind cantors who are thought to hear more sensitively than sighted ones. The use of professional blind singers was apparently common in Pharaonic temples.”

probably influenced each other, and both share common elements with the ancient, and continuing, Jewish institution of master singers in the synagogue. Professional training for Coptic chanters did not arise until 1850, under Patriarch Cyril IV. One of Moftah’s most important tasks was the teaching of hymns and responses to aspiring church singers. Moftah instructed Coptic clerical students in the choir of cantors and deacons at the Music Division of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo, from 1954 – 2001, and for many years at a summer school in Alexandria. He is said to have had an infallible ear for a wrong note and would correct anyone he heard straying from the traditional melodies and rhythms of the music. But how Moftah himself was drawn to his self-ordained role as the savior of this tradition can only be understood by knowing him and his own illustrious roots.

Born into an upper-class family in Faggala, Cairo on December 21, 1898, Moftah descends from a line of prominent figures in the Coptic community. One of them, Moftah’s great-great uncle Yusuf, received an imploring letter from Napoleon Bonaparte during the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801), attesting to his personal prestige across religions lines. Bonaparte asked Yusuf to use his influence over both the Copts and the Muslims in his quarter of El Darb El-Was’ in Cairo to calm anti-French disturbances there in about 1799. Unfortunately, it is not known how Yusuf replied. Ironically, it was only during Bonaparte’s ill-fated expedition that the first attempts at transcribing the orally transmitted music of the Coptic Church into the Western notation system were made. This was done by Guillaume André Villoteau, who, in 1809, gave some five pages of *La Description de l’Égypte* to the Coptic “Alleluia.”

Moftah’s “extremely elegant” father, Habashi (who kept Napoleon’s letter in the family home), was an official in Egypt’s railroad company, who died in 1935. But Moftah said the greatest influence on his life – apparently more

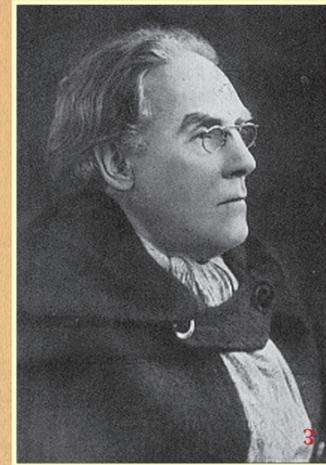
emotionally than intellectually - came from his mother, Labiba. They remained very close until her death in 1926. Luckily, Moftah said, though his father was strict and his mother indulgent, both his parents were very supportive of any career he might choose.

Of Moftah’s nine siblings, his brothers, as a whole, grew up to be distinguished. But his three sisters were more dramatic - sometimes daring, even formidable. Several years before activists Hoda Sha’rawi and Cēza Nabaraoui dropped their face veils at the harbor in Alexandria in 1923, launching Egyptian feminism, Moftah’s oldest sister, Victoria, rode to school in a carriage without a head covering. At that time, even Coptic women used to cover their hair. Another sister, Farida, with the help of Sha’rawi and other prominent citizens, established the first orphanage for girls in Egypt, in 1912. Throughout her life, Farida wielded such influence over Moftah that he never dared address her by name, calling her simply “my sister.” A third sister, Blanche, married the prominent lawyer Kamil Sidqi, who became minister of finance in one of the Wafdist cabinets and was awarded the rank of pasha.

At an early age, Moftah found himself enchanted by the haunting music of the Coptic Mass. However, he first chose a more conventional career and left for Germany in 1919, where he studied agriculture in Bonn for four years. He returned to Egypt where, in 1926, he met someone who would change his life utterly. Newlandsmith, a clergyman’s son who composed music and played the violin, was just over fifty when he encountered Moftah while passing through Cairo en route to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Newlandsmith, a fellow of the Royal Academy of Music, was himself larger than life. A monastic eccentric for twenty years, in 1940 he married Maria Romero, a British diplomat’s daughter who reportedly believed her ancestors came from the lost continent of Atlantis. Described by his biographer as “a philosopher, a mystical theologian, a violinist, a composer, an author, a lecturer” and “a reformer,” Newlandsmith began to call himself “the Hermit of Mount Carmel” after his sojourn in Palestine. The sobriquet stuck, and in his later years it was often used in announcements of his many concerts and lectures.

On his return from Palestine to England, Newlandsmith stopped back in Egypt and again met Moftah. Finding they had a love of religious music in common, Moftah saw in



the ascetic Englishman a superior musical scholar. He invited him to stay on his houseboat on the Nile, at what is now the site of the Semiramis Intercontinental and Helnan Shepherd’s hotels, and undertake a great project together. Moftah proposed that they collaborate to notate the music of the Coptic Church, beginning with the liturgy of St. Basil.

With background rhythm from the River Nile and singing mainly by the great blind master cantor Mu’allim Mikha’il Jirjis al-Batanuni, the two men spent nine winters listening to these chants, day in, day out. Newlandsmith labored to get it all down on paper, scribbling madly while sitting crosslegged in a corner on the floor. Meanwhile, Moftah, who paid all expenses, including Newlandsmith’s travel and living costs, recorded the music on paper tape reels.

Under Moftah’s guidance, Newlandsmith strove to strip away what he contemptuously termed “an appalling debris of Arabic ornamentation” to get at the pure core of original Coptic psalmody. He declared that, “After piercing through this unfortunate outer cloak, the true Egyptian idiom emerged. The music is not Arabic, it is not Turkish and it is not Greek - often as these elements appear.” A true believer in the Pharaonic roots of Coptic incantation, Newlandsmith added, “It seems impossible to doubt but that this is Ancient Egyptian. Moreover, it is great music: grand, pathetic, noble and deeply spiritual.”

Not only Moftah and Newlandsmith worried about preserving the music’s integrity. When one cantor on the houseboat asked if it was dangerous to present this music in the potentially corrupting Western environment, al-Batanuni replied, “Do not fear my brother, no one in Europe

could possibly sing it!”

Newlandsmith also had a great regard for his patron, Moftah, whom he described as a “highly cultured Coptic effendi” and whom he credited as “the initiator of these extensive musical researches in the Near East.” He also saw Moftah as a bridge between nations, “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.” What work Newlandsmith had in mind exactly is not known, but presumably it was about Moftah’s contributions to explaining the apparent link between Ancient Egyptian and Western music.

In 1931, they stopped briefly to complete Newlandsmith’s return to England together. There they lectured on the glories of Coptic music - its first recognition in the West since it reached Ireland, possibly with Egyptian missionaries around the fifth century - at Oxford and Cambridge universities, among other places. Once, at Oxford, they had a special visitor in the audience - a young physicist named Albert Einstein. The lectures drew many notices in the press, which seized on the theme of Western music’s hitherto neglected Egyptian roots.

Moftah and Newlandsmith made their way back to Cairo, more determined than ever to finish the daunting enter-

3. Master cantor Mu’allim Mikha’il Jirjis al-Batanuni

4. Musical scholar Ernest Newlandsmith began notating the music of the Coptic Church in 1927 with Dr. Ragheb Moftah.

5. Dr. Ragheb Moftah in Alexandria.



prise. There were great successes and sadly missed opportunities as well. For a brief while, their work intrigued Béla Bartók, who visited Egypt in 1932 to attend a giant conference on Arab music sponsored by King Fouad. The great Hungarian composer and ethnomusicologist corresponded with them before his arrival, promising to work with them when he came. Before they could begin, however, Bartók was called away to a more urgent project in Turkey and never returned. Despite this disappointment, by 1936, with Moftah's expert organizing of the various singers, some sixteen volumes of music were transcribed. These include "special songs for the various feasts and fasts, and special songs reserved for high church officials" according to University of Utah ethnomusicologist Marian Robertson-Wilson, writing in the Coptic Encyclopedia. The liturgy of St. Basil, whose music Moftah describes as "plain, like Coptic painting and frescos - simple and captivating and deeply spiritual," was still a work in progress.

Devotion is what has kept Moftah going in his drive to preserve this complex and elusive music. As recordings did not exist, Moftah and Newlandsmith, followed by the German Hans Hickmann and the Frenchman René Menard in the 1940s, had to recruit singers to perform the same material over and over again in order to copy it properly. Often, there were many competing versions of the same songs, varying from subtly to vastly different. Finally, after Moftah established the music section of the Institute of Higher Coptic Studies in 1954 and began taping the songs on more modern equipment, it became easier to standardize the versions for transcription and for use in Holy Mass.

Moftah's life went through many phases, though apparently undisturbed by the turbulence around him - World

War II, the 1952 Revolution, wars with Israel and, finally, the uncertainty of peace. In his youth a dapper figure who loved the opera and dressing up, he gradually settled for simple clothes and an austere lifestyle. Though he wed Mary Gabriel Rizq in 1963, in the villa they occupied, until his death, near the pyramids in Giza, "The marriage has never been consummated," he said in 1997. "I just needed someone to look after me."

For many years, Moftah was assisted by musical scholars Martha Roy and Margit Toth. Roy, now in her 90s, is fluent in Arabic, Coptic and German and holds a master's in musicology from Columbia University, a subject she taught for some time at the Coptic Seminary in Cairo. Toth, in her late eighties, is the former head of the ethnomusicology department at the University of Budapest. The two women worked together on and off beginning in 1970, transcribing the music and transliterating the words. Moftah selected the songs while Roy, working with Anba Gregorius, a renowned bishop and theologian who specializes in translating the liturgical texts, transliterated the Coptic, Greek and Arabic words into Roman script. Toth transcribed the music into the Western system of notation. Yet, after many years of complex collaboration, by the mid-1990s they were still unsure what would become of their work. Intricate negotiations to arrange publication with the AUC Press and the Church seemed to be bogged down in technical details until Moftah sought the help of his longtime friend Pope Shenouda III. When he learned of their plight, Pope Shenouda is said to have declared, "This music is the property of the church and not of any one man." The patriarch proved to be the catalyst for the publishing and copyright agreements.

In 1998, the work culminated commercially in publication of Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil with Complete Musical Transcription, compiled by Ragheb Moftah, transcribed by Margit Toth, and edited by Martha Roy. As of 2006, this is accompanied by a box of four audio CDs (purchased separately), both by the AUC Press.

Another admirer of Moftah's work is James Billington, head of the Library of Congress in Washington. In a May 1995 visit to Cairo, Billington threw a reception in Moftah's honor at AUC. He called for Moftah's legacy of recordings and the sixteen volumes he transcribed with Newlandsmith to be kept at the library, and to be added to his own pet project - a survey of the world's musical heri-

tage. "Your work is important not for the Coptic Church or Egypt alone, but all humanity," Billington told Moftah. Later, Moftah signed agreements with the Library of Congress to preserve all of his collected recordings and transcriptions.

As a result, in addition to six audio cassettes of St. Basil's liturgy recorded by Moftah before concluding his publishing work with AUC, he also provided the Library of Congress with recordings on forty-three reels of paper-based tape, including twenty-four containing the liturgy of St. Gregory, traditionally used for feasts of the Epiphany, Nativity and Easter. All forty-three were rerecorded and digitalized for the Library of Congress at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and Billington has recently announced that they will all soon be available online through the LC website.

Indeed, Laurence says that Ragheb succeeded in recording the entire still-living corpus of Coptic liturgical music. A total of fifty-seven of his audocassette recordings from 1954 to 1971 can be downloaded on a number of Coptic websites, such as [www.coptichymns.net](http://www.coptichymns.net), [www.coepaonline.org](http://www.coepaonline.org), [www.suscopts.org](http://www.suscopts.org), [www.tasbesh.org](http://www.tasbesh.org), and [www.copticheritage.org](http://www.copticheritage.org).

In 1996-97, this writer conducted an oral history project with Moftah for the Library of Congress, in which I interviewed him and his niece Laurence in Arabic on videotape about his work. This effort and the recordings of Coptic music were both part of the Library's World Heritage series initiated by Billington. Ragheb appeared happy in the sessions, and, in a return to earlier ways, always smartly dressed. His mind and memory were clear, his eyesight and hearing good, and his voice strong. He was even then a remarkably boyish man, with a wise face, features straight from an Ancient Egyptian wall painting and a highly infectious laugh.

Laurence, formerly head of the reference department at the AUC Library, where she is now Librarian Emerita and Consultant of Coptic Studies Collection Development, became involved in her uncle's work in 1979. "I was inspired by the desire to prevent what happened to my Uncle Aziz [Ragheb's brother] - whose four-thousand page opus in four volumes on St. Mark vanished when he died - from happening to Uncle Ragheb." She was determined to prevent Moftah's work from going unrecorded and unprotected by copyright. To this end, she served as Ragheb's

all-round assistant for the last eighteen years of his life, and has been his advocate for the past thirty years. With his agreements with both the AUC Press and the Library of Congress - the latter of which grants Moftah copyright to all the material on audio tape and to the music in Newlandsmith's sixteen folios of transcriptions her mission seemed to be accomplished.

Yet there was a valiant postscript. Beginning in the mid-1990s, working quietly with "a very talented" priest, Abouna Metthias Nasr, at his home, Moftah attempted to restore the liturgy of St. Cyril. According to Roy and Toth, the liturgy, which is used for Grand Friday (the Friday before Palm Sunday), was almost totally lost over the previous sixty-plus years due to the deaths of the last surviving cantors who knew this music. However, Ragheb was not satisfied with the result, ending the project when it became clear that not enough of the original melodies survived to complete it.

Despite these massive achievements, the question remains: "Who will follow?" Moftah himself thought that for the most part, his work was done. "I did what I was obliged to do, and it's finished," he declared at the end of one of our videotaped interviews. On Moftah's 100th birthday, in 1998, Pope Shenouda III celebrated a mass in his honor that drew roughly a thousand persons to the Abbasiyah Cathedral.

Tragedy struck at Moftah's also-crowded funeral on June 18, 2001. His eighty-four year old second cousin, Abdullah Moftah—a comparative youngster, and the family's unofficial historian—was struck by a car while leaving the cathedral. He died the next day.

Regardless of these losses, the music that Ragheb Moftah so lovingly helped save from oblivion lives on, rising from the throats of cantors and choir as it has from the days of the pharaohs.

*This article is based on, and updates, one that appeared in Egypt Today magazine, April 1997, by Raymond Stock copyright © 1997-2008.*

*Photos 1 - 5 from the Moftah family archives are courtesy of Laurence Moftah.*

6. Writer and Arabic translator Peter Theroux visited with Moftah (right, center) and the choir at the Institute of Higher Coptic Studies in the early 1990s. Courtesy of Raymond Stock and Peter Theroux.