



Coptic Music

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Description of the Corpus and Present Musical Practice:

The following remarks pertain only to the music of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Other Christian churches in Egypt (Greek Orthodox, Coptic Catholic, Protestant, etc.) have their own musical practices.

Coptic music, an expression of a proud and constant faith, still lives today among the Copts as a vestige of an age-old tradition. It is monodic, vocal, and sung a cappella solely by men, with the exception of some responses assigned to the whole congregation. Small hand cymbals and the triangle are employed with specified pieces during certain services.

The Divine Liturgy and Offerings of Incense:

The core of Coptic music lies in the Divine Liturgy (Arabic: *quddās*), whose texts are all meant to be sung, excepting the Creed and the Dismissal. In the liturgy the most familiar hymns and chants are heard. It is basically a great music drama, consisting of three parts: (1) the Preparation; (2) the Liturgy of the Word, also called the Liturgy of the Catechumens, which comprises the Prayer of Thanksgiving, the scriptural readings, various intercessions and responses, the recitation of the Creed, and the Prayer of Peace; and (3) the anaphora, that is, the Eucharist ritual. The entire service may require some three hours of singing, and during Holy Week, the special services may last six or seven hours.

Three liturgies have been established in the Coptic church: (1) the Liturgy of Saint Basil is celebrated throughout the year except for the four major feasts of Nativity, Epiphany, Resurrection and Pentecost; also, it is used daily in the monasteries whether there is a fast day or not; (2) the Liturgy of Saint Gregory is used today in the celebration of the four major feasts mentioned above; its music is somewhat more ornate than that of the Liturgy of St. Basil and has been characterized as the most beautiful because of its high emotion; and (3) the Liturgy of Saint Cyril, also known as the Liturgy of Saint Mark, the most Egyptian of the three.

Unfortunately, most of the melodies of the Liturgy of Saint Cyril have been lost, and it can no longer be performed in its entirety. The most recent record of its performance is that of Patriarch Macarius III (1942-1945), who used it regularly. Immediately thereafter, there may have been a few priests in Upper Egypt who remembered his manner of celebrating the anaphora. Abūnā Pachomius al-Muharraqī, vice-rector of the Clerical College, also performed it on various occasions. According to Burmester, only two chants have survived: the conclusion of the Commemoration of the Saints (“Not that we are worthy, Master...”) and an extract from the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed (“And these and everyone, Lord...”).

by the iconostasis at right angles to the sanctuary in two lines facing each other, with one line as the *bahri* (“northern”), and the other as the *qibli* (“southern”). According to the rubrication of the “B” or “Q” marked in the margin of the text, the choir may sing antiphonally, strophe about, or two strophes about. The singers alternate according to the form of the musical phrase. They may also sing in unison.

Among many familiar choir pieces, three may be cited: (1) the hymn “We worship the Father...” (Coptic: $\tau\epsilon\nu\omicron\upsilon\omega\omega\tau \ \acute{\alpha}\phi\iota\omega\tau$), which is sung Wednesday through Saturday at the beginning of the Morning Offering of Incense; (2) the Trisagion (“Holy God! Holy and Mighty! Holy and Immortal!...”; Greco-Coptic: $\alpha\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma \ \omicron \ \theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma : \ \alpha\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma \ \iota\omicron\chi\upsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma : \ \alpha\gamma\iota\omicron\varsigma \ \alpha\theta\alpha\omicron\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma\dots$), which, according to legend, comes from a hymn sung by Nicodemus and Joseph at the Lord’s entombment; and (3) the Lord’s Prayer (Coptic: $\chi\epsilon \ \Pi\epsilon\omicron\nu\omega\tau\dots$), which is chanted on one note.

The melodies for the people and/or choir are quite simple, with little embellishment. However, certain hymns are complicated by some rudimentary, rhythmic ornamentation integral to the composition.

As has been stated, this choral singing is monodic, and should any harmonic elements appear, they are only occasional overlappings of the incipits of one part with the finalis of another. Also, the unison chant may not always be perfect, for some singers, wishing to participate in the acts of praise but not having good musical ears, do not listen to each other. Such lack of precision may be rather prevalent today, for in many churches the people, led and supported by the choir of deacons, are again actively rendering the hymns and responses, once again fulfilling the role originally assigned to them. A very wide vibrato characterizes all the singing.

Although the melodies of the participants are distinctive, as described above, there are many traits common to all. One of the most obvious characteristics of Coptic music, and one that probably derives from ancient times, is the prolongation of a single vowel over many phrases of music that vary in length and complication. This phenomenon may take two forms identified by scholars as *vocalize*, when the vowel is prolonged with a definite rhythmic pulse, and *melisma* (pl. *melismata*), when the vowel is prolonged in a free, undefined rhythm. A melisma generally lasts from ten to twenty seconds, but some vocalizes may continue for a full minute. Because of these many vocalizes and melismata, a study of the text alone does not always indicate the form of the music.

The music may further show its independence from the text in that musical and textual phrases do not always correspond. For example, in the Liturgy of Saint Basil, there is considerable enjambment in the solos of the priest and in the hymns sung preceding the anaphora; in some hymns a musical cadence may occur even in the middle of a word (“Judas, Judas,” heard during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday, is a case in point). In addition, the music may distort the stress and length of the syllables, especially if the text being sung is Greek.

Other traits are also prevalent. Melodies tend to proceed diatonically, usually within a range of five tones, with a characteristic progression of a half-step, whole step, and half-step, both descending and ascending. There may be intervals of thirds in the melodic line, although the distinction between the major and minor third is not always

recognized as clearly as in Western music; the augmented second is rare; the diminished fourth occurs rather often. Throughout, there are numerous microtones, and therefore, many intervals can never be accurately reproduced on a keyboard instrument. Indeed, by means of these microtones, the implied tonal center of a given tune may shift imperceptibly, sometimes by as much as a minor third or more.

Many scholars have felt that Coptic melodies seem to unfold in spontaneous and endless improvisation. However, analyses reveal that this music has been constructed according to definite forms, three of which may be described. (1) Some songs are made up of various brief phrases, which are woven together so as to form clearly identifiable sections (usually three or four) and repeated with slight variation; the piece ends with a prescribed cadential formula. Concerning these compositions, Newlandsmith isolated ten musical phrases which he termed “typical.” The extended vocalizes and melismata described above are found most often in this kind of piece. (2) Other melodies are composed of longer, individual phrases, repeated as strophes and/or refrains, are sufficient for the construction of an entire hymn. (3) Some songs are made up of melodic line and rhythm that are simplified to fit the inflection and rhythm of the text. Such melodies tend to be syllabic and often have an ambitus of only two or three tones.

Some important terms, which appear in liturgical books and manuscripts to specify the music to be sung with a given text, are the Coptic ⲙⲗⲟⲥ , adopted from the Greek $\eta\chi\omicron\varsigma$; the Coptic Ⲡⲟⲓⲉⲙ or ⲟⲩⲟⲓⲉⲙ , meaning “response”; and the Arabic *lahn* (p. *alhān*). Ibn Birri (1106-1187), as quoted in *Lisān al-‘Arab* (compiled by Ibn Manzūr, 1232-1311), assigned to *lahn* six meanings, among which are “song” and “psalmodizing” or “intoning.” Western scholars have translated *lahn* as “tone,” “air,” and/or “melody,” but none of these words conveys its full meaning. Although the term may have some affinities with the Arabic *maqām* and the Byzantine *echos*, in Coptic music it refers basically to a certain melody or melody-type which is readily recognized by the people and known by a specific, often descriptive name, such as *lahn al-huzn* (“... of grief”), *lahn al-farah* (“... of joy”), *lahn al-tajniẓ* (“... for the dead”), *al-lahn al-ma’rūf* (“familiar”), etc. Writing in the fourteenth century, Ibn Kabar named some twenty-six *alhān*, most of which are still known today. Some, designated *sanawiyyah* (annual), are sung throughout the year, whereas others may be reserved for one occasion only. The same text may be sung to different *alhan*, and conversely, the same *lahn* may have different texts. Furthermore, the same *lahn* may have three forms: short (*qasir*), abridged (*mukhtasar*), and long (*tawil*). Among many beautiful *alhan*, the sorrowful *lahn Idribi* may be cited as one of the most eloquent. Performed on Good Friday, during the Sixth Hour, it expresses vividly the tragedy of the Crucifixion. Its text being the Psalm versicle preceding the Gospel lection, it is also called *Mazmur Idribi* (Psalm Idribi). This name may derive from the ancient village Atribi, which once stood near present-day Suhaj, or it may stem from Coptic ⲉⲧⲉⲣⲓⲛⲃⲓ (one causing grief). Another *lahn* whose name shows the antiquity of its music is *lahn Sinjari*, name after Sinjār, an ancient village near Rosetta.

The two melody types most frequently named are *Adam* and *Batos* (Arabic: *Adām* and *Wātus*). Hymns labeled *Adam* are to be sung Sunday through Tuesday, and also on certain specified days, while hymns labeled *Batos* are reserved for Wednesday through Saturday, for the evening service, and for Holy Week. The two names derive from the Theotokia for Kiyahk, in which *Adam* is the first word of the Theotokia for Monday,

Ἀδάμ ἐλιεῖροι : νέμ κἀρνηστ... (“When Adam became of contrite spirit...”), and *Batos* is the first word of the Theotokia for Thursday, πῖβᾶτος ἐτα Ὑωυχς : πᾶν ἐροϋ... (“The bush which Moses saw...”). Although they are distinct from each other in verse structure, length, and mood, their music differs little in contemporary practice, and both may be heard in the same service.

The foregoing descriptions of the music and terminology used in the services of the Divine Liturgy and Offering of Incense also apply to the rest of the corpus, discussed below.

The Canonical Hours:

A great wealth of Coptic hymnology may be heard in the canonical hours, which are prayers performed by lay people in the city churches and by monks in the monasteries. There are seven: First Hour, or Morning Prayer; Third Hour; Sixth Hour; Ninth Hour; Eleventh Hour, or Hour of Sunset; hour of Sleep, with its three Nocturns; and Midnight Hour. In the monasteries, the Prayer of the Veil (Arabic: *salāt al-sitār*) is added. The book containing these prayers is the *Book of the Hours* or *Horologion* (Coptic: πᾶχπᾶ, from ἄχπ, “Hour”; Arabic: *al-ajbiyyah*, or *salawāt al-sawā`i*).

The canonical hours consist of the reading of the Psalms assigned for each hour, followed by the cantillation of the Gospel, two short hymns written in strophic form, known as *troparia* (Greek: τροπᾶριον, pl. τροπᾶρια), plus two more *troparia* called Theotokia, which are an invocation to the Virgin Mary. The *troparia* and Theotokia are separated from one another by the Lesser Doxology, which is also cantillated. Then follow the Kyrie, the Prayer of Absolution, and throughout, responses to each part. Although *troparia* and Theotokia are also heard in the canonical offices of the Greek Orthodox church, their order of performance is different from that of the Copts. The Greek and Coptic melodies differ as well.

Since the hours are not dependent on priestly direction, in the towns and cities, the musical parts of each hour are led by the cantor. Formerly, in the monasteries, the monks, not being musically educated, could not intone the hours; moreover, during the early years of their development, the monastic communities rejected singing and chanting as not conducive to the reverence and piety required of their strict discipline. Today, however, many of the monks are former deacons well acquainted with the melodies of the church rites, and they cantillate the hymnic portions of the hours as prescribed. In general, the hours are in Arabic only, but in some monasteries, the monks are beginning to recite them in Coptic.

The Service of the Psalmody:

In addition to the canonical hours, there is a special choral service known as *Psalmody* (Greek: Ψαλμωδία, Arabic: *al-absalmudiyah* or *al-tasbihah*), which is performed immediately before the Evening Offering of Incense, at the conclusion of the Prayers of the Midnight Hour, and between the Office of Morning Prayer and the Morning Offering of Incense. In the monasteries, *Psalmody* is performed daily, but in

Theotokia are performed in a single *Psalmodia* service because one hymn may suffice to represent the complete set.

There is a special collection of Theotokia meant to be performed only during the month of Kiyahk for Advent. De Lacy O’Leary has determined that although many of their texts resemble those of the Greek Orthodox church – especially those Greek hymns attributed to Saint John Damascene and Arsenius the monk – the Coptic Theotokia are not translations, but, rather, original poems composed on the Greek model. De Lacy O’Leary’s translation and editions of the Theotokia for Kiyahk provide ample material for analyzing the texts and comparing manuscripts. A succinct summary of their contents has been outlined by both Martha Roy and Ilona Borsai. As we mentioned above, two of these Theotokia have given their names to the melody types most commonly used throughout the liturgy and offices, namely, *Adam* and *Batos*.

Legend attributes the texts of the Theotokia to both Saint Athanasius, and Saint Ephraem Syrus while ascribing the melodies to a saintly and virtuous man, a potter by trade, who became a monk in the desert of Scetis. Euringer has identified him as Simeon the Potter of Geshir (a village in the land of Antioch); he is also known as a poet and protégé of the hymnist Jacob of Sarugh, who died in 521. This date indicated that the Coptic Theotokia were composed in the early part of the sixth century.

Mallon, however, asserts that these works are of neither the same author nor the same period. He would date them no earlier than the fifth century, but before the Arab conquest of Egypt (642-643). In the fourteenth century, Abu al-Barakat wrote that the Theotokia for Kiyahk were not used in Upper Egypt, but were passed around among the churches of Misr, Cairo, and the northern part of the country.

3. The *lobsh* (Coptic: λωβω, “crown,” “consummation”; Arabic *lubsh* and/or *tafsir*, pl. *tafasir*, “explanation, interpretation”) immediately follows a *hos* or a Theotokia; it is a nonbiblical text on a biblical theme. In hymn form, consisting of four-line strophes and usually unrhymed, the *lobsh* is recited rather than sung. However, its title designates the appropriate *lahn*, either *Adam* or *Batos*, which would seem to indicate that at one time it was sung.
4. The *Psalis* (Coptic: ψαλι, “praise, laudation”) are metrical hymns that accompany either a Theotokia or *hos*. Muysier and Yaasa ‘Abd Al-Masih have published detailed editions of certain *Psalis*, using manuscripts dating from the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. Their articles serve to demonstrate the high level of technique in handling Coptic rhymes and rhythms attained by *Psali* authors. Every *Psali* has from twenty-six to forty-six strophes, each of which is a rhymed quatrain; the rhyming schemes may vary. The strophes are often arranged in acrostic order according to the Coptic or Greek alphabet by the first letter of each strophe. Some are even in double acrostic, and others in reverse acrostic. Such patterns serve as mnemonic devices, enabling the singers to perform the hymns in their entirety with no omissions.

One feature which makes the *Psalis* very popular is the refrain, an element rarely found in the ritual pieces of the liturgies and canonical hours, or in the *hos* and Theotokia of the service of *Psalmodia*. Usually the refrain is made by

repeating only the fourth line of the strophe, but sometimes both the third and fourth lines are repeated.

Another unusual aspect of the Psalis is that, except for a few paraphrases reserved for Kiyah, these are the only pieces of Coptic music whose authors are identified in the texts. The writer's name may be found embedded in a strophe, with a plea for mercy and pardon from sin, and with mention of him as "the poor servant" or "a poor sinner." In the paraphrases, the author's name may be given in acrostic form as the first letter of each strophe of the hymn, or as the initial letter of each of a set of hymns arranged seriatim.

Most Psalis are to be sung either to the melody-type *Adam* or *Batos*, depending on the day of the week, and are thus designated as Psali *Adam* or Psali *Batos*. However, certain ones specify the title of another familiar Psali or hymn to whose melody they may be sung. These melodies are rhythmic and syllabic, that is, the notes match the texts with little trace of melisma or improvisation; their range usually covers four, or at most, five tones; they swing along in quasi-parlando style, and emphasis on textual and melodic accents makes them easy to sing, all of which encourages congregational participation. The very simplicity of these hymns leads the listener to speculate that herein lies the oldest core of ancient Egyptian melody.

A few Psalis are written in both Coptic and Greek, some in both Coptic and Arabic, and others in Arabic alone. Only one manuscript entirely in Greek has been discovered (Church of Saint Barbara, Old Cairo, History 8, 1385). Most Psalis, however, are in the Bohairic dialect, and the date of their composition is unknown. It is probable that some are no earlier than the thirteenth century. On the other hand, certain Psalis in the Sahidic dialect have been assigned to the ninth and tenth centuries (Morgan Collection, vol. XIII). These latter are in acrostic order, according to the letters of the alphabet, and they are unrhymed.

5. The *tarh* (pl. *turūhāt*) usually denotes a paraphrase used to explain a preceding *hos*, Theotokia, or Gospel reading. It differs from the *lobsh* or *psali* in that it is introduced with two unrhymed strophes in Coptic, which are followed by an Arabic prose text. In general, it is recited, not sung. Sometimes the same hymn is termed both Psali (Coptic) and *tarh* (Arabic), but, technically speaking, it may be considered a *tarh* when it follows the Coptic hymn of the Gospel lections. A *tarh* dating from the ninth century has been edited by Maria Cramer. Written in Sahidic for Palm Sunday, it was supposed to be sung. Abu al-Barakat referred to the *tarh* as a hymn, which further testifies to its once musical character.
6. The doxologies are hymns of praise sung during the service of *Psalmodia* in honor of the season, the Virgin Mary, the angels, the apostles, the saint of a particular church, or other Coptic saints, as time may allow. Their texts are similar in structure to those of the Psalis and *tarh*, having short strophes of four lines each and concluding with the last strophe of the Theotokia for the day. 'Abd al-Masih has published detailed studies of the doxologies.

In addition to the foregoing, other special hymns are sung by the Copts in commemoration of their saints and martyrs. These are to be found in the *Difnar* or *Antiphonarium* (Greek: ἀντιφωνάριον, from ἀντιφώνέω, "to answer, to reply"), a book containing biographies of the Coptic saints written in hymnic form. This

volume also includes hymns for the fasts and feasts. The texts are arranged in strophes of rhymed quatrains, and two hymns are given for the same saint, their use being dependent on the day of the week, that is, one for the days of *Adam*, and another for the days of *Batos*. Because these hymns are quite long, only two or three strophes may be sung during the service of *Psalmody* to commemorate the saint of the day. Further, if the *Synaxarion* is read as a commemoration, the singing of the *difnar* hymn may be omitted completely.

The compilation of the *difnar* is ascribed to the seventieth patriarch, Gabriel II (1131-1145). However, the oldest known manuscript with *difnar* material dates from 893 (Morgan Library, New York, manuscript 575). Another unpublished *difnar* from the fourteenth century, found in the library of the Monastery of St. Antony, has been described by A. Piankoff and photographed by T. Whittemore.

Mention should also be made of the numerous ritual books that contain further repertoire to be sung for particular liturgical occasions such as the rite of the holy baptism and the rite for marriage. Each of these many rituals has its own book detailing the specifics of the rite, which of course include the use of music. Other rituals with their special books containing hymns for the specific occasions are those for the feasts and fasts of the liturgical calendar, such as the ritual for the feast of the Nativity, for the feast of Pentecost, for the fast of Holy Week, the fast of the Virgin Mary, and others too numerous to mention here.

There is one other book very important in the description of the corpus, *The Services of the Deacon* (Arabic: *Khidmat al-Shammās*), which was assembled by Abūnā Taklā and first published in 1859. This work was compiled from the various books and collections of hymns already in existence in order to assist the deacon, who, along with the cantor, has the responsibility for the proper selection and order of the hymns and responses for each liturgy and office. This book outlines the hymns and responses in Coptic and Arabic for the liturgies and canonical offices throughout the year – according to the various seasons and the calendar of feasts and fasts – and for the various rites such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, and so on.

Its rubrics are all in Arabic, but the hymn and responses are in both Coptic and Arabic. Musical terms are employed in directing the singers. The name of the *lahn* for each hymn and response is specified, and the rubric for the use of instruments (Arabic: *bi-al-nāqūs*) is also indicated where necessary. Since its first printing, *The Services of the Deacon* has appeared in four editions.

RAGHEB MOFTAH
 MARIAN REBERTSON
 MARTHA ROY
 MARGIT TOTH