



The Oral Tradition

Source: Atiya, Aziz S. (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), p. 1730.

All the manuscripts discovered and books compiled to date record only texts and rubrics. There is no known notation now in existence designed specifically for Coptic music, though manuscripts bearing ancient Greek notation have been found in Egypt. From the beginnings of the church, the music has passed from one person to another, from one generation to the next, by oral teaching and rote learning. Thus Coptic music has always depended on a continuous oral tradition.

Because the Copts have tended to be fiercely conservative about the many rituals of their religion, it is reasonable to suppose that they must also have been meticulous in regard to the music. According to Hans Hickmann, this music was held as a sacred trust by those who learned it, and indeed, was purposely not transcribed lest it fall into the wrong hands. For the most part, the instruction must have been very strict and rigid, as it is today.

To study the reliability of this tradition, Marian Robertson has compared transcriptions of the same piece of music written decades apart by different scholars. These studies indicate that the simpler melodies may have remained intact for centuries. Other comparisons of recordings made years apart at the Institute of Coptic Studies also show that the basic melodies have remained unchanged, and that even the embellishments, though varying slightly, occur in the same places throughout the melody in question. This is especially true for those compositions sung by the choir. In the case of solo performers, variation and improvisation are to be found, particularly in the embellishments and melismata, as may be expected.

In view of the abundance and complexity of Coptic music, one might well wonder if any mnemonic devices were used to aid in transmitting it. Hickmann maintained that a system of chironomy that dates from the Fourth Dynasty (2723-2563 B.C.) is still employed. However, not all scholars have shared this opinion. Indeed, Ragheb Moftah, head of the Music Department at the Institute of Coptic Studies, affirms that although cantor may use his hands in directing other singers, his system is strictly individual and not consciously adopted from anyone. The chironomic gestures used in Coptic singing seem to relate more to setting the rhythm than to delineating the pitches of a given melody.

Scholars do not agree concerning the antiquity and purity of the Coptic musical tradition. Admittedly, without notated manuscripts, it is virtually impossible to unravel the sources of many melodies. Nevertheless, specialists who have studied, transcribed, and analyzed this music concur that, at the very least, it does reflect an extremely ancient practice. Ernest Newlandsmith traced it to pharaonic Egypt, whereas René Ménéard, a bit more cautious, proposed that those melodies sung in Coptic descended from the pre-Islamic era. In all probability, various sections of the music, like the numerous texts, were introduced into the rites during different stages of the early Coptic church, and the music as a whole does not date from any single era or region. It is clear, however, that the

musical tradition has continued unbroken from its beginnings to the present day. Hickmann considered it a living link between the past and the present.

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