



Cantors, Their Role and Musical Training

Source: Atiya, Aziz S. (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), p. 1736-1738.

Because members of the clergy were not equally talented as singers, it became and has remained the tradition to entrust performance of the music to a professional cantor (Arabic: *arif*, “one who knows,” or *mu'allim*, “teacher”), who is employed and trained by the church to be responsible for the correct delivery of the hymns and responses in all the services. He is usually blind, due to the popular belief dating from ancient times that the sensitivity of eyesight was transferred from the eyes of a blind person to his ear, and that such transference enhanced musical skills. He is expected to be at the church to perform and sing all the rites at their proper times and is thereby assured his living.

The cantor is not an ordained member of the clerical orders, but in times past, a prayer used to be said for him as the appointed singer in the church. This prayer, entitled A Prayer Over One Who Shall Be Made a Singer (Coptic: ΟΥΕΥΧΕ ΕΞΕΝ ΟΥΔΙ ΕΥΝΔΑΙΩ ΨΑΛΜΩΔΟΣ), is as follows:

Master, Lord God, the Almighty... this Thy servant, who stands before Thee and hath hastened to Thy Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, do Thou illumine him for rendering sweetly Thy holy words, and give grace to him to chant unto Thee, with understanding, the spiritual hymns.

Little is known about the cantors prior to 1850. However, at that time, it became apparent that the music and texts had often been rendered incorrectly by untrained and/or careless cantors. Patriarch Cyril IV (1853-1861), concerned about this situation, made the training of cantors a matter of prime importance to the church. He felt that a specialist, trained and highly skilled in singing the rituals, could help solve the problem, for such a professional could then teach others and thus be responsible for the improvement of the music. With this in mind, the pope found a blind young man who was teaching in the school adjacent to the patriarchal Church of Saint Mark, and perceiving him to be gifted with a good voice and keen ear, he appointed him to be teacher of melodies. Later, this teacher was ordained a deacon, Abūnā Taklā by name.

As part of his task, Abūnā Taklā corrected the pronunciation of the language, demanding proper enunciation and delivery of hymns. In 1859, at the order of Pople Cyril IV, he published the first edition of the book *the Services of the Deacon*, with the help of Deacon Iryan Jirjis Muftah, teacher of Coptic in the Patriarchal College. Also at the direction of the pope, Abūnā Taklā included therein four Greek hymns, which he translated into Coptic, and which are sung yet today for the feasts of the Nativity and Resurrection. They have kept their Greek melodies and are designated as *Yunāni* (Greek). Further, Abūnā Taklā sang Coptic songs of his own composition in the homes of outstanding families, and because of a patriotic song that he composed and presented to the Khedive, he was granted the title of *Bey*.

Abūnā Taklā has seven students to whom he transmitted his knowledge and skills. Among these were two cantors, Abuna Murqus of Matay, and Mu'allim Armanyus.

In the generation following, one of their students was the blind cantor Mu'allim Mikha'il Jirjis al-Batanuni, who was blessed with an excellent, very clear voice and a prodigious memory. As a youth, he was sent to visit churches in many towns of Egypt to learn and collect hymns. A faithful teacher at the Institute of Saint Didymus, he was the cantor chosen by Ragheb Mofteh to sing to the English musicologist, Ernest Newlandsmith, who, from 1928 to 1936, notated the complete Liturgy of Saint Basil and many hymns reserved for Advent and Lent. Thereby, Mu'allim Mikha'il became the means through which many of the great treasures of Coptic hymnology have been preserved in writing. He died in 1957, over seventy-five years old.

Cantors and deacons of today who were taught by Mu'allim Mikha'il include Mu'allim Tawfiq Yussuf of the Monastery Dayr al-Muharraq, Mu'allim Sadiq Attallah, Dr. Yussuf Mansur, and many others in the churches of Cairo and the provinces. These men are acknowledged today as the experts for the liturgical services and correct rendering of hymns. They have also assisted in the recordings of the liturgies and offices now being made by Ragheb Mofteh.

In 1893, at Mahmashah, Cairo, Patriarch Cyril V (1874-1927) opened the Theological Seminary, of which one branch was the Saint Didymus Institute for the Blind. It was only natural for the blind cantors to come here for their training. This institute is now located in Shubra, under the direction of Mu'allim Faraj.

Today, the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies has music department where the music of the church rites is also taught. Ragheb Mofteh has headed this department since its beginning in 1954 and has been responsible for the training of those wishing to master the myriad hymns and melodies necessary to Coptic ritual. Mr. Mofteh has also been in charge of the teaching of the hymns and responses to the students in the Coptic Clerical College adjacent to the Institute. These latter students are not cantors, but rather will become priests. Each summer, Mr. Mofteh takes a group of talented pupils to summer camp in Alexandria for additional training. Here, they review what they have been taught, correct their intoning and language, and study new repertoire. In all this work, Mr. Mofteh is assisted by priests having good ears and strong voices. All instruction is done by rote, with the students repeating the melodies until they become note perfect. Thereby, music, which perhaps was in danger of being lost and forgotten, is now being preserved for a new generation.

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