



Musical Instruments

Source: Atiya, Aziz S. (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), p. 1738-1741.

When Christianity was established in Egypt, many musical instruments of diverse forms and origins were known. However, they were, in the main, frowned upon by the church and the early fathers wrote strict injunctions forbidding their use. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-220) inveighed against playing the psaltery, the trumpet, the timbrel or tympanon, and the pipe. However, he seems to have tolerated the *lyra* and *kithara*, because of King David's alleged use of them. Origen (c. 185-254) attributed definite spiritual qualities to the sound of certain instruments, with the trumpet representing the power of God's word, the tympanon depicting the destruction of lust, and the cymbals expressing the eager soul enamored of Christ. Saint Athanasius I (326-373) also gave instruments symbolic meanings (Reese, pp. 61-21). For his part, Saint Cyril I (412-444) characterized a psalm as "a musical utterance for which the instrument is played rhythmically according to harmonic notes" (Werner, 1959, p.318), thereby recalling the Greek definition of this ancient form as a song sung to the accompaniment of a harp, or *kithara*, or *lyre*.

Three Arabic manuscripts from Saint Catherine's Monastery (no. 30, 977; no. 21, eleventh century; no. 22, twelfth century) quote hymn and Psalm texts that name many different instruments suitable for praising the Lord: cymbals (*sanj*), small drum (*daff*), two different chordophones, whose sound is produced by a vibrating string, either bowed or plucked (*awtar* and *ma'azif*), drums (*tubul*), and rattles (*salasil*), all of which indicate the variety of instruments known at this time (Atiya, 1970, pp. 77, 21 and 25).

Today, two percussion instruments are used in the rites of many of the Coptic churches: the small hand cymbals (Arabic: *sanj*, or colloquially *sajjat*), and the metal triangle (Arabic: *muthallath*, or colloquially *turianta*), each played by one of the deacons and/or the cantor. Providing a rhythmic accompaniment to specified hymns and responses sung by the choir and/or congregation, they signal the congregation to participate and unify the singing.

The hand cymbals are mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments (Ps. 150; I Cor. 13:1), which might be considered as a sanction for their use in the Coptic services. They were probably brought into Egypt from the Near East, but when they were introduced into the church is as yet unknown. They are a pair of slightly concave metal disks (usually silver) about 7 inches (18 cm) in diameter, with a cupped center 1 ¼ inch (3 cm) in depth. A hole in the center of each disk permits the passage of a string held in place by a wooden pin that acts as a handle for manipulating the cymbals. Throughout the hymn which they accompany, two movements of the cymbals characterize the beat: a diagonal sliding of the two disks against each other, and a circular motion of the two rims alternately against each other. Both movements produce a varied depth in tone. A trill of the rims with a final clap completes the rendition of the hymn.

The Arabic word *daff* is a controversial term popularly used by some Copts to refer either to the cymbals or sometimes to the triangle, but this is a misnomer since the *daff* is a membranophone constructed of a circular wooden frame over one side of which

a fish or goat skin is stretched taut; such instruments are considered unsuitable for use in church services.

The Arabic word *naqus* (pl. *nawaqis*) is the only term mentioned in the rubrics of the liturgical books (notably the *Khidmat al-Shammas*) to indicate the need for instrumental accompaniment. An ancient kind of bell, sounded by striking the outside with a rod, it gradually disappeared over the centuries from Coptic ceremonies and is not generally known today. It came into the early church perhaps via Alexandria, where it replaced the small wooden clappers used in antiquity as an instrument to signal the beginning of worship services. Writing in the fourteenth century, Abu al-Barakat, referred to the *naqus* in his description of the rite of consecration of the altar in the church: “The bishop proceeds around the altar and beats the *naqus* three times, after which the ministers holding many *nawaqis* strike them.” However, the exact form of the *naqus* mentioned by Abu al-Barakat is a matter of conjecture, for it is not known when the bell fell into disuse among the Copts (see the discussion of the bell below). In the seventeenth century, J. Vansleb did note that small bells and ebony bars were used in Coptic services.

The metal triangle is suspended by a string held in the left hand, and is struck on two or three of its sides by a small metal rod held in the right hand. It is never mentioned in the rubrics, either in Coptic or Arabic, but when accompaniment by the *naqus* is specified, the triangle automatically joins in. Its light tinkling beats might be described as resembling the light jangling of the ancient sistrum.

When the hand cymbals and triangle are played simultaneously, intricate rhythmic patterns emerge, and as these instruments accompany the varied meters of the vocal music, a complex and quite distinct polyrhythm is produced.

Although the liturgical books definitely specify the occasions, hymns, and responses requiring instrumental accompaniment, the use of instruments is somewhat haphazard, for those playing instruments do not always follow directions and often play when no instruments are called for in the rubrics.

Among the hymns rubricated for instruments are, in the Morning Offering of Incense, “We worship the Father...” (Coptic: $\tau\epsilon\theta\upsilon\omega\omega\tau \ \acute{\alpha}\phi\iota\omega\tau\dots$), and “O Come, let us worship...” (Coptic: $\alpha\omega\omega\iota\iota \ \mu\alpha\rho\epsilon\theta\upsilon\omega\omega\tau\dots$); in the Divine Liturgy the Hymn of the Aspasmos (variable); in the Evening Offering Incense, the people’s response to the Kyrie; on Good Friday, the Kyrie of the Sixth and Twelfth Hours; in the *Tasbihah* of the Saturday of joy, the Psali of *Hos* One; during the feast Resurrection, the $\chi\epsilon\rho\epsilon$ after the Psali of *Hos* One; and the quatrains of the *Tasbihah*, when it is performed.

Many instruments known in pharaonic Egypt also existed among the Copts. The following information about them is based mainly on research published by Hans Hickmann.

Idiphones:

1. *Clapper*. A kind of castanet, the clapper consists of two small boards that strike against a third, central board which also forms the handle. Although nothing can be affirmed as to its use in the early church, many clappers dating from the third

- to sixth centuries have been conserved. These have been found at Saqqara (Dayr Apa Jeremiah), the Fayyum, and elsewhere in Egypt.
2. *Castanet*. Made of concave shells of ivory or hard wood which are struck on against the other, the castanet existed in ancient Egypt, but it probably took its definitive form only in the second century A.D. In the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo there are a number of them dating from the Coptic era, found at Akhmim and Elephanitne. It is thought that they descended from the hand-shaped clappers of pharaonic times.
 3. *Crotalum*. Composed of two small cymbals attached to the ends of a sort of elastic fork that strike against each other when the fork is shaken, the crotalum was invented by Egyptian musicians of the Lower Epoch. Examples dating from the Coptic Epoch have been found at Thebes.
 4. *Sistrum*. Consisting of bars fitted loosely into a metal frame that rattle when the handle is shaken, the sistrum was the instrument sacred to Hathor and other goddesses such as Isis and Bastet. From Egypt it spread to Greece, Rome, and wherever else the cults of these Egyptian goddesses penetrated. In Western Europe, Isidor of Seville (560-636) mentioned its use (*Sententiae de musica*), as did Pseudo-Odo (Odo of Cluny, 879-942). According to Hickmann, the sistrum was also used by the Copts for many centuries.
 5. *Bell*. Not found in Egypt until the Late Kingdom, most of the bells recovered from ancient times stem from the third to sixth centuries A.D. Ancient Coptic bells, which may be decorated with the sign of the cross, have been found mostly in the Fayyum or other centers of early Coptic life. Hickmann felt that the use of Coptic bells might be the origin for the sounding of bells during the Roman Catholic mass, and that these instruments appeared in Rome following the cult of Saint Antony.

Aerophones:

1. *Flute*. The long flute, which is held vertically when played, is the most ancient wind instrument of Egypt, having existed in prehistoric times. Examples made of bone dating from the third to sixth centuries A.D. have been found at Saqqara (near Dayr Apa Jeremiah). Known in Arabic as the *nay*, its descendent is still heard today in Egyptian folk music.
2. *Clarinet*. Like the flute, the Egyptian clarinet descends from very ancient times. The double clarinet, which has two pipes linked together, dates from the Fifth Dynasty. Similar instruments dating from the Coptic era have been found at Saqqara (near Dayr Apa Jeremiah). These are the prototype for the modern Egyptian *zummarah*.
3. *Hydraulis*. According to Athenaius, the hydraulis (water organ) was invented by Ctesibus of Alexandria, surnamed "The Egyptian" (c. 246 B.C.). It was described first by Philo of Alexandria (second century B.C.), and later, in more detail, by Hero of Alexandria (c. 150 A.D.) and Vitruvius. A favorite instrument at gladiatorial shows, it became very popular with the Romans. Although the organ later became the main instrument for the rites of the Latin church, it has never been accepted in the Coptic church.

Chordophones:

1. *Harp*. The harp is probably of Egyptian origin, and during its long history, it has assumed many forms which have been amply described elsewhere. The Copts did not use the harp in sacred services, but it might have been popular among the people. O'Curry maintained that the Egyptian harp may have served as the prototype for the Irish harp, which spread from Ireland into Italy.
2. *Lute*. A lute found at Dayr Apa Jeremiah, dating probably from the seventh or eighth century, is important because it represents a transition from the long lutes of antiquity (both Egyptian and Asiatic) and the short lutes of Arabic, Iranian, and Indian origin (Arabic *al-'ud*). Described by many scholars, it is characterized by two crescent-shaped notches, that is, it is *doublement échanuré*. There are examples in the Coptic Museum in the Old Cairo and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Hickmann suggested that it might be the forerunner of the guitar, especially the *guitarro morisco*. Further, he felt that such lutes indicate the role Egypt played in musical history between antiquity and the Middle Ages, a role not confined to the development of the liturgy, but also important in the history of musical instruments.

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