



### Transcriptions in Western Notation

Source: Atiya, Aziz S. (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), p. 1742-1744.

Although there may be some evidences of a notation system using dots and a primitive ekphonic notation for Coptic music, the Copts have preserved their music over the centuries essentially by means of an oral tradition. Only in the nineteenth century did scholars begin to transcribe Coptic melodies using the notation system established for Western music. Guillaume Andre Villoteau, a French scholar who was part of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, was the first to attempt such a transcription when he devoted some five pages of his *Description de l'Egypte* (1809) to an Alleluia from the Divine Liturgy. Later, near the end of the nineteenth century, other transcriptions were made by Jules Blin (*Chants liturgiques coptes*, 1888) and Louis Badet (*Chants liturgiques des Coptes*, 1899). Whereas Blin's transcriptions are unreliable, those of Badet are fairly accurate as to the general scheme of the melodies.

In the twentieth century, Kamil Ibrahim Ghubriyal published a small volume of transcriptions of hymns and responsorial, *Al-Tawqi'at al-Musiqiyyah li-Maraddat al-Kanisah al-Murqusiyyah* (1916). Unlike previous transcribers, Ghubriyal, a lieutenant in the Egyptian army, was a Copt, and deeply steeped in the musical tradition of his church. He designed his transcriptions for Coptic youth, and in an effort to make them more attractive to his audience, he adapted them for piano, adding a rhythmic accompaniment (no harmony, notes at the octave only) and making certain changes in the pitch and rhythm of the vocal melodies. Notwithstanding such obvious alterations, the basic melodic line was kept intact, and Ghubriyal is to be recognized for his pioneering efforts as a Copt seeking to notate the music of his people.

Nearly one generation later, one of the most ambitious efforts in this regard was undertaken by the English musicologist Ernest Newlandsmith, who came to Egypt at the invitation and sponsorship of Ragheb Moftah for the express purpose of transcribing the music of the Coptic services. From 1926 to 1936 he compiled, from listening to the best Coptic cantors, some sixteen folio volumes of music, which include the entire Liturgy of Saint Basil, and other important hymns, responsoria, and so on, reserved for special feasts (vol. 1 alone comprises more than 100 pages). Because he felt that the abundant ornamentation in Coptic music was primarily "Arabic debris," Newlandsmith tended to ignore most of the embellishments. Thus, his transcriptions depict simple melodic lines, adapted to the rhythms and key signatures of the West. Nevertheless, for that part of Coptic music which is devoid of embellishment, these transcriptions compare favorably with the work of recent scholars, and his vast corpus of notation offers much material for comparative study and analysis.

All the foregoing transcribers, not having the advantage of recording equipment, had no way to compare what they heard with what they had notated. Hence, many intricacies of rhythm and intonation were neither perceived nor indicated accurately. Fortunately, when, in the 1950s, interested musicologists began work with tapes, they were able to produce transcriptions of much greater detail and accuracy. Among these scholars were Hans Hickmann and René Ménard, who, working both separately and

together, transcribed a few short pieces. Ménard, by slowing the tape, was able to hear, and thus notate, the embellishments with more exactitude than had been possible before. In so doing, he observed that the Western notation system cannot really indicate all the nuances of rhythm and expression inherent in Coptic music, and suggested that certain ancient signs used in Gregorian chant might be useful.

Following directives of Hickmann, scholars in the Ethnomusicology Laboratory at the University of Hamburg, employing the most modern acoustical equipment which allowed them to record the exact oscillations of the sound waves, notated the complicated variances of intonation in Coptic music to the nearest quarter-tone.

In 1967, Ilona Borsai went to Egypt to collect materials for study and analysis. During her short span of ethnomusicological studies, she was able to publish some seventeen articles containing transcriptions and observations on facets of Coptic music never before touched upon.

In 1969, Margit Tóth, also of Hungary, came to Cairo to study Coptic music. Working with Ragheb Moftah and the recordings he had made, she, like Newlandsmith, notated the entire Liturgy of Saint Basil. By using the new methods for recording and playback, she has completed transcriptions of enormous detail, wherein not only the audible embellishments are transcribed, but also auxiliary tones discernable only at a slow tempo. This project will enable scholars to make many comparative studies and analyses.

In the late 1970s, Marian Robertson, of the United States, also working with tapes, began transcribing excerpts from the Liturgy of Saint Basil and Holy Week services. Having specialized thus far in music sung by the choir, in which the embellishments are somewhat blurred by the individuality of each singer, Robertson has not transcribed the ornamentation with the same detail as Tóth. Explanations in accompanying texts serve to describe the phenomenon produced by the varying vibratos and embellishments of the performers.

In 1976, Nabil Kamal Butros, violin teacher in the Faculty of Music Education in Helwan University and a member of the Arabic Classical Music Ensemble, completed a master's thesis, "Coptic Music and Its Relation to Pharaonic Music," in which he made a comparative transcription and analysis of one hymn as sung by several different choirs.

Although Western notation was not designed for transcribing Coptic music, it may be the form in which this ancient music from the Near East will at last be written. By comparing the various transcriptions of dedicated scholars, one may at least glimpse the complexity and variety of the Coptic musical tradition.

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