

Coptic Musicologists

Borsai, Ilona (1925-1982)

After graduating from the University of Kolozsvár, in her native city of Cluj, Rumania, qualified to teach Greek and French languages, Ilona Borsai attended the Academy of Music in Budapest, Hungary, where she received the Diploma of Music Education. Completing further studies in the field of musicology under Bence Szalócsi, she began to work in research in folk music under the direction of Zoltán Kodály at the Academy of Science. Having retired in 1978, she died in Budapest on July 8, 1982.

Her research led into musicological studies of Egyptian music, pharaonic, folk, and Coptic. During three visits to Egypt, she made many recordings of folk and Coptic music in 1967-1968 to collect recordings for transcriptions and analyses, in 1969 to attend the Second Conference of Arab Music where she presented a paper, and in 1970 to follow up on the studies and recordings of Coptic music. As a result of these visits she produced a number of transcriptions in collaboration with Margit Tóth and publications describing the results of her research (see bibliography).

She was member of the Coptic Archeological Society, the Hungarian Ethnographical Society, the Association of Hungarian Musicians, the Hungarian Society of Studies of Antiquities, the [International Association of Hungarian Studies](#), the Hungarian Kodály Society, and the International Association of Coptic Studies.

Her pioneering research into the details of the historical, analytical, and liturgical significance of Coptic music opened the field of Coptic musicology and defined its direction. Her contribution has had an impact not only on Coptic studies but also on all research concerning music whose historical roots have been transmitted through the centuries by oral tradition.

Hickmann, Hans (1908-1968)

Hickmann, a German musicologist, was known primarily as an authority on the musical instruments of ancient Egypt. He devoted much study to the music of the Coptic church, which he felt was a living link between the past and the present (for more details of his research into the Coptic musical tradition, see Oral Tradition, History, and Musical Instruments, above, and Transcriptions in Western Notation, below).

Born 19 May, 1908, in Rosslau bei Dessau, Germany, he received his early education in Halle and continued his studies in musicology at the University of Berlin under the direction of some of the most distinguished scholars of the time, including Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs. After his graduation in 1934, he studied at the Staatliche Akademie für Kirchen- und Schulmusik (Berlin-Charlottenberg) and the [Berliner Hochschule](#) für Musik. His interest in Eastern music was first aroused by a field trip to the Siwa Oasis (1932-1933), sponsored by the Berliner Phonogrammarchiv. In 1933, he settled in Cairo, and from here he conducted extensive investigations into the music of Egypt for more than two decades.

From 1949 to 1952, he lectured in many countries of Western Europe. In 1957 he left Egypt because of political conditions and returned to Germany to head the department of Ethnomusicology at the University of Hamburg (see Transcriptions in Western Notation, below). In 1958, as the new director of the Musikhistorisches Studio (Archiv-Produktion) of the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft in Hamburg, he produced many recordings of ancient music, all of great scholarship and authenticity. He died 4 September 1968, in Blandford Forum, Dorset, England.

His published works cover more than three decades (1934-1968, plus articles published posthumously). A comprehensive bibliography,

comprising some 198 entries, is listed in the *Journal of the Society of Ethnomusicology*, vol. IX, no. 1 (January 1965), pp. 45-53, and vol. XII, no. 2 (May 1969), pp. 317-19.

MARIAN ROBERTSON

Newlandsmith, Ernest (1875-? [after 1936])

British violinist, composer, and writer, best known for his extensive transcriptions of Coptic liturgical music.

The son of a clergyman, he was born 10 April, 1875. Having shown a talent for music, he entered the Royal Academy of Music in 1893, from which he graduated with distinction in 1899, earning the A.R.A.M. (Associate of Royal Academy of Music). Disillusioned as a music teacher and concert violinist, he turned his back on music as a profession (1908) and became a “pilgrim” or “minstrel friar.” Henceforth, he traveled through the countryside presenting musical religious services and living by the generosity of others.

In 1926 he undertook a musical pilgrimage to the Holy Land. En route, he stopped at Cairo where he met Ragheb Moftah (see Cantors, above), who arranged for him to compile a book of liturgical music of the ancient Coptic church. Newlandsmith continued his journey to the Holy Land (Mount Carmel), but soon returned to Cairo. Here, as the guest of Mr. Moftah, he lived in a houseboat on the Nile, notating the music as chanters—among them the great master chanter Mu'allim MIKHA'IL JIRJIS (see Cantors, above)—sang their time-honored melodies hour after hour, day after day (1926-1931). He also spent some time at Abu al-Shuquq working with Mr. Moftah on the transcriptions (1929).

The complete project lasted about ten years (1926-1936), and during this time, Newlandsmith transcribed some sixteen folio volumes of music, including the Liturgy of Saint Basil (vol. 1), numerous other special songs

for the various feasts and fasts, and special songs reserved for high church officials.

Impressed by the dignity and beauty of this music, Newlandsmith used certain melodies in his own violin compositions, and upon return trips to England (1928, 1931), he played these works as part of his music services. He also gave enthusiastic lectures about the antiquity of the Coptic musical tradition.

During his life Newlandsmith founded various musical-religious societies, the most significant being “The New Life Movement.” A prolific writer, he penned several pamphlets and books wherein he expounded his ideas about music.

A bibliography of his early musical compositions is listed in the *Universal Handbuch der Musikliteratur aller Zeiten und Völker* (Vienna, n. d.), vol. 1, Pt. 1, p. 124. He based his later works on Coptic melodies, of which two, dating from 1929, remain significant: his *Oriental Suite* for violin and piano, and the *Carmelite Rhapsody* for solo violin.

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Transcriptions in Western Notation

Although there may be some pieces of evidence 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 (see Oral Tradition, above). 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 responsoria, *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 (see Musicologists, above), 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 to 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 notating 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 (See Musicologists, above) 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 at 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.

RAGHEB MOFTAH

MARIAN ROBERTSON

MARTHA ROY

Nonliturgical Music

In recent years, strictly nonliturgical songs have been developed for use in the Sunday schools. They bear the general title *alhan*, but thirteen, composed especially in honor of the Virgin Mary, are designated *taranim* (sing. *tarnimah*). Both the *alhan* and *taranim* have texts of praise and worship, strophic in form. Sung antiphonally or in unison by both men and women, they are monophonic. Quite distinct in style from both Arabic chanting of the Qur'an and Coptic liturgical melody, they betray much Western influence, for example, the singing is always accompanied by the violin, piano, and/or organ; this instrumental accompaniment has rudimentary harmony; and some songs borrow phrases from well-known Western melodies such as Handel's "Joy to the World" and Mendelssohn's "Hark! The Herald [Angels](#) Sing." They may be described as light-hearted, charming, and attractive to youth. However, Coptic purists decry their existence and maintain that they have neither the dignity nor the spirituality of the ancient liturgical tradition.

Recordings

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