

MUSIC

The Coptic Church uses more than one tune. The yearly tune, is used for all days except some feasts, **fasting**, and other occasions. The tune of Joy (*Faraihi*) is used from the first day of Tut, the beginning of the year, until the feast of the Cross, then in the dominical [feasts](#) and in the 29th day of every Coptic month, except for the month of Tubah and Amshir. The tune of *Sha'anini* is used for the feast of the cross and the **Palm Sunday**.

The tune of the Month of Kihak or the advent tune is used from the first day of Kihak until the 28 of Kihak. The tune of the Lent (*Siyami*) is used for the [fast of Jonah](#) and the lent.

The tune of Sorrow (*Hazaini*) is used during the **Holy week** and for the burial service.

For each category, there are two main subcategories: the melody [Batos](#) and Adam tunes. The first is used from Wednesday to Saturday every week and the last is used for the rest of the week. There are three primary traditions, from which Coptic music very likely absorbed elements in varying proportions: the Jewish, the Greek, and the ancient Egyptian. Hans 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.

As Coptic music is transmitted orally, we are totally depending on the literary texts treating this topic. Clement of Alexandria in the third century had banished the Music that breaks the souls and provokes carnal sentiments. St. Athanasius was for a psalmody closer to speaking rather than singing. In his letter to Marcelinus on the interpretation of Psalm 27, he says: "Some of the simple ones among us . . . think that the [psalms](#) are [sung](#) melodiously for the sake of good sound and the pleasure of the ears. This is not so."

The attitude of the **Desert fathers** was similar; **Pambo** rebukes his disciple who appreciates the hymns of Alexandria, i. e., canons and *troparia*. [Paul](#) of Cappadocia complains that he is not able to sing hymns as is habit.

Apparently, there were two traditions in Egypt, the first is the Cathedral tradition of beautiful melodies, and the monastic tradition that consists of the recitation of Biblical texts, such as the **psalmodia**. In a later stage, these two traditions fused together to form one tradition. It is very hard to determine when this happened because all the manuscripts record only texts and rubrics. No known notation exists designed specifically for Coptic music, though manuscripts bearing ancient Greek notation have been found in Egypt.

The music has passed from one person to another, and from one generation to the next by oral teaching and rote learning. Thus, Coptic music has always depended on a continuous oral tradition. According to 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.

The Coptic Church uses for her rites Coptic, Greek, and recently Arabic and other languages as well. Texts are [sung](#) interchangeably in different tongues, the melodies remain essentially intact. 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 ears, and that such transference enhanced musical skills.

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.

In 1859, he published the first edition of the book *The Services of the Deacons* with the help of Deacon Iryan Jirjis Muftah, teacher of Coptic in the Patriarchal College. 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. Blind cantors joined the institute for their training, which is now located in Shubra, Cairo.

The Copts have preserved their music over the centuries essentially by means of oral tradition. Only in the 19th 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, toward the 19th century, other transcriptions were made by Jules Blin and Louis Badet . In 1916, Kamil Ibrahim Ghubriyal published a small volume of transcriptions of hymns and *responsoria*, *Al- Tawqi'at al-Musiqiyyah li-Maraddat al-[Kanisah](#) al-Murqusiyyah*. 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. 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 through listening to the best Coptic cantors sixteen folio volumes of music, which include the entire Liturgy of Saint Basil and other important hymns and *responsoria* reserved for special [feasts](#). Among other scholars are Hans Hickmann and Rene Menard, who, working both separately and together, transcribed a few short pieces.

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 17 articles containing transcriptions and observations on facets of Coptic music never before touched upon. In 1969, Margit Toth came to Cairo to study Coptic music.

Working with Ragheb Moftah, she, like Newlandsmith, notated the entire Liturgy of Saint Basil. In 1976, Nabila 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 she 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 can at least glimpse the complexity and variety of the Coptic musical tradition.

GAWDAT GABRA

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