Coptic Music Value And Origins By Dr. Ragheb Moftah Habashy

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Coptic Music: Value & Origins

Â Music elevates the spirit. It takes it from this tangible materialistic world towards the intangible spiritual world. Art in general and music in particular fleshes out what is spiritual. It is the medium between spirituality and our material life. Every beauty in nature shows elevation and every artistic inspiration demonstrates a level of elation. Music is not fantasy or distraction; it is part of life and one of its most important elements. Musical talents are in each one of us. Some have the strength to express it and others have the strength to feel it, enjoy it, and be touched by it. Â The best instrument ever is the human's voice. People used vocal music since their very early existence on earth. It has no substitute. All mothers, starting with Eve, sing in order to calm down their babies. The songs or tunes may differ, but they have one source: Motherly love. Â For thousands of years, people used music in worship to praise their creator. They used music when working in prairies and over hills and mountains, when building their houses, when traveling down rivers or across oceans. Music is not just a combination of beautiful sounds that pleases the ear; it is an essential nourishment of the soul. Food might taste good, but the purpose of food is the nourishment of the body. Similarily, I won't be exaggerating when I say that music's purpose is the nourishment of the spirit. The Old Testament tells us that musical arts existed from the very early existence of humans. In Genesis 4:21, we learn of Jubal son of Lamek of the 9th generation from Adam. He was the father of all harpists and organists. Â When Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Exodus tells us how "[they sang] this song unto the LORD, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously... And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea." [Exodus 15:1,21] Also in Judges we read: "Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day, saying, Praise ye the LORD for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the LORD; I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel." [Judges 5:1-3]. And during the prophet David's time, music reached its fullness in poetry, melodies and performances. Music was an essential part of all their praises to their creator, their prayers in times of war and in times of peace, theirin times of joy and and in times of sorrow. Â In Chronicles we read: "It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD." [2- Chronicles 5:13]. Â With this artistical splendeur, the Spirit came along, and with the strengh and influence of music immobile materials were moved, and Jericho's walls fell down. This is the status of art in worship it arrived to it's optimum.. How beautiful are Psalms!!.. People still enjoy them until this day.. They were written by the best ever mentioned psalters.. And Isaiah says in Isa 6:1-4: I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was

filled with smoke. Â The church on earth tries to imitate the Heavenly Church.. The Revelation Book says that all heavenly hosts despite their different classes praise around God's throne and in His house day & night saying the Trisagion and reply saying that to Him be Power & Wisdom & Strengh & Honour & Glory & Blessing for all things were created by Him.. And Rev 5:8-9 says And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. Â This is life in heaven.. One hymn on heaven will exceed all earthly hymns together in beauty.. That will be our life in the New Jerusalem coming from heaven.. Â How beautiful are the tunes of these few verses of the Bible: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. I think that however great & profound our imagination is, we can never realise how beautiful these tunes were.. I think it became clear why Apostolic Churches did take a big amount of music in it's services & dogmas over the whole year.. Specially the Coptic Church where almost each word during the whole year whether in the morning or evening is chanted.. Â Here is the Apostolic teaching.. St.Paul speaks to Christians in his letter to Ephesians.. Eph 5:19-20 Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; And in his letter to Colosians.. Col 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord... Â St.John Christosomos explains that "singing with grace in your hearts".. Also Origen, St.Basil, St.Augustin among others explained these verses clearly.. It was clear from that letter to Clossians that St.Paul was referring to Church Prayers which were well known to the readers.. From both texts, it is clear that St.Paul made music an essential element of worship and divided it to three: Psalms-Praises-Spiritual songs which are hymns.. These three parts were the fundamentals on which all traditional churches: Oriental & Occidental based their prayers.. If anyone objects on Apostolic Churches we may say that the base is in the Bible.. Â The early Christian Congregation began in Jerusalem.. It did attend both the synagogue & the temple.. Several texts in the Acts book mentioned that.. Among which Acts 3:1 Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.. Â Although the temple's music was instrumental, the synagogue's music was vocal.. So, when the first christians became independent, they took their musical rites from the synagogue and used only vocal singing.. Composers & Readers who left Judaisme & believed in Christianity used to have the same job in Christianity.. So, Psalms were chanted exactly the same way they were sung in synagogues.. Â As the early Jerusalem's Church the music was vocal in all Oriental & western churches.. Also, it used the same Jewish way of psalm chanting in most cases as the Jewish Christian church.. That what was said by fathers: Apostles did transmit something from the Jewish dogmas & traditions to all lands.. Â With the beginning of Christianity, in every oriental or western country, raised prayers, liturgies & dogmas conforming with the nature & environment of each land also every land composed the music conforming with it's own taste so the Byzantine Church Music is Byzantine, the Egyptian Church Music is Egyptian, the Jewish the same.. Â The best example for that is that the Ethiopian Church although conceived and affiliated to the Egyptian Church for long generations remained pure Ethiopian.. That means that the local inherited art had the biggest influence in forming the Church Art.. That shows a big evidence on the difference between Coptic & Ethiopian Hymns. Â So every nation took from it's previous worship tunes which were found appropriate. So undoubtedly, Greeks took from their ancient worship hymns and used it in Christianity.. Also Romans took from their Ancient war Music & used it and so did Egyptians.. Â Once St.Mark came to Alexandria, Inianos' family was baptised and Christianity spread quickly in all Northern &

Southern Egypt in the first & second generations.. In year 400 the Anas-Elwogood Island had a church and a monastery.. Scientists agreed that no population believed in Christianity in strength & zeal as the Egyptians did.. The Ancient Egyptian man did in vain search for the unseen creative strength in the soul & spirit. Â The most important tradition for the Ancient Egyptian City was art.. As the Ancient Egyptian arts were profoundly engraved in the people's heart, it appeared clearly in Architecture, Sculpture and Ornaments.. Very influenced, almost the same as the Ancient Egyptian with a compromise with the new positions & thoughts of Christianity in the first four generations where Christianity Hypostasis & basics were founded.. Â Let's have a look at Ancient Egypt's art the land which believed in Christianity.. Pithagorus, the Greek scientist visited Egypt after 520 BC during the Hellenic invasion to Egypt.. their pressure and destruction to all civilisation & troubled social life.. He said that he could gather from Egypt elements on which he based his well known musical theory!! Â Singing & Music was necessary at every Ancient Egyptian festival.. No meetings lacked music.. Also women in every house, mastered music & practised it.. In the pharaoh's Palace there existed Musical teams or bands with singers they had conductors which were proud that they fill the pharaoh's heart with joy & can realise His wants with their beautiful singing.. Â Religious Festivals were real wonder and Glory when they move with the God in his ship over the priest's shoulders in the temple.. People used to present their offerings and salutations.. These customs were usually accompanied by Musical & Singer groups.. Many of the religious liturgies were accompanied by music.. Also kingly marches were lead by priests with praises & incense many of the priests were called Psaltos Priest.. Or King singer priests.. The Egyptian People is a very rich civilisation since old times.. Yet some of ancient words are said in Labours' songs and a song to Nile's Sailors sung in Arabic exactly in it's same Ancient Egyptian pronunciation which is:"Ya Tera Tiri we hatili..." Â Egyptians usually preferred to use blind singers.. There were many and the Coptic Church still chooses it's cantors among blinds.. But we should take care and choose only the talented ones.. Â The Alexandria Library responsible " Dimetrios the Valerion" in 297 BC said that in their Honour & Intercession festivals for Gods Egyptian Priests used to sing on the 7 Greek vowels consecutively.. It produced beautiful sounds which satisfied them from using the Flute or Harp.. Nikomax the Mathematician who lived in the first century said the 7 vowels were special to the seven stars.. Until today, most of the Coptic Hymns are sung on these vowels.. Some are sung on Alpha (a) others on (e) as aretenshonty, the Big Alleluia and the Offering Alleluia.. Ancient Egyptians considered that singing with these vowels represented the most profound religious expression.. Â Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish Philosopher who lived in the first century said: "The first Christians took from the Ancient Egyptian Hymns & used it in their new worship" Whether they took it as is, adding a spiritual dimension or didn't take it, the Egyptian Art was still living and was still Egyptian Flesh & Blood. The Singary tune was named after Singar a city in the delta since Ramses II which became famous in the Coptic Aera for the numerous monasteries which were there around and it's church were 2 consequential Popes were chosen.. Â The Edriby Tune is probably named after Edribah the City whose Ancient temple was changed by Abba Shenuti to a church.. Copts used also to find a relation with the Coptic word "Eder Hipi" which means sorrowful.. The text for hymn of the Cross: "When King Costantine's peace letters arrived Alexandria saying close the Baraby doors & open the churches" this hymn was written for the discovery of the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ in 326.. Many other hymn share this same tune with this one among which the Shaaneen Sheres & Tarh and the Cross Tarh Hymn.. That proves that these hymns are old. Â Among the oldest hymns, one written by St.Clement of Alexandria in 180 in his book "Paedagogus" (the teacher).. It is a thanksgiving for Christ recited by new baptised people for their salvation from the seas of sins its translation is:"Holder of the wild animals, wing of the young birds, director of peace for ships, shepherd of kingly lambs, gather Your poor children to praise in holiness and sing in honesty with sincere mouths the Christ leader of children. Jesus human's salvation, the Vineyard Shepherd, the heavenly help and the Holy sheep"

No wonder that this hymn is no longer in use since our fathers wrote hundreds of hymns Â The Oldest Christian hymn transcribed with musical signs was found on a Papyrus in Bahnasa.. Coming from the ends of the 3rd century it is a trisagion musically deciphered by Prof.Phales among which:"Let all forces praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit the only giver to good people Amen" Â This Papyrus is a very important one.. It is not like any of the thousands of old Coptic Papyrus available in Egypt & in the whole world.. Some of them return back to the 9th Century & of course copied from older copies (Many of them are concerned with music) Nothing has any musical sign except in one Papyrus in John Rylands Library, Manchester Collection.. Mr.Crum the Coptic Language scientist used some specialists to decipher those signs but they could never do it.. I hope Prof.Phales will arrive to a decision in this matter. Â Coptic Hymns were transmitted as oral tradition from one generation to another until 1927 when I brought Prof. Newlandsmith (Composer & Ex-Prof. in London Royal Music Academy) we signed a contract to transcribe hymns and masses in Musical Note.. I will mention that in details later on. Â The Egyptian Church arts & dogmas began to raise with the beginning of Christianity in Egypt.. The Egyptian Church has it's own four masses never used by any other church. Â The Kyrollos Mass was written by St.Mark the Apostle himself.. Probably, this Mass' status became stable long ago before St.Kyrollos because it is very similar to St.James Mass & The Lord's Covenant Mass, the oldest liturgies.. Both St.Basil Mass & St.Gregory do share the same Awashy part with St.Kyrollos Mass that's why we think that their music also return to it.. Except those, most of St.Kyrollos Mass Music was lost.. Nothing remained except the hymn Oukoty & Ouoh Nay they are used for the Dead Mass (Requiem Mass). Â Concerning the St.Basil Masses, there exist 3 masses named after St.Basil.. St.Basil of Costantinople Church Mass, The Syrian St.Basil Mass & St.Basil Coptic Mass (it has a Greek text).. These three differ from each other in text, dogmas & music.. Â Certainly, the Egyptian St.Basil Mass does belong to the Egyptian Church.. It was used before the division of 451 (long before St.Basil the Great).. St.Basil's Mass Music is pure Egyptian except the confession part & Confession Introduction they are Byzantine.. Â This Byzantine part also belongs to the Egyptian Church since it has no brother in the Costantinople text except a small sentence.. Neither in the Music, nothing is similar.. The St.Basil Mass Music, whether the Coptic or the Byzantine is so beautiful and have big influence if chanted in their original tunes and with a beautiful talented voice. Â The Gregorian Mass also belongs to the Egyptian Church before division.. It's music also is Egyptian except it's beginning "The love of God the Father..." and the Confession are Byzantine.. Â "The Love of God the Father" is available in both the Coptic St.Basil Mass and Byzantine St.John Christomos but still their music are VERY different.. The Gregorian Mass Music is nothing but some Big Hymns which were going to be lost unless I did record it several times from Mlm.Mikhail who was the only one to have known it complete.. This mass is used in Big feasts.. It's tunes are splendid and profound and have celebration influence.. Â The Malachite Church in Egypt used these 3 masses also after the division of the Church until the 12 th century.. The 4th Mass is Abba Serapion Bishop of Tomees (Tamyel Amdid) who was the disciple of St.Anthony the Great and a friend to St.Athenese the Apostolic. It was published in 1894.. We have strong proof that it belongs to the church of Alexandria.. Part of it is exactly the same in St.Mark Mass. Â We do know nothing about it's music or use.. It seems it wasn't used widely and didn't last for long.. Â In the writings of HH Gabriel Ben-Toreik Pope No 70 we got that some people tried using different masses than the 3 known ones.. In section 26 of his writings we found: "It came to me the weak, that some people in the Southern Cities (Seiid) pray inappropriate masses different from the three we all know which are St.Basil, St.Gregory & St.Kyrollos.. I defended people who are depending on that until they come at my residence and show these masses.." Â Concerning hymns, a big rich collection survived and was preserved for the Church.. Their number exceed 300 Big & Small hymn.. Most of their texts are Coptic, some are Greek.. BUT all the music IS Coptic... These hymns are Spiritual, Profound & Beautiful.. They represent the High Standard of Spiritual Literature.. The original source of these

hymns is pure Musical.. Some of them do last 15 minutes & are sung over one or few words or just a short sentence. Some of them (only in Greek words) are in use by Malachite but have different Byzantine Music.. Â All Church services as Tasbeha, Evening & Morning Incense Offering, Masses, Feasts & Fasts have their own hymns.. It differs accordingly to seasons.. Many Hymns are said just once a year. Which means it was composed for a special occasion.. Which proves that the Coptic Church is a very Musical One.. The Coptic Dogmas with their hymns throughout the year represent the LIFE in both the Old & New Testaments which shows CHRISTIANITY with splendid beauty in representation.. Â The sorrowful hymns have a very strong influence. No music in the whole world is similar.. It seems that this special aspect did characterise Egypt since very old ages: Herodote who visited Egypt in 460 BC said in his book about Egypt section 79:"One thing I am wondering about, which is the source of the song called Linos.. I think it is so old there, they call it Maniros.. They say that Maniros was the only son of their very first King.. He died very young so that they sang this sorrowful song for him.. And that this song was the first one they had.." In 1933, when more than 30 European Musician & Scientist heard these sorrowful songs, in the Music Conference held in Cairo, where I had the honour to be a member, a strong feeling mastered them.. I will never forget the "Singing Science" Professors in the Sorbone - Paris who asked Hegmn. Morcos Shenouda to repeat the Commemoration of Saints OVER 6 TIMES.. Also Mr.Newlandsmith said in one of his speeches: "Give me Cruzu's voice singing some Coptic Hymns and I will destroy Jericho's Walls.." Â These sorrowful Hymns make the earthly boundings disappear, make the soul humble some of them could destroy the Hypocrite soul who insists in living sinner!! Â The Coptic joyful hymns have their very special spiritual taste.. They make us feel that the heavenly beauty is very superior to all this world's feelings.. We do believe that a hymn, sung in a talented voice and sincere soul has big influence more than dozens of words in attracting people to the Lord.. Â Religious Hymns which where composed similar to folkloric songs played a big role in spreading heresies and also in fighting them.. By the ends of the second Century, the Syrian "Beridessane" composed 150 psalm to spread the Gnostic Heresy which he joined he and his disciples.. So St.Avraam the Syrian composed hymns to resist & oppose it and gathered Choruses of Virgins who were intended to become nuns to sing them.. Also Arios composed folkloric songs to spread his heresy.. And a lot of fathers in Egypt & Europe composed opposite hymns to resist his thoughts.. As I did mention previously, Coptic Music was transmitted orally since the beginning of Christianity until 1927 when I called the Great Professor Newlandsmith who spent eight years transcribing it from the voice of Mlm.Mikhail until the work was done in 16 volumes. Â In 1931, when this job came to it's middle, the renewing supporters who called themselves the Reformation Party attacked me saying that I don't want to preserve the old things.. On this same year in May, I travelled to England and gave with Mr.Newlandsmith three speeches concerning Coptic Music in the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London.. Hundreds of Newspapers & Magazines in Europe, the States, Egypt & the Far East wrote about these speeches.. Fortunately, I still have all these speeches, here I show it to you.. Here on the first page an article in Oxford Newsletter: "A Great Speech added to the group of this season's speeches" These articles described Coptic Music as Very Spiritual Music Very impressive and A Great Musical Treasure.. Â Here are the 16 volumes dear Copts would you publish them.. I don't want any personal benefit, I even don't want to write my name down there.. After that, I don't think that any group of people would lack in preserving the most important tradition he & the whole world have, the oldest musical heritage. Many scientists everywhere are waiting for the publishing of these volumes to study Coptic Music & know the Coptic musical scales.. Although great researches on Byzantine, Syrian, Gregorian Music were published, not a word in any Musical Encyclopaedia was written about Coptic Music!! Â I am working on recording the hymns on tapes to provide the Great Genius Prof. Phales with the recordings and transcriptions and prepare to publish them. This Professor is the one who deciphered Old Byzantine Music Transcription.. Â Coptic Music is Not Arabic, Not Turkish, Not Byzantine & Not Western IT IS PURE ORIGINAL EGYPTIAN MUSIC. Â Until today, many

traditional Church music is only vocal among which Coptic, Greek & Syrian.. Above mentioned Scientists and many others advised to preserve it. They said it is the biggest crime to try playing it on musical instruments for it was designed for human's voices.. Playing it on strings gives poor, cut performance which does not represent by any way the hymn itself.. Playing it on Piano (or keyboards) requires adding harmony which also is not appropriate and requires us to destroy it's basis & squeleton foundations.. That means destroying the Church Heritage which is considered one of the most profound Church traditions.. The Greek Church also doesn't use instruments even the Cymbal & Triangle are not used there.. Â Prof. Newlandsmith did find some few small Coptic pieces, counted on one's hand fingers which could give the same effect when played on violin as when sung (A Capella) such as the Revelation Book Response. Â Although we do have this great heritage, Copts tend now to use western songs & hymns which are superficial in both structure & meaning.. It's music is repulsive with our Church's beautiful dogmas & hymns.. What really hurts me & breaks my heart is that these songs did invade some of our Coptic Orthodox Church's atmosphere. which surely not appropriate with our father's spirit. Â So, dear Copts I urge you to preserve Your heritage & Your church's tradition.