

**A Cappella Music
&
The Coptic Orthodox Liturgical Chant
By
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Exclusion of Instruments to Accompany the Coptic Orthodox Liturgical Chant

My Uncle Ragheb Mofteh expressed emphatically that Coptic music is entirely vocal. It must be sung without harmony and should not be accompanied by musical instruments. He stated this over and over again in his writings and lectures. He meant that Coptic music should be chanted in 'a cappella' style', where voices of chanters are not accompanied by musical instruments. He was also referring to specifically church music.

Ragheb Mofteh's Adherence to the 'A Cappella' Style in Coptic Orthodox Church Chant

In an article entitled *The Music of the Coptic Church* written by Ragheb Mofteh in the 1960s, he describes Coptic music and its chant as entirely vocal and it must be sung in its entirety in 'a cappella' style. However, it would be erroneous to assume from this that Ragheb Mofteh had polemic views against the use of instruments in music. He particularly enjoyed percussion instruments in orchestras and symphonies, and was a frequent operagoer until he was well after his one hundredth birthday. Yet he clearly felt that ecclesiastical Coptic music should only be chanted. In *Music of the Coptic Church*, which he probably wrote in the 1960s and certainly after he established the Department of Coptic Music, in the Coptic Institute in Cairo, in 1954, he says:

Coptic music is entirely vocal and must be sung without harmony, since the keys of this music cannot be adapted to the harmonic system: and, if we were to try to harmonize this music, it would be necessary to find a special harmonic system, so as not to alter its real expressions and its original spirit, and this would not be an easy matter. It must, also, be strictly unaccompanied, because the vocal cords, are the only instrument which can truly render the real character and special expression of this music.

The early Apostolic Church took over the chant-system of the synagogue which was entirely vocal; and the Church Fathers, like Clement of Alexandria, etc., always

*emphasized that the ecclesiastical chant should be strictly vocal. Indeed, the chant of the Greek Church and many other Churches has remained so till now.*¹

The only accompanying instruments exceptionally allowed in Coptic ecclesiastical chant which are always used sparingly are the percussion instruments: the 'cymbals' and 'triangle'. These provide a rhythmic accompaniment to specific hymns and responses sung by the choir and/or congregation. They signal the congregation to participate and unify the chanting. These instruments are referred to in the *Coptic Encyclopedia* in an article entitled "Musical Instruments," written by Ragheb Moftah, Marian Robertson and Martha Roy. They give a description of the instruments and define their specific use when chanting the Coptic hymns. They state the following:

*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.*²

Consequently, the authors define the use of the instruments as somewhat random:

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.*³

The Exclusion of Musical Instruments from the Ancient Synagogue and Early Churches

Throughout several decades my uncle Ragheb researched and examined the history of Coptic Orthodox Church music. He analyzed its basic structure and its relationship with music of earlier periods before and after Christianity in Egypt. He read about the exclusion of musical instruments in religious music before early Christianity, and emphatically stressed the link between 'a cappella' music with chants in earlier periods before the Christian era and after. He also studied the historical origin of other forms of music that influenced Coptic chant and its development over centuries, in various environments in which the early Copts lived. He strongly

believed that the Coptic ecclesiastical chant was influenced by the Jewish traditional '*a cappella*' form of music, although the content had ancient Egyptian roots as mentioned by my uncle Ragheb and other scholars. Terence Duquesne, scholar of Egyptology and Comparative Religion, states:

Some authorities have been convinced that Coptic Liturgical music, as used to the present day, has its roots in ancient Egypt. The practice of the chironomy whereby hand-signals are used to indicate musical notation, is attested as early as the IV Dynasty. Hickmann and others regarded the chironomic gestures still used in Coptic singing as being directly derived from it. The 'sistrum', sacred to Hathor and other deities of ecstasy in ancient Egypt, has certainly been used as an accompaniment to Coptic Music. ⁴

The sistrum which was called '*sheshese*' by the ancient Egyptians was a favored instrument used in their religious ceremonies and rites. It was a musical instrument which vibrates when shaken or rattled and provides an almost identical effect like the 'cymbals', which are common percussion instruments used sparingly in Coptic ecclesiastical chant. The sistrum was particularly sacred to Hathor, the goddess of music and other deities. Hans Hickmann (1908 - 1968), the renowned German musicologist and specialist in Ancient Egyptian musical instruments, was closely associated with my uncle Ragheb and both discussed together quite extensively the origin of percussion instruments used in Coptic ecclesiastical music. Hickmann provides the following description about the '*sistrum*' and '*cymbals*':

The sistrum (6th century BC) represents the double faces of the goddess Hathor, surmounted by a naos whose 'door' is guarded by two uraeus set back to back. As usual the walls of the naos are pierced by three holes, three metal rods originally ran through these, producing a characteristic metallic jangle when the instrument was shaken. This specimen shows clear signs of use; evidently they must have been in actual use for ritual purposes by the priestesses of Hathor and, later, of Isis and other goddesses...etc.

The Copts have always liked percussion instruments. Castanets, little cymbals, triangles and even rattles and bells. ⁵

Many historical documents indicate that the '*a cappella*' form of chanting was practiced by the Jewish and early Christian people and religious communities totally without harmonic accompaniments. Clearly the early Christians in Egypt and ultimately the Copts borrowed the form of singing that was characterized by responsorial, antiphonal and refrain in the liturgical practices of Jewish religious rites. Ragheb Mofteh was perhaps the first to realize that playing any

instrument other than the '*triangle*' and '*cymbals*' when accompanying the chant would distort the indigenous and authentic rendition of the ancient Coptic rites. Perhaps my uncle Ragheb has been perceived as a rigid observer of the traditional 'a cappella' style of music for Coptic liturgy, but it was because of his conviction that this form of music emanated from traditions handed down from the early Christian practices of Coptic ecclesiastical chant.

Over the years the '*a cappella*' style of music is predominantly found in religious music, has kept true to its roots. Jewish and Christian chant were performed without musical instruments. Christians performing the chants in chapels without the accompaniment of instruments, and cantors and choirs delighted their audiences with their unique voices and appealing vocal style. Indeed, the chant of the Greek Church and many other Churches, have retained these characteristics up to the present time. Even the Muslim '*anasheed*' are sung without musical instruments.

Historical Evidence Attests to the Exclusion of Musical Instruments in the Old Testament and Talmud

There are several references in the early history of Judaism and the Old Testament which support the prohibition of the use of musical instruments. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah (8th century BC) expressed his disdain of wealthy Jewish people in ancient Israel who were not keeping God's commandments of the Divine rules, by indulging in drunkenness and entertaining themselves with musical instruments such as the '*harp*', '*viol*' and '*pipe*'. Obviously Isaiah found musical instruments dangerously beguiling, as he perceived them as tools of hedonistic pleasure and therefore a temptation to avoid the ways of the Lord:

*Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink;
then tarry late into the night that wine inflame them!*

And the harp, and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts, but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operations of his hands. **The Book of Isaiah 5:11-12.** ⁶

The Bible and the Talmud provide historical evidence that spontaneous music making was common among the ancient Jews, when celebrating important religious or secular occasions. Hebrew music was both instrumental and vocal. According to the Bible early instruments that were used to accompany singing and dancing were the kinnor, which was a lyre similar to the kithara, and the ugab, which was similar to the flute. ⁷ The latter was part of David's fame as the soother of Saul's troubled sleep and later no doubt accompanied his dancing after war victories. However, the chief Priests never allowed singers or instrument players to enter the Holy Place in the Temple, known as the Sanctuary, which had within it an inner room called the Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place containing the Ark of the Covenant. According to the Talmud which constitutes Jewish civil and religious

law in Orthodox Judaism, the Levite priests who were also musicians, but assumed a subordinate role, offered animal sacrifices and passed on the religious, moral, and cultural education. They sang Psalms during the sacrificial ritual of burning the lamb:

The musical portion of the service came at its climax. It consisted of the singing by the Levite musicians of the proper Psalm for the day as the sacrificial lamb was consumed on the altar fire and the libation of wine was being poured out. The limbs of the lamb had just been cast upon the fire, and two priests gave three blasts on their silver trumpets. ⁸

Chant-system in the Early Apostolic Church

The early Apostolic Church adapted the chant-system of the synagogue to their ecclesiastical liturgy and this continued to be entirely vocal. Church leaders were apparently divided concerning the use of instrumental music to accompany singing, simply because some associated it with pagan festivities. Thus, in effect, instrumental music was banned from Churches by many of the early Church Fathers and this became standard liturgical practice. Among those supporting this ban were Clement of Alexandria (died c. 215 AD) and John Chrysostom (born in 347 AD in Antioch and died in 407 AD). Clement was the first member of the Church of Alexandria and was distinguished for applying Greek philosophical thought in interpreting Christian doctrine. John Chrysostom even described cymbals and auloi (pipes and flutes) as the “*rubbish of the devil*.” ⁹

Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that my uncle Ragheb was a strong adherent and believer of Patristic theology. He revered the sayings of the early Church Fathers and regarded it profane to question the validity of their writings on Christian Orthodoxy and its practices. Ragheb Mofteh thus, preferred not to comment or dispute the ecclesiastical interpretation of the Patristic Fathers which forbids the use of musical instruments in the liturgy. Moreover, he only referred to it within an historical context as evidence that the early Church Fathers disdained its use during worship. In essence musical Puritanism was not Ragheb Mofteh's intent. His aim was to preserve the Coptic Orthodox Church hymnal rites intact as they are regarded as '*sacred*'.

The Coptic Orthodox hymnal vocal tradition was adopted from several ancient cultures, other than the Jewish vocal musical rites that were practised in the Synagogue. Several reputed authorities had also sailed against the use of musical instruments in certain settings, including Plato who called for a ban on the 'aulos' and on 'many stringed instruments in his ideal state (The Republic of Plato). He states the following:

Then we shall not maintain the artificers of lyres with three corners and complex scales, or the makers of any other many stringed curiously – harmonized instruments? Certainly Not.

But what do you say to flute-makers and flute-players? Would you admit them into our State when you reflect that this composite use of harmony the flute is worse than the pan-harmonic music is only an imitation of the flute. Clearly Not. ¹⁰

Ragheb Mofteh also referred to the great Hellenized Jewish philosopher Philo who was born in Alexandria in 20 BC and lived until the early part of the first century, dying in 40 AD. He was influenced by Greek philosophy and sought to synthesize the ancient Greek philosophy and wisdom with his Jewish heritage. To this end in view, he fused many Greek doctrinal concepts into his Hebrew mythical tradition to justify certain religious truths, such as synthesizing the ethical concept of Stoicism with traditional Jewish exegesis. Philo's philosophical concepts were not widely accepted by Jews, but later they were well regarded by Christian theologians. Philo was considered to be an advocate of 'silent spiritual worship', as he disdained the use of percussion musical instruments such as the '*cymbals*'. His influence spread rapidly to the extent that a certain sect of the Pharisees adopted his concept and opposed the use of musical instruments in the Temple. My uncle was strongly influenced by the Jewish philosopher Philo's '*silent spiritual worship*', and '*a cappella*' style. He also advocated the exclusion of musical instruments while rendering the Coptic chant. Furthermore, he advised cantors and deacons to adhere to the practices of the Coptic Orthodox hymnal rites as have been handed orally from one generation to the other since early Christianity.

Ragheb Mofteh's Classical Music Education and Favorite Composers

Let us not lose sight of the fact that Ragheb Mofteh had pursued classical music studies in Pre-WWI Germany and was an avid and passionate connoisseur of orchestral music and operas. He also enjoyed listening to a variety of symphonic orchestral music almost all of which included instruments, ranging from woodwinds, brass, strings, to percussion sounding instruments. Nevertheless, when it came to Coptic Church music he strictly adhered to the traditional Coptic hymnal rites deeply rooted in him since his childhood days. He grew up listening to Coptic liturgical music at home and in Church and it shaped his perspective at this early stage of his life. Then later it was re-enforced when he studied and came to appreciate its form and content. He became a vehement advocate of the practices of Coptic hymnal rites and the traditional ecclesiastical '*a cappella*' form of music. To this end he presented lectures at Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities in 1931 and also in Egypt on various occasions. He intended to create awareness about it and to encourage research in this new field of study.

Perhaps my uncle Ragheb did not talk a great deal about his interest in other forms of music, quite simply because he was occupied with Coptic Orthodox Church ecclesiastical music and felt a clear need to restore it. It is well-known that he had a classical music education when he was in his early twenties, but I doubt that he had the opportunity to discuss the kind of music he favored. He was an avid admirer of several favorite

classical composers, including Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and Jules Massenet (1842-1912). Massenet's operas were very popular in the late 19th and early 20th century. My uncle Ragheb's favorite aria was the '*Meditation*' from the opera *Thaïs*, which has since become one of the great violin classics of all time. *Thaïs* is an opera in three acts by Jules Massenet based on the novel by Anatole France. The setting of the novel was during the fourth century Roman period in Egypt. The author narrates the story of Athanael, a cenobitic monk, who lived in the desert. The monk attempts to convert to Christianity a courtesan called *Thaïs* who lived in Alexandria. Eventually the monk Athanael realizes that his obsession with her is rooted in lust. Ironically, *Thaïs* goes through a spiritual journey and converts to Christianity and becomes a saint. She dies in ecstatic transcendence, while the monk Athanael recognized in his despair that he was in love with *Thaïs* and falls stricken down beside her. ¹¹

Richard Wagner was another favorite composer of uncle Ragheb. He particularly enjoyed Wagner's dramatic music, who was a 19th century German composer and poet famous for taking opera to new dramatic heights. My uncle was particularly fond of Wagner's masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a sequence of four operas, that was first performed in 1876. In the course of conversation with my uncle when he was bedridden during the last two months before he passed away, we spoke about his favorite composers and he consistently expressed his profound admiration of Wagner's music. Even when I pointed out to him that I was rather surprised that he favored Wagner's music which sounds tempestuous in some of his compositions, as in *Der Fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman). His immediate response that it is an "infinite and ecstatic form of art." Obviously, his taste for dramatic music did not interfere with his deeply rooted love of the practices of the religious form of Coptic music.

The Predominance of the Vocal Component in Jewish and Early Christian Religious Chant Over the Instrumental Music

Many nineteenth century and twentieth century ethnomusicologists had ambiguous feelings about the way Jewish traditional music sounded and raised questions about it. Nonetheless, they, in general, agreed that the vocal component of religious chant is the dominant factor and therefore more important than the instrumental component. Among those who researched musical traditions was Professor Amnon Shiloah. He is a well-known scholar of Arabic and Jewish music and musical theory. Shiloah expressed his ambiguity about the melodies heard today and was rather doubtful whether they were more or less a faithful reflection of the past. He expresses his viewpoint on the matter in his "Introduction," to his work entitled: *Jewish Musical Tradition*.

It should be borne on mind that when studying Jewish musical traditions we face a situation in which, essentially, we rely on what we can actually hear in the course of our research. This means that the further back we go, the more difficult it is to determine with reasonable certainty the character of the tradition and the way the

music sounded. We can, of course, refer to verbal sources that provide information about the past, but no matter how much knowledge we derive from them they cannot help us reproduce lost sounds. In such circumstances, is it possible to propose a solution to the problems raised earlier? Can we assume, for example, that the melodies we hear today are more or less faithful reflections of past traditions? ¹²

In fact, Amnon Shiloah and Eric Cohen, a socio-linguist, affirmed that the vocal component in Jewish traditional music predominated over the instrumental:

Jewish Oriental music has historically been associated with the "great tradition" of the Middle Eastern music. This tradition was characterized by several major traits, common to all national music in their religion: the 'vocal' component predominated over the instrumental; the musician is both a composer and a performer; there are no time limits and no fixed program in the performance; rather the performance is a display of soloist virtuosity and the performer is permitted, and indeed encouraged, to improvise spontaneously; in this he is helped by the continuous interplay between himself and a limited, and often intimate audience, which confronts him directly, without any formal barriers; the music is orally transmitted and was generally banned, for religious reasons, from institutions of formal education. ¹³

Reasons for the Rabbinic Prohibition of Musical Instruments in Jewish Music

Some scholars thought the absence of instruments in the Synagogue was the result of some sort of ruling to prohibit the use of musical instruments in the Synagogue, while others thought the Rabbis prohibited the use of musical instruments that were used in the Temples, as a "symbol of mourning" after the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. Playing of any music was only allowed in exceptional celebrations, such as weddings. However, there is a great deal of evidence in the Old Testament and Psalms that instrumental music was used in worship and on various occasions. It is mentioned In the Old Testament in the Book of Numbers that during the Post Exodus period, when the Israelites left Mount Sinai in the wilderness and were about to enter the Promised Land, (between 1405 BC to 1404 BC), the Lord commanded them to use specific instruments such as the '*trumpet*'. The Israelites regarded the use of specific instruments for the various occasions as a "divine commandment." Moses was instructed by the Lord to make '*silver trumpets*' and use them for specific purposes, such as calling for assembly, burning of sacrifices, and other occasions:

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying: Make thee two 'trumpets of silver'; of a whole piece shalt thou make them: that thou mayest use them for the calling of the assembly, and for the journeying of the camps. And when they shall blow with them,

all the assembly shall assemble themselves to thee at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. Numbers: 10:1-3. ¹⁴

And if ye go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresseth you, then ye shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the LORD your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies. Also in the day of your gladness, and in your solemn days, and in the beginnings of your months, ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; that they may be to you for a memorial before your God: I am the LORD your God.

Numbers 10:9-10. ^{15, 16}

According to the Old Testament, the Temple followed music traditions that were instituted by King David and occupied a 'prominent place in the ritual of the Jerusalem Temple in both pre- and post- exilic times'. Several sources provide evidence that probably the Levitical singing of the Psalms in the Temple came after the Israelites were exiled to Babylon, (sometime after BCE 587-588). Many of the Psalms were essential in the ritual and had a 'cultic' significance for ancient Israel and early Judaism. It is worth noting that the practice of the rituals of the Jerusalem Temple remind us, to sometime extent, of the present day Coptic Orthodox ecclesiastical practice. In the sense, that the Coptic Orthodox Choir of deacons which is led by a cantor chant the liturgical hymns 'as a choir' similar to the Levites (ancient Israelite tribe) who also 'sang as a choir, whilst the worshippers were allowed to inject periodically with such acclamations such as 'Amen'. Similarly, the Coptic Orthodox Church congregation of worshippers interjects with responsorial acclamations such as 'Amen,' 'Kyrie Eleison' and other responses. Nevertheless, an apparent difference in both practices is that the Coptic hymnal practice is unaccompanied by musical instruments and the only two percussion instruments used sparingly are the 'cymbals' and 'triangle', whereas the ritual of the Jerusalem Temple was performed with real musical instruments:

And the priests waited on their offices: the Levites also with instruments of musick of the LORD, which David the king had made to praise the LORD, because his mercy endureth for ever, when David praised by their ministry; and the priests sounded trumpets before them, and all Israel stood.

2 Chronicles 7:6. ¹⁷

We have a great deal of evidence in the Book of Psalms for the use of instrumental music and singing in Jewish worship in ancient times. King David who reigned from BC 1000 - 961 BC wrote many Psalms. His Psalms largely celebrated the move of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The Levite singers and musicians sang praises while accompanying the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in a tent in Jerusalem the city of David. Other

Psalms express David's moods, laments and prayers for help, as well as offering thanksgiving and praise. The entirety of Psalm 150, is about David's dancing and praising the Lord for bringing the Ark back into Jerusalem:

1. *Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.*
2. *Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.*
3. *Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.*
4. *Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.*
5. *Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.*
6. *Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.*

Psalm 150: 1-6. ^{18, 19}

According to James W. McKinnon, (1932 - 1999), an American musicologist, there was a deliberate act of prohibition of instruments long before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD:

Music historians have long since made note of the contrast between instrumental-accompanied psalmody of the Temple and the vocal psalmody of the Synagogue.

They assumed that the absence of instruments from the Synagogue was the result of a deliberate legal act and spoke of prohibitions and banishments. ²⁰

Whereas Abraham Zevi Idelsohn (1882-1938) the prominent Jewish ethnomusicologist and trained cantor, who almost single-handedly founded the discipline of Jewish ethnomusicology as well as being of the pioneering generation of "comparative musicology," gave another explanation for the ban of musical instruments. He stated:

After the destruction of Jerusalem under Roman rule in A.D. 70, much of the chant was preserved among congregations of Middle Eastern Jews and arguably remains intact today, but the instrumental music was lost when the dispersed peoples, "as an act of mourning, ceased playing instruments," and that this was "a sign of national mourning." ²¹

But then Idelsohn added:

Meanwhile, Eric Werner (1901-1988) who was an eminent scholar, musicologist, authority on sacred Jewish music, teacher and composer sought to assert the existence of a link between Synagogue and Church music and the interrelationship between Jewish and early Christian liturgical music. Werner affirmed Idelsohn's viewpoint and stated:

The Synagogue had banished all instrumental music without exception as a symbol of mourning over the destruction of the Temple. ²²

Later, Werner discredited the hypothetical view perceived by the Rabbis that banning instrumental music as a symbol of mourning over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. He gave a different interpretation and claimed that such a concept was '*specious*'. Eric Werner suggests instruments were banned from the Synagogue for the same reasons Philo and the Sibyl (a prophetess) opposed the use of musical instruments:

Yet it is clear that the two reasons for the rabbinic opposition to instrumental music were of a quite different nature. Philo and Sibyl display both contempt for any musical instrument well before the fall of Temple and land. In both cases spiritual worship is regarded as more exalted than any other sensuous ceremonial. Philo, in particularly, emphasized the value of the spiritual hymns and praises...[while] In much stronger terms the Sybil turns against the pagan type of music. ²³

James W. McKinnon, however, adds that Werner claimed that both Philo and the Sibyl or prophetess, showed contempt for all musical instruments. Philo preferred the more '*spiritual worship*' form over what he described as a '*sensuous practice*', whereas the Sibyl expressed contempt for any musical instruments and described their use as a form of a '*ceremonial pagan cult*'. Werner's reference to Philo and the Sibyl came earlier than the destruction of the Temple, thus providing an historical proof that discredits the Rabbinic claim:

Both Philo and the Sibyl pre-date the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and hence further discredit the rabbinic claim that the instruments were banned as an expression of mourning over the Temple's loss. ²⁴

It is to be borne in mind that the Jews mourned over the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC, which predates the destruction over the Second Temple in 70 BC. The First Temple was built by King Solomon in 960 BC and destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, whereas the Second Temple was dedicated 520 BC and destroyed by the Romans under Titus. However, James McKinnon provided another explanation for

the exclusion of the use of musical instruments from the Synagogue and Early Christian Church, it was not necessarily a form of prohibition but rather the fact that musical instruments were relatively rare or unavailable, so 'a cappella' singing prevailed:

The truth is that the simple declamation of scripture in the Synagogue and Church, by a non-musician it can be maintained, was a tonal phenomenon to which the sort of instrumental participation required by Temple psalmody was simply irrelevant. This is not to declare absolutely that some individual at some time or another might not have used an instrument in early Synagogue or Church. But there is little evidence to suggest isolated incidents of this sort, no compelling musical motivation for their occurrence to any appreciable extent, and much to be said against these from the demonstrable 'a cappella' practice of both later Synagogue and Church. ²⁵

McKinnon continues to provide a pragmatic interpretation that 'a cappella' music was the norm, as there has been little evidence of the isolated participation of instrumental music when the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, which was followed by the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD and later during the early period of Christianity. However, at a much later time vocal practice was rendered in both Synagogues and Churches, while the elaborate instrumental type of music was reserved for Temple rites:

The a cappella issue as opposed to the a cappella practice, that is the tendency to think in terms of legal exclusions and the like, is a different matter. It arose in both Judaism and Christianity many centuries after the fact, apparently from observing the contrast between a highly developed vocal music within the Sacred Precincts (Synagogues and Churches) and the elaborate instrumental without. ²⁶

There is strong evidence that 'a cappella' music prevailed during the early period of Christianity and can be traced back to the early Church fathers who rejected musical instruments during and after the third and fourth centuries. Temple worship is described in the Old Testament as accompanied by instrumental music, whereas "the New Testament has no direct statement against musical instruments" ²⁷, but there are several references which indicate that singing was unaccompanied by musical instruments.

Therefore, it is believed that such hostility toward musical instruments resulted from preferences of the Patristic fathers rather than from a Biblical one. McKinnon affirms that such harsh criticism of the use of music instruments was expressed by the Church fathers, who held strong views against them and regarded them as "a symbol of lasciviousness and debauchery." ²⁸

The Patristic fathers allowed only vocal music for liturgy. They believed that the 'rational pertains to the human voice 'as it is directly connected with the mind, whilst the 'irrational to musical instruments.' Evidently, such hostility that was created by the Patristic fathers toward the use of musical instruments was more of a reason for banning it during early Christianity, rather than justifying its connection with any Biblical dictum. Furthermore, many Church fathers justified their polemic views according to their own interpretation of the subject. For example Clement of Alexandria stated:

A beautiful breathing instrument of music of the Lord made human being, after his own image. ²⁹

Whereas, Chrysostom said:

The soul is an excellent musician, an artist, the body is an instrument holding the place of the kithara, aulos and lyre. ³⁰

In his commentary on Psalm 150, Chrysostom continued to elaborate his viewpoint on the subject of '*singing hymns and Psalms*,' including the fact that it can be regarded a 'spiritual sacrifice' and '*a way of involving the whole self in praise of God*'. He then gave reason for Christians not to use instruments:

The Jews are commanded to praise God with all musical Instruments, so we are commanded to praise Him with all our members – the eyes, the tongue, the ear, the hand." ³¹

Constantine the Great called the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which was the first Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church, and gave 300 religious leaders the responsibility of separating debatable and dubious writings from the sacred and divinely inspired ones. Yet it is to be borne in mind musical instruments were introduced several hundred years after '*the whole canon of the scriptures of the New Testament was commenced and completed during the latter half of the first century*'. According to Louis Ganssen and other authors it was during this period that 'the Church, already formed and unceasingly extending, reached the extremities of the earth'. ³² Later, the Council of Carthage confirmed and declared its approval of the inspired writings of the New Testament as the sacred Scripture and put together the Old and New Testaments in 397 AD.

It is worth noting that the Apostles do not mention the use of musical instruments. For example, Matthew says that Jesus and His disciples went to the Mount of Olives and sang together but never mentioned musical accompaniment.

*When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Matthew 26: 30.*³³

Paul advises the Corinthians to sing and make music to the Lord with their hearts:

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of the our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. I Corinthians 14:15^{34, 35}

Origin of Modernized Chant of Hymns and Psalms Accompanied With Musical Instruments

It is to be borne in mind that modern chanting of hymns and Psalms is prevalent among young Copts in Egypt today was originally borrowed from the Psalters of the early American Presbyterian missionaries who started coming to Egypt in 1854. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt: '*el-Kanisah El-Injiliyah*', was founded in 1926. Heather Sharkey mentions in her book entitled: *American Evangelicals in Egypt* the following:

*In 1854 American Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Egypt as part of a larger Anglo-American Protestant movement aiming for worldwide evangelization. Protected by British imperial power, and later by mounting American global influence, their enterprise flourished during the next century.*³⁶

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt began its missionary work by establishing an English-language school for girls and missionaries from the United Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia directed the school and its activities. Eventually, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt which is the *Synod of the Nile* founded several schools for girls. As part of its mission it established churches in local communities, as well as educational programs and medical services. Approximately 95 percent of these who joined the newly established Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt were Copts. Many became active members of the evangelical congregation, while maintaining their membership in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The missionaries claimed that their intention was to establish and maintain a reformed Church in Egypt according to Biblical principles and appropriate to the contemporary situation in Egypt. But according to Heather Sharkey, the Evangelicals faced considerable opposition.

To Egyptian Muslims and Coptic Christians, missionaries presented new models for civic participation and for women's roles in collective worship and community life. At the same time, missionary efforts to convert Muslims and reform Copts

stimulated new forms of Egyptian social activism and prompted nationalists to enact laws restricting missionary activities. ³⁷

In fact, the Coptic Orthodox Church reacted negatively to the early American Presbyterian missionaries. The missionaries would like to reform the Coptic Orthodox Church, but Coptic Popes led in resisting its influence. Later, the Coptic Orthodox Church also resisted the influence of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt when it became autonomous in 1926 and maintained this stance throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, those who embraced the Evangelical reform movement were excommunicated from the Coptic Orthodox Church:

The main objective of the early missionaries was to reform the Coptic Church, but none of the Coptic popes made any attempt at that; they actually made the church reject the Evangelical movement. And in response to this, Copts who had embraced the Reformation walked out of the church. At first, they had to congregate in one of their houses, but eventually they established their own denomination and house of worship in which they could practise. ³⁸

Copts who joined the Evangelical Presbyterian movement adopted its practices. Instead of chanting the Coptic Orthodox Liturgical hymns in their original form and language, they sang the Psalters and Hymns using the melodies and instrumental accompaniment normal for the Western missionaries. The hymns used a familiar Western tune or an Arabic one. According to Emily R. Brink, Senior Research Fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship:

Many hymns are translated from English, there are also several Arabic songs, some that came from Beirut; many songs are given two tunes...Many songs in the hymnal have two tunes; the main one and an alternate; many are in Arabic...One with a familiar Western tune, preferably with an Arabic tune below. The songs sung sounded Middle Eastern. Singing was mainly led by a composer who also sang and played his accordion. A few times a piano was used. ³⁹

Obviously the chant is either a Western hymnal song or an Arabic or Middle Eastern translation of it. That represented a profound drift from the traditional Coptic hymnal chant. The newly converted congregation sang only Psalms until 1932, later adding 150 hymns.

Historical Events Which Urged Ragheb Mofteh to Embark on a Project to Save the Coptic Music Heritage

During the early 20th century some Copts attempted to change and modernize the Coptic Orthodox Church traditional practices of religious rites. Members of this movement were known as '*Jamma'it al-Islah*' [Reform Society]. They described the Coptic Orthodox Church's religious rites as an 'antiquated tradition' orally handed down for almost 2000 AD years, but that no longer works well with the spirit of present times. They also suggested replacing the 'triangle' and 'cymbals' with other musical accompaniments, such as the organ and piano.

In an article written by Hala Halim entitled: "Ragheb Mofteh: Songs of Praise," which appeared in *al-Ahram Weekly*, January 7-13, 1999. Dr Halim recounts her interview with my uncle Ragheb, in which he listed the events in the 1920s that compelled him to save the Coptic music heritage. Dr. Halim states the following:

When Mofteh embarked on the formidable task of documenting the musical heritage of the Coptic Church, he enjoyed neither papal patronage nor any form of institutional support. As Mofteh recalls it, what gave him the impetus to begin his project was an iconoclastic, Westernised -- or modernising, depending on your vantage point -- movement, initiated by the influential Father Ibrahim Louqa and a number of Coptic notables in the 1920s. Contemptuous of what they considered to be the antiquated traditions of the Coptic Church, this group wanted to introduce into the Church Mass such extrinsic elements as the 'organ' and do away with "the ouey, ouey of Church hymns", as Mofteh says, his face creasing with laughter as he mimics their mockery. At the time, however, Mofteh was deeply disquieted by this trend and felt that the only way "to subvert their movement would be to transcribe all the hymns and thus preserve them for all eternity. ⁴⁰

Later in 2000, my uncle Ragheb Mofteh confirmed to another interviewer his earlier account. Nadia Mansour in an article entitled: "*Rajul li- Kul al-Qurun*" (A Man for all Centuries), in *al-Shabab Magazine*, vol. 23, no. 273, April 2000, says that Ragheb told her that he had been terribly disturbed by the allegations of members of *Jamm'iyyat al-Islah* [Reform Society] in the early 1920s. Members of this movement had a poor opinion of Coptic music and wanted to include it in its efforts to reform the Coptic Orthodox Church liturgical rites. The leader of the movement was Father Ibrahim Louka, a priest at the Coptic Orthodox Church in Heliopolis. This priest was influenced by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church missionaries in Cairo and wanted to adopt their hymnal practices. My uncle decided to resist it and instead to revive the Coptic music heritage:

Jamm'iyyat al-Islah regarded the Coptic music as "decadent," allegedly that it does not conform to the spirit of the present day. (This movement advocated the reform of the Coptic Orthodox Church religious practices). Ragheb refuted their perspective on that matter, and he decided to fight the new trend of those who wished to disassociate with the traditions of past generations. Especially that Coptic music expresses all the religious rites of the Coptic Church year round. ⁴¹

My uncle Ragheb was keen to keep the authenticity of the Coptic music heritage intact for posterity. With the help of his sister Farida, Ragheb launched in the 1920s a campaign to resist the reforms proposed by members of *Jamma'it al-Islah* movement. A meeting held at a girls' school in Heliopolis drew around 3,000 attendees was even mentioned in the papers. The two were able to create awareness of the Coptic music heritage. Auntie Farida was an extraordinarily tough and influential woman, who wielded her influence in the Church as well as on the national level. Ultimately, my uncle Ragheb and auntie Farida managed to deter the *Jamma'it al-Islah* movement from going any further and the latter's plan was dropped.

Coptic Orthodox Choral Choirs Ensembles Recitals of Modern Chant

Beginning in the early 1920s, Ragheb Mofteh stubbornly resisted any attempts to change the Coptic hymnal practices. Nevertheless, during the mid and latter part of the twentieth century, many Coptic Choirs continued to gradually replace the traditional Coptic Orthodox liturgical chants with songs borrowed from the Evangelical Presbyterian Psalters and Hymnbooks. Modern chant often included paraphrased biblical verses or passages. The melodies were a blend of Coptic hymnal chant with Arabic or Middle Eastern folkloric songs accompanied with orchestral music, such as the lute, piano, violin, 'oud and guitar.

Noticeably nowadays, Evangelical Presbyterian Church songs have become popular among young Copts who nevertheless remain in the Coptic Orthodox faith. Variations of Coptic hymnal chant have emerged in recitals of Coptic Orthodox Choral '*ensembles*'. Young female and male singers often give recitals in Arabic and sometimes in Coptic. Several Coptic Orthodox conductors or composers extrapolate some parts of the Coptic hymnal chant and adapt them into a newly improvised genre of chant. Furthermore reached the extremities of the early singing with its new Oriental or Arabic melodic form is replacing the original Coptic traditional one. At present many recitals are performed by Coptic Choirs at Coptic Orthodox Churches and broadcasted on Coptic or Christian television channels programs. However, despite the fact that their performances are brilliant, from a standpoint of Coptic hymnal practices, the new forms of chanting fail to render the indigenous and authentic expression of Coptic hymnal rites.

My uncle Ragheb Mofteh attended one of those choral recitals at the American University in Cairo in 2000. During the intermission, the conductor of the Choral ensemble greeted my uncle and thanked him for attending the performance. The conductor was eager to know my uncle's impression of the performance. My uncle assured him that he was impressed by the virtuosity of the singers, who performed in perfect unison. My uncle Ragheb, polite as ever, also remarked that the musical instruments which included violins, violas, cellos, brass and percussion instruments were well orchestrated.

During the performance I was privy to an ongoing conversation between uncle Ragheb, Drs. Margit Toth and Martha Roy. I sat on my uncle Ragheb's right hand-side, Martha Roy on his left hand-side, and Margit Toth was sitting next to me. They all shared the same viewpoint about the rendition of the traditional Coptic chant and commented that the original Coptic element in its pristine form is missing in this performance, due to the interpolation of Arabic or Oriental modernized genre of music into the Coptic traditional form. I knew from this that in my uncle's eyes, no other musical arrangement could surpass the original Coptic hymnody.

My uncle never objected or opposed any creative work that was influenced by other traditions or cultures, but he was keen that composers or artists not interpolate modern tunes into the traditional Coptic chants. Composers should be consciously aware that the new forms remain foreign to the "Coptic Orthodox Church liturgical music tradition." My uncle Ragheb whole-heartedly encouraged artistic creativity, but really found it scandalous to improvise or add new forms to the traditional authentic music. Presently, despite the new musical genre, young Coptic composers and performers have established, the Coptic chant itself is to be preserved and such is arguably the case for the older generation of Coptic chanters. However, eventually this new trend to modernize Coptic chant will gradually prevail in recitals of Coptic Choirs ensembles, even if it is resisted in the official Coptic Orthodox Church liturgical chant.

Today, the ancient Coptic chant does not appeal to young Copts since it does not reflect their musical tastes. The new genre of Coptic hymnal chant is very different from the traditional Coptic one. Besides, Coptic composers have developed new instrumental playing techniques and use other musical instruments that are different from the early traditional '*cymbals*' and '*triangle*', that are traditionally the only instruments commonly used in Coptic Orthodox Church services. Moreover, Coptic orchestral choirs have expanded the range and complexity of instrumental performances and playing techniques. The prevailing trend to modernize Coptic chant is not consistent with Ragheb Mofteh's legacy.

Professor Ernest Newlandsmith's Perspective on Coptic Music

According to Professor Ernest Newlandsmith, Coptic music cannot be "modernized" as its original ancient Egyptian element is its very base. It therefore does not lend itself to improvisation or any other form or

language but Coptic. Furthermore, Professor Ernest Newlandsmith emphatically expressed the following in a lecture delivered at the University of Oxford, on May 21, 1933, entitled: *The Ancient Music of the Coptic Church*:

It is true that I have had to dig deep; for the original Egyptian element lies largely buried under an appalling debris of Arabic ornamentation. But after piercing through this unfortunate outer coat, the true Egyptian idiom has emerged. The music is not Arabic; it is not Turkish; and it is not Greek - often as these elements appear. It seems indeed impossible to doubt but that it is ancient Egyptian. Moreover, it is great music grand, pathetic, noble and deeply spiritual. ⁴²

Conclusion

My uncle Ragheb Moftah was always passionate about orchestral performances and expressed his enthusiasm about musical creativity and composition. He valued artistic talent and music education, and realized that a composer or any artist needs to cultivate musical knowledge and taste before becoming a composer. As an example, Richard Wagner (born 1813-), who was one of my uncle Ragheb's favorite composers, composed numerous symphonies, overtures and even some works for the piano, all of them influenced by Beethoven. Franz Joseph Haydn, also recognized Beethoven's brilliant talent, not only as a performer but also as a composer. Accordingly, Beethoven was influenced by Haydn and other classical composers, even he auditioned as a composition student for Mozart, before creating his own masterpieces.

In conclusion, creativity was greatly appreciated by Ragheb Moftah, but his real concern was that the 'sacred' Coptic music handed down orally from one generation to another throughout history should remain pristine and untouched by modern music. When dealing with Coptic liturgical music, Ragheb Moftah made sure to urge chanters to adhere to the traditional practices of Coptic religious rites. Historical evidence confirms this practice since early times, when it was adopted by ancient Greeks, Jews and early Christians. It continues today in the practices of Jewish, Coptic and Eastern Orthodox Churches and Islamic '*anasheed*'. He maintained that Coptic liturgical music is always chanted without the accompaniment of musical instruments, and he ardently advocated and favored the use of '*a cappella*' style. He urged pressingly on various occasions, in his writings and lectures that Church officials to keep intact the Coptic hymnal tradition. His legacy was to preserve the original liturgical Coptic music for posterity.

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