



## *Holiness of Hymns and Purity of Praises*

### *Coptic Music preservation: Dr. Raghib Moftah*

Παρεν ἡτορελλε ἡρεμῆχμῖ: Δρ. Ραγεβ Μοφταρ

**D**r Ragheb Moftah, past director of the Department of Music and Hymns at the Coptic Institute of Higher Studies in Cairo, Egypt devoted his life to the preservation of Coptic Music through its teaching and recordings of its authentic forms of music. Dr Moftah realized the uniqueness of the liturgical music of the church. Its melodies and hymns form a grand tradition that has bound the Coptic Orthodox Church adherents since the introduction of Christianity into the mother country, Egypt, during the first century.

**The language of the Divine Liturgy is Coptic with the texts** having long been translated into Arabic and today in many other languages. The Coptic Divine Liturgy is an entirely sung Rite apart from prayers offered inaudibly by the priests and the Holy Scripture readings. The Divine Liturgy of St Basil is used throughout the year in most churches and is the Divine Liturgy most familiar to Copts. A second Divine Liturgy is used for the four Great Feasts: Nativity, Epiphany, Glorious Resurrection, and Pentecost. The Divine Liturgy of St Cyril is least frequently observed as its melodies have been lost. The Divine Liturgy of St Basil has been thankfully passed down orally over the many centuries and with the book, *The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St Basil With Complete Musical Transcription* authored by Dr Moftah is the first time its music has been published in full.

**Impressed at a very early age by the need to preserve the** Coptic musical heritage of the Church, Dr Moftah sought out cantors who knew its melodies and had transcriptions made of these melodies. He trained singers in the music and made recordings of this as well. These recordings were the first ever made, and were used in training choirs and provided a foundation for transcribing scientifically and in detail the chants that had been passed down from one Coptic generation to the next over the previous centuries.

**Dr Moftah's search for cantors who knew the authentic** melodies of the Coptic Church began ardently in 1926. In 1928, Ernest Newlandsmith of the Royal Academy of Music in London came to Egypt sponsored by Dr. Moftah to make transcriptions of Coptic hymns and the Divine Liturgy.

**In 1954, a Music Department was established at the Institute** for Coptic Studies in Cairo with Dr Moftah as its first Department Head. A recording room was installed and the

process of collecting recordings of the Coptic Church's music faithfully began.

**Dr Margit Toth, in 1970, came to Egypt to transcribe for** Dr Moftah. With her experience in the Hungarian system of translation (Bela Bartok system) she began using the Institute's archive of recordings to make detailed transcriptions of the music.

**The Divine Liturgies of the Coptic Orthodox Church are** sung in monophonic style, unaccompanied by an melodial instrument. It is characterized by the frequent use of two musical elements: melisma and different kinds of embellishment. The melisma is the melodic extension of a single vowel within a word, as opposed to the syllabic rendering of the text within the basic melody. Some embellishment is part of the melody itself and is thus traditional; other embellishment is improvised by the singer in his own style of ornamentation. Each figure consists of tones added around a given pitch, and each singer is known for his unique ability to incorporate this into his vocal song.

**The prayers of the priest, the Holy Scripture lectures, and** the directions of the deacons are in free rhythm. Most of the Coptic congregational hymns which are sung by a choir of deacons are in regular rhythmic measures. The all-male choir of deacons stands in two rows, facing each other. Certain hymns are performed antiphonally, between the north and south sides of the choir.

**The only instruments utilized in the Coptic Church today** are a pair of small hand cymbals and a triangle. Rubrics specify the hymns that are to be accompanied by the cymbals but do not mention the triangle.

**The early text of the Divine Liturgy was first written in** Greek, later translated into Coptic, then Arabic. The early Coptic manuscripts were written without any form of punctuation. An unknown period of its history, the script was reorganized into stanzas each containing two to four unrhymed phrases separated by colons. The Euchologies of today all follow this traditional strophic arrangement of the text.

(The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St Basil With Complete Musical Transcription, 1998)