

RAGHEB MOFTAH AND COPTIC MUSIC

Quotations are Taken from Dr. Ragheb Mofteh's Article Entitled:

The Music of the Coptic Church

By Laurence Mofteh

I. Introduction

Dr. Ragheb Mofteh (1898 - 2001) was among the first scholars to recognize the unique cultural as well as liturgical value of Coptic music, and a pioneer in creating awareness of it by recording the entire corpus of the Coptic liturgical music, thus making it available to Coptic communities and scholarly circles in Egypt and abroad. Such awareness led during the latter part of the twentieth century to its unprecedented revival and its emergence as a new academic field of study.

Undoubtedly, Mofteh's main goal was to preserve Coptic music for posterity by recording for the first time in history the entire corpus of Coptic chants, as he was extremely passionate about it. But there was another compelling reason. My Uncle recounted on several occasions that during the early 20th century, the British occupiers in Egypt alleged that they needed to protect the Christian minority, a pretext intended to justify their prolonged occupation of the country. British evangelists and Protestant missionaries who were particularly keen to convert Copts to Protestantism, described Coptic liturgical music as "decadent". My Uncle was devastated by this comment. No doubt the untrained ears are unable to appreciate this kind of music, as the chants lack the melodies and harmonies of modern European music. He also feared that the Coptic musical heritage would be compromised by the influence of modernity in general. However, Mofteh's immediate reaction was to prevent the Protestant missionaries from interfering with the Coptic Orthodox Church practices of its rites. It is worth noting that Ragheb Mofteh was born into a Coptic Orthodox traditional family, and had an innate appreciation of the traditional Coptic chants. Therefore, he realized that something had to be done to preserve the Coptic music heritage lest it risks extinction as the Coptic language, already lost for centuries. This realization marked a decisive turning point in his life. From then on he was on a crusade to save the sacred Coptic music heritage, a quest that continued until his death in 2001.

Already a music scholar who had his musical education at the University of Munich in Germany and considerable contact with the *intelligentsia* of pre-World War I in Europe and Egypt. Besides saving the Coptic music heritage, Mofteh had a vision to institutionalize the study of Coptic music as a new field of study within Coptic Studies, so

that it would be researched academically and scientifically. Mofteh also wanted to standardize the form of the rendition of the Coptic chants. He thus worked toward this goal, and ultimately he achieved it. Based upon Mofteh's recommendation, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III announced in 1971 that the Coptic Church would begin to standardize its liturgical music. However, achieving this goal was a long process. Mofteh had decided in 1954 to establish the Coptic Music Division in the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies, using his own personal resources to fund it. When the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies was inaugurated, the announcement that appeared in *Speculum*, volume 30, number 2, 1955, stated:

The inauguration of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies may be regarded as a major event in the cultural history of modern Egypt.

The Institute contains numerous seminar rooms and lecture halls, an amphitheater, ...in addition to an excellent auditorium installed with modern fittings and apparatus for the recording of Coptic music and divine liturgies.

Dr. Mofteh had established earlier in 1945 two centers for teaching and recording the Coptic chants. One was located in Bab el-Hadid, and the other in Old Cairo. He also ran summer camps in Alexandria for additional instruction, all by rote memorization, and he recorded the chants as learnt by the participating Choirs. Dr. Mofteh also used these Centers to record the celebrated and venerable cantor al-Mu'allim Mikhail al-Batanouni's versions of the traditional chants so the importance of those first Centers should not be underestimated. However, establishing the first real Studio on the premises of the Patriarchy is significantly important, as it fulfilled Dr. Mofteh's dream of giving the study of Coptic music an academic environment. Each of these efforts to build a complete recording of the entire opus of Coptic hymnology represents a certain phase and historical period in Dr. Mofteh's life achievements. Together these early Centers represent a landmark in the history of Coptic Orthodox Church liturgical music, since they were the first to record it for posterity.

II. Background: The Undocumented State of Coptic Music

But aside from that primary goal of preserving Coptic music, Ragheb Mofteh quite naturally had a second goal which was to assist in the survival of the Coptic liturgy itself, that is to save the centuries long tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Actually the music and the hymns of the chants are virtually inseparable. The one in large part determines the other.

The Coptic occurring in the liturgy is that remnant of the language spoken by the majority of Egyptians in the early centuries of Christianity up to the Arab conquest in 640 AD when Arabic became the country's most common language. Coptic was still currently spoken until the thirteenth century and certainly read as transcribed in a variation of the Greek alphabet but by the seventeenth century it was almost extinct. Nevertheless, it survived in the Coptic Orthodox Church liturgical services, and was spoken in isolated areas of Egypt until the beginning of the 19th century.

It is interesting to know that both Iryan Mofteh, Ragheb Mofteh's great uncle, and Ragheb Mofteh himself made marked contributions to the preservation of both the Coptic language and the chanted liturgy of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and by extension to the humanities in general. Iryan Mofteh (1826 - 1886) was a prominent Coptic language specialist who introduced the Greco-Bohairic dialect to the Coptic language. It is an improvised form of Bohairic. Iryan was appointed teacher at the newly established Clerical College by the Father of Coptic Reform, Cyril IV (1854 - 1860), whose aim was to modernize the Coptic Orthodox Church. Despite the fact that Iryan's new dialect found opposition among the clergy in Upper Egypt, who refused to use it, clinging to the old Bohairic dialect, his influence prevailed and his system spread rapidly in Lower Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria throughout the 20th century. Today, Iryan Mofteh's improvised Greco-Bohairic dialect is the official one used in the Coptic Orthodox Church offices and liturgical services. Therefore, it is worth noting that Ragheb Mofteh's great uncle Iryan Mofteh revived the Coptic language in the nineteenth century, and Ragheb Mofteh saved the Coptic music heritage for posterity during the twentieth and twenty- first centuries.

Apart from his life achievements, Ragheb Mofteh was a simple unpretentious scholar, and a true ascetic. I worked with him extensively from 1978 - 2001, and I can assure you that he never sought fame and glory, and was never tempted by what the world offered him in terms of celebrity, wealth and honors. The considerable inheritance from his father mattered only to him as a means for financing his scholarly goals. He subsequently impoverished himself in pursuit of his research goals, and lived several decades of his life in poverty. He never regretted his investment, however, and continued to struggle to save the Coptic music heritage. Earning a "status" or "title" was unimportant in all his considerations and plans. He never felt for a moment that he was *the* pioneer single-handedly preserving the Coptic music heritage. On the contrary he often described himself very modestly as a simple servant of the Coptic Orthodox Church, whose duty it was to save the Coptic music heritage. Neither were academic ranks or honors ever considered by Dr. Mofteh to be a goal in his life-long endeavor. When he was tenured as chair of the Music Division of the HICS that he occupied from 1954 until he died in 2001, he never requested titles or remuneration. His mind was set solely on his work to preserve the Coptic music for posterity.

Dr. Mofteh actually came to represent Coptic music, and is today perceived by many scholars of music and Coptology to be its most renowned scholar. Dr. Margit Toth, the renowned Hungarian musicologist, once told me that had Dr. Ragheb Mofteh been in Hungary, he would have been honored like other famous musicologists or musicians. An institute for Coptic music would have been established bearing his name, similar to the Béla Bartók Institute of Music of the University of Miskolc in Hungary, or the Franz Liszt Institute in Bologna in Italy. In Egypt, this was unfortunately not the case. He was admired certainly, but honors such as he might have received in Europe simply were not part of the mores of Egypt at the time.

Incidentally Bela Bartok (1881 – 1946) and Ragheb Mofteh (1898 – 2001) knew each other, for they were introduced to one another in the Arab Music Conference in 1932. Ragheb Mofteh was chosen by the Egyptian government to present Coptic Music at the Conference that was held in Cairo, and sponsored by King Fouad I. Bela Bartok attended this Conference, was intrigued by Mofteh's endeavors and promised to work with him. He was unable to commit himself, however, as he was called for a more urgent project in Turkey. However, Mofteh and Bartok maintained their relationship by starting to correspond, and a collection of their correspondence is today housed in the Bela Bartok Emlekhaz (Bela Bartok Memorial House). (It is a little museum, high in the Buda Hills, which occupies Bela Bartok's last home in Hungary).

Perhaps we could draw an analogy between these two musicians. They both had an interest in folk and traditional music. Bela Bartok was one of the leading Hungarian and European composers of his time, who collected folk-music from Hungary and the neighboring regions, whereas, Ragheb Mofteh was the pioneer who recorded the entire corpus of Coptic liturgical music, which mainly (he and other scholars believed) originated from the practices of the religious rites and folk traditions of the ancient Egyptians.

Dr. Ragheb Mofteh was also obsessed with trying to discover the origins of Coptic music. This again, takes into account the Coptic language itself which indeed is considered to be the direct descendant of pharaonic Egypt. He searched for clues in the Coptic manuscripts that were kept at the British Museum Library, the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the old St. Mark's Cathedral Library in Ezbakkiyyah, and in many other libraries and museums. Despite that he had an amazing memory to recall each bit of information that he found, and where it was located, he was keen to document whatever he researched and discovered.

III. Ragheb Mofteh's Mission

Ragheb Mofteh was mesmerized by Coptic music, and passionate about its practices. He celebrated the chanted rituals with utter devotion and solemnity. He also tended to engage himself in deep meditation when he listened to Coptic chants, and was profoundly immersed in the religious practice of the ancient Liturgies. He bowed his head and never sat for one moment during the Mass or celebration of the Coptic Feasts at the Coptic Church, observing the canons of the Orthodox Church even when he was a hundred years old. He listened very attentively to every melody chanted by members of his Choir, keen on accuracy in the rendition of such chants

Dr. Mofteh described Coptic music passionately in an article he wrote, and entitled: *The Music of the Coptic Church*, probably written in the 1960s, but certainly after he had established the Department of Coptic Church Music, in the Coptic Institute in Cairo, in 1954. He stated the following:

No other music however classical can compare with the "pathos" of the music of the Coptic Church, nor with the tremendous power it has on the human soul and the passion it awakens in it.

According to Ragheb Mofteh's theory, the Coptic chant is intended to evoke a sublime and spiritual effect that is "*divested of every earthly sensation.*" He stated the following in his article:

When you listen to this music, try to imagine yourself in one of the many Coptic Churches which still survive from ancient times, in which so many generations of devout people, mystics and Saints have lifted up their hearts to God in the words of the ancient Liturgies celebrated with solemn ritual, amid clouds of incense and echoes of chants which harmonize with the beautiful style of the architecture.

Imagine yourself listening to the music of this chant in such an eirenic atmosphere, and the effect of it will cause you to forget completely all worldly things, since this music is entirely divested of every earthly sensation. Though this chant is simple in its structure, the appeal is most captivating in that it recalls the spirituality of the airs of the ancient Coptic Church.

Dr. Mofteh shared his passion for Coptic music with Newlandsmith, and quoted the latter's description of it as follows:

Coptic Music is a great music and may be called one of the seven wonders of the world, and, indeed, if a Caruso filled with the spirit of God, were to sing some of the Coptic themes in the form of a great oratorio, it would be enough to re-ignite Christendom. [Quoting Newlandsmith].

IV. Ancient Egyptian Roots In Coptic Music

Another reason for his passion for the chants, however, was due to the fact that Ragheb Mofteh was convinced Coptic music was of ancient Egyptian origin, so to prove his theory he studied the early practices and religious rites in various countries where Christianity first spread. He wrote the following in his article:

In early times, both in the East and West, Christian Liturgies, rites and prayers were influenced by the nature and the characteristics of the various countries to which the Gospel spread. Thus, every country composed its own ecclesiastical music in accordance with its particular knowledge and taste of music; and hence it comes about that Byzantine ecclesiastical music is Byzantine by nature, Egyptian ecclesiastical music is Egyptian, and Jewish Synagogue ecclesiastical music is Jewish; and, as additional evidence, we may note that Ethiopian ecclesiastical music is entirely Ethiopian, although the Ethiopian Church is a daughter Church of the Coptic Church and under its jurisdiction.

He continued:

National traditions of music have considerably affected the formation of ecclesiastical music, and many nations took over, from their earlier religion melodies they found suitable for the new Faith. The Greeks certainly adopted such melodies, and the Copts did the same thing. It should be remembered that the Copts are the direct descendants of the Ancient Egyptians, who possessed a very ancient musical tradition, and from early times worshipped their gods with hymns and music and elaborate rites.

He gave as additional proof of the origins of Coptic music:

Some of the Coptic hymns bear the names of towns which have long since disappeared; for example, the hymn called after Singari,

a town in the north of the Delta known in the time of Ramses II; and the hymn called Adribe from Atribis, a town which formerly existed in Upper Egypt.

And:

Demetrius of Phaleron, the librarian of the Library of Alexandria in 297 B.C., reports that the priests of Egypt used to praise their gods through the seven Greek vowels which they used to sing one after the other; and, in place of the flute or the harp, the utterance of these vowels produced a very agreeable sound. The music of many of the Coptic hymns is still entirely chanted on the one or other of these seven vowels. The text of certain long chants may consist of only one verse, or merely a single word like Allelia.

Dr. Mofteh confirmed his earlier statement about the origin of Coptic music by referring to Dr. E. Drioton, the Egyptologist's comment on the subject in a letter to him in 1946. It reads as follows:

[La clef du mystere de la musique pharaonique se trouve donc dans une bonne edition de la musique ecclesiastique copte en usage de nos jours].

The key to the mystery of Pharaonic music will be found, then, in a good edition of Coptic ecclesiastical music in use in our days.

Dr. Mofteh was convinced that Coptic music resulted from the practices of the ancient Egyptians, but he had to prove his theory. So he traveled with his Choir to Edfu, and his Choir gave a live performance of the Coptic liturgical music in the Temple of Horus, (this was sometime during the 1960s). He was fascinated by the experiment, and stated the following:

It was, indeed, a fascinating experiment which I recently undertook with the Choir of the Institute of Coptic Studies (Cairo), in the great Temple of Horus at Edfu. This temple is in a complete state of preservation, in spite of the fact that it was built by the Ptolemies over 2000 years ago. Our Choir chanted in Mezzo forte some pathetic hymns in the inner sanctuary reserved for the high priest. Although the temple occupies an area of about 7000 s.m., the acoustics were perfect, the solemn sounds of the voice being distributed with equal intensity or degree of tone over the whole temple from one end to the

other, as well as in the lateral chambers. The singing was distinctly heard even in the open courtyard between the Pylons and the Temple, which was reserved for the people. Indeed, this was a miracle of voice distribution, which is well worth serious study.

V. Coptic Orthodox Chant: Unaccompanied Vocal Music

Further, Mofteh emphasized in this article and in other research that it is entirely vocal:

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.

It is worth noting that when Ragheb Mofteh decided to have the Coptic music notations transcribed, it was intended as a means to preserve the Coptic music heritage, as recording devices were not prevalent during the early 1920s, nor of good quality for sometime thereafter. For this reason Ragheb Mofteh agreed with Professor Ernest Newlandsmith to undertake the formidable but necessary task of setting Coptic music into Western notations, and they both started researching it extensively in 1927, continuing to work collaboratively until 1936. Newlandsmith, prophetically telling Ragheb Mofteh that it would take fifty years for researchers to rediscover this form of music, and another fifty years to start researching its foundations.

It was only later in the 1930s that Ragheb Mofteh started recording Coptic music. Sound engineer, Mr. Salib Bastawros told me that Dr. Mofteh informed him that at times he himself recorded Coptic chants for both the Choirs and al-Mu'allim Mikhail al-Batanouni in the early 1930s. The latter's Collection of chants is considered to be the official canonical Coptic Orthodox Church music.

No doubt the transcription of Coptic music notations could stand on its own as a contribution to ethnomusicology. However, despite that transcriptions add considerably to the resources available for the study of the Coptic music tradition, there remain unresolved issues. For example, which of the various forms of transcription among the many possible is actually the most accurate?

According to the renowned musicologist/Coptologist Marian Robertson- Wilson:

Without hearing the music to become acquainted with it, transcription of notations could misguide musicologists when reading the Coptic music notations. Besides, each transcriber has her/his own interpretation of the music.

Therefore, sound recordings of the Coptic hymns are essential for research and study, since they represent best record of the Coptic liturgical tradition.

Dr. Marian Robertson-Wilson added:

Each person has his/her own method for transcribing Coptic music into our Western system of notation (see my article about the notations of Newlandsmith), which cannot really accommodate the nuances of pitch and rhythm of the ancient Coptic tradition. For myself, when I've transcribed it, I always warn the reader that the notation is appropriate, and that one must hear the music to become acquainted with it.

It is also worth noting that transcribers of music notations will transcribe music according to the schools they follow. For example, Professor Ernest Newlandsmith followed the English form of music notations transcription, while Dr. Margit Toth followed Bela Bartok's form. The latter form of transcription lends itself to detailed ornamentation of the melodies. Therefore, their notations transcription will not necessarily project what is in the content of the Coptic hymns as contained in the recorded music.

Further, Marian disapproved of the excessive use of ornamentations and embellishments of the melodies when transcribing the music notations. She stated the following:

I feel it is more accurate to transcribe the essential notes of the melody and state everything is sung from beginning to end with a very wide vibrato.

VI. Conclusion

Ragheb Mofteh was highly esteemed by scholars who dealt with him, and was appreciated for the Coptic music legacy that he bequeathed to the Coptic people and to the world of scholarship. Marian Robertson-Wilson expressed her gratitude to him on his hundredth birthday on December 21, 1998:

Along with my admiring congratulations and you upon your one hundredth birthday, I send my heartfelt thanks for the great legacy you have given us of recordings and the Newlandsmith notations of the great Coptic musical tradition. You have opened this world to all of us.

Dr. Ragheb Mofteh's personal research offers a wealth of information in several subject areas, and his research findings are documented in the archival materials owned by the HICS Music Division. He, in fact, never stopped researching Coptic music until his death in 2001. Unfortunately many of Dr. Mofteh's research findings were not published, although he wrote extensively on Coptic music in the form of essays or articles. Unpublished documents in his collection include correspondence with renowned scholars of music, Coptology and Egyptology. So far few renowned scholars have felt encouraged to research Coptic music due a perceived lack of primary sources. Those scholars who have written about Coptic music include Hans Hickmann, Ilonai Borsai, John Gillespie, Marian Robertson-Wilson, Margit Toth, Martha Roy, and presently Magdalena Kuhn. Dr. Mofteh's collection could certainly be used to attract scholars now to this relatively untapped field of study.

Therefore, for the sake of world knowledge, primary sources of information including Dr. Ragheb Mofteh's personal documents, as well as the work of other scholars should be made accessible to researchers, otherwise it will be difficult for them to conduct any form of complete research on Coptic music. However, with the proliferation of the Coptic music recordings worldwide via the internet, the survival of the historical record (and recordings) of Coptic music is reasonably assured. Its value has been recognized in both religious and academic circles in Egypt and abroad.

Ragheb Mofteh was obsessed with his projects to save Coptic music, and his dedication to his work on Coptic music was the main consideration of his entire life. Moreover, no matter what dire circumstances he faced or experienced, nothing deterred him from his endeavors. Even when he had health problems, and he was seriously ill several times due to kidney disease, (he had one of his kidneys removed in the 1940s,) and prostate-related problems in the 1980s he never stopped working. At times he also suffered

tinnitus in his ears, causing him to hear whooshing sounds that were annoying and distracting, yet he stoically persevered and never abandoned his work. Sometimes those bouts of tinnitus were due to listening to music for long hours daily; later also due to his advanced age. Even when he was on his deathbed Coptic music occupied his thoughts. I can never recall hearing him ask about his health condition or medication. He spoke only about his music, his aspirations about it, what was needed to preserve it for future generations, and how to enhance its study in academic institutions. He regarded saving the Coptic music heritage as his sacred service to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

No doubt Ragheb Mofteh will always be acknowledged historically as the pioneer who inaugurated the new age of Coptic music. Many renowned scholars pay tribute to him for his phenomenal contributions to save and preserve the Coptic music heritage. Moreover, his name will be always regarded in most people's mind as synonymous with Coptic music, as mentioned by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, when He eulogized Dr. Mofteh at his funeral on June 18, 2001. However, he will also always be remembered as an extremely modest and unassuming person, never dazzled by the honors that were bestowed on him. The successful preservation of the Coptic music heritage will be the enduring memorial to this humble genius for whom Coptic music remained a passion throughout his long life.

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