

Chapter III

Preserving the Coptic Hymns

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1- Preserving Coptic Hymns

Church role in preserving Coptic hymns

What the Coptic Orthodox Church did to preserve the Coptic hymns that were delivered to her from the early church fathers is considered to be a great miracle. If the west get astonished in witnessing our Pharaohs heritage that stood firmly for thousands of years, how more amazingly they regard those hymns and ask: “How were you able to keep those melodies that move in the air and are transmitted through emotions & feelings, for two thousand years, in an era with no recording machines? How did they survive in the heart of the church through generations before the existence of musical notation¹?”

It is a miracle by all means, a miracle of Oral Tradition, a miracle of receiving and delivering through generations. It reflects how Coptic church is determined to preserve all what she received from the Apostles, whether rituals or prayers or sacraments or priesthood order or unblemished spiritual concepts or hymns. It might seem to the knowledgeable impossible to keep all these hymns for twenty centuries without musical notation or recording. Coptic Church for this objective appoints singers or Cantors² that have the ability to preserve all these hymns - with their diverse ways³ specified for different occasions - in memory, in spite of long durations between occasions (some hymns are chanted only once a year). In each generation arise calibers that have the ability to deliver and others that have the ability to receive, this role happened with no doubt by the upholding of the Holy Spirit.

¹Musical notations was known in Europe in the beginning of the nineth century, and was called “newmz”, this notation resembled the writing signs like dots, slashes, comma ... etc. and it was placed over the poetry words to let the singer remember the tones, whether rising up or getting down and these signs was used only to determine tone duration and to assist in moving from one tone to another. This way in musical notations was used till the end of the eleventh century until Franco of Colona city in Germany invented new signs that have different shapes, each one specifying an interval (each sign equals one third of the next one ahead). In the fourteenth century Philip De Vitrei added other signs, signs kept changing & improving until the present time with their shapes & names. The musical notations helped a lot in preserving musical works from loss, deterioration & forfeiture and the new signs that were added improved the accuracy and capability to record stanza details including stances of breath as well as colors and shadows of performance.

²“Cantor” is the singer or chanter in the Coptic Church. This term also is used to call the musical leader in the Lutheran church in Germany.

³ Ways: are specific ritual tones for Coptic hymns to differentiate between occasions through the Liturgical year (joy way, mourn way, kyahk way, shaanini way, fast way, yearly way). One of the well known Coptic hymns is called “The Seven Ways”.

Cantors role in preserving the Coptic hymns

It is known that ancient Egyptians preferred blind singers, and those used to put their hands on their cheeks while singing! This idea was passed to the Coptic Church who depended on blind singers in receiving and delivering hymns from generation to generation. Blind are gifted with strong memory, capability of concentrating and remarkable ability in imagining tones and rhythm forms which they called “jars”.

They were chosen very carefully with the ability to produce accurate vocal performance of tones and rhythm forms, and were called “teachers” or “Cantors”. Up to the present time, each church has her own cantor, his main duty is to chant in the Mass and other church services as well as to deliver and teach the hymns to deacons. During Mass and liturgical services deacons stand in two choruses, north chorus and south chorus, and ahead of the north chorus stands the Cantor who acts as a maestro⁴ or a leader who by doing few signals by his hand leads the deacons and determines the suitable hymn speed and points out the starts and finales.

The cantor also plays on the timbrel instrument accompanied by a deacon playing on the triangle, especially while chanting a joy hymn.

About the signals that cantors usually do while leading the chorus Dr. Ragheb Moftah says: “it has been noticed according to the pictures found in the old Egyptian art, that the signals done by cantor Michael El-Batanony while singing hymns resemble to a great

⁴ Maestro is the orchestra leader. In the eighteenth century the term was used for the church musical leader as well as for the harpsichord performer. The role of the maestro is to deliver the melodies to audience in the most perfect way, by the assortment and coordination between the performers and singers, directing them to produce the melody accurately. He should be musically informative and able to understand the nature of the melody as well as the tactics of the production time, he should have a sensitive musical ear and strong memory, leading & loving personality, and capable to perform on one or more instrument. The maestro usually have his impact on the melodies according to his own sense and personal view, so the output can differ from one maestro to another. From ancient days, the leader in praising God was known. In the First Book of Chronicles (15:22) (Catholic Translation) it is mentioned that : “Chenaniah, leader of the Levites, was instructor in charge of music, because he was skillful”

extent the signals used by singers & musicians in the pharaohs era” [Al Fikr-Al Fan El Moasser Magazine, Cairo – issue 140, July 1994 P. 152]

Sometimes the cantor stops when he feels content with the performance of the chorus or if there is another one doing his role or if there is an Archdeacon leading, as if by his silence he is recognizing his success in creating another generation capable to preserve this spiritual and eternal heritage. Cantors role is accomplished when they succeed in implanting the love of Coptic hymns in deacons’ hearts and preparing a new generation of musically talented children as the future deacons.

Factual example of oral tradition

I cannot forget “Naguib Salib” the cantor of Marmina Church in Shoubra, who used to come to our house which was so close to the church, to teach Coptic hymns to my older brother “Mounir Kyrillos” (Fr Kyrillos Kyrillos afterwards). By that time, I was a young child, nearly six years old, so fond of Coptic hymns and I used to sit nearby and enjoy the fine private lesson. At the end of each lesson the cantor Naguib used to ask me to recite what I memorized, and with candies and sugar cubes attract me, for he knew that I have more ability to swallow a lot of candies than to memorize the melodies.

Time passed and this cantor departed to heaven to share praising with angels, and the story of hymns in the church does not end, for another capable cantor (Kamel Ayad Kellini - 1939-1994) took his role to sow a new plantation and deliver hymns to deacons. My love to hymns grew faster than the rate of classes in the church so I had no choice but to follow my older brother and have private hymn lessons.

The holy zeal found its way to the church. Deacons became desirous to learn more hymns, more difficult and longer, and the small house of the cantor turned to be a place for competition, at its gate a deacon or more waiting for others inside till they finish their lesson, with curiosity listening and trying to figure out the name of the hymn learned inside

to compete by one more difficult. Deacons learn from each other in a loving environment and the preceding one proudly takes the position of a teacher for few moments.

I personally have received hymns from more than one cantor or deacon, I recall the noted cantor “Fahim” (St. Mark church in Klotbek), Mr. Nazmy Banoub (Fr. Kernilios the monk in St. Macarious monastery afterwards), Eng. Fayez (Fr. Stephan Fayek priest of Marmina church in Shoubra afterwards), Eng. Safwat (Fr. Bishoy Sidki afterwards), Mr. Younan (Fr. Younan Aziz priest of St. Demiana Adawya afterwards), Mr. Atef Atta, Dr. Wahid the competent deacon and Fr. Morcos Guirgis (priest of Marmina Church in shoubra) the possessor of so pleasant a voice.

By the end of the sixties I heard about a clear-sighted cantor with a pleasant voice teaching hymns at Alnahda Coptic Association twice a week. Immediately I joined the Association with a group of deacons, this was the cantor “Ibrahim Ayad” who was chosen by H.H. Pope Shenouda III afterwards to be his dedicated cantor, and who had joined David’s chorus several times in festivals inside & outside Egypt.

The previous depiction of the contest in learning Coptic hymns, is a real picture of what I practiced in Marmina church in Shoubra: It is a sample of what the ancient Apostolic Church had gone through from the beginning and what contemporary Coptic Churches are practicing. This practice is one of the main reasons having Coptic hymns preserved for about two thousand years. It will continue in each church till the time come when we all praise together holding harps of God by the sea of glass:

“They sang as it were a new song before the throne ...and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God” (Rev 14:3-5)

The same picture & practice continued with me with all the details when I moved to a new location to Maadi district, and the center of my church ministry was transferred to St. Mark church at El-Maadi. There I found Cantor “Samuel” doing the same role, implanting love of hymns in the children and deacons to continue keeping the mission of oral tradition.

When I used to do the final tryouts of the praise Performances for David’s Ensemble the most reverend H.G. Amba Daniel (Bishop of Maadi) – well known for his love to Coptic hymns – was keen on attending part of these tryouts to make sure that the Coptic hymns chanted (their speeds and jars) are exactly typical to what his reverence memorized through years, and frequently he stopped us introducing some important remarks. Fr. Morcos Yessa the priest of the church and the spiritual father and sustainer of David’s Ensemble was keen also on attending all of the Performances and most of the tryouts.

It is clear from the above that the church with all her orders and institutions supports attentively the transfer of Coptic hymns. When I teach hymns, I use musical notations (that may be considered new for many) and I make sure that it is done accurately according to the church plan of “regular succession between generations”. I will continue unceasingly proclaiming that musical notations must be the main expedience for teaching hymns at the “Music & Hymn Department” of the “Institute of Coptic Studies” (The main Acaemic Institute for teaching hymns). For all choruses and orchestras that I direct, I adhere to musical sheets in teaching hymns which I write using the records compiled by Dr. Rageb Mouftah, and recheck their accuracy with the deacons in David’s Ensemble who were chosen from different churches, It is also a must for Clerical Colleges to teach hymns with this scientific method which has been well known since centuries.

The previous picture in spite of being a personal experience carried out from the mid of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty first, there are several other similar

practices in many churches, through different generations, all showing the church care for this eternal heritage and the persistent attempts to preserve it.

I will introduce here two persons that strived to preserve the heritage of the Coptic hymns, from the end of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, spending time and money and sparing all their life to act as a ring in the giants chain that preserved this heritage.

The role of cantor Michael El-Batanony

This brilliant savant and notable artist was born in the 14th of September 1873 in Cairo, his father who was a simple officer loved Coptic hymns and mastered a lot for he had received them from the noted monk “Botros Mouftah” who departed in 1875.

Michael in his childhood was partially clear-sighted, his father observed his talent and introduced him to the church to learn hymns, not sparing any money to accomplish this task. Michael took his preschool education at “Abouelsaad Kottab” in Azbakia district from 1879 to 1881, then he joined “AlKobra” school - that was originated by Pope Kyrillos IV (The father of reform 1845-1963) - from 1881 to 1885. In the same year he joined El-Azhar to learn Arabic language (from 1885 to 1891).

Michael learned hymns from cantors : “Morcos” and “Arsanios”, the pupils of cantor “Takla” (Fr. Takla afterwards) who was the one teaching at the Patriarchal school before the start of “Alkobra Coptic school”.

When Pope kyrillos IV observed that the condition of hymns require his personal attention and care, asked cantor “Takla” –an admirable musician– to care for Coptic hymns. Takla added some beautiful Greek hymns and chose seven talented singers and concentrated on teaching them, those seven afterwards became the pioneers in church music , two of them were “Morcos” and “Armanios” the teachers of Michael.

All the circumstances helped Michael to benefit from the available knowledge resources and church art. All the musical talents bunched up in him, for his ears were musically very sensitive, his rhythms of tunes was so accurate and had so pleasant voice of Baritone⁵ tone. By the time he reached nineteenth he had mastered most of the Coptic hymns and as soon as he joined the Seminary in 1891, he took the post of the “Chief Cantor” at St. Mark cathedral.

He was appointed as hymns teacher on the 2nd of November, 1893 at the Seminary. He was known for his accuracy, his lovely voice and his ardency in preserving the hymns original tunes.

His new post as teacher did not detain him from learning more about this art and confirming the hymns with the noted Cairo cantors especially after the departure of cantors “Morcos & “Armanios” . He also searched for any new hymn, not known to him or not used in Cairo, he got some hymns used at Menia province (like the hymn: Abet geek evol” which is chanted before reading the Catholicon).

Cantor Michael founded a school for blind cantors at Zaitoon district in 1901, where “Saad Basha Zaglool” (Minister of Education at that time) visited him.

He was granted the appellation of the “Bakawia” for his great efforts in transferring the Coptic mass to the Arabic language in the paacy of Pope Kyrillos V (1874-1928) who was known for his love and care for Coptic hymns. Pope kyrillos embraced the talented cantor, supported him and took care of his education.

To assist blind cantors, Cantor Michael prepared and published books for Coptic hymns in Brail format.

⁵ Baritone is the mid vocal tone for men. It is middle between the sharp tenor & the coarse bass, and is characterized by its flexibility in performance.

Dr. Rageb Mouftah narrates about his memories with cantor “Michael El-Batanony” (Cairo magazine - issue number 140):

“One day we were in Alexandria and Cantor Michael heard from one of the early cantors a short refrain, not known to him, immediately with great interest he said, “I want to hear it once more”, and soon he grasped it very easily”

Dr. Rageb continues : “I have traveled a lot and lived among many nations, but I never heard about a man in the age of eighty five so eager and persistent in work like this man. He liked to deliver the hymn trust which he was entrusted with to each one seeking and caring to gain. He cheers up when seeing a pupil having a musical talent and gets delighted when one of his schoolboys masters a difficult hymn.

I remember when I gathered the senior cantors, his early disciples, asking him to regulate the melodies of the “Gregorian Holy Mass” for them, after they received it all, we assigned for each one a part to practice so we can record the mass for the next generations. One part - which was given to an admirable cantor - was really difficult; each time we try to record, the cantor errs so we try again. Finally he did it correctly, and before finishing the recording cantor Michael in his ecstasy stood up and applauded happily. With his applaud we lost the chance to record this part, the chance we all were waiting, for we were so exhausted and the place was narrow & hot, in a big gathering of priests , deacons and cantors who angrily complained, so I went to him sweating and welcomed him cheerfully and said to all: “Do not get angry, for cantor Michael as a brilliant artist could not bridle his joyful feeling”.

He always cheered up when hearing an accurate performance, always encouraging his pupils. Truly he was the cantor of the cantors and an encyclopedia of Coptic hymns. I heard a lot from priests and deacons (like Fr. Morcos Guirgis of Matay) how they prefer to receive hymns from cantor Michael – in spite of his old age and senescence of his voice–

than receiving from others for his strains and accents were clear and accurate, easily delivered and understood by others.

In our last meeting, before his death by three days, he introduced to me a talented boy saying : “This boy deserves a lot of support & encouragement” and he spent hours teaching the boy, I was caring too much to let him save his voice, but I couldn’t but bow to him respectfully. This bright star did not vanish for he is singing the universal hymn with the angels”

In sincere words full of love and respect Dr. Rageb elegizes Cantor Michael, saying :

“You did not die, you immortal one, your great spirit and power will continue, you son of the Pharaohs. You are like the Nile river in its flooding covering the whole valley; for your teaching covered the whole country from one end to the other, you had an immortal impact like the pyramids that overlook on each epoch without shaking.

The Coptic hymns – echoing throughout the valley from thousands of years - you had preserved for us in a generation always changing and altering. You are crouching amidst us like Sphinx, for you will continue to be the pioneer teacher.

You – the great heart - had exhaled from this tiny room to the universal world to be one of the singers of the melodies of the holy of holies, each melody of them excels all the hymns on earth whatever its spirituality. You are now talking with Didymus - associates talk - and Athanasius is listening, for the church became enlightened by you both”

The role of Dr. Rageb Mouftah:

Dr. Rageb Mouftah was born in 1898 to a respectable Coptic family (one of his ancestors was Raphael Mouftah who lived in early seventeenth century). We can find reference to the great services his family did to the church in the codices number 75 at the Coptic Museum (dated 1613). He learned music in Germany, and one of his main

achievements was collecting the Coptic hymns heritage from the tongues of the cantors and recording it vocally on tens of tapes to be a lantern for coming generations.

He hired from England the expert “Ernest Newland Smith” (professor of “Royal Music Academy of London” and a music composer). The deal stated that Mr. Smith should stay in Egypt for seven months each year (from first of October to the end of April) to write down the musical notes for Coptic Hymns. All the expenses of traveling, accommodation and stipend were covered by Dr. Rageb. This work was accomplished from 1928 to 1936 in sixteen volumes covering all the rituals of the Coptic Church. Mr. Smith depended upon the cantor Michael El-Batanony in recording the hymns on sheets for his pleasant voice and accurate performance.

In 1940 Dr. Rageb assembled several choruses, one for singers from the Seminary, and the other two from the university students. He invited Mrs. Margaret Tout - the Magyar musician and one of the students of Bella Partok the great musician – to add the musical ornaments⁶ to the Coptic hymns sheets recorded by Dr. Smith.

In 1931, he traveled to England to give lectures at Oxford, Cambridge and London. The following year, he was invited to the international music conference that was held in Cairo, thirty music professors attended from several European universities, and one of the main topics was Coptic Music. Dr. Rageb invited the conference members to a Holy Mass at El-Moalaka Church and held several meetings for them at his house in ELHaram district to study the Coptic music. As an output, the conference decided to record on discs some of the hymns and portions of the Holy Mass (produced by Gramophone company).

In 1989, he was invited by Berlin radio station to visit Germany and record some portions from the Coptic melodies.

⁶Musical ornaments or melody trappings are added tones placed to adorn the musical work with beauty & diversity, either written as signs or symbols placed before, after or above the main sounds. When written, it does not take its time interval from the measure but from the main sounds that precedes or comes after. Musical ornaments have many kinds and names like :Abodgatora, Chkatora, Mordent, Gretto, Tyrell...etc

In 1992, he granted all his work to the Congress Library in Washington to be preserved for generations using the most recent technological devices.

In 1998, he issued a book, entitled “The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil with Musical Notations”, which was published by the American University of Cairo.

The experience of Dr. Rageb (Pluses & minuses):

On this experience and the book previously mentioned I have some comments that might help in continuing this march and assist others in their own trials

+ The huge and great effort in recording the Coptic hymns from the mouths of the noted and accurate early cantors on cassette tapes was a magnificent and splendid work. History will attribute that to Dr. Rageb for his work will be the only genuine and trustee reference - without any distortion or alteration – for he had fetched to us the raw melodies from their origin before doing any scientific reparation.

I personally depend mainly on these records when writing the musical note of hymns I present through David’s Ensemble. When someone asks me about the accurate source for learning hymns - for there are several records by monasteries and well-known cantors – I refer him definitely to the authentic, accurate and complete (covering all hymns) records of “The Institute of Coptic Studies”, for this institute is the official Institute representing the Coptic Church inside and outside Egypt.

+ Regarding the book mentioned previously, it is really a considerable work of dedicated years of three persons that loved and spent their time and effort: Dr. Rageb Mouftah the Coptic Egyptian, Dr. Margaret Tout the Magyar Catholic and Dr. Martha Roy the American protestant. This kind of ecumenical gathering around Coptic hymns was a sign of communion and love.

I have no comments on the content of the book but I have some remarks regarding the musical notations produced by Dr. Margaret Tout:

First- Coptic melodies are special reflecting the culture of the ancient Egyptians, Mr. Smith, in one of his lectures (at Oxford in 21st of May 1926) expressed how difficult it was for him as a foreigner to write musical notes for Coptic melodies since they differ totally from other nations music. That is why no one can accurately write those notes unless he is an Egyptian, knowing the rules, modes and bars of Egyptian music as well as the scientific methods to accomplish the task. In my personal opinion, the experience of getting a foreigner from Europe to write musical notations for Coptic music, or getting a Magyar to add the musical ornaments should be taken cautiously.

I quote here the opinion of the noted maestro Youssef Elsisy, who after observing some musical notations of a group of Coptic melodies that I personally recorded, said :

“Dr. Margaret Tout is the most capable musician to write the Magyar popular music heritage, but she may not be capable to write the heritage of the Coptic melodies. Those notations should be written by a deacon, conservator of hymns heritage and musically educated... like you !!? “

Secondly- The musical notations in this book manifest Coptic music as if it has no rhythmic modes, bars, or keys. I heard the same remark from some great musicians caring for Coptic hymns, after checking the notations included in this book.

Thirdly- I think that notations were written accurately in terms of tone & time measures using the Milo -graph, but it seems that she who operated this device having not understood the essence or the spirit of the melodies, she did not reform its tones inside the musical measures, and since she is not an Egyptian she could not understand the modes of those melodies, she did not set the proper “Key signature” for them in the Armattora (Musical sheet), and did not choose the normal suitable vocal league for scale stability. Thus the Coptic hymns appeared as if they had no modes, rhythms or time signatures, though on the

contrary it is well known scientifically and internationally that the old Egyptian music is the one that set up the rules of modes, rhythms and time signatures for music of other nations.

As a simple evidence, while performing we hold the timbrel and triangle to sign in uniform rhythmic modes, these modes were the same ancient Egyptian modes that were praised by musical scientists like Plato and Phithagore, for each mode a key signature that differentiate it from other modes. (Refer to books speaking about Egyptian music rules)

Fourthly- The ornaments and trappings that filled the book– that have no rapport with the main Coptic hymn - had entirely confused the main Coptic hymn. Its sedate identifications was lost amid huge numbers of ornaments and trappings that showed the Coptic melody in a form that shaded its reverence.

There are with no doubt some ornaments and trappings – that most of the singers and cantors agree upon - which are considered within the main part of the melody contexture, but the ones that are added by each singer according to his own view and personal feelings does not count as a main part of the melody.

About the musical ornaments in the Coptic music, “Nabil Kamal” writes in his Master’s Tractate:

“The singer adds while singing some extemporaneous ornaments with an objective of beautifying the melody and expressing the meanings, each singer with his personal method adorn these hymns according to his feelings and vocal capability (as proceeding from his sentiments). No two singers may accord on the same ornaments for any specific hymn, but even with the same singer while reduplicating the same melody he will not iterate the same ornaments exactly”.

How then could we record for history melodies with ornaments that no two singers agree upon? Or ornaments that cannot be iterated twice by the same singer?

The ornaments or trappings or arabesque miniatures are additions added by each performer according to his personal view and his interaction with the melody, its words and meanings, but it may differ for the same person from time to time according to his spiritual and psychological state. Therefore writing those ornaments - that do not relate to the main melody (canto fermo) - are considered records of tones of instant emotions and personal feelings that belong to a person and not a hymn.

Dr. Adel kamel confirms that saying (in Cairo Mmagazine-issue number 140):

“The nature of our Coptic music is exactly the nature of public music⁷ in any place having ancient folklore heritage, and writing musical notations is only a record for the time measures and sound intervals, but such music has its way of performance including accurate details that could not be written since it changes from one performer to another”.

When adding these ornaments to the musical note of the original melody, it confuses the main tones because its musical moves are usually faster than the original tone moves.

How much I wished that before producing a book like that a revision of all musical notations had taken place. The revision in my point of view, should let a musician or more - experts in reading the Egyptian music notes – read the sheets right away in front of a credible cantor. This revision to the musical notations are very important before publishing and granting the notations to foreign institutions, that can by their financial capabilities use them – with their mistakes – in performances through orchestras and international choruses.

⁷ I disagree with Dr. Adel Kamel in considering the Coptic music having the nature of public music.

It is a critical matter since these orchestras will not be capable to perform the Egyptian musical modes like sika⁸, bazrak, iraq, awg or fine fingering the nems & teeks (from our eastern Coptic music mysteries) or performing the “Egyptian tetra chords” : “saba” , “hozam”, “bayaty” or “rast” with their strange intervals to the European vocal chords and ears that are not adapted to our unique Coptic Egyptian music.

I hope that those foreign institutions do not export back to us those musical notations recorded on cassette tapes and compact discs (that may be received eagerly and with curiosity to see what foreigners have about our heritage even if it is a deformed heritage) and after a hundred years or so it will be normal for people to doubt the accuracy of the cantors and give the credit to the hymns received on fancy compact discs (which shall take its authenticity from this fancy authenticable book)

For the unmusical reader I will try to simplify the matter of how difficult to a foreigner to read and write Coptic melodies, If you can think of how many foreigners lived in Egypt for years and tried to learn Arabic language with all its details and difficult rules, some Arabic letters (O ð were an obstacle in their task, for they could not articulate them accurately. All the letters that have similar letters in their native languages were easy, only the extraneous letters were difficult. Similarly in the Coptic music there is no problem in writing and performing any tone similar to a tone available in the European music, but only the special tones of Coptic music are an obstacle.

For the musical reader, I have no doubt that he agrees with me, for I had discussed this matter with several noted musicians before writing those words.

⁸The Persians set names for tone rhythms in the Egyptian musical scale (rest which means straight) being the main scale in the Egyptian music. These names were the names of the used numerical numbers, to indicate how the musical scale was in order, the first tone was “Yaka”, the second “Doka”, the third “Sika”, the fourth “Gharka”, the fifth “Bengika” (Elnoy), the six “Sishka” (hosainy), the seventh “Hefka” (awg), the eighth “hetshka” (kerdan), Also some city names were used for eastern scales like “nahawend”, “hegaz” & “iraq Elkordy”.

We have some attempts of presenting Coptic music in modes different from their original modes. The result was negative, deformed melodies without the quarter of tone⁹ (Microtone). There is a certain group, for example that tried to produce several hymns, one of them was the joy hymn “Eporo”, after removing from it the three quarter of tone. The hymn changed to another mode than its original one (Bayati mode); it turned to be a distorted hymn, not an Egyptian or a western. This happened due to their inability to produce it in its original Byati mode, or more probably the inability to distinguish the low “Be mol”¹⁰ degree. Performing the quarter of tone in general requires a sensitive ear capable of distinguishing it, and in the Coptic church it requires a more sensitive accurate ear, for the quarter of tone in the church music has a comma¹¹ added to it than in general eastern music.

Fifthly - We should discuss the objectives which that book tried to achieve. If it was published to preserve the heritage for next generations, then it should have been written in the first place in an accurate scientific way, showing the rhythms, scales, time signatures and modes, especially for those hymns that are chanted using the timbrel. The ornaments that reflect personal feelings which are mere individual tones should not have not been written (for they show the instability of the melody and sometimes disjoin from the main melody when the singer fails to choose the suitable kind of the ornament, besides, the long ornament sometimes do away with the regular scale of the melody.)

If the objective of the book was to teach Coptic melodies using the musical note, then the method applied in writing hymns in that book make it so difficult for great musicians to read¹².

⁹ Quarter of a tone is the tone produced from the distance between two successive tones in the musical scale, equal to a quarter of complete distance and it is used frequently in the eastern music. Europe in the past used to use it according to the ancient Greek music, and after the development that happened in the European music all scales under the semitones were exempted.

¹⁰ “Be mole” degree is the musical tone that was dropped by a semitone.

¹¹ Comma is a very small distance that can not be calculated , it is the difference available between two tones having one tandem sound

¹² I heard from Dr. Martha Roy that Dr. Tout will produce a cassette tape (having the recorded sound) to be attached to the book. This will help in reading these difficult notations.

But if the objectives from this publishing is to study different kinds of ornaments that Coptic cantors use, their classification, and indicating their impact on the original melodies, then such a book will be useful only for the few persons that seek such a study (like Robert Lakh who was specialized in studying the Melisma¹³ and the ornaments in the eastern music, and like the researcher Elona Porsay that published a paper about the kinds of ornaments in the Coptic music)

Unfortunately from the time Dr. Smith finished these musical notations in 1936, those notations were kept unexposed for more than sixty years, not accessed to musicians to be able to read, comment, sing while reading and perform using musical instrument. If they were exposed, the accuracy of the notations would be revealed, mistakes would be corrected, and then and only then would be published, for a lot of Coptic musicians were caring for this heritage but had no notations until this recent publishing.

The noted Coptic maestro, late Youssef EL-Sissy, invited me several times to his house spending hours to search around the Coptic hymns. This heritage was occupying him but he had no sheets except the records collected by Dr. Rageb Mouftah, and the modest information that I know about the hymns and what I have wrote by myself.

I wish that a special Coptic chorus be assembled, capable of reading the musical note accurately (after correction) and their hymns be recorded and produced so that the two pictures match (the read & the heard). Are sixty years not enough to find twenty deacons only capable of reading musical notations?

Though I am not dedicated (I work in the engineering field), I was able to assemble a modest group (also undedicated, I often wished that we all be dedicated for this ministry) that know how to read musical notations, love the Coptic hymns and understand there meanings. I was caring to explain to them the spiritual and musical meanings implied in

¹³ Melisma is a method of elongating the single verbal portion of the word with several musical grades, and it is different than the conflation method that have one musical grade for each single verbal portion of the word.

each hymn, to make their performance reflect these meanings. We presented in many ceremonies several hymns after I wrote their notations and rechecked them with Cantor “Ibrahim Ayad” (Coptic Hymns teacher at the Institute of Coptic studies). We were also honored by him accompanying us in Performances, and representing these hymns in their scientific and accurate form inside and outside Egypt, and had a great impact on the audience. He always incites me to prepare more hymns using the same method for he had observed that the Coptic hymn had dressed its original dress.

The great and pioneer experience of Dr. Mouftah opened the way to many others to add a step or more on this important path.

God had presented for us in every generation a witness to preserve the hymns He had entrusted His saints with, and in this generation this great hard worker as a witness to preserve His hymns to pass these hymns safely and unblemished from this century to the third millennium.

I will not forget this historical day when I met this giant, in the celebration held to lionize him at the American University in Cairo (13th of January 2000), and I was invited with the chorus to present some Coptic hymns and at the end of the celebration he said with humbleness: “The hymns you represented today were great, they were the most beautiful thing in the celebration”. It was a warm meeting that made me cry from his compliment and encouragement and I talked to him about this book, about his great works I mentioned in the book, his role that will not vanish, and about my critique regarding Dr. Tout’s work, and he replied : “The reason is because she is highly influenced by the trend of “Bella Partok” that depends to a great extent on exaggerations in writing the ornaments in a very detailed way”. I was afraid that he might criticize me for using some musical instruments accompanying the hymns, but on the contrary he favored the performance of David’s chorus.

I thank God for giving me favor in his eyes, and I ask Him to give me the power to continue the mission of this great man that consumed all his life to preserve this immortal heritage received from the holy apostles and fathers.

The role of St. Mark the apostle:

The Coptic Church stayed preserving what she had received from the talented fathers who had applied the Coptic hymns to psalms and ancient prayers without any new composing, not in the modes or ways, whereas the western church - who had received from us in the past – developed in this field unlimited modes and ways.

Coptic hymns started with the beginning of the church, the history of Coptic hymns started with St. Mark at Alexandria (which was an important cultural center at that time). St. mark himself was learned in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. He established the Seminary which was teaching music, philosophy, logic, medicine, engineering as well as religious topics, he chose “Youstos” for managing the college, and its prominence spread all over, even to the leader of pagan philosophers like “Amonios ELSakas” who used to attend its lectures. (Refer to the book of St. Mark written by H.H. Pope Shenouda III). Perhaps this is a main evidence that the Coptic hymns were not only inspired by the Holy Spirit but is also an output of an academic scientific study.

What will also may cheer you up is that the Coptic hymns are genuine, having their tones and modes adjusted at the apostolic era, the era of pouring out of gifts abundantly.

Eusebius the Caesarian (264 - 340A.D.) - the noted historian – writes conveying from Philo the Jewish historian (20 BC - 55 AD) who lived at the time of the apostles:

“They do not just spend their time in meditations, but they compose songs and hymns to God with all kind of modes, and classify them to different scales”

In fact this quotation as it comes from an eyewitness is considered to be one of the main references about the beginning of producing such powerful hymns in the Coptic church.

Those fathers had arranged the elementary basis for the Liturgy and other church services whether psalms or hymns, specifying their time and occasion. It is well known that after accepting Christianity the church in Egypt lived for two centuries in a peaceful and calm state, God's providence desired for her to concentrate on establishing in Egypt the traditions that were received from the apostles.

When Cassian speaks about the church life as received from St. Mark, we discern that the church arrangements were set and established from the early days of faith. Both Cassian and Eusebius agree upon the time the church regulations were set concerning the daily worship, number of psalms, and the ways of their modes and melodies.

Today there are within the church a huge number of hymns, all having accurate vocal modes, each hymn expresses wonderfully its meaning. To compose something similar it is not only difficult but impossible even by the greatest composer.

Copts should be proud of their church tradition because it was the base for most of the churches in east and west, regarding the prayers system and canonical hours, the Coptic church is the instructor of the whole world.

Praises and its methods whether antiphon or responds , psalm numbers and service of all night praise, all these church arrangements were established in Egypt from the first century, and through Egypt after about three centuries the church system were spread by foreign monks who came to learn from the desert fathers, to Palestine by Hilarion the monk, to Babylon by Ogeen the monk, to Cappadocia and Asia minor by St. Basil, and to France and Italy by St. Athanasios the apostolic (in his second exile 340-346 A.D.) and John Cassian.

All those came and visited the church in Egypt and transferred her succinct system in worship, asceticism, prayer, and especially in praise, they all knew a rite that connects all prayers with special delightful tones and ways.

2- The World & Coptic hymns

The eyes of the whole world began to turn towards the everlasting heritage of Coptic hymns. This heritage the church has preserved so far and delivered one generation after the other through prayers, fasting, metanoia, tears, humility, sweat, and blood. The church could cross with her heritage the waters of bitter persecutions along lengthy generations. Though not recorded musically, and in spite of the lack of recorders (which spread only in this century), the repetition of tunes, their timing and rhyming beats were the only means through which these hymns survived for twenty centuries.

This way is the most difficult for survival. The Psalms of David the Prophet, for instance, being written down without their musical tunes, were kept for thousands of years, but without those tunes. Due to their great spiritual value, many musicians tried to create for them certain tunes to enable enjoying them.

Had Beethoven not written his nine Symphonies, not even one tune would have reached us (perhaps only the wording of the fourth movement of the ninth Symphony). Evidently it is a miracle that we received such a heritage of Coptic Hymns after 2000 years although they have not been recorded.

It is a miracle indeed that indicates how keen is the church on preserving the tradition handed down from the father apostles, whether orally or written (imitation is not meant here).

The Coptic Orthodox Church is the only Church that kept what she received from the father apostles with incomparable honesty. She kept every thing as received, for each rite has its origin, its movement has its meaning, each form of worship has a spiritual significance, each rank has a role and a garment and a type, and each hymn has its importance on the suitable spiritual occasion, and nothing of these has fallen away!

Untraditional Churches, on the contrary, stand now before these symbols, rites, forms, ranks, instruments, garments and hymns without understanding their significance and thereupon without awareness of their importance. That is why those untraditional churches cancelled whatever they wanted of worship forms or rites, priestly ranks or garments - thinking them of no use- and hymns as well – seeing they are difficult to learn.

This resulted in a new image of the church different from that engraved in the Lord Christ's heart and in the holy apostles' minds. The new image neither the Lord nor the apostle recognize. It is an image far from the doctrine of the Lord Christ, the teaching of the apostles, and the Gospel; an image in which the holy orders are lost, and Stephen the Archdeacon and First Martyr vanished, Timothy the Bishop disappeared, and the See of St. Mark dropped; an image where there is no censer, no icon of the holy virgin, nor Coptic hymns. The praise song, which the Lord and His holy disciples sang and went out to the olive mountain, has no existence in this new image, nor even St. Mark and his liturgy and hymns which he taught to the students in the Seminary of Alexandria.

Our Coptic Orthodox traditional Church really deserves the honor it receives from the whole world for preserving that holy image depicted by the Lord Christ to His holy disciples in the form of rituals, worship forms and deep melodies expressive of holy feelings.

Christ leads the chorus of disciples:

+ I think that some of these hymns the Lord chanted with His holy disciples; for after He gave them His holy body and precious blood in the upper room, as St. Mark the owner

of that room says in his Gospel, “*And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the mount of olives.*” (Mt.14: 26)

I cannot imagine that one of the disciples dared to lead the Lord Christ and the other disciples to teach them singing! The Good teacher alone taught them everything, and taught them how to sing a new song. Nor can I imagine that the apostles neglected the hymn they sang with the Lord Christ, but rather that they included it in the tradition they handed us with the Eucharist rite.

+ I think also that most of these hymns was composed at the time of the descending of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost when they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, “*and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” (Acts2: 4)

+ I believe that some of the hymns of Midnight Praise Songs were chanted by Paul and Silas in Prison; for we read in the Book of Acts, “*But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the Prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were loosed.*” (Acts 16:25)

Is it reasonable that such hymns that had shaken the foundations of the prison and opened all the doors immediately and loosened everyone’s chains were not preserved in tradition, while other hymns that had done no miracles like that were preserved?

And how could St. Paul the Apostle require us to speak to one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord (Eph 5: 19), and repeat this request in another way, saying, “*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.*”(Col.3: 16)? How could he

require us to do that unless he had set for us a model of such spiritual songs which he certainly used to sing to the Lord?

The Holy saints John Chrysostom, Basil the great, Augustine, Origen and others assert that Paul the Apostle referred by these verses to the ritual church prayers that were well known to the readers of those Epistles. It is also evident that St. Paul was aware of the importance of music as a basic element in worship, therefore he classified it into three divisions: Psalms; Praise Songs; Spiritual Songs. All traditional Churches therefore followed this classification and included it in their tradition.

Once more, when Christ healed the blind man who was sitting by the road begging and who cried out to Him, saying, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me*" and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God (LK. 18:43). How could they sing? And what did they sing? Is it not that which they learnt from Jesus the Son of David, that sweet singer of Israel? Probably their song was one of the hymns we sing now, which was preserved by tradition till we received it.

+ There is also Anna the prophetess, the daughter of phanuel of the tribe of Asher, the widow who sang with the others and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. It is not unlikely that St. Luke the Physician, Evangelist and Artist who recorded the event in his Gospel (LK.2: 38) has also recorded the melody of that hymn to be handed down as a model of praise songs to all those waiting for the Lord.

+ Furthermore, part of the hymns we chant on Palm Sunday is probably derived from the hymn which the disciples sang near the descent of the mount of olive. For St. Luke wrote in his Gospel, "*The whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*" (Lk.19: 37)

In my opinion, the multitude of the disciples could not praise with one voice and one hymn unless: either they all had learnt that hymn one day in any place (in the sea, in the upper room, in a deserted place, or on the mount before the sermon), or the Holy Spirit had descended on them so they composed that hymn with one spirit!

+ Those disciples, who were continually in the temple praising and blessing God (LK 24:53) are the source that handed down to us the tradition, the rituals of the intellectual worship and the hymns so that we may sing like them in the sanctuary continually. Certainly they were aware of the significance of praising to God and that it is "the sacrifice of the New Testament" that makes God's heart glad, as St. Paul the Apostle says in his Epistle to the Hebrews; "*Let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.*" (Heb 13:15)