

Coptic Hymns

1- Objectives

- Brief introduction to the history and development of hymns.
- Appreciation of the importance of hymns in the Coptic Church

2- References

- Coptic Music: Selected Writings
Ragheb Moftah Habashy, Head of the Coptic Music Department, Coptic Studies Institute, Cairo, Egypt (1958)
Deacon Nabih Fanous (Coptic Theology College of Pope Shenouda III)
- Coptic Contribution to Christian Civilization by Prof. Aziz Surial Attaya
- <http://www.coptic-cairo.com/culture/music/music.html>

3- Scriptural Verse

- “Then David spoke to the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy” (1 Chronicles 15: 16)
- “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19-20)

4- Lesson Guidelines

Music and Singing

- Music is the language used by the Seraphim in heaven (Isaiah 6:1-4; Revelation 5:8-9) and humans on earth to Praise God. St. Augustine says: “There is no emotion of the human spirit which music is incapable of expressing”
- Musical talents are in each one of us. Some have the strength to express it and others have the strength to feel it, enjoy it, and be touched by it.
- The best instrument ever is the human's voice. People used vocal music since their very early existence on earth. For thousands of years, people used music in worship and during hard work (Farmers, builders...) even mothers sing in order to calm down their babies.

History of the Music in the Bible

- The Old Testament tells us that musical arts existed from the very early existence of humans. Jubal son of Lamek was the father of all harpists and organists. (Genesis 4:21)
- When they crossed the Red Sea, Miriam with all the women after her sang to the Lord. Also for Joshua, Deborah and Barak, David the Psalmist and others, music was an essential part of their praises and prayers in times of war and peace, joy and sorrow.
- “When they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and praised the Lord.... that then the house was filled with a cloud” (2 Chronicles 5:13).
- It is the apostolic teaching; St. Paul made music an essential element of worship and divided it to three: Psalms-Praises-Spiritual songs (hymns) (Ephesians 5:19-20; Colossians 3:16).

- The early Christian Congregation attended both the synagogue and the temple in Jerusalem “Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer” (Acts3:1). They have been influenced by the Jewish music. An evidence of such an influence is the universal use of the Jewish word ‘Alleluia’ in all churches. Also Psalms were chanted the same way they were sung in synagogues.
- No attempt was made by the early preachers to dictate a uniform system of prayer on all churches. Rather they devoted their teachings to faith and doctrine and left the remaining details to individual churches to be arranged in accordance with their traditions and culture. An example of this is the Ethiopian Church which used dancing and their hymns and music totally differ from its parent church; the Coptic Church.
- The local inherited art had the biggest influence in forming the Church Art. In every country, raised prayers, liturgies and dogmas conforming to the nature and environment of each land that composed the music conforming with its own taste so the Byzantine Church Music is Byzantine, the Egyptian Church Music is Egyptian, etc... So every nation took from its previous worship tunes which were found appropriate and so was in Egypt.
- Religious Hymns which were composed similar to folkloric songs played a big role in spreading heresies and also in fighting them (Arius composed folkloric songs to spread his heresy and a lot of fathers in Egypt and Europe composed opposite hymns to resist it).

History of the Egyptian (Coptic) Music

- The Ancient Egyptian arts were profoundly engraved in the people's heart, it appeared clearly in Architecture, Sculpture and Ornaments. Singing and Music were necessary at every festival, in the king’s palace and even at homes.
- Thanks to St. Mark, Christianity spread quickly in all Egypt in the first century with great strength and zeal. The first Christians took the hymns from the Ancient Egyptians as well as from the Jews who lived there and used it in their new worship by adding to it spiritual dimensions.
- Both hymns (Egyptian and Jewish) mixed exceptionally well due to the similarity of the background of the two cultures and the dedication of the early Coptic Christians
- Historical evidence suggests that the Coptic hymns existed since the apostolic ages. It was formulated and formalized during the foundation of the Coptic Church. Contrary to the western churches whose hymns were developed with time, the Coptic hymns remained unchanged.
- No one can be certain as to how the hymns were developed and to what extent they were influenced by the surrounding cultures and time as they were transmitted as oral tradition from one generation to another until 1927 when Prof. Newlandsmith (the great English musicologist of Oxford and London Universities) invited by Sir Ragheb Mofteh, signed a contract to transcribe hymns and masses in Musical Note. He spent eight years transcribing it from the voice of Moalem (teacher) Mikhail until the work was done in 16 (18) volumes.
- A big rich collection of spiritual, profound and beautiful hymns survived and was preserved for the Church. Their number exceeds 300 Big and Small hymn. Most of their texts are Coptic, some are Greek. They are so diverse that only very few could claim absolute mastership of all hymns.

Nature of the Coptic Hymns

- Coptic hymns meant to express the innermost emotions of the praising spirit. They do not follow musical notes or dedicated rhythm but rather they translate the pulses of the spirit. No doubt, they were the product of highly spiritual people guided by the gifts and inspirations that were pertinent to the apostolic period.
- As such, it would seem impossible to duplicate it or challenge it by musicians. This conclusion was confirmed by the English musician Professor Newlandsmith who listened to the entire range of Coptic music and documented it in 18 (16) volumes.
- He said: “What we understand today as oriental music appears simply a degradation of what was once a great art. This music which has been handed down for untold generations within the Coptic Church should be a bridge between the East and the West and place a new idiom at the disposal of Western musicians. It is lofty, noble and great art especially in the element of the infinite, which is lacking today. Western music has its origin in ancient Egypt”.
- In spite that Coptic hymns are primitive and very ancient, they are still alive and appeal to both the simple and the sophisticated. It offers joy, peace, stimulation and fulfillment to whoever takes interest in it.
- All Church services as Tasbeha (Praise), Incense Offering, Masses, Fasts and Feasts have their own hymns. It differs accordingly to seasons. Many Hymns are said just once a year as they are composed for a special occasion.
- The sorrowful hymns have a very strong influence. No music in the whole world is similar. In 1933, more than 30 European Musician and Scientist heard these sorrowful songs, in the Music Conference held in Cairo, a strong feeling mastered them and the "Singing Science" Professors in the Sorbonne - Paris asked Fr. Morcos Shenouda to repeat the Commemoration of Saints over 6 times.
- The Coptic joyful hymns have their very special spiritual taste. They make us feel that the heavenly beauty is very superior to all this world's feelings.
- All other forms of music run out of fashion with time but the Coptic hymns have provided the Copts with an everlasting means of praising God.

Importance of Hymns

- Essential To Coptic Studies because it is related to the Church's tradition, rites, worship and spirituality.
- Essential to the Apostolic Church as they are part of the service and not to prepare the spirit for prayers as in the Non-Apostolic Church.
- They represent a valuable inheritance, which dates back to the apostolic age unchanged. Those who learn it become distinguished servants of the holies and participants of one of the church's most valuable Sacraments, namely, Praising God.
- Praising God is highly honored by the Coptic Church to the same degree as the Holy Sacraments as it is a 'sacrament of the heart'. Thus, the Didascalia warns even the bishop against taking hymns lightly or neglecting it.
- Hymns are essential to the Coptic Person as they are written to reveal the faith and beliefs. When it is sung by the spirit, it expresses participation in faith and thirst to God,

5- Conclusion

- Music is not fantasy or distraction; it is part of life and one of its most important elements. It is not just a combination of beautiful sounds that pleases the ear; it is an essential nourishment of the soul and the spirit.
- The real effect of the hymns comes from the fact that they are centered on God and His love. It is an appreciation and a display of love and gratitude towards the loving Father! Praise is a Divine service whereby we join the cherubim and seraphim in their continuous praise. Thus, we get raised to the level of the heavenly Angels.

6- Activities / Discussion Points

- Discuss how many tunes we have in the Coptic Church and their occasions: The Coptic Church has six musical tunes namely; Annual (throughout the year), Kiahk (the month before Christmas), Fasting (7 weeks of the Lent and Jonah's fast), Shaaniny (on Palm Sunday and Cross feasts), Hazayny (meaning sorrowful during the Holy Week and Funerals) and Farayhy (meaning joyful for feasts and joyous occasions) in addition to the mixed tunes of Bright Saturday.
- Relate each tune to a known hymn or song so that it will be easy to change from a tune to the other. For example, Lent (blessed are those who have mercy); Kiahk (Tente nembe shere tismos); Shaaniny (algaes faouka el Sherubim), etc...