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HOW EARLY CAN YOU GO? COPTIC CHANT IN WESTERN TRANSCRIPTION

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The Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt has produced one of the world's most extensive and profound liturgical traditions, consisting of three liturgies (St Basil, St Cyril, and St Gregory Nazianzes), services for the Offices (Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, the Prayer of the Veil, and Matins), hundreds of hymns included in a special office called the Psalmody (Arabic: *Psalmodiyya*), and a wealth of chants used for feasts and special occasions (Holy Week, Nativity, Epiphany, Resurrection, Lent, and Pentecost, to name a few). There is no known notational system devised specifically for this musical corpus; the chants have been passed on from generation to generation, through oral teaching and rote learning. There is even a firm belief amongst its participants that Coptic melodies originated during Pharaonic times, and it is certain that some Coptic liturgical rites, and with that perhaps even a measure of the Coptic hymnology, have survived since at least first millennium: a liturgical and musical treasure that is ancient.

As such, the significance of this oral tradition cannot be undervalued. It seems a historical curiosity that this tradition, which is possibly “the nearest analogue to the period in 8th-century Europe immediately before the first ever codification of a musical repertory, that of Frankish Gregorian chant”¹, has not garnered widespread academic investigation. In the study of Coptic music, scholars may be able to find possible answers to critical questions facing musicology: the nature and constancy of oral tradition, the size of repertory, and, perhaps, a clearer understanding of the early, vanished parts of plainchant.

There have been a handful of scholars—most notably Ernest Newlandsmith, Ilona Borsai, Margit Tóth, and Marian Robertson—who have dedicated much time and thought transcribing this sacred monophonic vocal tradition into Western notation. Though this body of collected transcriptions spans decades and has been produced under a variety of scholars with different methodologies and different sources, there is a degree of notational consistency in terms of melodic content. This is an indication that a measure of constancy has indeed been attained in this oral tradition.

For this paper, I intend to delve deeply into the work of the aforementioned scholars, analysing their methods of transcription and comparing them to one another. Beginning with a brief history of the ambitious efforts of those who dedicated themselves to the study Coptic chant and transcription, all of whom lived in the 20th century, I will trace the development of

¹ Hiley 1982.

the understanding of this complex and vast musical canon from its most prescriptive insight—as realized by Newlandsmit—to the most recent and meticulous notational rendering by Tóth, who dedicated much of her time to the intricacies of rhythm and notation in the melodic embellishments common in Coptic chant.

Before I begin, I am obliged to make a few perfunctory remarks concerning Coptic history and language and the musical attributes of Coptic chant, so the listener can become better acquainted with the environment of this musical corpus.

COPTIC HISTORY AND LANGUAGE

According to tradition, St Mark founded the Coptic Church in the first century; it has continued since then in the form of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the See of St Mark. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., the Alexandrian Patriarchate, which had been a leading force in the ancient Christian Mediterranean world, withdrew from the other Papal centres (the Byzantine and Roman churches) and, with the exception of some contact with the Armenian and Syrian (Jacobite) Churches, continued to develop its own unique and distinctive musical tradition. The Copts were further circumscribed by the Arab conquest of Egypt (640-41 C.E.). They continued to maintain their liturgical rites but began to incorporate an increasingly common usage of Arabic.

The Coptic language is the latest stage in the development of Ancient Egyptian. The language is written in the Greek alphabet (a vestige of Ptolemaic times) with seven characters borrowed from Demotic script. Greek is still the language of much of the liturgical terminology: Greek phrases transliterated into Coptic, such as *Kyrie eleison* (English: Lord have mercy) and *Agios* (English: Holy)—left over from the period before the 3rd century A.D. during which the liturgies and Gospels were translated into Bohairic Coptic—still remain firmly in the Coptic lexicon.² Since the seventh and eighth centuries, when the liturgies were translated into Arabic, prayer books were divided into two vertical columns, on the left Coptic and on the right Arabic (**Figure 1**). As a spoken idiom, the Coptic language has probably been dead since the end of the seventeenth century³. Today Coptic is only used for liturgical purposes; Arabic, Coptic and vernacular languages of Coptic communities in countries of immigration are used throughout services interchangeably.

Figure 1.
C. Mid-14th-century
Psalmody service book
Sourian Monastery,
Wadi-n-Natrun, Egypt



² Coptic possesses a number of regional dialects, the major ones being Sahidic, Bohairic, Akhmimic, Lycopolitan, Fayyumic, and Oxyrhynchite. Since this dissertation is focused on the musical concerns of the Coptic liturgical rites, Bohairic Coptic will be the primary linguistic interest.

³ Atiya 1968.

ATTRIBUTES OF COPTIC MUSIC AND PROBLEMS OF TRANSCRIPTION

Coptic music is entirely vocal, monodic and sung a capella by men. Certain hymns are accompanied with vigorous percussion played by deacons: a pair of small metal hand cymbals (Arabic: *al-naqus*) and a metal triangle (Arabic: *trianto*) are the only two instruments used.

Coptic melodies use extremely fine and subtle degrees of macro- and microtones. Although some of these nuances of pitch are foreign to the Western musical tradition, Coptic cantors have developed an extraordinary capability of performing rhythmically and notationally complex phrases. In performance, a wide vibrato – akin to a quarter-tone trill – and various other improvised embellishments colour the singing. Though the melodies themselves are diatonic and nearly all have the ambitus of a perfect fifth, intervallically the Western distinction between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ does not exist. Most hymns have a very narrow range of tones: leaps greater than a third are rare, as is the augmented second; the minor third is used frequently, together with the major third used for many cadence-like phrases.

One of the most distinct elements of Coptic chant is the prolongation of a single vowel over several musical phrases.⁴ These prolongations are so ubiquitous and complex that they often hinder an understanding of the musical structure for those not familiar with the liturgical prayers. Moreover, the prolongations can even impede the text. If one looks closely at the prayers and the pre-anaphoral hymns, an enjambment occurs when the musical cadence falls in the middle of a line of text. Consequently, longer melodies are built upon intervallic relationships, rather than being fixed in pitch, and—like many vocal folk music traditions—are often performed at whatever pitch is suitable for the singers.

These characteristics are often the source of consternation for the transcriber: how does one distinguish between what is the structural melody and what is simply a performative embellishment? How does one deal with chants that are intervallically constructed, or with a cantor that migrates to whatever tonal centre pleases him? Different scholars arrive at different conclusions to such questions. Especially with transcriptions in the earlier half of the 20th century, the limits of Western notation are clearly challenged. After notational developments introduced by Bartók, Dobszay, and even New Complexity composers toward the end of the century, minute pitch renderings become an obsessive focal point for some transcribers.

TRANSCRIPTION BEFORE THE RECORDING ERA: ERNEST NEWLANDSMITH

The English musicologist Ernest Newlandsmith spent ten years (1926-36) working on transcriptions of Coptic chant under the sponsorship of Ragheb Moftah, eventually producing some sixteen folio volumes of music, most of which are in the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo and in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.⁵ Newlandsmith transcribed the chants from live performances by the cantor Mu'allim Mikha'il Guirgis al-Batanouni, the most famous Coptic cantor of his time, who was “blessed with an excellent, very clear voice and a prodigious memory”.⁶

Although the intention of Newlandsmith’s work could be interpreted as pioneering and ambitious, his style of notation is, predictably for its era, selective and prescriptive. Newlandsmith ignored most of the embellishments and goes to great lengths in describing the difficulty of stripping this newfound music of the Turkish, Arabic, and other influences that he felt had crept in. In a lecture delivered at the University of Oxford on 21 May 1931, Newlandsmith says:

⁴ Marian Robertson, in her Grove Encyclopedia article on Coptic music, differentiates between two different types of long prolongations on a single vowel: one with a definite rhythmic pulse which she labels as a ‘vocalise’, and the other with heavy use of rubato and embellishment which she labels as ‘melisma’. I, however, finding in most other scholarly work that these prolongations are simply referred to as ‘melismas’, see no need for such a distinction. (Stanley Sadie, ed., *Grove Encyclopedia of Music* v. 4, 412)

⁵ Ragheb Moftah had devoted his long life to the preservation of Coptic chant. Not only had he commissioned transcriptions from Newlandsmith and Margit Tóth, but recorded the entire corpus of Coptic Liturgical chants and hymns.

⁶ Newlandsmith 1931.

It is true that I 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.”⁷

Newlandsmith’s thoughts are clearly coloured by the social prejudices of his time resulting in an imposition of Western musical imperatives upon his transcriptions. His transcription of *Estatheetee* (English: “Stand up...”) (Figure 2a)⁸, the call to hear the Holy Gospel in the Liturgy of St Basil, is devoid of any indication of the “quarter-tone trills”, the inimitable embellishments, and microtones that make Coptic music distinctive. Instead, the chant is constrained by a 2/4 time signature and a B-flat major key signature.

His transcription of *Megharloo* (English: “The great...”) (Figure 2b),⁹ sung on the last Friday of Lent, is very straightforward. Written in F major, the only supplemental editing is an accented D flat. What is most striking about this transcription is its uniformity and symmetry; the whole phrase is constructed in a ten-measure concept of antecedent and consequent, moving step-wise towards the D flat and back to the F.

Of all the transcriptions in Newlandsmith’s oeuvre, the rendition of the hymn *Vay Aytay* (Figure 2c)¹⁰ displays the least amount of notational rigidity. In *Vay Aytay*, Newlandsmith does make an effort to transcribe embellishments through the use of mordents. He also transcribes with a more acute sense of metre and pulse.



Figure 2a. Transcription of Estatheetee from the Liturgy of St Basil (Newlandsmith 1929-1933).



Figure 2b. Transcription of Megharloo (Newlandsmith 1929-1933).

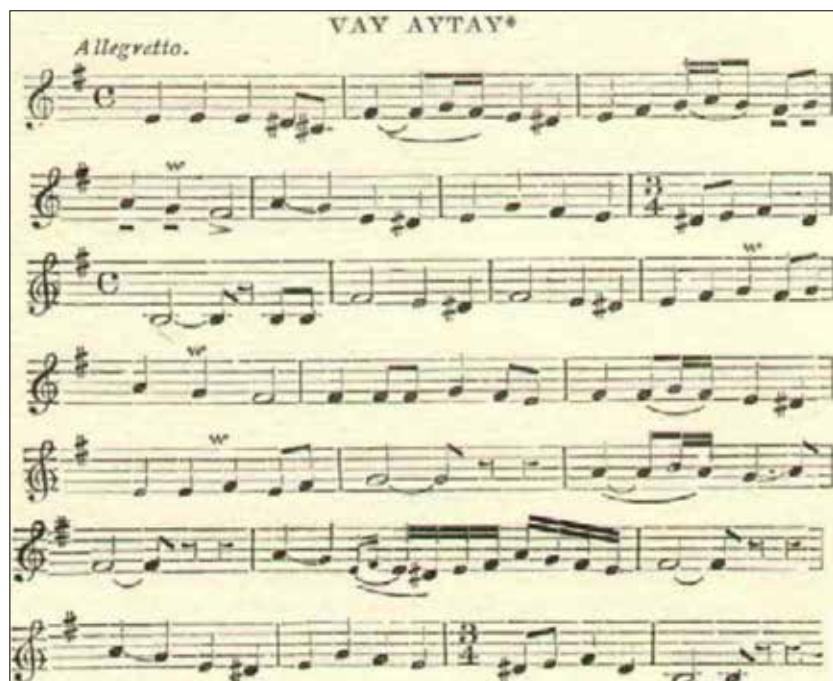


Figure 2c. Transcription of Vay Aytay (Newlandsmith 1929-1933).

7 Newlandsmith 1931.

8 Newlandsmith 1929-33.

9 Newlandsmith 1929-33.

10 Newlandsmith 1929-33.

Instead of fitting the chants into even time signatures, he mixes common and 3/4 time, and, as opposed to his other transcriptions, is not concerned with symmetry.

Unfortunately, as with much of Newlandsmith's work, a source for this transcription is not indicated. One can only conjecture that it was, like the majority of his work, based on oral transmission from Mu'allim Mikha'il Guirgis al-Batanouni. As for its placement in the Coptic hymnology, Newlandsmith specifies only that the hymn is translated into English as "He that hath ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches" (Revelation 2:7), and neglects to include either the original Coptic text or the commonly used Arabic text. Given the translation he provides, one can assume that this hymn is part of either the Litany for Bright Saturday or part of the Office of the Psalmody.

What Newlandsmith's work relinquishes in fastidiousness is made up for in melodic structure: an awareness of the clear and simple melodic lines in Coptic music. Although his transcriptions are devoid of embellishment and are adapted to the rhythms and key signatures of the West, his sense of melodic contour compares favourably with the work of more recent scholars.

Although both of Newlandsmith's and Margit Tóth's interpretations of the Amen/Amin (**Figures 2d and 2e**) chant share a similar melodic structure, Newlandsmith's interpretation shows its datedness; he limits his selection of intervals to a diatonic interpretation, while Tóth specifically writes quartertones to capture the microtonal inflections native to Coptic chant.

Newlandsmith's output of transcriptions allows one to glimpse the complexity, variety, and breadth of this unique musical practice. It is important to note that Newlandsmith, unlike his successors, did not have the advantage of recording equipment. His transcriptions are based entirely on oral transmission; he had no way to compare what he heard with what he notated.

Figure 2d.
Transcription of melismatic
"Amen" from the Liturgy of St
Basil ((Newlandsmith 1929-1933).



Figure 2e.
Transcription of melismatic "Amin"
from the Liturgy of St
Basil (Tóth 1998)



THE HUNGARIAN TRANSCRIBERS: ILONA BORSAI AND MARGIT TÓTH

Both Ilona Borsai and Margit Tóth were educated in Hungary, a country whose greatest composer of the 20th century, Béla Bartók, turned ethnomusicological transcription into something of a national pastime. Margit Tóth, in particular, was schooled in Bartók's method of notation under the tutelage of László Lajtha, who according to László Dobcsay "even surpassed it [Bartók's method] through greater detail of notation".¹¹ Both scholars used their training in the study of archaic European folk music as an informative tool in their transcriptions of Coptic chant, and both scholars, apart from collaborating with each other, also collaborated extensively with Ragheb Moftah. The cooperation between the Coptic Church and these Hungarian musicologists is undoubtedly of great importance; their partnership allows us for the first time to become

acquainted with Coptic chant on an intimate and detailed scale, and also produced an extensive set of transcriptions.

Ilona Borsai's research led to studies of Egyptian music: speculative studies on ancient Pharaonic music, transcriptions of Egyptian folk music, and vast studies of Coptic music. Her most compelling contributions are her transcriptions of Paschal Week chants,¹² her studies of ornamentation in Coptic hymns¹³ and her studies of metre and melody in Coptic chant¹⁴.

Borsai uses an effective method of transcription; she does not neglect embellishments but rather emphasizes their subtleties of pitch and rhythm. She also uses quartetone key signatures tailored for the transcribed chant, iterating the pitches with consistent microtonal inflections. In her comparative study of the Psalm cantillation during Paschal Week, she uses two different recordings by different cantors and compares the two to create a final transcription that removes the excess embellishment and shows the chant's structural melody (**Figures 3a and 3b**), a feat no other transcriber had accomplished.

Figure 3a.
Transcription of Paschal psalm cantillation (Borsai 1979)

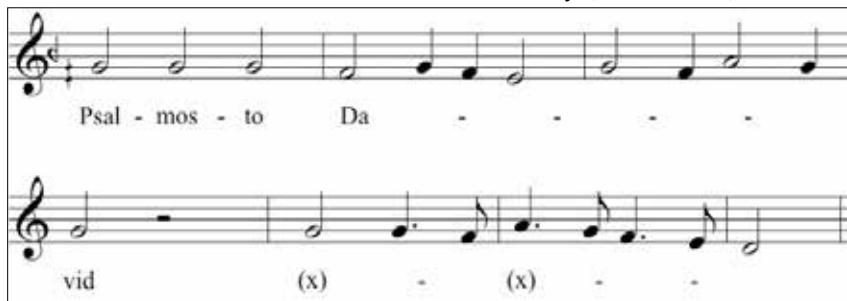
The transcription is a musical score for a single voice. It features five staves of music, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The tempo is marked as 96, 84, and 108. The lyrics are written below the staff, corresponding to the musical notes. The lyrics include 'Ψαλ - μος', 'ΤΩ', 'ΔΑ', '(α)', 'τιΔ', 'ε - τα - νε', 'τιΔ', 'ΙΙΑ', 'Ψε', '(ε)', '(etc.)', 'ΓΑ', and '(α)'. The notation includes various note heads, stems, and rests, with some notes having horizontal lines above them.

12 Borsai 1979

13 Borsai 1969

14 Borsai 1980.

Figure 3b.
Psalm cantillation structural melody (Borsai 1979).



The top figure shows the transcriptions of the two cantors side by side for comparative purposes. It is detailed to the point of showing changes of tempi; embellishments are notated with smaller noteheads whose stems point downward – a consistent characteristic of both Borsai's and Tóth's transcriptions. This particular transcription also shows that embellishments do not occur in the same areas and are not consistent with each cantor but are inherent to each of their performances. Notice that there are similar embellishment configurations at the end of their phrases; according to Borsai, these types of embellishments occur without fail in solo chanting and are a kind of cadential ornamentation.¹⁵

The bottom figure seems nearly as straightforward and prescriptive as Newlandsmith's transcriptions, but Borsai came to this conclusion using a very different and nearly scientific method. The very recording materials denied to Newlandsmith's work allowed Borsai to portray all of the expressions inherent in the Coptic voice. Moreover, instead of seeing the embellishments as a hindrance, or as 'debris', Borsai was keenly interested in them. She saw them as a manner of verifying the constancy of the Coptic tradition; a comparison between the two renditions of the same chant elucidates a form of music, which Borsai claims is indeed ancient.¹⁶ The comparison not only manifests consistency in the structure of the chant, but also a consistency in the types of embellishments used to ornament Coptic chant.

Borsai collaborated with Margit Tóth to catalogue and transcribe all of the embellishments in one Coptic hymn, *Ten O'ousht* (English: "We worship ..."), sung during the celebration of the Liturgy of St Basil as the priest and deacons don their vestments. In their expansive, jointly written article "Variations ornementales dans l'interprétation d'un hymne Copte", Borsai and Tóth aimed to portray the breadth, variety, and complexity of Coptic embellishment and organize a compilation of embellishments in Coptic chant. This study proved, however, to be disappointingly inconclusive. When Borsai tried to compare the embellishments to other recordings, she discerned discrepancies in the manner of singing *Ten O'ousht*. Unlike her successful experiment with the Psalm cantillation of Paschal Week, *Ten O'ousht* proved to be elusive; she came to conclusion that because *Ten O'ousht* is a common hymn sung every time the liturgy is celebrated it is prone to further improvised embellishment. Although the melodic structure of the hymn remains intact, Tóth's and Borsai's compendium of ornamentation was not universal in Coptic hymnology. As matter of fact, the only gain of the study was cataloguing the specific embellishments of the cantors on tape, and although it proves insightful for this specific hymn, it certainly does not reveal broad observations on the manner of embellishment in Coptic music.

The following transcription was notated by Tóth (Figure 4)—Borsai wrote the majority of the accompanying article—and one can already see that Tóth produces the most punctilious renderings of Coptic music in her transcriptions. Tóth indicates exact metronome markings to the cantors' whimsical tempi changes, and, like her colleague Borsai, she also marks the embellishments in smaller note heads with the note flags pointing downwards and marks

15 Borsai 1969.

16 Borsai 1969.

phrasing extensively. Tóth notates the rhythm of the chant with fervent specificity. In this transcription especially, Tóth does not seem interested in revealing a hidden structure or melodic spine; in fact, the melody she notates (denoted by the larger noteheads with stems turned upwards) is nearly as rhythmically complex as her notation of the embellishments.

Figure 4. Transcription of *Ten O'ousht* (Borsari 1969).

1. *TCX' δt - w* 2. *OGJT e e*
3. *μ. c* 4. *Φt - w* 5. *T*
6. *10.* 7. *15. J-69* 8. *πi*
9. *J-63* 10. *o - uoh - o - uoh - o - ho - o - mo - w - o1 πi*
11. *J-66* 12. *20.* 13. *xc - - μ. tc - y - wjx - - pi*
14. *25. J-66* 15. *o - - ho - o - ho - o - ho - o - - uo - o - u*
16. *J-60* 17. *30.* 18. *o - - uo - o - - uo - uo - o -*
19. *35. J-66* 20. *mo - o - uo - o - o - o - - zc - -*
21. *J-69* 22. *e - - nh - i - - i - yei - e - yei -*
23. *40. J-72* 24. *45. J-72* 25. *e - - ye - e - - e - ye - e - - yi - e:*
26. *50. xc - ye - e - - e - e - - e - - e - - e - - e - -*
27. *55. (J-72) xi - e - - xc - - τ. x2 - e - μ. π2 - - pa - -*
28. *a - - a - - a - - a - - a - - a - - a - - a - - a - -*

Like Borsai's comparative transcription of the Paschal Psalm cantillation, Tóth's intentions are to adhere to the specific cantor's every musical nuance and to then notate it as meticulously and accurately as possible. However, beyond that, their long-term scholarly aims differed. Borsai was interested in producing transcriptions that reveal the structural melodies of chants: their backbone. Tóth's transcriptions ambitiously portray every musical fibre inherent in the chants; because of this, her other transcriptions may be of profound interest to Western scholars.

MARGIT TÓTH'S TRANSCRIPTION OF THE LITURGY OF ST BASIL

Margit Tóth's transcription of the Liturgy of St Basil is the most accurate notational rendering of Coptic chant to date. Tóth's work cannot be underestimated; her transcription of a liturgy that can take anywhere from two and a half to four hours to perform is a seminal scholarly and musical achievement. The project took nearly three decades to complete, from its inception when Ragheb Moftah commissioned Tóth in 1970, to its publication in 1998. Laszlo Dobszay wrote that Tóth has an "almost morally determined conviction" that a scholar of transcription must perform notation to the greatest minutiae, and that the "notational morale" of the Bartók-Lajtha school is certainly manifest in its most extreme form in this transcription of the Coptic Liturgy. Her close attention to the highly embellished style of Coptic chant depicts the improvised melodic ornaments in a descriptive and very complex manner. As with her earlier collaborations with Borsai, Tóth differentiates between melody and embellishment through the use of stems and the size of the note head. The work's preface remarks on how the music should be studied:

- a) All sung pitches, including vocal ornamentation are transcribed on the staff in careful detail.
- b) The staff pitches written in large notation with stems turned up denote the traditional melody.
- c) The pitches in smaller notation with stems turned down denote improvised ornamentation chanted by the singer added to the regular melody.
- d) Extended melodic vocalizes within the text on one syllable, melismata, are made on some vowels.¹⁷

Tóth's complete transcription of the Basilian Liturgy is useful when looking for specific transcriptions and when trying to search for a melodic structure of the Liturgy. Tóth's transcriptions allow for relatively easy comparisons of congregational and cantorial chanting, something not before afforded to the student or scholar interested in Coptic chant.

The following (**Figure 5a**), the *Trisagion* hymn sung during the Liturgy of St Basil, *Agios o Theos* (English: 'Holy God'), is an example of a steady and rhythmic hymn sung by the congregation. Notice the lack of melismas and microtones, the straightforward metre (2/4 with the exception of a few measures), and the relative absence of embellishment.

Figure 5a.
Transcription of Agios from the
Liturgy of St Basil (Tóth 1998).

The musical notation consists of three staves of music. The top staff has a tempo of 76 BPM. The lyrics are 'Agios o Theos' followed by a fermata over a note, then 'Agios o Theos' again. The middle staff has a tempo of 69 BPM. The lyrics are 'Agios o Theos' followed by a fermata over a note, then 'Agios o Theos' again. The bottom staff has a tempo of 63 BPM. The lyrics are 'Agios o Theos' followed by a fermata over a note, then 'Agios o Theos' again. The notation uses a mix of stems (upward for higher notes, downward for lower notes) and note heads to indicate traditional melody and improvisation.

When compared with a melismatic chant sung by the priest (**Figure 5b**) it is still relatively free of embellishment. The hymn is also repetitive and, in both text and musical material, and the melody is quite simple because it is intended for the congregation.

Figure 5b.
Transcription of
“final Amen” from
the Liturgy of St Basil
(Tóth 1998).

A musical score for 'The Star-Spangled Banner' on four staves. The top staff uses a treble clef, the second staff an alto clef, the third staff a bass clef, and the bottom staff a bass clef. The key signature is two sharps. The lyrics are written below each staff: 'O - H - I - M - O - H -' on the first staff; 'N - A - M - H - - - N - J -' on the second staff; 'N - A - 2 T - T - N - A - - - 2 T -' on the third staff; and 'J - N - A - - - -' and '2 - J -' on the fourth staff. Measure numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 are placed above the staves.

This excerpt of chant, Figure 5b (*Amin*, the final “Amen” in the *Confession* of the Liturgy of St Basil) is impressively complex. The text, a repetition of the words ‘Amen, amen, amen; I believe, I believe, I believe . . .’ marks the *confession*, a call and response between the priest and a cantor that precedes the communion. Although the entire antiphonal passage is only a few minutes in length, Tóth’s notation of this excerpt occupies nearly nine pages (the example in this slide is only the opening excerpt of said passage). This is one of the finest examples of the depth and subtlety of Tóth’s notation. Every gradation of pitch performed is recorded in notation, and it certainly gives one an indication of the complexity involved in the execution of Coptic chant, especially when it involves an individual cantor or priest.

Notice the lack of a time signature or clear measures in the *Amin*; as opposed to the *Agios* in the preceding figure, Tóth's transcription of the *confession* mirrors a free, open, and complex melismatic fashion in which the individual chanter can ornament as he pleases. There seems to be no straightforward rhythmic structure, but there is a lucid melody underneath the plethora of embellishments. If one looks closely at Tóth's transcription in Figure 5b, there is a noticeable jump from *E* to *A* which marks a tonicization in an *A*-like key, hence the indication of an *A* major key signature. A jagged rise to *C* sharp in the third system on the word *Tnaht* (English: "I believe") marks a zenith in the melody, showing a melodic contour in the transcription – starting and arrival points. An equally intricate fall back to *E* in the fourth system marks a kind of half cadence, and a final thorny phrase that encompasses the range of the entire chant excerpt (from *E* to *C* sharp) ends with a final cadential phrase – using a nearly identical cadential ornamentation Borsai points out in Figure 3b¹⁸ – to bring the cantor back to the tonic, *A*.

Despite Tóth's lucid and impressive quality of transcription, depicting Coptic chant in such an exact manner – one that is zealously loyal to a specific recording – presents a major problem. Since Coptic music has been handed down for centuries and was never codified into a notational system and because of the shortage of scholarly resources and the scarcity of prior transcriptions, the execution of chant varies, sometimes radically, in different regions or cities in Egypt. This is especially true concerning the style of embellished improvisation. Tóth's transcriptions are based entirely upon recordings chosen by Ragheb Moftah, which he deemed as the most accurate representations of the chants. How is one to know which interpretation of which chant is correct? This question is compounded by the fact that Moftah, for most of the twentieth century, was solely responsible for the preservation of Coptic music, giving him an ultimate position to discern which variation of a chant may be secured through recordings or transcriptions. This issue of representation could possibly be rectified if the volume simply specified exactly which of Moftah's recordings, and, perhaps, even the status and availability of said recordings, Tóth based her transcriptions upon.

Precisely because Tóth's transcriptions are so meticulous, they represent only one variant of the liturgy of St Basil. If Tóth had chosen to notate the chants in an ambiguous manner, capturing only the structural flow of the chants and ignoring the ornamental improvisations, similar to the appearance of Newlandsmith's transcriptions, then the transcriptions would not reflect one specific variation of the liturgy. Unfortunately, by doing this, one would relinquish some of the inimitable details that allow Tóth's transcriptions to capture the essence of Coptic worship. Bartók attempted to overcome this obstacle by writing a double transcription: the upper line includes the embellished and rhythmically detailed notation whilst the lower line depicts a simple form presenting the melodic and rhythmic construction of the music.¹⁹

REVISIONISM AND SIMPLICITY: THE TRANSCRIPTIONS OF MARIAN ROBERTSON

Marian Robertson's transcriptions²⁰ are straightforward, simple, and clean. Although she does forgo the detailed transcription of embellishment common in the work of Tóth and Borsai, she adopts the use of mordent and cadence symbols found in the work of Newlandsmith. Robertson, like Borsai, is interested in finding large-scale similarities in Coptic chant: pervasive thematic ideas, structural points of unification, and modal relationships.

Robertson simplifies the entire corpus of Coptic chant into three different types of 'compositions'. Unlike Ménard's concept of pitch organization, none of these 'compositions' necessarily signify a specific office; rather they are all used interchangeably and intersect at different points during the Coptic liturgical rites.

The first, as seen in the transcription of the hymn *Shere Maria* (English: "Hail Mary") (**Figure 6a**) is a complex series of short motives: the motives are combined in different ways to produce new musical material and can also act as a recapitulation of ideas. The motives are not confined to any one specific hymn and move freely throughout the corpus of Coptic chant. For example, 'motif I' is not confined to this specific hymn and can be found in multiple hymns throughout Coptic hymnology.

An excerpt from the hymn *Golgotha* (English: "Golgotha") (**Figure 6b**), is an example of Robertson's 'composition type 2', a simple strophic hymn with two alternating phrases. In this hymn, each phrase is repeated three times with different text, before the hymn turns back to the first phrase and repeats again three times:

Robertson's final chant type, 'composition type 3', as seen in the transcription of the free-chant *Isoos Piekchristos* (English: "Jesus Christ") (**Figure 6c**), are through composed, based around a narrow range of pitches. This type, claims Robertson, is used primarily in syllabic

¹⁹ Dobszay 2000, PAGE

²⁰ Robertson's transcriptions are found mostly in accompanying articles in the Grove Encyclopedia and the Coptic Encyclopedia, of both of which she was a co-author, and at the University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections.

chant performance. Unlike Tóth's style of transcription depicting solo singing, Robertson's is astonishingly minimalist. With the exception of plus [+] and minus [-] signs to indicate quartetone inflection and mordent symbols, Robertson transcribes an unadorned melodic line with basic rhythmic indication (see Figure 20).

Figure 6a.
Transcription of "Shere
Maria" with motivic
analysis (Robertson 1995).

Motif I

Motif II

Xe - pe Ua - pi - a - T - oF - pω T-Bω n a-λo-λi

Motif III

Motif IV

N - aT - ep - δε - λλω θH - ε - TE - uπε oF - ω - i

Motif V

ε - po - F - ω - i ε - poc -

Figure 6b.
Transcription of
“Golgotha” with phrase
analysis (Robertson 1995).

Figure 6c.
Transcription of “Isoos
Piekhristos”, a through-
composed free-chant
(Robertson 1995).

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff uses a treble clef and shows a sequence of notes with corresponding lyrics: IH - COUC, III - XHIC -, TOC, II - OH. The bottom staff also uses a treble clef and shows a sequence of notes with corresponding lyrics: PI - U - O - NOT - T - CO - TEU, E - pon.

Unfortunately, Robertson has not transcribed long solo melismatic sections comparable to Tóths transcription of the final ‘Amen’, in the *Confession* of the Liturgy of St Basil (see Figure 19). Moreover, her more extensive transcriptions have yet to be published or are in private hands. The transcriptions available are but a glimpse of a fascinating process of transcription combined with a clear understanding of the underlying structure of Coptic chants. However, Robertson does not attempt to transcribe the embellishments that so consumed Margit Tóth’s work. Her lack of such scrupulous detail does offer a clearer understanding of the chants, and allows for more universality or even performativity, but may be, at times, too vague.

The nascent transcriptions of Coptic chant produced by Newlandsmith, although disquieting in their simplicity, do bear a resemblance to the clear, lucid melodies of Robertson's chant transcriptions. Indeed, one can read the history of Coptic chant transcription as a *crescendo/decrecendo* image: from the early rudimentary and Eurocentric plainness of Newlandsmith, to the complex and Gordian transcriptive style of Tóth, back to the streamlined perspicuity of Robertson.

One thing is clear about this body of transcriptions: all of these transcribers, each using various methodologies, imposed their own musical narratives on a complex body of vocal music that is resistant to the rigidities of Western notation. The effects of their transcriptions notwithstanding, their intentions in transcribing add another layer of interest. Newlandsmith, by claiming that he had to dig through "appalling debris of Arabic ornamentation" to unearth 'ancient' Egyptian music that is "grand, pathetic, noble, and deeply spiritual,"²¹ is the most egregious perpetrator of a classically orientalist perspective. One thinks of the words of Edward Said: "Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world."²²

Linking Coptic music to an ancient Egyptian past, which Western observers such as Newlandsmith cartoonishly romanticized and glorified, skirts round the awkward issue of Coptic chant flourishing, for over a millennium, in the Islamic world. Coptic chant is as a mosaic of different musico-cultural shards, not something developed in a culturally vacuumed space. The Hungarian transcribers, Tóth and Borsai, capture this malleable essence at its best. Instead of ignoring ornamentations, they focused on them, prized them, and compiled a catalogue raisonné for them. Their intention was to record the specific performance of a specific cantor, and not use transcription as a tool of looking for some deep, noble, pathetic, ancient past. The current is deep, noble and pathetic enough.

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21 Newlandsmith 1931.

22 Said 1980.