

Coptic hymns - a living legacy of the ancient Church



An unusual evening took place on March 6 at the Moscow Museum of Russian Icons in Goncharnaya: Egyptian composer and researcher of ancient musical culture Kirillos George told the audience about the many 2000-year history of the Coptic Christian hymns.

The meeting was organized by the Embassy of Egypt in Russia, the Musical Association "modern tradition" and the Foundation of St. Gregory the Theologian supported by the Department for External Church Relations of Moscow Patriarchate, Moscow Patriarchate Publishing House, Moscow House of Composers and the Foundation "The Museum of Russian Icons."



Counselor of the Embassy of Egypt's tourism in Russia, introduced George Nahed Nazmi Kirillosa as "a landmark figure in the Coptic Church of Egypt." This is not surprising when you consider that he is known not only as a brilliant musician, composer, music historian, lecturer of the National Academy of Arts, founder of the "Ensemble of David," the head of "Orchestra and Chorus Coptic Church" and "El-Nazer Ilah Orchestra and Chorus" but as an engineer, who, according to embassy staff, manages the construction of "the largest museum in Egypt."

In a message to Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion, read out at the party chief editor of the Moscow Patriarchate Archpriest Vladimir Power, notes that familiarity with the original vocal samples of the ancient Christian heritage, "helps us get closer to understanding the deep roots of the Christian community of the world, that is so important for our common witness of Christ's truth. "



"I love the Coptic hymns and enthusiasm of their study," - these words Kirillos George began his lecture, which was accompanied by slides and his singing. At first he thought it necessary to clarify the term "Copt": it refers not to religion, but on a national and is synonymous with the name "Egypt." That is, the Copts - it was not originally Egyptian Christians, as is commonly believed, but more broadly, "Copt = Egypt - a country which is blessed with his presence, Jesus Christ," - said the lecturer.

The body of Coptic Christian hymns more than a thousand songs, they are known from ancient times through the centuries and passed from mouth to mouth. "Literally a miracle saved the Coptic Church is the legacy from the days when there was no notation method ... Over time, the tones and harmonies of hymns were fixed in the hearts of the Copts," - said Mr. Kirillos.

It is believed that the first Coptic hymns date back to Moses, after passing the Red Sea miraculously, he has sung the glory and thanksgiving to God, that was the beginning of the use of hymns in worship. There is no doubt that Christ, too, were known to the ancient Jewish hymns, and it can be argued that St.. St Mark "received the flame from the mouth of these hymns, and Christ came to Egypt, where he founded a theological school of Alexandria with the music department," continued the speaker. Therefore, the apostle Mark is the founder of the Coptic religious music, which is particularly booming in the first three centuries Christianity.

However, the Coptic hymns there is another source: the researchers found their relationship with the music of the ancient pharaohs. G. Kirillos brought evidence of the Jewish historian Philo of Alexandria, according to which the early Christians in Egypt, used by the ancient melodies, "stored in their subconscious," filling them with new content. Thus, the Coptic hymn "Golgotha", performed at the service of Good Friday, back to the music that was played during embalming and burial of the pharaohs. The musician played the hymn fragment of "Golgotha" and mentioned that it is mournful chant heard in major scale, which was known to the Egyptians long before the birth of Christ.

As for the mechanism of musical continuity, the main link in it were cantors appointed by the Church for centuries. Often, cantors were selected from the blind, who have "outstanding vocal abilities", in their duties included not only the performance of hymns in worship, but also training the choir of deacons. Cantor himself has also played on the cymbals, setting the rhythm, and deacons, accompanied by a triangle. Those percussion musical instruments - the only ones allowed during the service, they serve "to control the tempo and to transmit a sense of joy," said G. Kirillos. He cited as reasons for the ban on the use of other tools: it is the need to distance themselves from the pagan rituals, accompanied by an abundance of instrumental music, and the secretive nature of Christian worship of the first centuries, and the apostolic choices in favor of "the synagogue rituals," which sounded just singing. "Personally, I agree with this ban, for the sake of tradition, in spite of all my love for musical instruments," - said the visitor from Egypt, which has demonstrated excellent game on the triangle. "Imagine that all the hymns are performed only by the sounds of cymbals - God, what a headache! And if you do without instruments - what a bore! "- Expressive, he outlined the importance of musical instruments in the Coptic church.

By the way, Coptic hymns are expressive, but we are not talking about the rapid display of emotion, but of different musical techniques that help to clarify the essence of the songs. Thus, the "melodic repetitions" in the Litany may express "perseverance asking for forgiveness," and singing the first part of the hymn in honor of the Nativity in a whisper, "the atmosphere of" that special night. In the Easter hymn in the phrase "death by death," the first and second "death," sings quite differently, depending on the shades of meaning.



G. Kirillos also touched upon the language of Coptic hymns: Coptic alphabet that is based on Greek, included vowel sounds, which made the Coptic language "musical language". But with the arrival of the Arabs Coptic language, which communicated all the Egyptians, was ousted. Many Christian hymns have been translated into Arabic, which did not go for them, "led to distortions," says Mr. Kirillos. He illustrated his assertion by singing the same hymn in Coptic and Arabic languages, concluded: "It turns like a completely different hymn."

Then we went about the features of the Coptic hymnography. Thus, these songs are distinguished "ornament" when the main part of the song, performed in unison, echoed by "ornament" - improvised polyphony. Coptic hymns characterized as "redundant chord" ("melisma") - one vowel stretch for a few tones, which is typical for ancient znamenny chant. Lecturer sang the same phrase, "Praise Him and exalt Him for ever and ever": "usual" it sounds like 5 seconds, and "redundant chord" can enjoy it as much as 7 minutes.



Coptic hymns are very diverse, each service has its own set of motets. According to G. Kirillosa, sometimes service can last 10 hours (for example, on Good Friday), and all this time, "from early morning until late evening, the community tirelessly singing hymns." Responding to questions, the speaker explained that the church choir sings not only deacons, led by a cantor, but also the laity. What can people do not get tired? This variety of rhythms and hymns, styles of performance, composition, modulation within a single chants, alternating melodies, sounds of musical instruments and church bells, the contemplation of the sacred elements of the interior of the temple, the full implications of clergy vestments, their movements during the service ... "As a result, the performance of our hymns can not be bored!" - summed up the artist, inviting all to Egypt to "listen live "so beloved by his Coptic hymns.

Concluding the meeting, Mr. Kirillos played one of the Psalms of David to the music of his own, and answered numerous questions about the relationship of Egyptian singing culture of the Greek and Syriac, the language of worship.

George Kirillos and representatives of the Embassy of Egypt in the Russian Federation thanked the organizers of the meeting and interested audience.

Julia Zaitseva - especially for the site of the Fund Gregory the Theologian

Photo by the author and the Museum of Russian Icons

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Source: [Fund of St. Gregory the Theologian](#)