Egyptian Musical Instruments

Second Edition, Expended Revision

Moustafa Gadalla
Maa Kheru (True of Voice)

Tehuti Research Foundation
International Head Office: Greensboro, NC, U.S.A.
CONTENTS

About the Author v
Preface [1st Edition] vii
Standards and Terminology viii
Map of Egypt x

1. The Wealth of Instruments 1
   1.1 The Egyptian Instruments 1
   1.2 General Characteristics of Egyptian Instruments 7
   1.3 Musicians in Ancient (and Present-Day) Egypt 8
   1.4 The Musical Orchestra 9

2. Stringed Instruments 12
   2.1 General 12
   2.2 Lyres 13
   2.3 Tri-gonon/Tri-qanon (Zither) 17
   2.4 Harps 19
   2.5 Tanbouras (String Instruments with Neck) 30
3. Wind Instruments 51
   3.1 The Magic Nay (End-Blown Flute) 52
   3.2 Transverse Flute 57
   3.3 Pan Flute 58
   3.4 Single Reed Pipe (Clarinet) 59
   3.5 Double Pipes 60
   3.6 The Twin Horns/Trumpets 70

4. Percussion Instruments 74
   4.1 Membrano-Phone Instruments 74
   4.2 Non-Membrano-Phone (Idiophone) Instruments 80
   4.3 Human Parts (hands, fingers, thighs, feet, etc.) 93

5. The Musical Performance 99
   5.1 The Harmonic Merit Hand 99
   5.2 The Written Sounds 103
   5.3 The Rhythmic Timing 105
   5.4 Moods and Modes 113

Glossary 117
Selected Bibliography 121
Sources and Notes 125
TRF Publications 131
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Moustafa Gadalla is an Egyptian-American independent Egyptologist who was born in Cairo, Egypt in 1944. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering from Cairo University.

Gadalla is the author of twenty two published, internationally acclaimed books about the various aspects of the Ancient Egyptian history and civilization and its influences worldwide.

He is the Founder and Chairman of the Tehuti Research Foundation (https://ww.egypt-tehuti.org)—an international, U.S.-based, non-profit organization dedicated to Ancient Egyptian studies. He is also the Founder and Head of the online Egyptian Mystical University (https://ww.EgyptianMysticalUniversity.org).

From his early childhood, Gadalla pursued his Ancient Egyptian roots with passion, through continuous study and research. Since 1990, he has dedicated and concentrated all his time to researching and writing.
PREFACE [2ND EDITION]


This book shows the wealth of the Ancient Egyptian musical instruments and their ranges and playing techniques; as well as short overviews about the musicians and how the musical orchestra followed hand signals and written musical notations.

It should be noted that the digital edition of this book as published in PDF and E-book formats have a substantial number of photographs that compliment the text materials throughout the book.

This book consists of selected excerpts (portions) from the book *The Enduring Ancient Egyptian Musical System: Theory and Practice* by Moustafa Gadalla.

Moustafa Gadalla
Our book *Egyptian Rhythm: The Heavenly Melodies* presents the cosmic roots of Egyptian musical, vocal, and dancing rhythmic forms. It also details the fundamentals (theory and practice) of music in the typical Egyptian way: simple, coherent, and comprehensive. In addition, it provides a detailed description of the major Egyptian musical instruments and their playing techniques, functions, etc. It also elaborates on Egyptian rhythmic practices in all aspects of their lives.

We have noted that many readers may not be interested in the detailed theory and practices of music in Ancient Egypt. Therefore, we decided to publish a separate book showing the wealth of the Ancient Egyptian musical instruments and their ranges and playing techniques. We also included short overviews about the musicians and how the musical orchestra followed hand signals and written musical notations.

Moustafa Gadalla
STANDARDS AND TERMINOLOGY

1. Throughout this book, octave ranges are named according to the following system:

   c3 c2 c1 c c1 c2 c3

   <— Lower Octaves —<—|—>— Higher Octaves—>

2. Capital letters (C, D, E, etc.) are reserved for general pitch names without regard to a specific octave range.

3. The Ancient Egyptian word neter and its feminine form netert have been wrongly, and possibly intentionally, translated to god and goddess by almost all academicians. Neteru (plural of neter/netert) are the divine principles and functions of the One Supreme God.

4. You may find variations in writing the same Ancient Egyptian term, such as Amen/Amon/Amun or Pir/Per. This is because the vowels you see in translated Egyptian texts are only approximations of sounds which are used by Western Egyptologists to help them pronounce the Ancient Egyptian terms/words.

5. We will be using the most commonly recognized words for the English-speaking people that identify a neter/
netert [god, goddess] or a pharaoh or a city; followed by other ‘variations’ of such a word/term.

It should be noted that the real names of the deities (gods, goddesses) were kept secret so as to guard the cosmic power of the deity. The Neteru were referred to by epithets that describe particular qualities, attributes and/or aspect(s) of their roles. Such applies to all common terms such as Isis, Osiris, Amun, Re, Horus, etc.

6. When using the Latin calendar, we will use the following terms:

   **BCE** – Before Common Era. Also noted in other references as BC.

   **CE** – Common Era. Also noted in other references as AD.

7. The term Baladi will be used throughout this book to denote the present silent majority of Egyptians that adhere to the Ancient Egyptian traditions, with a thin exterior layer of Islam. The Christian population of Egypt is an ethnic minority that came as refugees from Judaea and Syria to the Ptolemaic/Roman-ruled Alexandria. Now, 2,000 years later, they are easily distinguishable in looks and mannerisms from the majority of native Egyptians. [See *Ancient Egyptian Culture Revealed* by Moustafa Gadalla for detailed information.]
MAP OF EGYPT
CHAPTER 1.

THE WEALTH OF INSTRUMENTS

1.1 THE EGYPTIAN INSTRUMENTS

The archaeological and traditional Egyptian history of music is much more abundant than in any other country. The wall reliefs of the Ancient Egyptian temples and tombs depict numerous types and forms of musical instruments, the technique in which these instruments were to be played and tuned, ensemble playing, and much, much more. These musical scenes visibly show the hands of the harp player striking certain strings.
and the wind instrument players playing certain chords together.
The distances between the lute frets clearly show that the corresponding intervals and scales can be measured and calculated. [A detailed analysis is shown in a later chapter in this book.]

The positions of the harpists’ hands on the strings plainly indicate ratios such as the Fourth, the Fifth, and the Octave, revealing an unquestionable knowledge of the laws governing musical harmony.

The playing of musical instruments is also depicted as being controlled by conductors’ hand movements, which also help us identify certain tones and intervals and functions of sound, as shown on the left in the depiction below.
The intervals of Fourth, Fifth, and Octave were the most common in Ancient Egyptian representations. Curt Sachs [in his book, *History of Musical Instruments*] found that out of 17 harpists represented on Egyptian art works (with sufficient realism and distinctness to be reliable records), seven are striking a Fourth chord, five a Fifth chord, and five an Octave chord.

The most frequently depicted harps were found to have seven strings and, according to Curt Sachs’ study of Egyptian instruments, the Egyptians tuned their harps in the same diatonic series of intervals.

One of the two harps depicted in Ramses III’s tomb [shown below] has 13 strings; where if the longest string represented pros-lambanomenos (or D), the remaining 12 strings would more than **supply all the tones, semitones, and quarter-tones, of the diatonic, chromatic,**
and enharmonic genera; within the compass of an octave.

In addition to the numerous representations of musical scenes pictured in temples and tombs from all periods throughout Egypt’s dynastic history, we also have access to hundreds of various Ancient Egyptian musical instruments which have been recovered from their tombs. These Egyptian instruments are now spread in museums and private collections throughout the world.

Most of these instruments were found to be carefully and individually wrapped in cloth before they were placed in the tombs.

All these findings, together with early historian writings of Egyptian musical heritage as well as the traditions of modern Nile inhabitants, corroborate to provide a most authentic account of the musical history of Ancient Egypt.