

ERNEST GAGNON ON NATIONALISM AND CANADIAN MUSIC: FOLK AND NATIVE SOURCES¹

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I have spent my life studying and documenting the history of our country. It has always been my belief that the "discovery" of our roots would help establish a sense of national identity. With particular reference to music, I intended my work on our folksongs and the music of our native Indians to lay a foundation for a musical language based on these repertoires. Perhaps you will continue to encourage Canadian composers to seek out these sources in their musical works.²

This declaration is contained in a letter by Ernest Gagnon to Marius Barbeau dated August 8th, 1911. It is a remarkable statement in that Gagnon is suggesting that at least one motivation for his folksong collecting efforts and his research on native music was to encourage composers of art music to develop a national musical style derived from these sources. Gagnon was one of the first in this country to articulate a nationalist stance regarding music. It is well known that his eminent successor, Marius Barbeau, spent considerable energy, particularly during the 1920s, attempting to convince his musician friends and colleagues of the value of cultivating a musical "language" based on folk and native material. Expressed a generation earlier, Gagnon's nationalist views form an important link with those of Barbeau. This paper focuses on the nationalist theme in Gagnon's work with reference to his folksong collection, two musical compositions, and his writings on native music.

Gagnon is remembered today for his landmark folksong collection, the *Chansons populaires du Canada*, his arrangements of folksongs, and his role in the plainchant restoration movement in Quebec in the second half of the nineteenth century. Gagnon's initiatives as an administrator are also recognized, notably in projects such as the establishment of the Union musicale de Québec and the Académie de musique de Québec.³ He is usually, however, left out of discussions of the movement for a "nationalist" Canadian school of musical composition. This is no doubt because of his small output as a composer and his isolated position as a nationalist spokesman in the nineteenth century. Indeed, this aspect of Gagnon's work is overlooked in favour of his reputation as a folksong collector and scholar.

French-Canadian nationalism was the strongest formative influence on Gagnon's life and work. He spent his entire life studying and documenting French-Canadian historical topics with the aim of defining the race of which he was such a fervent member. He believed in the worth of French Canadians as a people and sought to establish their identity by uncovering their roots. To this end, Gagnon was an ardent lobbyist for nationalist concerns. His extensive career as a journalist for publications such as *Le Courrier du Canada* and *La Revue Canadienne* was one aspect of this effort.

Gagnon was part of a nationalist literary and historical movement in Quebec in the 1860s. This movement began around 1840. Following the 1837-38 rebellion, French Canadians felt conquered for a second time, and in a position of economic, political, and social inferiority vis-à-vis

their anglophone counterparts. Faced with a closer prospect of assimilation and a need to cope with their sense of humiliation, French Canadians turned to their past. According to the Québécois political scientist Denis Monière:

The past assumed values that compensated for the powerlessness of the present... Distress about what was to come found expression, in our young literature, in glorification of the colony's early days. Facing assimilation and fearing oblivion, we began to write our "epic."⁴

More than in the case of any other nineteenth-century French-Canadian musical figure, a serious evaluation of Ernest Gagnon's work demands assessment of the nationalism which motivated this group of Quebec City historians, literary figures, and politicians in the 1860s. The movement gave rise to an increasing number of literary and historical works which revived and glorified the past of French Canadians by using such topics as life in the early colony, the Conquest, the 1837-38 rebellion and, later in the century, the Louis Riel affair. Historians, poets, novelists, and playwrights strove to portray this subject matter in a powerful way so as to provide them with their own heroes and mythology.⁵ Organizations such as the Institut canadien, established in Montreal in 1844 and in 1847 at Quebec City, were important for the nationalist movement because they served as forums which attracted increasing numbers of sympathetic and active participants. In the 1860s, the two literary/historical journals, *Les Soirées canadiennes* and *Le Foyer canadien*, were founded with the prime purpose of promoting nationalist issues. Ernest Gagnon was an energetic participant in many of these projects. French-Canadian nationalism became a focus of his work throughout his entire creative life. No other nineteenth-century musician in French Canada was so long devoted to the cause of French-Canadian nationalism as Ernest Gagnon.

The philosophy of this movement bore striking resemblance to nineteenth-century efforts to establish national identities based on historical and folkloric models in such European countries as France and Germany. Thus, Gagnon's work as a nationalist may be seen both in the French-Canadian context and in that of European Romantic nationalism.

In Gagnon's case, the nationalist spirit was an impetus for, and a theme of, his 1865 folksong collection. By the late 1850s when Gagnon made his first trip to Europe, the folksong collecting movement was well underway. By his own account, Gagnon was introduced to the view of folksong and national identity at this time.⁶ He knew, for example, the contribution of the government-sponsored enquiry into folksong which took place in France during the first part of the 1850s. While in Paris, he met the secretary of the organizing committee, Jean-Jacques Ampère, as well as other participants in the enquiry. This national effort in France to collect folksongs stimulated a full-fledged movement which had ramifications in other parts of Europe as well as in French Canada. The essay and collection of song texts by Hubert La Rue entitled "Les Chansons populaires et historiques du Canada" published in two parts in 1863 and 1865, was a direct result of the French folksong enquiry. Gagnon's collection, in turn, was a response to calls in the French press for a French-Canadian collection with musical as well as textual renditions of the songs.

A less obvious stimulus for Gagnon's *Chansons populaires du Canada*, which stemmed from the nationalist folksong movement in Europe, was the work of the German folklorist, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). We know that Gagnon was familiar with Herder's work since he refers to it in the "Préface" to his song collection.⁷ In a letter dated May 12th, 1880 to his colleague, Pierre Lagacé, Gagnon compares Herder's nationalist views with his own:

Herder wrote that each nation is an organic unit with its own unique culture; in order to survive and grow this culture should be cultivated. He believed also that the national "soul" of a people is expressed best in folksong. The *Chansons populaires* was compiled with this express purpose in mind: to provide the French-Canadian people with a sense of national identity.⁸

There is no question that Gagnon's ideas and those of his friends in the nationalist movement in Quebec in the 1860s, were akin to Herder's. Points of comparison between Gagnon's work and Herder's about seventy years earlier, such as their views concerning folksong and national expression, serve to illustrate that the *Chansons populaires* may be understood as more than simply an early collection of French-Canadian folksongs. Like Herder's initiatives in the field of folksong scholarship, Gagnon's collection may be assigned an ideological position along with pioneering collecting efforts which were the basis of Romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century.

Gagnon's nationalist position is seen prior to the first publication of the *Chansons populaires* in two compositions. The first is a work for violin with piano accompaniment entitled *L'Incantation de la jongleuse* (1862). An important aspect of this piece is its programmatic nature: it is based on the "légende de la jongleuse" by Henri-Raymond Casgrain, a nationalist historian and writer, and a colleague of Gagnon's.⁹ First published in 1860, this tragic tale of conflict is the story of a young French-Canadian boy and his mother who, with their canoeist guide and friend, are attacked by a band of Iroquois and taken prisoner. The boy and his mother undergo a series of tortures and eventually the mother is killed; the boy is subsequently rescued by the canoeist who had managed to escape. The evil which drives the Iroquois to terrible acts is a central theme represented in the legend by "la jongleuse," a mysterious, magical force in the imagination's of the legend's characters. The diabolical nature of the "la jongleuse" instills a tremendous sense of fear in both the mother and her young boy who believe this vengeful force to be the cause of their misfortune.

Gagnon does not use the legend's narrative as a structural paradigm for his composition; instead he took the intriguing idea of the "jongleuse's" incantation as his point of departure. At the beginning of his composition Gagnon has included a citation from Casgrain's legend which is a poetic description of the "voice" of "la jongleuse." Structurally, the piece falls into a series of sections distinguished by tempo indications and changes of musical style. The different musical styles which Gagnon provides, particularly for the violin part, help to emphasize the mystery of the incantation theme.

In a commentary on this work, Gagnon points out three contrasting sections intended to represent musically the "jongleuse:" 1) the free, improvisational opening of the work; 2) the subsequent "cantabile"

theme at measures 41-65; and 3) the “glissandi” which occur at measures 67-71.¹⁰

Example 1:

L'incantation de la jongleuse, mm. 8-20; mm. 41-65; mm. 67-71; mm. 8-20

mm. 8-20

Musical score for measures 8-20. The score is arranged in three systems, each with a single treble clef staff and a grand staff (piano and bass clefs). The first system includes the tempo marking "Allegro agitato" and the dynamic marking "a espresso". The second system includes the tempo marking "Primo Tempo" and the dynamic marking "Vivace". The third system shows a melodic line with a glissando effect. A "2da Corda" marking is present above the first system.

mm. 41-65

Musical score for measures 41-65. The score is arranged in three systems, each with a single treble clef staff and a grand staff (piano and bass clefs). The first system shows a complex rhythmic pattern. The second system includes the dynamic marking "Cresc.". The third system includes the dynamic marking "p".

According to Gagnon, unity in the piece stems from Casgrain's legend and, specifically, the cited passage referring to the incantations or "sounds" of the "jongleuse." As with other nineteenth-century programmatic music, the idea of interpreting Gagnon's work with regard to the accompanying note is what the composer intended. Its formal structure is one indication of this point; rather than following a formal plan based on recurring sections, contrasting themes, and characteristic key changes, Gagnon constructed the work as a series of unfolding sections based on musical themes growing out of each other.

The nationalist implications of the programme are affirmed in the following statement:

...the basis of *L'Incantation de la jongleuse* is Casgrain's legend, specifically the incantation of the spirits. The work is a nationalist one because it uses a distinctively Canadian derivation in the form of Casgrain's legend.¹¹

Gagnon claims a similar nationalist intention for *Stadaconé*, a work for piano solo published in 1858. Unlike *L'Incantation de la jongleuse*, which is based on a literary idea, the programmatic association in *Stadaconé* is a reference to the music of the Iroquois Indians after whose settlement the piece is named.

Stadaconé is particularly noteworthy for its descriptive elements and is a reflection of the composer's interest in native music and culture. Subtitled "Danse sauvage pour piano," the work represents a deliberate attempt to incorporate some particular aspects of Indian music Gagnon had gleaned from his exposure to Indian tribes in the Quebec City area:

In *Stadaconé* I have incorporated certain stylistic aspects of native music. These include melodic and rhythmic repetition, open fifths, and marked accentuation patterns.¹²

There are many instances of the repetition of melodic motives in *Stadaconé*: one occurs at the beginning of the piece where the four-measure phrase pattern is subdivided into a two plus two format and the second two phrases are a repetition of the first. The systematic way in which Gagnon makes use of the reiteration device is a structural characteristic of the work and one which emphasizes the "danse sauvage" spirit. A second example of this procedure is the drum-beat open fifth figure sounded in the first two measures and again in the left hand as an accompanying motive at measures 27-38.

Certain rhythmic features also contribute to the character of the piece: these include Gagnon's use of accents which occur variously on and off the beat and are sometimes accompanied by grace note figures. *Stadaconé* is further distinguished by its harmonic monotony which Gagnon may have used to emphasize the descriptive aspect of the music. These points are observed in example 2 which is the opening twelve measures of the piece.

Example 2

Stadaconé, mm. 1-12

Gagnon's success at creating a descriptive keyboard work based on the native style is demonstrated by the fact that on at least one occasion *Stadaconé* was performed to acclaim in a band arrangement by the Regiment of Quebec for a group of Iroquois. A contemporary commentator, Beaurival, wrote that the Indians were suitably impressed by the performance, and that they recognized familiar elements of their own music in Gagnon's composition.¹³

As indicated in his own writings, Gagnon regarded folksong and legend as powerful sources in creating a nationalist musical idiom. His *Chansons populaires* and folksong settings and arrangements, as well as such

a musical composition as *L'Incantation de la jongleuse*, is testimony of this fact. Gagnon's views on native music are less clear in a nationalist context. Examination of the essay entitled *Les Sauvages de l'Amérique et l'art musical*, which was presented to the fifteenth conference on North American Studies held in Quebec City in 1906, is helpful in that it provides further insight into Gagnon's approach to native music.

Gagnon's essay was based on historical research and some fieldwork conducted in the Ancienne-Lorette region near Quebec City; it is a descriptive account based on a strikingly ethnocentric position widespread among researchers at the beginning of this century. This is evident, for example, in Gagnon's observations regarding musical instruments in Indian music-culture which, with one exception concerning a rattle called the "chichigouane," are based on generalizations regarding the eventual adoption of Western instruments such as violins and flutes by Indian musicians. Further evidence of Gagnon's ethnocentrism is an account of a field expedition in 1859. Challenged by a desire to examine scale types in Indian music, he tried to learn one of the songs of his informant, Madame Philippe Vincent, but failed. A transcription of this song, along with a musical commentary which deals mostly with rhythm, is given by Gagnon in the paper. Gagnon's rendition is a musical outline of the song rather than a detailed transcription; he admits that he has left out the song's ornamental motives which caused him difficulty when he tried to sing the piece.

In spite of this reservation, Gagnon evidently liked the sound of the Indian's "chants profanes," and attempted to explain what he considered to be original elements in the music. As examples, he has included two dance songs with accompanying comments on their respective methods in the *Sauvage de l'Amérique et l'art musical* study. In the religious songs of the Indians, Gagnon observes the influence of plainchant. To illustrate, he provides two Christmas "cantiques": "Gabriel Nazareth," the air of which has been identified by the French scholar Julien Tiersot as coming from Brittany, and the well-known "Jesous Ahatonhia."

The plainchant influence in Indian music was noteworthy as far as Gagnon was concerned; in his view, this influence was a unique characteristic of the Indian musical repertory. This is not surprising since he also considered the plainchant influence on French-Canadian folksong of paramount importance; indeed it is the central argument in his *Chansons populaires du Canada*.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the limitations of Gagnon's investigation of Indian music-culture, his work has decided historical value. Gagnon was probably the first French-Canadian to treat native music with scholarly respect, and his pioneering effort in this area was precedent-setting in light of later work by Barbeau and others.¹⁵ As indicated in the letter excerpt to Barbeau from 1911, Gagnon considered native music as unique and, therefore, a potential source for composers.

Gagnon's ideas on establishing a national musical style bore no results during his lifetime. With few exceptions, other musicians in French Canada were more preoccupied with establishing their reputations based on writing in musical styles derived from European tradition. Within this context Ernest Gagnon was unique: his entire professional life as a musician, administrator, journalist and historian, was committed to the

French-Canadian people. Unlike Marius Barbeau in this century, who consciously tried to convince musicians to cultivate musical idioms based on "nationalist" sources, Gagnon's work as a musical nationalist was part of a broader cultural movement aimed at establishing a sense of French-Canadian identity. Like his colleagues in the nationalist literary movement of Quebec City, such as Philippe Aubert de Gaspé and Hubert LaRue, Gagnon sought to identify the roots of his people through the careful documentation of their past. The movement marked the intellectual point of departure for that spirit of nationalism that has become woven into the social, cultural and political fabric of modern Quebec. Using folksong, native music, and folklore, Gagnon was one of the first in the history of this country to articulate clearly a nationalist position regarding music.

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ENDNOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian University Music Society at Laval University, Quebec City, in May 1989.
2. Ernest Gagnon, Letter to Marius Barbeau, 8 August 1911, Fondation Lionel Groulx, Montreal. The English translations of Gagnon's writings in this paper are my own.
3. The most recent and comprehensive account of Gagnon's musical career is François Brassard and Denise Ménard's article on Gagnon in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, ed. Helmut Kallmann, Gilles Potvin, Kenneth Winters (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), 361-2. See also *L'Encyclopédie de la Musique Canadienne* (Montreal: Fides, 1983), 386-7.
4. Denis Monière, *Ideologies in Quebec: The Historical Development*, trans. Richard Howard (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), 129.
5. See James Huston, *Le Répertoire national, 1848-50*, 4 vols., ed. R. Melançon (Montreal: VLB, 1982) and François-Xavier Garneau, *Histoire du Canada* 3rd ed. (Quebec: Augustin Côté, 1859).
6. See Gagnon, *Choses d'autrefois* (Quebec: Dussault, 1905), 17-18, where he writes of meeting members of the folksong enquiry including Ampère.
7. Gagnon, *Les Chansons populaires du Canada* (Montreal: Beauchemin, 1935), 334.
8. Gagnon, Letter to M. Pierre Lagacé, 12 May, 1880, Ursuline Archives, Quebec City.
9. Henri-Raymond Casgrain, "La Jongleuse," *Légendes canadiennes et oeuvres diverses. Oeuvres complètes de l'abbé H.R. Casgrain* 3 (Quebec: Darveau), 34-54.
10. Gagnon, Letter to Thomas-Etienne Hamel, 16 June 1864, Archives de Séminaire de Québec.
11. Gagnon, Letter to Thomas-Etienne Hamel, 16 June 1864.
12. Gagnon, Letter to Hamel, 16 June 1864.
13. Beaurival, "Chronique musicale," *Echo du cabinet de lecture paroissiale* IV, no. 7 (Montreal, April 1862): 151.
14. For a detailed study of this topic, see chapter 6 of my doctoral dissertation, *Ernest Gagnon (1834-1915): Musician and Pioneer Folksong Scholar* (Univ. of Toronto, 1989).
15. Alexander Cringan's pioneer recordings on wax cylinders of about one hundred Iroquois songs made at the turn of the century represent another early, and much larger effort by a Canadian to document and analyze native music.

Resumé: *Gordon Smith poursuit son étude d'Ernest Gagnon; en particulier il vise l'importance de la musique dans la création d'un sentiment et d'une identité nationalistes. Pour illustrer ce thème, Smith examine la collection, la composition, et les oeuvres écrites de Gagnon.*