

ERNEST GAGNON'S "CHANSONS POPULAIRES DU CANADA" — an argument for plainchant and folksong

GORDON SMITH

The notion of linking plainchant and folksong is a somewhat unusual and problematic one which has been examined in various ways by scholars since the 19th century. These include French musicologists such as Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin (188-195)¹, Julien Tiersot (287-322), Vincent d'Indy (83-90), and Charles Bordes (297-358), all of whose work on this subject dates from the 1880s onwards, the English song collectors, Cecil Sharp (36-71) and Maud Karpeles, and latterly, the well-known French-Canadian folksong scholar, Marius Barbeau (15-25) and his French colleagues, Marguerite and Raoul d'Harcourt (17-41). The topic has also been studied by ethnomusicologists such as Bertrand Bronson (37-49) who, by way of more theoretical discussions, have established different methodologies for examining scale types in folk repertoires.

Ernest Gagnon and his plainchant-folksong thesis was a fundamental point of departure for the folksong collection entitled *Les Chansons populaires du Canada* published first in 1865. Gagnon's linking of plainchant and folksong in this work represents an early and quite possibly the first systematic application of this concept. Before discussing several aspects of this thesis in Gagnon's work, we will briefly examine the historical position of the *Chansons populaires* in order to establish a broader historical perspective within which Gagnon's views on plainchant and folksong may be most clearly understood.

Gagnon's *Chansons populaires* is unequivocally a landmark in 19th-century folksong research. Largely because of Gagnon's scholarly approach, its historic importance remains undisputed today. In an article written in 1961, the French-Canadian folklorist, Luc Lacourcière, specified three reasons Gagnon's collection continues to be historically valid:

1. Being a fine musician, Gagnon noted his melodies with great precision.
2. He included data on his informants and the regions where he collected.
3. He published the first songbook of its kind. (89)

In terms of other 19th-century collections, Gagnon's *Chansons populaires* may be considered as unique, and Lacourcière's claim that it was the first song book of its kind is not without justification. Contemporaneous French song collections, if they include melodies at all, often demonstrate a casual approach to the musical renditions and provide "doctored" versions of the songs complete with interpretative dynamic markings and phrasing, and in some cases, distracting and inappropriate keyboard accompaniments. Generally, the idea of collecting folksongs in French Canada was still in an embryonic stage, and examples of publications prior to Gagnon's were either intended for college use and hence simply contain the most well-known songs of the day, or follow the French model with accompaniments, etc. For his scrupulous attention to detail in the musical transcriptions, Gagnon's collection is outstanding.

In France reaction to the *Chansons populaires* was immediate and genuinely positive in tone. For example, Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin, who

had collaborated with Champfleury on the large collection entitled *Les Chansons populaires des provinces de France* (1860), was sufficiently impressed that he had Gagnon named a corresponding member of the "Société des Compositeurs de musique de Paris" in 1868. Not surprisingly, in French Canada Gagnon's collection was the source of much praise and pride. For the subscribers of the journal *Le Foyer canadien*, to whom it was initially presented, the *Chansons populaires* represented a unique contribution to the preservation of their cultural heritage, and the French-Canadian community at large hailed the work as a distinctive and emphatic affirmation of its national consciousness.

In spite of its historic position and its immediate success, Gagnon notably did not pursue his activity as a folksong collector, nor for that matter did anyone else in French Canada until the turn of this century; for all intents and purposes, this time lag may be extended to the beginning of Marius Barbeau's career around 1915. Partly this was because most believed Gagnon's volume to be authoritative and exhaustive, even though it contained only one hundred songs. The fact that the *Chansons populaires* stands as an early and isolated example of French-Canadian folksong scholarship invites us to define Gagnon's motivation and purpose in undertaking this project.

As an active figure in Quebec literary and cultural circles, Gagnon was both a witness to and a participant in the nationalism movement in French Canada. As a document recording folksongs, a vital aspect of French-Canadian culture, Gagnon's volume may be considered an example of nationalist literature in the same spirit as, for instance, Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1860). Furthermore, study of the individual song commentaries and the two essays which respectively open and close the folksong collection, strongly indicate that Gagnon used the *Chansons populaires* as a means of arguing the hypothesis that French-Canadian folksong was rooted in the modleal language of Roman Catholic plainchant. As late as the 1940s in unpublished letters to both Lacourcière and Barbeau respectively, Gagnon's daughter, Blanche, maintained that her father had always said "...qu'en recueillant les chansons populaires, il faisait une étude des tonalités anciennes et soutenait une véritable thèse musicale" ["that by collecting folksongs he was making a study of the church modes and establishing an important musical thesis."] (1949 1-2)² Similarly, in an interview which took place in August, 1986, Luc Lacourcière told me that both Blanche Gagnon and Barbeau had always emphasized the importance of the plainchant argument in Gagnon's *Chansons populaires*.

The remainder of this paper addresses two formative processes which serve to clarify Gagnon's position. The first is the historical construction of the plainchant argument which includes contextualizing Gagnon's views in terms of 19th-century developments, and determining his role in the plainchant movement in French Canada. The second formative process is Gagnon's individual application of the argument which involves certain musical issues in the collection, and inevitably derives from a characteristically nationalist view of the French-Canadian people.

As a point of departure for the historical process, Gagnon's position in terms of the later 19th-century when several scholars, notably Vincent d'Indy and Charles Bordes, appear in some respects to have struck a similar line concerning plainchant and French folksong should be explained. A matter of crucial consideration is that these men, who

indeed become two of the most outspoken and articulate defenders of the plainchant theory, did not begin to formulate their ideas until the turn of the present century. The absence of an historic link between Gagnon's ideas and this later school may be explained on one hand by the fact that in 1865, the year the first edition of the *Chansons populaires* appeared, d'Indy was fifteen years old and Bordes was two, and on the other, by the lack of attention to Gagnon's work in any published source by these scholars. The plainchant thesis in the work of d'Indy and Bordes was primarily a means to explain the origins of folk music. This view, enunciated by d'Indy in the first volume of his *Cours de composition musicale* (83-90) and Bordes in an article on Basque folk music entitled "La musique populaire des Basques" (297-538), was essentially that folk music originated from church music since plainchant was the only music the people knew. The similarity of Gagnon's position with this later contention may only be considered to include the point concerning the importance of church music, and specifically plainchant, in the lives of the people. The historical construction of Gagnon's plainchant-folksong thesis does not depend on different theories on the origins of folk music which decidedly became an important preoccupation of later scholars. Therefore, in terms of Gagnon's argument, history as a formative process should be interpreted as including events leading up to the *Chansons populaires*, and consideration of Gagnon's ideas in the light of subsequent research and opinion, while both thought-provoking and interesting, does not figure within the historical framework of this essay.

In fact, Gagnon's plainchant thesis is strongly linked to the 19th-century resurgence of interest in plainchant. Gagnon gradually became familiar with this movement which, although initiated in France in the early part of this century with the desire of clergy members to rid the liturgy of abuses, had ramifications in French Canada by the 1850s. One aspect of this restoration in church music was a renewed interest in plainchant as the ideal and most appropriate music of the Catholic liturgy. A year in France during which he studied harmony and counterpoint, and close contact with leading clergy members in Quebec, helped to educate Gagnon regarding plainchant, its theory, and methods of accompaniment as articulated by French scholars such as Niedermeyer (1856) and d'Ortigue (1853).

In 1860, five years before the first edition of the *Chansons populaires*, the Quebec priest and educator, Pierre Lagaçé, published his *Chants d'Eglise* which was a collection of plainchant harmonizations, the order and content of which were based on the 1854 edition of the Gregorian missal in current use by the diocese of Quebec. The introductory statements of intention in the volume's preface, along with the inclusion of Niedermeyer's accompaniment rules and other instructions, indicate that this work was intended as a practical interpretation of Niedermeyer's method of plainchant accompaniment. Lagaçé's main purpose in presenting the *Chants d'Eglise* to church musicians in Canada was similar to Niedermeyer's aim in France, namely to improve the manner in which plainchant was sung by providing a standardized set of guidelines and examples. Like Niedermeyer, Lagaçé envisaged a uniform musical liturgy in the Catholic Church in which accompanied plainchant, governed by Niedermeyer's rules, would have the same unique effect as the chants themselves. Niedermeyer's letter to Lagaçé, which

he wrote upon receiving the *Chants d'Eglise*, is included in the introductory pages of the volume and is a strong endorsement of the work; in addition, this kind of recognition most certainly assured Lagaçé of his place as a respected and important figure in the plainchant restoration movement. In his letter to Lagaçé, Niedermeyer suggests that the manner in which plainchant was sung in French Canada was more consistently in the medieval tradition and, comparatively speaking, less influenced by the whims of individual parish organists in France who often showed little respect for what seemed to have become a lost tradition. Niedermeyer's knowledge of plainchant singing in French Canada was undoubtedly based on what he had learned from Canadian visitors to France such as Lagaçé and Gagnon since from all reports, Niedermeyer never visited Canada himself.

The publication of Lagaçé's *Chants d'Eglise* prompted Gagnon to seek clarification on what he believed to be several contentious points. Examination of this discussion, which typically took place in a series of newspaper articles in the year 1860 (*Le Courrier du Canada*), reveals that Gagnon was not attempting to criticize Lagaçé, but looking for solutions to a number of problematic issues regarding plainchant accompaniment. In his response, Lagaçé clarifies these points based on his knowledge of the Niedermeyer system which, it may be added, Gagnon was anxious to learn. The Lagaçé-Gagnon exchange not only assured the two participants a considerable amount of public attention, but also provided an opportunity for the two to become better acquainted; specifically, it served to educate Gagnon on several of the more technical aspects of the Niedermeyer method. Lagaçé and Gagnon quickly became strong allies in the propagation of church music and plainchant harmonization, and remained close friends until Lagaçé's death in 1884.

Immediately following the Lagaçé-Gagnon discussion, Antoine Dessane, the French musician who had emigrated to Quebec in 1849, entered the fray with a group of newspaper articles (*Le Journal de Québec*, 1860) in which he criticized Niedermeyer, Lagaçé, and latterly Gagnon. Dessane had obviously followed the Lagaçé-Gagnon exchange and mistakenly concluded that one of the main ideas the two were advocating was the exclusion of harmony from plainchant. The courteous and diplomatic tone of the Lagaçé-Gagnon polemic contrasts sharply with Dessane's scathing, personal approach. His three attacks were each met with an explanatory article from Gagnon in which he defended both himself and the Niedermeyer method. The reason for Dessane's interest in the plainchant issue is not entirely clear. We may speculate that because of his education and background he believed himself to be one of the leading musicians living in Quebec and therefore, should be at the forefront of any public debate on musical matters. In addition, he no doubt resented Gagnon who, as the native son in the affair, continued to maintain public support as well as that of the clergy throughout the controversy. Unlike the Lagaçé-Gagnon exchange which brought the two participants closer together, Dessane's challenge to Niedermeyer and especially to Gagnon alienated him at least partially from the mainstream of musical activity and respectability in Quebec. In spite of the relative brevity of the polemic, the acerbic, resentful tone which characterized Dessane's attack left a strikingly negative impression. Dessane's resignation as organist from Notre-Dame Basilica late in 1860 and his replacement in this position by Gagnon was a direct result of his quarrel with Gagnon.

Notwithstanding these circumstances, Dessane did continue to work effectively as a musician in Quebec, and following his departure from the Basilica he continued to conduct and compose, and after a four-year period in New York in the mid 1860s he returned to Quebec as organist at St-Roch Church in 1869.

That Gagnon used the *Chansons populaires* as an opportunity to continue the plainchant polemic is clear by the emphasis he places on the same points discussed and argued respectively with Lagaçé and Dessane. These issues concerned modal qualities in the song melodies, as well as the difficulties and incongruities of harmonizing the song melodies using chords borrowed from the major-minor system. Whereas the musical context of the earlier Lagaçé and Dessane debates is plainchant, Gagnon has changed the context to folksong in the *Chansons populaires*. The direct historical link between the earlier polemic and the song volume is apparent by the fact Gagnon's points are the same whether in the musical context of plainchant or folksong. Gagnon's individual application of the plainchant thesis is determined by an examination of several of these issues in the *Chansons populaires*.

The matter of using a key signature when notating a piece of plainchant, for example, is discussed as being necessary when the chant is transposed in order to maintain the proper sequence of tones and semitones of the mode in which the chant is cast. In the *Chansons populaires*, Gagnon raises this point in a number of places such as in his commentary to "M'en revenant de Saint-André":

Example 1: M'EN REVENANT DE SAINT-ANDRÉ

M'en re - ve - nant de Saint - An - dré, J'ai vu le

loup, le r'nard pas - ser, Dans mon che - min j'ai ren - con -

tré... Ou, ouah ! Son p'tit pe - - ta - pe, J'ai vu le

loup, le r'nard, le liè - vre; J'ai vu le loup, le r'nard pas -

ser.

Here Gagnon explains that the two sharps in the key signature are necessary because the song, which is in the first mode, is notated here with E rather than D as the final of the mode. He also cautions against those who might conclude that the song is in the key of e minor, an admonishment which suggests Gagnon was using the plainchant-folksong argument to educate his readership regarding French-Canadian folksong.

Similarly, the question of accidentals, a topic which is given considerable attention in the Lagaçé-Gagnon exchange, is also one which Gagnon addresses with significance in the *Chansons populaires*. In the song "Mon, ton, ton, Turlutaine," (example 2) Gagnon explains in his introductory remarks that the informant, M. Clément Cazeau, is one of a rare breed of older French Canadians who continue to sing in the tradition of their French ancestors. (1880 35). Gagnon adds that for this song he had Cazeau sing it many times in order to have the opportunity to verify his transcription. The most striking modal feature of the melody is the lowered seventh and Gagnon writes:

Maintenant, qu'un musicien essaie de chanter cette mélodie, la note *fa naturel* lui paraîtra excessivement dure; mais qu'il entende chanter cette même mélodie par un homme du peuple ... le *fa naturel* ne le choquera plus ... C'est que le musicien, à cause même de l'éducation de son oreille, ne peut, sans un véritable effort ... ne pas faire note sensible, tandis que l'homme du peuple, lui, peut chanter un intervalle de seconde majeure entre le septième et le huitième degré de la gamme sans le moindre effort, et que souvent même il lui serait difficile de faire autrement.

... if an educated musician tries to sing this as I have notated it the f natural will be difficult; however, when the same melody is sung by an untrained informant from the countryside... the f natural does not pose any problem. The reason for this is that the educated musician, because of his training, is not very amenable to singing a lowered seventh between the 7th and 8th degrees of the scale, and indeed for him it would be difficult to sing it any other way. (1880 35)

Example 2: MON, TON, TON, TURLUTAINÉ

Mon pèr' n'a - vait fil - le que moi, Mon
 pèr' n'a-vait fil - le que moi; En - cor sur la mer
 il m'envoie. Mon ton ton tur - lu - taine, oh! gaï,
 Mon ton ton tur - lu - tai - - ne.

In various places throughout the collection, Gagnon also refers to songs in which the seventh must be either lowered or absent if the song is to

sound modal. By his transcriptions and commentaries, Gagnon maintains that his informants usually treat the seventh accordingly in their songs. From a technical viewpoint, Gagnon stresses the lowered or absent seventh as an integral aspect of his plainchant thesis in the *Chansons populaires*.

On one hand, the emphasis Gagnon places on this argument appears to represent a rather limited approach to modality particularly when interpreted in the light of 20th-century study and research. On the other hand, Gagnon's knowledge of plainchant and modality reflected the teachings of the Niedermeyer school in Paris and his views, such as the one concerning the seventh, are valid when considered within the framework of this historical paradigm. In addition, Gagnon's position as organist, first at St-Jean Baptiste Church and then the Quebec City Basilica, provided him an outlet to both learn and experiment with sacred repertoire of the day. Gagnon's practical experience as a church musician should be considered as a vital link to his plainchant-folksong thesis in the *Chansons populaires*.

In other terms of modality and scale structure in the song repertoire, Gagnon also describes a category in which the songs demonstrate a mixture of tonal and modal elements; most often this hybrid derives from combining the first mode and the major scale. To illustrate, he cites a passage from d'Ortigue's *La musique à l'église* in which the French scholar describes collecting folksongs which in his experience are often given in two versions designated by the informants as the "old" and the "new," respectively (1880 327-8). The former or "old" version is exclusively modal in cast and design, while the latter or "new" shows tonal influences. D'Ortigue concludes with the following:

Effectivement, disaient-ils, l'ancien est beaucoup plus beau, et il est fort remarquable qu'ils traduisaient le plus souvent l'air moderne dans leur vieille tonalité favorite, en supprimant presque partout la note sensible.

In actual fact, they say the older version is much more beautiful, and it is indeed remarkable that they often sing the modern version in their favourite church mode by almost completely omitting the leading tone. (Gagnon, 1880 328)

Gagnon has introduced this d'Ortigue commentary because it not only compares with his own practical experience as a collector, but also because d'Ortigue reaches a strikingly similar conclusion vis-à-vis plainchant and folksong. Gagnon effectively uses the passage to reinforce his own position maintaining that specifically in terms of scale structure, the French-Canadian "chanson populaire" is most often based on the modal language of plainchant. Gagnon's strongest statements in support of the plainchant thesis are made in connection with scale structure. Partway through the "Remarques générales" essay which deals with this aspect of the repertoire he writes:

Nos chants populaires appartient le plus souvent, quant à l'échelle des sons, à la tonalité grégorienne. Les exemples de ce fait qu'on a pu voir dans ce volume ne sont pas des exemples isolés...

Concerning scale structure, our popular songs are most often based on Gregorian modality. The songs contained in this volume are not isolated examples of this fact. (1880 324)

That Gagnon notated the song melodies without any harmonizations is also a consideration which may be used as support for the plainchant thesis. He believed that in order to strengthen the plainchant argument in the folk repertoire the song transcriptions should be presented accurately and without editorial or interpretive additions; harmonization, he maintains, is acceptable when careful attention is paid to preserving the characteristics of the mode in the choices of the chords. For example, the melody must be studied so as to determine which notes are chord notes and which ones may be treated as non-harmonic tones. The dominant seventh chord, which is typical of the major-minor system, should be considered inappropriate for folksong harmonization and therefore be avoided. Gagnon does not, however, suggest that harmonizing a folksong adds to the song's beauty in the same way as he and his colleagues (Lagaçé, etc.) believed harmonizing plainchant was an enriching process, and if done properly, could add to the intrinsic beauty of the chants. Gagnon's own folksong harmonizations, the majority of which were done after the *Chansons populaires*, consist mostly of songs in major keys rather than modes, which leads to the conclusion that Gagnon preferred modal folk melodies in their original, unaccompanied state. His role as the collector is underlined in the following comment:

... ce livre, quant à la partie notée, n'est pas du tout mon oeuvre. C'est l'oeuvre de ce compositeur insaisissable qu'on appelle *le peuple*, et mon unique préoccupation, en recueillant les chants que contient ce volume, a été de les rendre tels que des personnes du peuple, ou du moins des personnes non versées dans l'art musical, me les ont chantés.

As far as the songs themselves, this is not at all my work. It is rather the work of that intangible composer which we call *the people*, and my sole preoccupation in collecting the songs found in this volume has been to present them exactly the way the people (specifically those untrained in music) sang them to me. (1880 xv)

The emphasis Gagnon places on the role of the French-Canadian people in his song collection is his most vital application of the plainchant thesis. As a work of nationalist literature, Gagnon used the *Chansons populaires* to make a strong statement about the French-Canadian character, which is typified most significantly by a deep faith and attachment to the teachings and liturgy of the Catholic Church. Whereas the importance of the Church in French-Canadian society throughout history is both well-known and thoroughly documented, Gagnon's affirmation of this fact in the *Chansons populaires* is unique when we consider that he used this argument as the main support stay of the plainchant thesis. Gagnon's twofold conclusion to the "Remarques générales" essay at the end of the volume refers to both the importance of preserving plainchant as the most appropriate music of the Catholic faith, and the strength of the French-Canadian people who, as descendants from Brittany and Normandy, founded the first settlements in New France. (1880 346) The link between these two points is the folksong which Gagnon maintains is based on the modal language of plainchant.

Undoubtedly Gagnon considered the *Chansons populaires* as a nationalist work, and was motivated to make the folksong collection with a precise sense of mission in mind. This mission was to demonstrate the plainchant-folksong thesis based on his knowledge of the church modes, and his practical experience as a collector. The volume is an effective

and revealing portrait of the French-Canadian people, and as a work of 19th-century musical scholarship remains a remarkable contribution to the field of folk music studies in French Canada. With its detail and scientific precision, the *Chansons populaires* is a penetrating document of one of our country's most rich and valuable musical traditions.

University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario

Works cited

- Barbeau, Marius. "Modalité dans nos mélodies populaires." *Mémoires de la Société Royale du Canada* (944): 15-25.
- Bordes, Charles. "La musique populaire des Basques." *La Tradition au Pays Basques*. Paris: Lucien Gougy, 1899. 297-358.
- Bronson, Bertrand. "Folksong and the modes." *Musical Quarterly* Jan. 1946: 76-88.
- Gagnon, Blanche. [Excerpt from her unpublished journal sent to M. Barbeau, summer 1949].
- Gagnon, Ernest. *Chansons populaires du Canada*. Montreal: Beauchemin, 1880.
- d'Harcourt, Marguerite and Raoul. *Chansons folkloriques françaises au Canada*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956.
- d'Indy, Vincent. *Cours de composition musicale en 1897-1898* Book one. Paris: Durand, 1912.
- Sharp, Cecil. *English Folk Songs: Some Conclusions*. Rev. by Maud Karpeles. London: Methuen, 1954.
- Tiersot, Julien. *Histoire de la chanson populaire en France*. Paris: Librairie Plon, Nourrit, 1889.
- Weckerlin, Jean-Baptiste. *La chanson populaire*. Paris: Didot, 1886.

NOTES

1. These and succeeding figures refer to pages in the appropriate author's book listed in the bibliography.
2. The English translations in this paper are my own.
3. Gagnon's own plainchant harmonizations are contained in a large volume entitled *Accompagnement d'orgue des chants liturgiques*, which was published in 1903. Whereas this work demonstrates Gagnon's continuing interest in plainchant, unlike Lagaçé's collection which figured as an important impetus for the plainchant debate leading to the *Chansons populaires*, because of its later date Gagnon's volume is removed from any specific connection to the folksong collection.

Resumé: *Gordon Smith démontre l'importance historique de l'oeuvre de Ernest Gagnon: Chansons populaires du Canada, et examine le rôle de cette oeuvre dans le mouvement nationaliste. Il discute aussi le «plainchant» et son rapport avec la chanson populaire française au XIXe siècle.*