

CHAPTER 8

“Those tones other than the tone and half tone”: A critical view of L.A. Bourgault-Ducoudray’s *Trente mélodies populaires de Grèce et d’Orient*

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[For reasons of space, the illustrations for this paper will be published separately.]

First, I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for the invitation to participate. I also thank colleagues in Greece, George Konstantzos and Kyriakos Gouventas, for having provided precious research resources.

To judge from the correspondence recently published by Peter Asimov, Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray seems to have been a nice fellow. Polite and sociable. Boundless energy. An insatiable musical appetite. And a solid commitment to world music.

Brittany, Egypt, Greece, Cambodia, Ireland, Scotland... etc – he was willing to seek everywhere in his quest for resources to bring life back to Western classical music. A rejuvenation. A return to simplicity.

What follows is a brief account of the key formative years of his activities – 1873-1878.

In 1873 an urgent need for a health cure took him to Greece, a visit which proved to be the starting point of a project of collecting Greek songs and understanding the musics of Greece, and of what he calls “the Orient”. His points of contact and collection were Athens, Smyrna, Constantinople, Megara and Marseille.

He had no Modern Greek; neither did he have Ancient Greek musical theory. So he set about learning, with all the crusading energy of a thirty-five-year old. He was appalled and outraged by what he saw as the deficiencies in Greek popular music.

He determined on three courses of action. One, to resurrect the Ancient Greek scales and bring them into European classical music, a major work of popularisation that hinged on the Universal Exposition of 1878; the second, to reform the millennial practices of Greek ecclesiastical music, of which he had a very poor opinion; the third, to engineer harmonisation and polyphony into Greek popular music, so that the country could break with what he saw as the immobility of Oriental musical culture, and enter at the civilised portals of European classical musical culture.

Attracted by the songs that he encountered, he then requested ministerial permission for a formal mission, and that was accorded. So he travelled out in January 1875.

Once in Athens, he was lucky enough to fall in with the *École Française*, and in particular with its director Emile Burnouf, who agreed to translate for him the theoretical writings of Chrysanthos of Madytos on the Ecclesiastical Music of Greece.

Meanwhile he busied himself with collecting songs. Notably at Carnival, and noting in the process that they accorded with the modal systems of the Ancient Greeks. Back

in France these songs were later to appear as a concert item, his *Carnival of Athens* for two pianos. [Fig. 1 below]

He then set sail for Smyrna and Constantinople, hoping that there he would find further musical enlightenment. It was his very good fortune to happen upon a Cypriot lady, Madame Laffon, the wife of an official at the French consulate, who had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of Greek songs, which he proceeded to write down in notated form – and then, subsequently to harmonise.

From Smyrna he travelled to Constantinople, where he was greatly disappointed by the church singing of the Greek community, but where he had the luck to meet two musical experts, Messrs Afthonidhis and Tantalidhis, both of them blind, who afforded him precious insights into Greek ecclesiastical music.

Now, here was the crux of the matter.

Ducoudray was scathing about what he heard being sung in the Greek churches. He wrote as follows :

"There is nothing more wretched, more barbaric, more repugnant to the European ear than the chant which one hears in the Oriental churches. Those intervals other than the tone and the half-tone, which most of the time are just false notes, those bleating voices, that nasal singing, that monotone, that insipid and un pitying *ison* which has on an expressive melody the effect of a skewer being stuck through a human body..." [Fig. 2]

And further, as regards the so-called "nasality" or nasal singing:

"today the majority of European taste rejects this bizarre thing as a monstrosity." [Fig. 3]

For Ducoudray the desiderata are progress and development, such as are represented in polyphony and harmonisation. That was what Europe does. But Mr Afthonidhis, his archimandrite informant, expresses what we might call the "native" point of view:

"Certain melodies that you consider naked and without flavour [and hence in need of harmonisation], for me are enough to reduce me to tears." [Fig. 4]

In passing he also notes the organological construction of the *tambour* and the *bouzouki*. Interestingly for current practitioners, the *bouzouki* of his times had one part of its fingerboard fretted in tones and half tones, to play European music, and an upper part fretted in thirds of a tone, so that the Greeks can play "oriental" modes on the same instrument. That facility – so poetically indicative of the dual face of Greek popular music – has unfortunately been lost in the subsequent development of the *bouzouki*. [Fig. 5]

All of these musical recollections were printed in *Souvenirs of a Musical Mission to Greece and the Orient*, published in 1876 by Baur in Paris.

Upon his return he set to work preparing the collected songs for publication, and they eventually appeared as *Trente Medlodies de Grèce et d'Orient*, published in 1876 by Henry Lemoine of Paris and Brussels. [Fig. 6]

It is those songs, and their commentaries, that I have been translating for the purposes of this conference and have posted on my Bourgault-Ducoudray website.*

The final outcome of this adventure was the public *Lecture on Modality in Greek Music* that Ducoudray gave in Paris in 1878, as part of the Exposition Universelle Internationale – the Paris Expo. He gave a well-oiled account of the modes of Ancient Greece, and then played some of the songs that he had collected and harmonised on his travels. The shorthand account of the lecture was published by the Imprimerie Nationale, and I have posted it on my website.

We should say immediately that his adventure, although exemplary in the breadth of its cultural openness, bespeaks the colonialism of his time. In this operation, Greece and the so-called “Orient” are seen explicitly as an “inexhaustible mine” of new musical possibilities that can be searched for (his word is *fouiller* – to excavate), dug up, and taken back to colonial France for the purposes of rejuvenating its jaded musical economy. Not for nothing was his 1878 lecture under the aegis of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce.

We may say further that the adventure perfectly exemplifies the “civilising mission” of the white man in foreign parts. He is frankly contemptuous of local musical traditions that are not to his taste, and wishes them to be reformed. His projected reform plan also has its tools. Where others may bring gunboats, his plan is to bring pianos. We shall return to the pianos later.

Now, I am half Greek, on my mother’s side, and I play the rebetiko musics of Greece. The past two millennia are replete with examples of imperial powers being simultaneously attracted by Greek culture, but also intent on engineering it to their own ends. Having surveyed Ducoudray’s account of his 5-year engagement with Greece, I see it as yet another indignity inflicted on the Greeks.

We recall his informant Mr Aphthonidis in Constantinople:

"Certain melodies that YOU consider naked and without flavour, for me are enough to reduce me to tears."

So, to put my argument in a nutshell :

Ducoudray puts himself through a period of intense study, and emerges with an understanding of the Ancient theories of musical modes. In the process, with some excitement, he identifies one that he chooses to call the "Oriental chromatic" scale. He embodies this in some of the piano harmonisations of the songs he collected in Smyrna.

Now, musicians from Gibraltar to Afghanistan – the broad sweep of musicality associated with Arabs, Jews, Turks, Persians and Greeks – would recognise instantly the tonal quality of that mode. It is part of their global musical culture known as *maqam*, a common musical culture that they all inflect in their particular ways, but which is a common heritage. There is no single term that embraces that whole reality, but we are, you might say "*il popolo del maqam* – the people of maqam". It is an act of extraordinary violence to attempt to extract Greece from that culture. It is a violence also reflected in the later historical period – of the two periods of fascism in Greece – Metaxas in 1936 and the Colonels in 1967, when, inspired by the likes of Bourgault-Ducoudray, state-imposed musical censorship busied itself with striking out the quarter tones in musical scores.

The underpinning principle of *maqam* is a deep spirituality, a moving of the spirit which in Arabic musical culture is referred to as *tarab*. One of its abodes is the Sufi

religious culture of that same geographical sweep. When it comes into the secular sphere, it manifests in the epic concerts of Um Kalthum in Egypt, with their magnificent progresses from one modulation to another before eventually returning to their start.

Ducoudray knows nothing of that musical culture. To that extent, he is a musical ignoramus. And that explains several things: On the one hand, in his musical notation of the Greek songs, he has great difficulties in establishing the time signatures of some songs. Underlying the switching 2/4 and 3/4 measures of his notations are 7/8 and 9/8 time signatures that are universally recognisable to Greek and Near Eastern musicians.

On the other hand, he also has difficulty locating his "Oriental chromatic" within the modes of the Ancient Greeks. He says:

"One finds in Greece, and above all in Turkey, innumerable examples of the Oriental chromatic scale."

"We thought we had discovered a certain affinity between the oriental chromatic and the diatonic Lydian. Should we see in the oriental chromatic a Lydian scale having its second and sixth degrees lowered by a flat? We leave it to people more competent than ourselves to decide this interesting question." [*Trente mélodies*, p. 22]

He is, as is apparent, groping in the dark. A *tâtonnement*, so to speak. He does not have access to the name for that mode – sanctioned by several centuries of usage – which is the family of Hijaz.

As regards the quality of his musical adaptations of the Greek songs, it is hard not to see them as essentially trite and banal in comparison to the great musical tradition from which they have been plucked. We would, in addition, also be justified in observing that in his account – true to the traditions of Western musical regimes – Islamic and Jewish music are so far Othered as to be entirely out of the picture.

At this point, and briefly, another element comes into the picture. The piano.

In July 1874, the director of the Pleyel piano company made an offer of a free grand piano to the École Française in Paris. And also further "special" pianos if needed. Namely pianos potentially capable of playing the Ancient Greek modes, and hence equipped with quarter tones. Ducoudray had decided that the only way to get Greeks to sing in tune was to educate them by means of pianos or organs. Emile Burnouf would have been the key man in this plan. However, to Ducoudray's chagrin, Burnouf's post was not renewed. So the plan came to nothing. To my knowledge (and also because of technical problems) the piano was never built. However the idea did resurface some years later, when a Professor Psachos set about constructing a quarter-tone harmonium, in line with Ducoudray's thinking. It was called the Panharmonion. Only three of these were ever built. Below I provide images of this instrument. [*Figs. 7a, 7b*]

In historical terms, real progress on this front would only be made with the advent of electronic instruments.

Incidentally, it is striking that Ducoudray's opinion was that the learning of correct intonation could NOT include quarter tones, because the effort would be too great.

Now, we are fortunate that colleagues in Greece have made it their business to make a critical examination of the songs contained in Ducoudray’s *Trente mélodies*. I refer to George Konstantzos and his team of musicians recording under the label of the Archive of Greek Music. Specifically, they have made recordings of the songs as annotated by Bourgault-Ducoudray in his piano versions. Then, in addition, they have done a substantial work of reconstruction, based on plausibility and early field recordings of Greek and Near Eastern music, of how the songs might have sounded when performed by native musicians in the 1870s. In other words, native versions. Those recordings have been issued on CD, and they make fascinating listening. [Fig. 8]

If you wish to explore this material further, the website that I have constructed contains my translation of Ducoudray’s *Trente mélodies*, together with musical notations of some of the songs.

Alongside his musical notations it also contains two recorded versions of each song. First, as performed by singer and piano following Ducoudray’s own notation; second in the historical reconstruction by our colleagues of the Greek Music Archive.

In addition to the printed texts of the *Trente mélodies*, on the site you will also find the *Souvenirs of a Musical Mission*, the *Lecture on Modality in Greek Music*, and the *Studies on Greek Ecclesiastical Music*.

As an example, at the end of this presentation, I include here a section from one of the songs. It is played first in Ducoudray’s notation and harmonisation, and then in the reconstructed version.

The song is No. 2 in the anthology, "Eis tou kosmou ta taxidhia", which Ducoudray notates in 2/4 and in G minor. [Fig. 9]

Here we can recognise the classic material of the *amane* laments practised by both Greek and Turkish musicians of the period. A very simple vocal text, around which the singer improvises, exploring the possibilities of the musical mode.

As a good example of this genre, which is truer to the tradition, I am also adding a sound clip of an *amane* from the much-missed Greek singer from Lesbos, Solon Lekkas, who died a couple of years ago. [Fig. 10] **

That brings me to the end. In conclusion, just to say:

In case you think that the matters outlined in this paper are to be taken lightly, I remind you that my friend and colleague the late Ilias Petropoulos was imprisoned under the Greek fascist junta of 1967 for having published another great song collection – his magisterial work *Rebetika Tragoudhia* [“Rebetiko Songs”] – which spoke of the Turkish and Islamic roots of much of what today passes for Greek culture. And I also speak from personal experience, because these questions of *modality* are matters over which we fight and argue endlessly in the weekly rehearsals of our SOAS Rebetiko Band. Occasionally even to the point of fisticuffs.

Thank you for your attention.

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* A fuller version of the original paper, with illustrations, translations and sound clips, is posted on our website at: www.geocities.ws/bourgault_ducoudray

** Solon Lekkas clip:

https://youtu.be/VH_1uYLYnMk