

HARMONIZING THE PAST

Sindhumathi K. Revuluri

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

In 1852 Napoleon III ordered the collection and preservation of French folk songs so he could “erect a grand monument to the anonymous poetic genius of the people”.¹ Such a directive was hardly surprising for the heavily nationalistic Third Republic. His concern was likely borne from a desire to compete with similar movements in other countries, as well as from the fear that these songs might disappear forever without the intervention of scholars. His demand inspired the beginning of a folklore movement in France and involved many composers, critics, and scholars in the enterprise of folk song gathering and publishing. Decades later, at the end of the 19th century, the project became even more charged, as the presence of foreign entities on French soil and contact with exotic cultures increased, leading to heightened anxiety about the preservation of a pure and authentic French identity and spirit. This anxiety was manifest through a growing interest in French popular traditions. As an extension of nationalist sentiment, many composers, critics-cum-scholars, and folklorists began collecting folk songs from every province of France. Because folk songs were seen as examples of a culture uncorrupted by foreign influences,² they were a perfect vehicle for the agenda of nationalism. When this venture was taken over by French musicians just before the dawn of the 20th century, its objective was recast as twofold: The first was to collect and preserve French folk songs before they disappeared, fulfilling Napoleon’s edict. The second was to encourage their diffusion through publication and practice, which gave rise to subsequent presentations and manipulations of the songs as musical objects and nationalistic and imperial agents. It is the remnants of these actions that make the French case different from many of its contemporary counterparts.

Folk songs were treated as products of the past and as representative of a less sophisticated time. Furthermore, as aids in constructing a history for French music, folk songs became part of a larger project of imperial assertion. This newly created history

¹ “Napoléon III avait ordonné en 1852 la collecte de tous les chants populaires de France pour ‘élever un grand monument au génie anonyme et poétique du peuple.’” “Collecteurs de chants populaires français”, www.musicus.com/page5.htm.

² Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (Paris: P. Belfond, 1967; originally published 1853–55) also echoes this point; since he believes that it is the mixing of cultures that will bring the downfall of civilization, the search for a pure French expression is particularly necessary and attractive.

set French music apart from various exotic and primitive musics which were thought to lack a history and to be stylistically static, and therefore inferior. The collection of folk songs thus served to enact nationalism in two ways: to celebrate the complexity of French folk music over exotic musics, and to celebrate the progress of contemporary French music over its less evolved “past”.

In this paper, I consider a particular product of the folk song enterprise: harmonized folk songs marketed to the general population. Though I believe the scholarly aspects of folklore studies and the subsequent use of folk songs in art music (as quotation or instances of irony) to be eventually fruitful areas of inquiry also, I believe the harmonized folk song, intended for a popular audience, offers the most insight into the construction of a French music history, the building of a musical image, and the way the French consciously manipulated how they wanted to be heard and understood.

During the last decade of the 19th and first decade of the 20th centuries, the study of folk song in France blossomed, and the published results took two main forms. The first was scholarly in nature; the most notable (and arguably most influential) was the collection of folk songs issued as the journal *Les chansons de France*, published by the society of the same name three times a year from 1907 to 1913.³ The journal was founded and run by Charles Bordes—a familiar name because of his involvement with the Schola Cantorum—and it was dedicated to the diffusion and performance of folk song. The songs in the journal were presented as single melodic lines and were often accompanied by commentary, usually on themes in the poetry. Also included were notes about the provenance of each song, specifically the region of France from which it hailed, and, when appropriate, translations of the text.

These scholarly efforts aimed at fulfilling Napoleon’s order—to find and preserve French folk songs before they disappeared or became too corrupt to recognize—also added another element to the larger folk song venture: As *Les chansons de France* states in its mission, the task of bringing these songs to the public consciousness was also crucial to the aim of preservation and to the inspiration of national pride. Some of the people involved with the scholarly aspect of the project, such as Vincent d’Indy and Maurice Duhamel, also engaged in disseminating the songs to the public through the production of popular editions, which I will spend the rest of this paper discussing.

Popular editions of folk songs often shed the austerity displayed in publications like *Les chansons de France*. They ranged in appearance from the quotidian to the extravagant. Some, like Julien Tiersot’s *Chansons du vieux temps* (1904), appeared almost as deluxe editions, the equivalent perhaps of today’s coffee-table books.⁴ This edition, as well as others that are similarly illustrated and ornate, were more likely meant for display than for actual use in performance, even at home: The pages are overwhelmed by illustrations, and the music itself is quite small. The size of the notation would preclude nearly anyone from actually being able to read it easily while seated at a keyboard. Others, however, could have been used in performance, despite being illustrated in similar fashion. Take Yvette Guilbert and Maurice Duhamel’s *Chansons de la vieille France* (1906), which could serve as a functional musical score; the illustrations did not take away from their ability to be read and performed.⁵ Still others, like d’Indy’s collection of songs from

³ The full run of the journal was later reissued in book format. Charles Bordes et al., *Les chansons de France* (repr. ed., Genève: Editions Slatine, 1980) unnumbered.

⁴ Julien Tiersot, *Chansons du vieux temps* (Paris: Hachette, 1904).

⁵ Yvette Guilbert and Maurice Duhamel, *Chansons de la vieille France* (Paris: F. Juven, 1906).

the Vivarais, or Bourgault-Ducoudray's songs from Bretagne, resemble the presentation seen in *Les chansons de France*: austere (that is, having no illustrations at all) and, in fact, sometimes including a general introduction, though no commentary on individual songs is given.⁶ Thus various publications supported different activities and aimed to involve as much of the general public as possible in the folk song movement.

What all of these popular editions have in common is the addition of harmony to the folk songs' original melodies. As we saw in *Les chansons de France*, the songs were collected and preserved monophonically. In fact, much was made of the fact that these songs, in their original form, existed as melody only. According to Tiersot,

In their original form, these songs, we cannot forget, were sung by their natural performers without any sort of accompaniment. The peasant with his simple and primitive spirit, has not the feeling nor the need for harmony, and one can assume that the origin of his art is much older than the relatively modern usage of the combination of simultaneous sounds.⁷

In the few places where popular volumes are granted an introduction, justification is often provided by the harmonizer for the presence of harmony.⁸ Most often, it is cast as a concession to the modern ear and its habits. As Tiersot tells us, this was a necessary step in the diffusion of this music to a contemporary mass audience:

The modern reader has other habits and more needs: that is why we have added to these folk melodies, accompaniments; in so doing, we have had no other goal but to provide a backdrop for these melodies, elucidate the rhythms, and clarify the tonalities.⁹

D'Indy makes a similar claim:

Folk song does not possess accompaniment, being, essentially monodic and of free rhythm; nevertheless, given modern habits, I felt I had no choice but to add to each of these pieces harmonic support which I forced myself to render as simply as possible in order that I did not change the character of the melodies.¹⁰

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to treat the particular ways in which these songs are harmonized in detail, I will say briefly that the harmonizations often present surprising and unconventional musical behavior. D'Indy's harmonizations are especially

⁶ Vincent d'Indy, *Chansons populaires du Vivarais*, op. 52 (Paris: A. Durand & Fils, 1900); Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, *Trente mélodies populaires de Basse-Bretagne* (Paris: Henry Lemoine & Cie., 1885).

⁷ "Dans leur forme originale, ces chansons, on ne l'ignore pas, sont chantées par leurs interprètes naturels sans aucun accompagnement. Le paysan, esprit simple et primitif, n'a pas le sentiment ni le besoin de l'harmonie, et l'on peut assurer que l'origine de son art est antérieure, et de beaucoup, à l'usage, relativement moderne, de la combinaison des sons simultanés." Julien Tiersot, *Sixty folksongs of France* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1915) xii. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

⁸ I use the word harmonizer here rather than "composer", since the person in question has only elaborated on an already extant creation, even if an anonymous one. However, it is not clear that those involved in this project felt the same way: D'Indy puts an opus number (op. 52) on his collection of songs from the Vivarais, thereby staking his claim to full authorship of the work.

⁹ "Mais le lecteur moderne a d'autres habitudes, et plus d'exigences: c'est pourquoi nous avons ajouté aux mélodies populaires des accompagnements dans la position desquelles nous n'avons pas eu d'autre but que de mettre en valeur le relief des mélodies, en accuser les rythmes, en préciser les tonalités." Tiersot, *Sixty folksongs of France*, xii.

¹⁰ "Le chant populaire ne réclame d'accompagnement, étant d'ordre essentiellement monodique et de rythme libre, néanmoins, vu les habitudes modernes, il ne m'a point semblé nuisible d'adjoindre à chacune des pièces un soutien harmonique que je me suis efforcé de rendre le plus simple possible afin de ne pas altérer le caractère des mélodies." D'Indy, *Chansons populaires du Vivarais*, iii.

modally inflected; he was perhaps particularly sensitive to modal tendencies due to his own musical preoccupations. While Tiersot and Bourgault-Ducoudray attempt simple and straightforward harmonizations, they involve uncomfortable voice leading, and obscure the modality of a piece by using modal mixture or leaving out the leading tones or third degree all together. I mention this only to show that this underexplored area of French music history can reveal a great deal about how the French were very self-consciously creating an image of themselves and what elaborate, if subtle, steps they took to achieve it. Still, before we can consider all of that, I believe we need to examine the very presence of the harmonizations, regardless of their particular character. What is at issue here is their role in achieving successful distribution to a popular audience and the further consequences of this action.

I posit that adding harmonies to these folk melodies did much more than simply make them more accessible to modern ears. Beyond the stated—and perhaps successfully achieved—objectives of preserving the songs before they disappeared and disseminating them to the public, there were other consequences that are directly tied to the agenda of nationalism. Though most, if not all, the melodies represented in popular and scholarly editions alike were collected from living traditions, they become products of the past through emphasis on their ancient origins, their simplicity and primitive qualities, and their unchanging nature. The musicians responsible for their distribution succeeded in cementing these songs—indeed, this entire tradition—in a less sophisticated past than their civilized present. The composers and critics involved in their collection created a musical history that incorporated popular traditions and established a clear progression from provincial to refined, from rural to urban, from primitive to civilized.¹¹

Though various commentaries cast harmony as a concession to modern musical tastes, its addition to these folk melodies is perceived as a necessarily civilizing force, one that adds sophistication to an otherwise banal artistic creation. As Tiersot tells us, he sees the melodies not as complete on their own, but actually as vehicles for a yet-unwritten harmony: “Folk melodies always provide rich material for harmonization.”¹² Patrice Coirault, perhaps one of the most famous folklore scholars of the 20th century, echoes this sentiment of simplicity: “Oral transmission [of folk songs] changes the complex into the simple.”¹³

It is based on this perception of simplicity that Tiersot and others act to “complicate” (as Coirault might say) the songs through the addition of harmony. Their act is meant to make the primitivism of folk melodies more palatable to modern ears, ostensibly more refined. By implying that the lack of harmony in these songs correlates with a lack of sophistication—that the original voices of folk songs were incapable of harmony—the original collective creators are robbed of their agency. Tiersot, d’Indy, and all involved in collecting and distributing folk songs succeeded in communicating a progression—from unrefined to accomplished—that identified the origins of their musical tradition in the past and further placed their contemporary musical output at the pinnacle of civilization.

¹¹ See Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité*, for further arguments about the lack of sophistication of peasants and their inability to understand what constitutes civilization; they are only able to follow the lead of the civilized.

¹² “La mélodie populaire fut toujours une féconde matière d’harmonisation.” Julien Tiersot, *Noëls français* (Paris: Heugel & Cie., 1901) ii.

¹³ “Elle (la transmission orale) change le complexe en simple.” Patrice Coirault, *Notre chanson folklorique* (Paris: Auguste Picard, 1941) 18.

In addition to their simplicity, folk melodies are charged with having no history. Tiersot, again: “By their very nature, popular songs do not have a history. It was, until now, impossible to determine the origins, age, provenance, the authors.”¹⁴ But because the songs were so consciously rooted in the past, scholars such as d’Indy and Charles Mélanct were able to use them as a starting point from which to build a history—a history that would lend their music complexity and refinement. That is, the folk songs may not have their own history, but they could *become* one for the subsequent products of French musical genius.

The collective and anonymous creators of French folk songs are further degraded with the implication that they corrupted their own tradition. Several composers include accounts of having had to track down the “correct” version of a given folk song because the villagers they interviewed were not able to “perform” it to their satisfaction. And nearly every author on the subject discusses the unfaithful nature of the oral tradition. Through their commentaries and actions, these “budding ethnomusicologists” seem to be saying that the peasants do not know how to care for their own culture—or, as Gobineau might say, they do not even recognize the elements that make up civilized culture. Somehow, these civilized people must save folk songs from the peasant.

All of these efforts to cast the songs as primitive and the subsequent processes of civilizing them helped to create a history—a history which only served to emphasize the progress and civilization represented by contemporary French music. In the end, the entire enterprise of collecting and publishing folk songs serves as a profound expression of nationalism: French music of the present day stands as the proud accomplishment of a greatly civilized culture, one that can show its roots in history and has proven itself capable of progress.

Another consequence to harmonizing folk songs actually promotes a more aggressively nationalist program. We arrive at the nationalist endpoint not through a path of French history or its construction, but via the treatment of exotic musics by French scholars at this time. In particular, I refer to a number of foreign or exotic folk songs in harmonized form, also collected in and around the first decade of the 20th century. Here, the harmonization acts as a normalizing force, making melodies that contain unconventional lines conform to an acceptable Western harmonic progression—a way of making the strange familiar. But beyond harmonized folk songs, we can find striking parallels between the general discussion of exotic music and French folk traditions. Most often, work on exotic musics—whether in the form of articles in a journal or book-length studies—tended to identify musical aspects remarkably similar to those labeled as *inferior* in discussions of French folk traditions. For example, accounts of exotic musics by French scholars and critics, particularly on French soil, tended to treat them as static entities, undermining the possibility of their history or progress, going so far as to label them as incapable of changing. The very things they combated in their own history—by making sure that we know they are *history* and not the present day—the very things that were coded as negative and inferior are the same ideas they emphasized in their discussions of exotic musics. French folk song was monophonic—so was most exotic music, at least in French understanding and depiction. French folk song was created collectively and anonymously, absent an individual author—and so was exotic

¹⁴ “De par leur nature même, les chansons populaires n’ont pas d’histoire. Il a été jusqu’ici impossible d’en déterminer les origines, l’ancienneté, la provenance, les auteurs.” Tiersot, *Sixty folksongs of France*, xiv.

music. French folk song had no history—neither did exotic music. French folk song required the aid of contemporary musicians in order to make it civilized enough for modern ears—so did exotic music.

Folk songs also share with exotic musics a sense of novelty; they seem to represent a simpler faraway time, one that is not entirely real to the contemporary audience. But French folk traditions could not become synonymous with what was deemed to be “primitive” music, lacking the benefits of civilization. This would work against the nationalist goals of the whole enterprise. While their folk traditions may have been too simple for any claim of contemporary artistic genius, they were, after all, still French, and as such, key to their pursuit of pure and authentic identity. In order to differentiate themselves from exotic musics, they had to show that their music was worthy of commentary on some higher level than exotic musics.

The key way in which this was achieved was through the identification of unique characteristics corresponding to geography within the realm of French popular song. Regional identity within France became important to the study of musical folk traditions in a way that never occurred for exotic musics. As far as those musics were concerned, once it had been specified that they were not French (or simply not Western), further distinctions were less important. Areas within continents were not differentiated, and several cultures were often conflated. While the scholar’s casual knowledge of France was much greater than their understanding of other countries, their faith in the *real* differences between the north, south, east, and west of France—versus their nonchalance regarding the specific provenance of exotic musics—is striking. D’Indy discusses “patois”, Tiersot the particular merits of the Vendée, Bourgault-Ducoudray of Bretagne. In the end, however, all of them are able to use these divisions again to their advantage: They bring up these differences only to say that, despite it all, they are first and foremost French.

This is all made more poignant when one considers the scholarly work and commentary occurring alongside these folk songs. Bourgault-Ducoudray claims, in the preface to his collection of songs from the Basse-Bretagne, that his interest in French folk songs came not from Napoleon’s orders or from his colleagues and peers conducting similar research, but from his own experience in Greece. He claims that the motivation behind this volume was his voyage to Greece and his work on traditional Greek music; teaching his students about the popular traditions of Greece and the Orient made him realize how valuable a similar study about French folk traditions could be to them.¹⁵ In a sense, Bourgault-Ducoudray seems to be engaged in the beginnings of comparative musicology. There seems to be an intention to compare popular or *folk* traditions—popular Greek melodies with French folk songs, not with French art music. Nearly all the music from other places studied by French scholars is considered by them to be part of a popular tradition. There are hardly any studies of “art” exotic music, or even a recognition that such a thing could exist, regardless of how pieces were perceived by those who created them.

Thus the various aspects of folk song collection and publication served purposes beyond those offered as the explicit reasons. Gathering the songs allowed the French to remain competitive with other countries who had already executed similar undertakings.

¹⁵ Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, *Trente mélodies populaires de Basse-Bretagne* (Paris: Henry Lemoine & Cie., 1885) 5–6.

The dissemination of French folk songs also aided in asserting national pride as seen through the superiority of French traditions over exotic and primitive musics. The scholars and critics engaged in this project further managed to carefully balance the showcasing of their popular traditions with the recognition of—and even an emphasis on—their simplicity. By couching folk melodies in the language of the past, they stressed their distance from the present. When looking further at the actual harmonies used, their place in history becomes even more clear—modally-inflected accompaniments, ambiguous tonalities, and unconventional voice leading. In doing all of this, French scholars and critics set up a clear progression from provincial folk melodies to the sophisticated musical language of the fin de siècle.

I believe the study of not only French folk songs, but, perhaps more importantly, their presentation and distribution, will continue to provide insights into the French self-image. Taken in concert with representations of the exotic in much contemporary French art music, we can begin to see not only how the French heard themselves, but how they *wanted* to be heard.

