

French Canada as an Inspiration to Canadian Composers

By Diane E. Peters
Wilfrid Laurier University Library

The music of Canada, with the exception of indigenous native and Inuit music, is unlike that of many other countries, in that it did not reach its current state as a result of development from primitive origins. Canada's contemporary music has grown from roots transplanted from various mature nations, each with its own social and religious traditions, and introduced to diverse regions of the country over a period of more than 300 years. As a result, it is difficult to speak of a distinctly Canadian musical style.

However, national or regional characteristics have made themselves evident in music in a number of ways: through adoption of folkloric content, through association with literary or artistic works by native authors or artists, through allusions to historical events, or through musical evocation of visual elements such as geographic features. The aim of this study is to provide a brief overview of the ways in which French Canada has served as an inspiration to Canadian composers.

The French Canadian Folk Heritage

Folk music, the predominant form of music in Canada to the end of the eighteenth century, was gradually supplanted by European musical tastes over the course of the nineteenth century, especially in urban centres, as communications became more rapid. However, the rise of a music-conscious middle class did not mark the end of folk traditions. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed a revival of interest in the traditional French Canadian folklore, as part of a general nationalistic trend. The first literary manifestation of this movement was

François-Xavier Garneau's *Histoire du Canada* (1845-48), which appeared in reaction to Lord Durham's *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, written in 1839. Durham had stated:

There can hardly be conceived a nationality more destitute of all that can invigorate and elevate a people than that which is exhibited by the descendants of the French in Lower Canada, owing to their retaining their peculiar language and manners. They are a people with no history and no literature.¹

Durham further recommended a policy of gradual assimilation of the French Canadians by the British, similar to that which had taken place in Louisiana. Garneau, by resurrecting the past, not only revealed to French Canada the facts of her secular history, but also the essential traits of her national character.

The most immediate results of Garneau's influence were the poems of Octave Crémazie, the legends and literary criticism of l'Abbé Casgrain, and the first Canadian novel of merit, *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863), by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé. A further impetus to the cause of nostalgic patriotism was the arrival of the ship *Capricieuse* from France in 1855, marking the re-establishment of French Canadian ties with her mother country, broken since the days of the British conquest. By 1860, the trend towards the creation of a literature based on the memory of past glories and the virtues of the race manifested itself in the works of the Patriotic School of Quebec, which included such figures as Louis Fréchette and William Chapman.

Musically, the patriotic movement produced patriotic songs and a revival of interest in their folk heritage among the educated middle classes. This resulted in the publication of a number of *chansonniers*, most without printed music. However, these were later proved to contain few true folk songs. The first scholarly consideration of folk songs was undertaken by Hubert La Rue (1833-91) and Ernest Gagnon (1834-1915), both of whom had studied in France and had come under the influence of European nationalistic musical movements. La Rue's studies, published in *Le Foyer canadien* in 1863 and 1865 under the title, "Les chansons populaires et historiques du Canada," focused on comparisons between French and Canadian versions of the same songs, and are of literary and political rather than musical interest.

More influential was Gagnon's *Chansons populaires du Canada*, published in Quebec City in 1865, a collection which included words and melodies of over 100 songs, with commentaries and analytical remarks on the musical structure. Gagnon's interest in folklore also inspired him to harmonize a number of French Canadian songs and Christmas carols. Similar arrangements were made by composers such as Achille Fortier, Amédée Tremblay, Antoine Dessane, Oscar Martel, Alexis Contant, Paul Gilson, and Jules Hone, some of whom also arranged folk songs into rhapsodies or medleys. One of the most notable of the latter was Joseph Vézina's *Mosaïque sur des airs populaires canadiens* (1880), famous chiefly because its first performance was coupled with the first of Calixa Lavallée's *O Canada*. Lavallée was also responsible for one of the few extended compositions using folk material composed in the late nineteenth century. On June 11, 1870, the official reception of the new Governor-General, the Marquis of Lorne, took place in Quebec City. The cantata of welcome which Lavallée had been commissioned to write for the occasion was climaxed by a simultaneous rendition of "God Save the Queen," "Vive la canadienne" and "Comin' Through the Rye," a combination symbolizing the friendship between the French and British elements in Canada.

On the whole, however, composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made few attempts to find inspiration in their folk heritage. At best, the Canadian environment was reflected in titles, song texts, or opera libretti. Most composers in the pre-World War I era undertook their studies abroad, and having been trained in European methods, showed disdain for the simple folk music of their homeland. As Gordon Smith points out in his article on Ernest Gagnon's attempts to promote Canadian musical nationalism, "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."² Even in the field of folk music research little further study was undertaken. Musicians of the period assumed that Gagnon's collection had exhausted the supply of authentic French folk songs, and that the encroachments of modern society had extinguished the last vestiges of local traditions.

It was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that this assumption was disproved. In 1910, Edward Sapir began systematic research on native Indian folk music for the newly-created Anthropological Division of the National Museum of Canada in Ottawa and, in 1911, Marius Barbeau, together with a team of other researchers, took over the task of expanding the collection. Barbeau's study of native music led him to further research on French Canadian traditional music. In May 1916, armed with a phonograph, a supply of blank wax records, and notebooks, he set out to interview many of the remaining folk singers of French Canada. The result was a collection of two hundred folktales and nearly six hundred songs. The search continued in subsequent years, and collaborators such as E-Z. Massicotte, Adélar Lambert, and François Brassard joined in. Barbeau and Massicotte published a new collection of folk tunes in 1919, and an English language version, *Folk Songs of French Canada*, with translations by Edward Sapir, was published by Yale University Press in 1925 and widely circulated.

After 1920, the performance of French Canadian folk music was promoted by Montreal baritone Charles Marchand and, later, by two male quartets which he founded, Le Carillon canadien (1922) and The Bytown Troubadours (1927). Principal arrangers of the music for these groups were Pierre Gautier and Oscar O'Brien. Public interest in Canadian folk songs was also aroused after May 1927, when Barbeau and John Murray Gibbon, chief publicity agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway, presented the first of what became a series of Festivals of Folk Songs and Handicrafts, organized under the joint auspices of the CPR and the National Museum. In Barbeau's words:

Recitals and folksong and handicraft festivals marked the revival of folklore in the region until, after 1940, the universities in French Canada became interested. Scholars and students awakened to a new humanism based on the traditions of the people.³

In 1944, Luc Lacourcière founded the Archives de Folklore at Laval University, a centre which has gained an international reputation. Extensive research on French-Canadian music in northern Ontario has been carried out since the late 1940s, and is currently centred at the Centre franco-ontarien de folklore in Sudbury.⁴ Acadian music has been a focus of studies at the Centre d'études acadiennes, established in 1970 at the Université de Moncton.

Around the time that Barbeau was beginning his folklore collecting activity, Ernest Gagnon had written to him:

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.⁵

While Gagnon's efforts to encourage a style of folk-based musical nationalism had met with only limited success, the re-discovery of folk song in the 1910s to 1930s, and its promotion by such men as Barbeau, Marchand, and Gibbon, led to the production of numerous harmonizations, arrangements and concert settings by Canadian composers such as Léo-Pol Morin, Leo Smith, Alfred Whitehead, Hector Gratton, Sir Ernest Macmillan, Alfred Laliberté, and Healey Willan. During the same period, renewed pride in the national heritage had its counterpart in literary movements; French Canadian research was carried out in all aspects of national history and literature, and poetry and novels of rural life came back into vogue.

However, in the 1940s and post-war years, many authors and musicians again began to reject such endeavours in favour of a more international, progressive style, furthered by advances in the technology of communication. Nevertheless, folklore influences continued to be evident in a variety of works, including many by composers of non-Quebec origin. Canada's folk heritage proved of particular interest in the years surrounding Canada's centennial in 1967.

The Use of Folkloric Material in Musical Composition

Folkloric material has been incorporated into musical compositions in a number of ways.

True folk songs in their traditional environment were usually performed unaccompanied or with instrumental doubling of melodies, by soloists or unison voices. As such, they were not restrained by strictures of musical harmony and temporal measurement. Since the folk revival of the late 1920s, Canadian composers employing direct

quotation of French Canadian folk melodies have usually regulated these by means of nineteenth-century metrical and harmonic idioms.

Choral settings of French Canadian folk songs display various treatments. Most straightforward are the numerous simple harmonizations such as the *Three French Canadian Folk Songs* (1958) of Richard S. Eaton, or Richard Johnston's *Folk Songs of Quebec* (1957), for a cappella choir (SATB). There is little contrapuntal development; settings are basically homophonic, harmonies are diatonic, and modulations are avoided. Colour and textural variety are achieved by alternating verses in 4-part choral settings with ones for male or female voices alone, or by increasing the choral weight on certain phrases of the text.

In other works, there is more development of the folk material. For example, in "Petit Rocher" from Violet Archer's collection of *Three French-Canadian Folk Songs* (1962) for a cappella choir (SATB), textures open up, with octave doubling on the melody and vocalized scale patterns in the women's voices on the phrase, "Ah! si j'avais des ailes comme vous." The third verse is shifted in tonality up a minor third, involving a tritone leap between the verses. In the a cappella setting of *Bonhomme, bonhomme* (1964) by Talivaldis Kenins textural complexity results from extended use of imitation, rhythmic counterpoints, syncopation and antiphonal passages.

A common approach, especially among composers producing instrumental arrangements, is to present folk melodies with little or no development, and with colour and interest lying in the accompaniment. One of the most successful early works of this type was Claude Champagne's *Suite canadienne* for choir and orchestra, premiered at the Festival of Canadian Song held in Quebec City in 1928. This score was the first Canadian symphonic work to be recognized internationally, and also the first work to be performed by a major European orchestra (the Concerts Pasdeloup Orchestre in Paris in

1929). The Suite was written at the conclusion of Champagne's term in Paris (1921-28), where he studied counterpoint and fugue with André Gédalge, teacher of Ravel, Milhaud and Honegger. The work consists of four movements, each a setting of a different folk song. The melodies are presented simply, but the accompaniment incorporates such techniques as dialogue between woodwinds and strings, imitation, syncopated accents, long sustained pedals, and the impressionistic use of the harp.

In some cases, composers use of folk song seems inspired more by an interest in its developmental potential than by the charm and simplicity of the original or by its patriotic or nationalistic sentiment. For example, Barbara Pentland, in writing her Sonata for Violin and Piano of 1946, which employed three French Canadian folk songs, noted:

There are certain basic sounds in all very old folk songs from almost any land which transcend race, colour, or creed and make it the common heritage of all peoples. My share of French ancestry may make me rather partial to these particular songs of our early settlers and voyageurs, but it is their purely musical qualities and possibilities which influenced my choice.⁶

Folk melodies have been used in this way as a basis for numerous sets of variations, rhapsodies, and fugues, many of which take considerable liberties in their rhythmic and melodic alterations of the folk themes.

An extension of this approach is the use of melodic fragments or motifs from folk material rather than entire songs. In a work such as Sir Ernest MacMillan's "A Saint Malo," one of his *Two Sketches for String Quartet* (1928), the introduction and conclusion are based on a simple melodic figure derived from the second phrase of the folk melody. In the middle section, each phrase of the folk melody is presented in turn, but the first phrase returns several times in the

course of the development section, suggestive of a rondo.

The general spirit of a people can be evoked musically not only through the use of actual folk material, but through the use of folk-like melodies or rhythmic patterns. François Brassard was one of Marius Barbeau's successors as a collector of folkore and an associate of Luc Lacourcière at Laval Archives de Folklore. His *Suite villageoise* of 1948 for violin and piano is arranged in three movements. The first, "Evocation," combines a simple chordal or arpeggiated accompaniment with a lyrical folklike tune. The second movement, "Gigue simple," was inspired by a fiddle jig collected by Brassard in the Lac Saint Jean area. The third movement, "Conte de feux-follets," is a lively musical representation of a folk-tale.

Brassard's work, like others of its type, suggests the French Canadian spirit primarily through its use of dance rhythms. It is also one of a number of works inspired by traditional folk legends. One of the most notable of these, described at the time of its first production in 1966 as "the first totally original 3-act ballet written and produced in North America,"⁷ is Harry Freedman's *Rose Latulippe*. Set in Quebec in the winter of 1740, the story is based on a theme common in French Canadian folk literature, that of the Devil's intervention in everyday life. The music incorporates atonality, aleatory passages, and contemporary dissonances, but is permeated with the country dance rhythms of an *habitant* celebration.

French Canadian History, Literature and Art

In addition to the folklore heritage, broader French Canadian culture has also provided extra-musical inspiration to composers.

It has not only been folk heroes such as Ti-Jean the lumberjack who have captured the imagination of Canadian musicians, but sometimes real-life heroes and events from French Canada's past. John Beckwith's *Les*

Premiers hivernements (1986), for soprano, tenor and instrumental ensemble, is based on texts by Samuel de Champlain and Marc Lescarbot that describe the hardships of life in the New World. The exploits of the seventeenth-century missionary Jean de Brébeuf have inspired several works, including ones by Healey Willan (1949), Paul McIntyre (1961), and R. Murray Schafer (1961). More recent times are reflected in Harry Somers' opera *Louis Riel* (1967), based on Métis history, and contemporary history in works such as Carol Ann Weaver's *Fourteen Women* (1990) for instrumental ensemble, one of a number of musical tributes to the victims of the 1989 Montreal massacre.

As noted earlier, the mid-nineteenth century revival of interest in the French-Canadian past inspired authors such as the poets Octave Crémazie and Louis Fréchette, and their texts were frequently set to music for patriotic occasions. Renewed pride in the national heritage in the 1910s to 1930s was also evident in the literary movements of the time. In turn, composers were drawn to the works of poets such as Emile Nelligan.

French Canadian literature as a source of extra-musical inspiration became increasingly important after the mid-1950s, as Quebec moved into the era of the Quiet Revolution, a period of both rapid change and growing nationalism. A younger generation of composers found inspiration in the works of progressive poets such as Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau, Gatien Lapointe, Wilfrid Lemoine, Fernand Ouellette and Paul Chamberland. Such works reflected a variety of media and took various forms, e.g., François Morel's *Boréal* (1959) for orchestra based on a text by Yves Préfontaine; Clément Pépin's *Hymne au vent du nord* (1960), a cantata for tenor and small orchestra, with text by Alfred DesRochers; Serge Garant's *Cage d'oiseau* (1962) for tenor and piano on a text by Saint-Denys Garneau; Pierre Mercure's *Psaume pour abri* (1963), a cantata for narrator, choir, instrumental ensemble and tape, text by Gabriel Charpentier; Micheline Coulombe Saint-Marcoux's *Arksalalartog* (1971), electroacoustic music based on text by

Gilles Marsolais and Noël Audet; Marc Gagné's opera *Menaud* (1986), with libretto by the composer based on a novel of Félix-Antoine Savard; André Gagnon's opera *Nelligan* (1990), on a libretto by Michel Tremblay. While French Canadian literature primarily provided an impetus to Quebec composers, its influence was also felt outside the province, resulting in such works as *Madrigals* (1967-73) for one or two voices and instrumental ensemble by Toronto-based composer Bruce Mather, based on poems or fragments of poems by Saint-Denis Garneau.

In addition to literature, the French Canadian artistic community has also attracted the attention of composers. François Morel's *L'étoile noire* of 1962, which reflects musically the influence of Varèse, was inspired by Paul-Émile Borduas' 1957 stark black-and-white abstract painting of the same name. Pierre Mercure, who also came under the influence of Borduas and his circle in the late 1940s, began his exploration of electroacoustic music in the late 1950s. His *Structures métalliques I et II* (1961), built from concrete sounds transformed electronically and accompanied by choreographic movement and projections, were based on kinetic sculptures by Armand Vaillancourt.

Musical Impressions of French Canadian Settings

Finally, French Canada has influenced composers is through its natural beauty. In some cases Quebec settings are reflected musically by means of some of the approaches suggested above, for example, through the use of folk or folk-like material (William McCauley's *Quebec lumber camp* (1953) for chamber orchestra), or through association with the works of Quebec literature (André Prévost's *Ode au Saint Laurent* (1965) for string quartet, which employs serial techniques in conjunction with a spoken text by Gatién Lapointe).

Other composers have attempted to evoke the atmosphere of French Canada through the use of impressionistic techniques. One of the most successful musical impressionists was Claude Champagne. His *Symphonie gaspésienne* of 1945 has been described as:

descriptive of the Gaspé countryside and its people: sights and sounds of early morning, the rising fog, and the sound of distant church bells of the coastal villages, the craggy hills of the landscape, waves breaking upon the shore, the chiming of church bells at noon, the flight of sea-gulls over the Percé rock.⁸

In painting his musical picture, Champagne employs various evocative techniques, including sustained pedals, themes which rise and fall like the ebb and flow of waves, orchestral colour derived from the use of instruments such as the harp and celeste, rhythmic subtleties, and an oboe solo which conjures up the melancholy and solitude of the Gaspé fisherman. The work is not divided into movements, but rather its sub-sections flow together; in the words of one commentator,

The movement of the work is free, like the movement of the waves in ceaseless motion and every-changing shapes, making us forget the tyrannical pulsation of the beats. ... The form renews itself at every moment; it progresses according to associations with musical landscapes, by a play of perspectives corresponding to those found in the panorama of the Gaspé coast.⁹

Epilogue: Nationalism in Canadian Music?

This paper is rooted in research done originally for a Bachelor of Music thesis completed in 1973, a time when the interest in musical patriotism sparked by the centennial celebrations of 1967 was still strong. Since the mid-1970s some composers, such as John

Beckwith, have continued to explore Canadian historical or regional themes in their works.¹⁰ While some of these compositions call upon the French Canadian heritage, Indian and Inuit music have also proven popular as sources of inspiration. A review of the acquisitions' catalogues of the Canadian Music Centre from the past 20 years suggests that a large proportion of the folk-inspired works produced have been piano-vocal settings of folk songs or choral arrangements designed for use in schools or commissioned by groups such as the Festival Singers and Elmer Iseler Singers, although a number of more extended compositions have also been produced.¹¹

Despite the existence of such a body of works, it is still difficult to speak of a "Canadian" musical style. Helmut Kallmann and Stephen Willis have suggested that the revival of interest in folk music in the 1910s and 1920s was "as much of a musical 'movement' as Canada has ever had." In addition, they note that the prophecy of that time, namely, that "in folk idioms lay the true

potential basis of a distinct Canadian music," has not been fulfilled, and that this is "largely owing to the poly-racial mix of Canadian society, and also because a distinct national idiom presupposes a degree of cultural isolation almost impossible to maintain in any developed country in the later 20th century."¹²

It is interesting to speculate as to whether the twenty-first century will witness a revival of interest in Canadian history and folklore. Traditionally, difficult times have tended to create a desire for a return to a simpler lifestyle and more traditional value systems. Will the events of fall 2001, and the sense of patriotism they have engendered, lead to a sense of nostalgia for the past which, in turn, will have an impact on cultural production in Canada? Could this translate into a renewed interest in Canada's musical heritage on the part of composers?

We can only wonder.

Endnotes

1. C. P. Lucas, ed., *Lord Durham's Report on the Affairs of British North America*, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 294.
2. Gordon Smith, "Ernest Gagnon on Nationalism and Canadian Music: Folk and Native Sources," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 17 (1989): 38.
3. Marius Barbeau, *Jongleur Songs of Old Quebec* (Rutgers, NJ: State University Press, 1962), xviii.
4. Germain Lemieux, "Disques et cylindres au Centre franco-ontarien de folklore," *CAML Review* 29:2 (August 2001), 26-32.
5. Letter from Gagnon to Barbeau, 8 August 1911, translated by Gordon Smith, *op. cit.*, 32.
6. Cited by Andrée Desautels, "Canadian Composition," in *Aspects of Music in Canada*, edited by Arnold Walter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 114-15.
7. "Standing Ovation for First Full-Length Canadian Ballet," *The Canadian Composer* (October 1966), 24.
8. Helmut Blume, *Thirty-four biographies of Canadian composers* (Montreal: CBC International Service, 1964), 25.

9. Andrée Desautels, "Canadian composition," in *Aspects of music in Canada*, edited by Arnold Walter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 107.

10. The biography of Beckwith at the Canadian Music Centre Web site notes that, from 1981-91, as performer and arranger with the summer concert series, Music at Sharon, Beckwith produced close to 200 arrangements of earlier folk music and composed music drawn mostly from the Canadian heritage. He also collaborated with prominent Canadian writers, notably James Reaney, Jay MacPherson, Margaret Atwood, Dennis Lee, and bpNichol.

11. A brief listing of works, compiled by Helmut Kallmann and Stephen Willis, is given in the article, "Folk-music-inspired composition," in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, 2nd edition, edited by Helmut Kallmann and Gilles Potvin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 482.

12. *Ibid.*

