

Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray (1840-1910) : overview of writings

To the extent that Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray is remembered by posterity, it is less for his compositional output than for his writings, which, though not especially voluminous, had a broad and significant impact on French musicology, folklorism, and composition. As with his compositions, Bourgault-Ducoudray spread his writings across many genres, publishers, and venues; his particular predilection for smaller, somewhat ephemeral forms (open letters, reviews, prefaces) has not served his legacy especially well. Yet if his writings are formally heterogeneous, they are thematically consistent, reflecting the composer's distinct vision for French music—a culture rooted in what he viewed as the patrimonial inheritance of popular melodies and modal structures, and channeled into a patriotic citizenry through music education and choral singing.

Bourgault-Ducoudray's writings are unevenly spread over his career, with his famous missions to Greece and Anatolia in 1874–75 marking a significant turning point. Prior to his departure, his sparse published writings consisted of his [Latin thesis](#) for the license (Bachelor's degree) in law completed in 1860; a handful of [programme notes](#) (*Guide des concerts de musique classique*) for the 1866–67 season of the Association Philharmonique de Nantes; and a [report](#) on the activities of the choral society he founded and led until 1874.

Bourgault-Ducoudray's two trips to Greece, the second of which included an excursion to Smyrna and Constantinople, proved an artistic and intellectual revelation for the composer, bringing him into close contact not only with unfamiliar folk and Orthodox musical cultures but also with the community of scholars (hellenists, archaeologists, philologists) at the École française d'Athènes, then under the directorship of Émile-Louis Burnouf (1821-1907). These encounters led directly to three book-length publications upon Bourgault-Ducoudray's return to France—[Souvenirs d'une mission musicale en Grèce et en Orient](#) [*Memories of a Musical Mission in Greece and the Orient*] (1876, initially serialized in *L'Art musical*), [Trente mélodies populaires de Grèce et d'Orient](#) [*Thirty Folk Melodies from Greece and the Orient*](1877), and [Études sur la musique ecclésiastique grecque](#) [*Study of Greek Ecclesiastical Music*] (1877)—and thence to his appointment as professor of music history at the Paris Conservatoire in 1878, the authoritative institutional position from which all of his subsequent writings emanate. The first of those publications is essentially a travelogue relating Bourgault-Ducoudray's travel experiences and itinerary, including details of his discussion with several Greek musicians, theorists, and reformers, offering instructive context (and a bit of marketing) for the subsequent publications. The second publication (for which subscription forms were published with the *Souvenirs*) is the collection of thirty Greek folksongs, collected and harmonised

by Bourgault-Ducoudray, and featuring an extensive music-theoretical preface in which he explains his theory of the ancient Greek modes, how they “survive” in modern Greek folksong, and how they may be deployed harmonically by modern composers. With his additional annotations explaining each song’s modal construction and his harmonic approach, the anthology set the tone for Bourgault-Ducoudray’s campaign thenceforth to hone and appropriate scientific insights from historically and geographically distant musical cultures for the artistic enrichment of French music, while productively complicating the boundary between the composer’s prose and musical output. The final volume, presented as a primer to expose western musicians to “oriental music”, also serves as a vehicle for Bourgault-Ducoudray to express his own views regarding future reforms to Greek music—namely, that Greek musicians should hone their traditional modes and develop them polyphonically in the service of an “original, European, and national” style. Roughly the final third of the volume consists of an appendix with Chrysanthos de Madytos’s treatise on Byzantine music, translated by Émile Burnouf. The musical principles established in these writings were succinctly presented in the form of a [Conférence sur la modalité dans la musique grecque](#) [*Lecture on Modality in Greek Music*], delivered at the 1878 World’s Fair and published the following year. On the back of this successful lecture, Bourgault-Ducoudray was offered the Conservatoire appointment, delivering his inaugural lecture (*Cours d’histoire de la musique I, II, II bis, III* published in *Le Ménestrel*).

Bourgault-Ducoudray’s travels to Greece were followed up in 1881 by a folksong collection mission to his native Brittany, which led him to develop his notorious theory of racialized musical forms, first delivered as a history lecture at the Conservatoire in 1881 (and [serialized in the *Ménestrel*](#)). Applying philologically inspired theories of an “Aryan race” (championed by Burnouf and others) to explain “modal” characteristics that he also heard in Greek, Russian, Scandinavian, and Celtic folksongs and concluded to be “common among all Aryans” Bourgault-Ducoudray exhorted his students to exploit these “modes”, describing them as “the patrimony of our race, which is rightly ours”. This lecture became integrated into the preface to his next major publication, [Trente mélodies populaire de Basse-Bretagne](#) (1885)—which Bourgault-Ducoudray described as the “logical consequence” of his Greek anthology—and he echoed his theory in a [lecture delivered for the Club alpin français](#) (1885). It is perhaps in this optic that Bourgault-Ducoudray’s final collection of *Quatorze Mélodies celtiques* [*Fourteen Celtic Melodies*] (1909) may be interpreted; although, curiously, the composer provided no preface or prose explications of these melodies, and so they have not been included in the *DictÉCo* database. Bourgault-Ducoudray would only produce one further monograph before his death: a biography of [Schubert](#) (1908), in which Bourgault-Ducoudray championed the Viennese composer not least by aligning his lieder with folksong as an expression of popular sentiment.

His remaining published writings consist chiefly of prefaces to works of music history and pedagogy (including Laure Collin’s [Manuel d’enseignement de la méthode chorale enfantine](#), Ernest David’s edition of [Le Théâtre à la mode au XVIIIe siècle](#), and Henry Woollett’s [Histoire de la musique](#)—the last of which strongly echoes Bourgault-Ducoudray’s teaching in its racialized narrative of

music's origins); of reviews, usually doubling as platforms to praise "modal" folk and liturgical music (reviewed corpora include Friedrich Kurschat's [collection of Lithuanian folksongs](#), Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens's [system of plainchant accompaniment](#), Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov's own [folksong anthology](#), César Cui's [compositional and prose output](#), Eugène Gigout's [anthology of modal miniatures](#)); and open letters (including to [Alexandre Guilmant](#) [twice], [La Villemarqué](#), [John C. Ward](#), [Félix Pécault](#), [Jules Combarieu](#), and [Charles Bordes](#))—an ad-hoc output appearing in a wide range of publications not restricted to the music(ologic)al press but also broaching specialist journals in comparative folklore (*Mélusine*) and education (*Revue pédagogique*). Bourgault-Ducoudray also produced an important report on *L'Enseignement du chant dans les écoles* as part of an official commission investigating music education in schools; excerpts of his findings and recommendations were published multiple times (1882, 1898, and 1903). Such texts, and above all his [lecture](#) opening the first International Congress of Music History at the 1900 World's Fair, testify to the respect and authority Bourgault-Ducoudray had accrued in his field.

A single article ("[Wagner à Bayreuth](#)", 1893) stands out as an exceptional long-format publication in the prestigious *Revue des Deux Mondes*; in it, Bourgault-Ducoudray spares no emotion in recounting his pilgrimage to the Festspiele, urging his French audience to judge Wagner not as a "simple composer of music, but above all as a dramaturge" and describing *Parsifal* as "not just a masterpiece, but a work of peace, of clemency, of faith" (p. 87). For all his effusive praise, however, Bourgault-Ducoudray cautions those who believe they should imitate Wagner's "system", arguing instead that French composers should privilege the "sacred tradition" of the melodic line: "the very essence of the pure genius of our race" (p. 98).

Bourgault-Ducoudray never systematically published his Conservatoire history sequence, with only the two lectures mentioned above (his inaugural lecture and his lecture on Breton folksong) having appeared in print. However, when Bourgault-Ducoudray became a lecturer at the Université des Annales in 1907—a sort of finishing-school for women founded that same year by Yvonne Sarcey—his lectures, transcribed by a stenographer, were published in the institution's organ, *Conferencia*. These transcribed lectures, spanning three academic years, center variously on individual composers ([Lully](#), [Rameau](#), [Rousseau](#), [Grétry](#), [Gluck](#), [Monsigny](#), Beethoven [early](#) and [late](#), [Rossini](#), [Schubert](#), [Schumann](#), [Liszt](#), [Franck](#)); genres ([early opera](#), [opera buffa](#), [choral music](#), [mélodie](#)); and folk traditions (Greek and French [musics and dances](#)). The extent to which these Annales courses—with their affable tone traipsing occasionally into paternalistic territory—mirror Bourgault-Ducoudray's Conservatoire curriculum is an open question: the focus is often descriptive or biographical, with more anecdotes than analyses; on the other hand, this may equally characterize Bourgault-Ducoudray's Conservatoire courses, open to and frequented by a much broader public than just the composition students for which they were "mandatory". As at the Conservatoire, Bourgault-Ducoudray conscripted an illustrious cast of first-rate musicians and dancers to pepper his lectures with musical numbers.

Bourgault-Ducoudray's legacy has not benefited from the fact that the composer did not leave behind a centralized archive, thereby complicating the scholarly task of assembling and appraising his place within *fin-de-siècle* musical culture. Many unpublished manuscript documents are doubtlessly lost; many more remain to be located in the archives of others'. One important tranche of Bourgault-Ducoudray's unpublished writings has been located in the archive of one of his most formative interlocutors, Émile-Louis Burnouf, who preserved roughly eighty letters sent to him by the composer from 1874 (the time of his first visit to Athens) through 1899; [a critical edition of these letters](#), which bear partial witness to the crystallization of Bourgault-Ducoudray's musicological thought as well as to the musical and intellectual networks upon which Bourgault-Ducoudray founded his career, is being prepared for publication on *DictÉCo*.

Peter Asimov

[Lien vers la traduction française de ce texte](#)

Suggestions for further reading:

- « *Les airs que j'ai rapportés de Grèce* » : *Lettres de Bourgault-Ducoudray à Émile-Louis Burnouf (1874-1899)*, , transcrites, annotées et éditées par Peter Asimov, *Dictéco - Domaine premier XX^e siècle* sous la direction scientifique de Valérie Dufour, 2021.

- Asimov, Peter, 'Transcribing Greece, Arranging France: Bourgault-Ducoudray's Performances of Authenticity and Innovation', *19th-Century Music*, 44.3 (2021), 133-68.

- Baud-Bovy, Samuel, 'Bourgault-Ducoudray et la musique grecque ecclésiastique et profane', *Revue de musicologie*, 68.1-2 (1982), 153-63.

- Brambats, Karl, 'Louis Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray and Baltic Folk Song Research', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 15.4 (1984), 270-81.

- Corbier, Christophe, 'Bourgault-Ducoudray et le style classique : la musique française entre hellénisme et classicisme', *Les Cahiers de la Société québécoise de recherche en musique*, 20.1 (2019), 11-21.

- Corbier, Christophe and Douche, Sylvie, *L'Enseignement de Maurice Emmanuel : musique, histoire, éducation*(Sampzon: Delatour, 2020).

- Groote, Inga Mai, *Östliche Ouvertüren: russische Musik in Paris 1870-1913* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2014), 238-58.

- Mordey, Delphine, 'Ideologies in Music History: Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray and the Cours d'histoire Générale de La Musique at the Paris Conservatoire, 1878 to 1908' (unpublished MSt Thesis, University of Oxford, 2001).

- Vlagopoulos, Panos, "The Harmonisation of Greek Folk Songs and Greek "National Music"", in *Music, Language and Identity in Greece: Defining a National Art Music in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Polina Tambakaki, Panos

Vlagopoulos, Katerina Levidou, and Roderick Beaton (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 206-28.

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