

BRETON MUSIC

By CHARLES QUEF

LIKE all Frenchmen under the age of 48, I was called upon to take my place in the army when war was declared, and in that manner both to obey the law and to fulfil my duty. Alas! after a little while, and following the German invasion, my regiment was ordered into the heart of Brittany, one of our provinces which has preserved its ancient fashions, costumes, language and customs.

On arriving in this part of France, what first strikes one is the aspect of the country. Its wild, sad and desolate physiognomy, and its hills and ravines covered with bracken, heather and furze, form a whole which leaves a melancholy impression.

Upon entering a town, one notes the costumes of the inhabitants; the men wear hats with streamers, the women bonnets of very various and often curious, though at the same time pretty shapes. In some districts the colours of both male and female attire are many and vivid.

But hearken to their speech! It is impossible to understand them! for the Bretons speak a language of their own, which has nothing in common with French. Their tongue resembles very much that spoken in Wales, and the natives of these two countries are well able to understand one another.

An essentially conservative and traditional country, Brittany has not forgotten its ancient and fantastic legends, which are recounted of an evening by the old folk when sitting near the enormous fireplaces which still ornament their homes, or close to the carved "lits clos" (cabinet bedsteads) which even yet form one of the curiosities of the country.

Each year, in every parish, on the day of the patron saint, "pardons" are granted and rejoicings—as much profane as religious—take place, and among the principal manifestations are the religious processions. There is nothing so curious as, nor more beautiful and impressive than, these long columns of people. At their head are the clergy (clothed in their most splendid robes) preceded by banners which are often of inestimable value; following them come the crowd of the faithful. The glittering white of the numerous bonnets of the women, mingling with the varied and brilliant colours of the picturesque costumes of the men, form a curious spectacle.

The procession sets out from the ancient Breton churches, which are at once so curious and so contemplative, for, be it noted, even in the very smallest villages are beautiful large churches out

of all proportion to the number of inhabitants. The numerous Calvaries may also be noticed, some of which are very remarkable and others less so. Those at Plougastel, Guimiliau and St.-Thegonnec are marvellous in their sculpture, and being of primitive design, they call to mind the Middle Ages and the charm of days past, and at the same time form reminders of the pilgrimages of that period of ardent faith.

It is therefore only logical and natural that, in this region, musical art should also have retained its peculiar and original characteristics. Like their grey skies, and the people themselves (for they are not a very mirthful race), their music is in general sad and melancholy and sometimes even barbarous and harsh.

From what period do these Breton songs date, and who were their authors? Here we are reduced to mere suppositions, or more often complete ignorance. Without a doubt, it is permissible to make the following hypotheses. Certain individuals musically gifted made themselves masters of the popular poesy and adorned it with simple and almost improvised music which conformed itself to the poems, to their form and expression, not concerning itself much with what we call the "broad rhythm," but, on the contrary, seeking only an elastic rhythm and melodic charm. Unconsciously, these people have thus created some extremely picturesque and very original songs, which seem to us to be full of relish. We give the following melodies as examples of peculiar rhythm:



Not only is the last song remarkable by reason of the originality of its rhythm, but also on account of the suspensive character of its ending, which gives one the impression that it is unfinished. So much so, indeed, that one feels as if one would like to complete it. This peculiarity is encountered rather frequently and we shall have occasion to refer to it again.

When listening to Breton songs, a fact which at first strikes a musician is, that they are largely in the minor mode; but that is only a very superficial observation, and a closer and more attentive examination leads to a discovery of much greater interest.

Upon studying the songs and making a minute analysis of them, not only do we find them related to Catholic plain-song, but we also discover in them a very close affinity to Greek music and its modes. From amongst very numerous Breton songs, we have chosen some in which the above-mentioned relationship appears to be very striking.

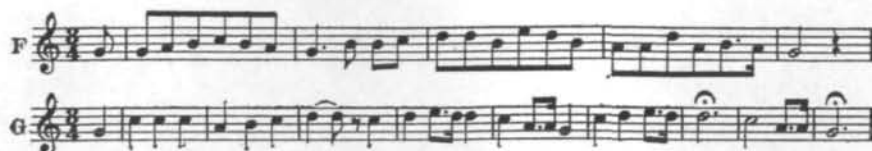
In order to refresh the memory of some of our readers, we give the scale of each Greek mode before the songs based upon it. The Phrygian mode, based upon this scale, is represented by a few songs, from which we choose the following:



The harmonisation of the above songs ought to be based upon our tonality of C major and should end upon the chord of G, the note D not being a final tonic but a dominant, giving to the songs the suspensive character which has already been mentioned.

The songs based upon the Hypophrygian mode are very few in number, but here are two examples:





They seemingly belong to our key of C major and appear to terminate upon the dominant, but we think that they may well be assigned to the Hypophrygian mode and so ought to have a harmonisation in the key of G major with all the F's natural. It is easy to convince oneself of this fact by harmonising them in our modern tonality (with the F's sharp); for, thus treated, the two songs which are of so melancholy a tint lose their very pathetic character.

The Dorian mode, which is very peculiar, corresponds to our E minor, but with its D's and F's natural. In reality, E ought to play the rôle of dominant, and the harmony should be in A minor with the G's natural.



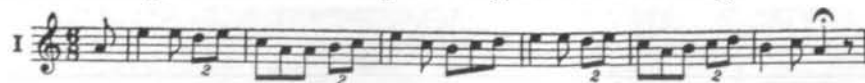
Very few Breton songs are based upon this mode; but we quote the following, which we heard sung on the reëntry of a procession into the Cathedral of St.-Pol de Léon, and which, with the accompanying ceremony, left upon us that sense of mysticism so peculiar to the Middle Ages—so much so, that we almost felt as if we were living in those times.



We shall not linger to insist upon the very expressive character of this song, but pass on to the Hypodorian mode, in which A plays the part of tonic.



This mode is frequently encountered in the songs of Brittany; from among numerous examples we give the following:



To this specimen of a supple and rather languishing rhythm, we cannot resist the desire to add the very pretty song, well known as "Paradis" :



Songs in the Lydian mode are very rare. In this mode the scale is that of C major, but the C is dominant, and so the tunes should naturally be harmonised in F, though with the B's natural. We cite the subjoined example, the tonality of which appears to be in C; but the harmonisation in F seems more rational, and above all more piquant.



The Hypolydian mode (scale of F with the B's natural) also furnishes very few examples; we can quote only the following:



We will here conclude our series of examples chosen from the great quantity of Breton songs, believing that we have sufficiently demonstrated the relationship existing between ancient Greek and Breton music by comparing each mode with a certain number of songs. There exist, however, other songs which are really in our modern major and minor modes, but we think that sometimes those in the minor have only undergone a deformation by the addition of a leading-note introduced by the caprice, error, or ignorance of singers. This hypothesis of a deformation arising out of the oral or traditional method of transmission, is quite probable. From among the songs in minor keys, we think it necessary to give only the following (chosen rather at random), in which, in spite of the absence of D#, the minor tonality seems to be well marked and established:



We submit also two examples which are plainly in the major mode and whose grace and charm deserve to hold our attention:



We will conclude by citing a song whose origin it is difficult to determine and which, by reason of its unusual and somewhat bizarre form and tonality, a strange mixture of Oriental and Hypophrygian modalities, merits our notice:



How is it that Greek art has been able to exercise such an influence upon Breton music, or how can the relationship be explained? Learned men have said that Greek musical art is found latent among all peoples, that it used to exist in a natural state, and that people expressed themselves musically in a kind of instinctive manner. If such were the case, then other peoples would also have an art resembling that of the Bretons and Greeks; but, on the contrary, only a few countries possess music related to that of Greece. On the other hand, this Greek music, with its divers modes and their derivatives, is not primitive art spontaneously born and found in a natural state, but it is the indication of a developed civilisation.

Poetry and songs being the most ancient monuments of the Celtic or Breton language, it is therefore necessary to go back to the origin of the language itself. In doing so we find that many Greek and Breton words are nearly alike and it is curious to note in passing that, in the opinion of some learned folks, it was from the language spoken by Gomer (the eldest son of Japhet, who received Europe as an inheritance) that the Celtic tongue was

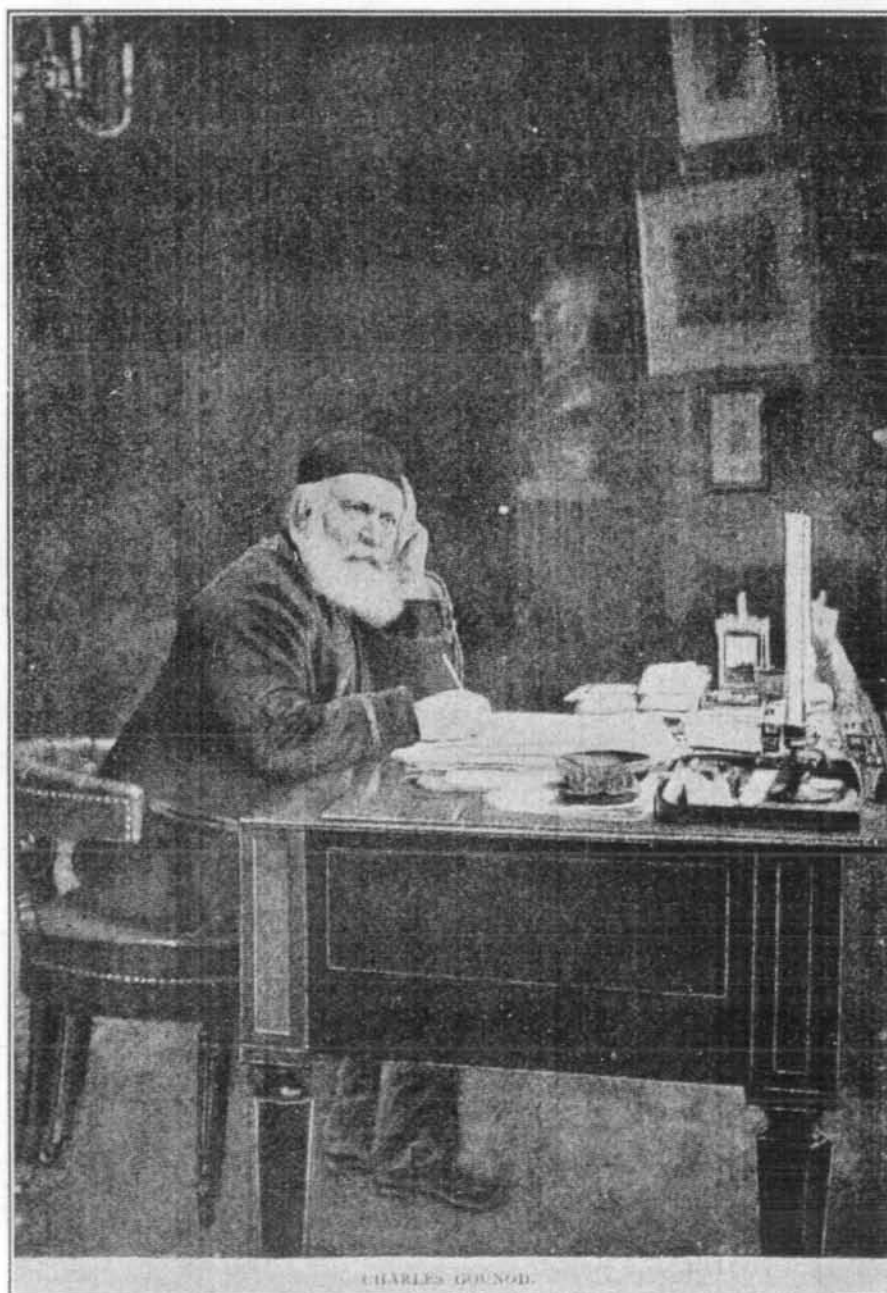
derived and that from it came all European languages.—According to this, the Greek language is derived from the Celtic!

All this is evidently obscure and vague, but it proves that once a close connection existed between the Greek and the Breton—a relationship which may have logically and conclusively extended to Art.

There is no doubt, moreover, no matter how strange it may appear, that the Phœnicians, who were hardy navigators, traded with Great Britain, and the coasts of Gaul, for this fact has been definitely proved. Certain Breton villages also claim a Phœnician origin. Have not the costumes of Brittany, with their vivid colours, a resemblance to those of the Orient? These wandering and emigrant Phœnicians would naturally transmit their art, and so its origin and relationship become plain. Even if these are merely gratuitous suppositions, they are nevertheless quite plausible.

It is the Breton tenacity (proverbial in France) which has been able to preserve their precious and ancient artistic heritage almost intact and with many traces of its primitive origin. We must rejoice over this, for we are enabled by that tenacity (we might almost say stubbornness) to possess a jewel wherein we can admire one of the finest and most peculiar branches of the popular musical art of France.

(Translation by E. Adcock.)



CHARLES GOUNOD.

