



A Link With Loys Bourgeois

Treasure No 21: A Link with Loys Bourgeois by J. Wilson: An article from Bulletin 79, Summer 1957

Many who use or study the Genevan psalm-melodies will welcome the chance of a closer acquaintance with the personality of Loys Bourgeois, who, as the hymn-books say, 'composed or arranged' a great number of them. Such acquaintance has been made possible by the recent appearance in facsimile of his very scarce little treatise *Le Droict Chemin de Musique*, published at Geneva in 1550 while the great work on the Psalter was still in progress. The facsimile has been issued by Barenreiter-Verlag of Kassel¹ in their series of *Documenta Musicologica* and is on the whole well produced. Some over-inking and distortion of print are occasionally found, but these are relatively small blemishes. For the few shillings that it costs, the booklet is a valuable acquisition, and the ordinary reader can browse in its 64 small pages until the old French spelling and typography no longer stand between him and the author.

Loys Bourgeois was born in Paris, perhaps about 1510, and we may think of him as the contemporary of Tallis and Marbeck. A few of his secular songs appeared in a collection of 1538, and it was in or about 1541 that he went to Geneva. Once there, he was soon at work under Calvin on the psalm-tunes, and he seems to have established himself rapidly, for by 1545 he had become 'chantre' at the church of St-Pierre, with responsibility both for the psalm-singing and for the instruction of the young. Two years later (as M. Gaillard mentions in an editorial note to the present facsimile) he was granted his rights of citizenship at Geneva 'parce qu'il est homme de bien et qu'il sert volontiers pour apprendre les enfants'. *Le Droict Chemin*, which obviously embodies much of his teaching method, is a primer of musical rudiments for would-be singers. Some of its technicalities go well beyond the needs of psalmody, but the title-page consoles the beginner with a promise of 'la manière de chanter les Pseaumes par usage ou ruse', which is to be illustrated by a setting of Psalm 34 ('nouveau mis en chant') and by the Song of Simeon.

In a prefatory letter 'à tous bons Chrestiens Amateurs de Musique' Bourgeois announces a principal feature of his 'droict chemin'. This is the abolition of the time-honoured method of instruction by la Gamme—meaning in this context the so-called Guidonian Hand², by which a pupil was taught to associate the degrees of the scale (or strictly of the hexachords) with a sequence of positions at the joints and tips of the fingers². This old method, he declares, is a vexatious obstacle, which discourages many from learning and may even wholly exclude some people who happen to be weak in their fingers. Instead, he is prepared to assert that the early stages of music can be learned 'en papier' as readily as those of the other 'sciences', and he has pupils to prove it—'jeunes gens et autres' who, without the Guidonian Hand and in far less time, have not only learned to sing a part 'seurement et de bonne grace', but can also fully understand what they are doing. The point is driven home at the end of the book, where a spare half-page carries the light-hearted quatrain:

¹ The British agents are Messrs. Novello & Co. Ltd., 160 Wardour St., London, W.1.

² Illustrations of the Guidonian Hand are given by Scholes in *The Oxford Companion to Music* (9th edn., 1955) plate 161.

*Puis qu'en papier ou parchemin
On peut apprendre la Musique,
Laissez ceste Gamme rustique:
Et me prenez Le Droict Chemin.*

This fresh and popular approach to music through instruction in sight-singing was a sign of the times. The printed word, especially when in the vernacular, was becoming ever more important, and for the musically-inclined at Geneva there were already some of the new psalm-tunes, plain or harmonised, published and waiting to be used. Calvin himself, though he favoured only simple music in worship, seems to have recognised the value of sight-singing, perhaps because the psalm-tunes in their great variety of metres could hardly have been used without it. The records show that in May 1550, when Bourgeois was well established as the leading musician of the Genevan community, the manuscript of his 'pety traicte de musique' was shown to Calvin who advised the Council that 'il sera bon Pimprimer'. The Council agreed to publication—at the author's expense—and the printing of the little book was completed during the summer¹.

Le Droict Chemin has twelve short chapters. The first ten of these deal with the hexachords, the solfa syllables, and the mutations; the pitching of the voice by tones, semitones and other intervals; the notation of notes, rests, dots and ligatures; the various kinds of triple time; the 'tacte' (or beating of time); proportional time-signatures; and melodic syncopation. The two final chapters are for the would-be psalm-singer, and reveal the author's 'ruse' to help him. This is the typographical device of setting the words on the musical stave with the notes, each note having its syllable in small print to the left of it and on the same line or space as the note-head. To demonstrate this 'ruse', Bourgeois prints the Genevan melody for 'Le Cantique de Simeon' twice in full, first with the appropriate solfa syllables beside the note-heads, and then with the proper syllables of Marot's text—'Or laisse Createur ...' This version of the Nunc Dimittis was already in use and may have been chosen for its familiarity.² A few pages later, however, the reader is confronted with the new setting of Psalm 34, which is paraphrased in 21 six-line stanzas, beginning:

*En tout temps l'excellence
Du Seigneur chanteray.*

This is provided with a characteristic hypodorian melody of metre 76. 76. 66. D., covering two stanzas, and presumably by Bourgeois himself; but neither the tune nor its metre appeared in the complete Genevan psalter of 1562.³

It is tempting to see what we can learn from Bourgeois about the contemporary manner of performance of the psalm-tunes, but in reading him we must remember that he was as much concerned with the part-singing of his harmonised settings (in the home or elsewhere in private) as he was with the unison singing in church. In the matter of tempo he gives us only slender clues. His printed examples, and indeed all the tunes in the definitive Genevan psalter, have the barred-C time-signature and are without bar-lines. The notes are semibreves and minims only, except for a very few ligatures and a conventional long note at the end of each tune. Bourgeois is careful to point out the theoretical difference (on the proportional system) between the barred-G and unbarred-C signatures, the former implying that all notes were diminished to half their value. But there is always the possibility that here, as frequently elsewhere, the barred-C was used conventionally rather than significantly; so on the evidence of time-signature we can only say that the singing of the tunes was probably faster rather than slower. A more helpful hint may lie in the phraseology of the explanation Bourgeois gives to beginners of the different note-values they will encounter in the

¹ Very little is known of Bourgeois beyond the brief statements in the records of the Geneva Council. Relevant entries are reprinted in *Arrêts du Conseil du Genève*, edited by Alfred Cartier (Geneva 1893), and in *Loys Bourgeois* by Paul-André Galliard (Lausanne, 1948).

² *EH* 269

³ Cartier (op. cit., p. 156) suggests that this paraphrase may be by Guillaume Gueroult, who was occupied, at the same time as Beza, in translating the psalms left out by Marot.

psalm-tunes. It must be understood, he says¹, that there are some words and syllables which have to be sung ‘pesamment’ (i.e. weightily or slowly) and others which must be sung ‘legierement’ (lightly or swiftly). The first, he explains, are those which are set to breves, semibreves, or ligatures; the others are those set to minims. From this we may reasonably conclude that he envisages a style and pace in which the minims can fairly be described as ‘légères’.

But in two other matters directly affecting performance Bourgeois does give us definite and valuable information. These are (a) the need for sharpening the penultimate melody-note at a cadence which the singer must sometimes do for himself, and (b) the jerky performance of crotchets and other short notes even when they are printed equal. It is difficult to discuss these points without musical illustration, but they may be mentioned briefly. As regards (a) a ‘cadence’ here means a melodic formula of three notes such as D—C—D at the end of a line of words, the question being whether to sharpen the C even if no sharp is indicated. While admitting that exact rules for this sort of *musica ficta* are hard to formulate, Bourgeois offers some good generalisations, which are worth study²; and his reasons for such changes are historical y interesting. The dip of a semitone rather than a tone is used, he says, ‘pour avoir plus douce melodic. & afin que chacune voix ou note puisse avoir dessus & dessous soy son harmonie: c’esta dire un accord melodieux, composé de divers sons, coninne de tierces, quintes, sextes, octaves, &c. Ce qui ne se pourroit faire autrement.’ This harmonic reason for departing from the strict mode is well understood, and is exemplified in the requirement that a dominant chord, even in a minor key must contain a major third; but the remark that the change produces a sweeter melody will perhaps surprise modal purists.

As regards (b), Bourgeois tells us definitely that if (under the barred-C and certain other time-signatures) we come upon a number of crotchets in succession—his printed example is of crotchets moving stepwise up and down the scale—then ‘the manner of singing them well is to take them by twos, dwelling a little longer on the first of each pair than on the second, as if the first were dotted and the second were only a quaver’, the reasons being ‘that the first is a harmony-note and the second is more often a discord ... and also that the notes have a better grace in the manner described, than if all were equal’.³ This statement is immediately relevant to the treatment of crotchets in such harmonised psalm-settings as those of Goudimel and of Bourgeois himself, and is one of the earliest references to the much-discussed ‘notes inégales’ which were especially, but not wholly, a French mannerism of performance and are referred to by various writers in the 17th and 18th centuries. Their effect, in the sort of example quoted by Bourgeois, is to give not only melodic ‘grace’ but also a more lively and unencumbered minim-movement and a greater fullness of harmony. In cases where the crotchets are not passing-notes of the kind illustrated, the performer must decide for himself whether or not to treat them as ‘inégales’.⁴

The beginner’s hints in *Le Droict Chemin* must surely be the earliest of ‘aids’ to metrical psalmody, destined to be followed in the next 250 years by a whole procession of Introductions, Methods, Helps, Companions, Devout Guides, and what not. But if Bourgeois was first in the field, he was not alone for long. In 1560, for example, Calvin’s friend Pierre Davantes brought out a most interesting *Pseaumes de David...avec nouvelle et facile méthode pour chanter*, containing the 83 psalms on whose melodies Bourgeois had worked, and printed in the elegant *civilité* type used for certain books on manners for the young. The aim of Davantes in this book is to help the singer in other stanzas than the first, his plan being to number the lines and spaces of the stave, so that a note can be known by a number, with a simple sign to indicate the note-length. The first stanza of each psalm has the melody printed normally, with the addition of solfa syllables in the manner of Bourgeois; the remaining stanzas have only the figures and signs as a sort of melodic shorthand. Another early instructional psalter was that of Pierre Vallete, who appears in the records as a deputy for the absent Bourgeois in 1553. Vallete claims to reduce the pupil’s labours from 3 or

¹ *Le Droict Chemin* has no page-numbers; the passage is in Chapter XII.

² *Ibid.* Ch. II.

³ *Ibid.* Ch. X

⁴ A good example of the ‘inégales’ manner, written out as it is to be performed, occurs in Downland’s harmonisation of the OLD 100TH (last line, bass part) in Ravenscroft’s Psalter of 1621. See *E.H.* 365 (first alternative version).

4 months to 2 or 3 weeks, his chief ‘aid’ being the printing of solfa syllables above the musical stave. It is worth noting that both Davantes and Vallete make it clear that in the practice of these psalm-tunes the ‘tacte’ or down-and-up beating of time, occupied the duration of a semibreve, even under the barred-C signature, and also that the rests at the ends of the lines were *a tempo* rather than *as libitum*. Thus to their early users, tunes such as the OLD 100TH, the OLD 124TH, and LES COMMANDEMENS were felt to be in what we should call 2/2 time, though without particular downbeat stress.¹

At about the same time, and no doubt under Genevan influence, the English publisher John Day took the opportunity of providing musical instructions in his early editions of ‘Sternhold and Hopkins’. In the (as yet incomplete) Psalter of 1561 he included ‘A short Introduction into the Science of Musick’ to encourage ‘the rude & ignoraunt in Song ... [in] ... the godly exercise of singing of Psalmes, aswell in common place of prayer, where altogether with one voice render thankes and praises to God, as priuatly by themselves, or at home in their houses’, and this preface was retained in the first complete English Psalter of 1562. In the 1570’s John Day published other editions with a ‘new print of Note’, whereby, as he tells us, ‘thou mayst knowe how to call every Note by his right name ... [and] mayst sing the Psalmes to more spedely and easlier’. Here the device was again akin to that of Bourgeois, each melody-note being preceded on the stave by the initial letter of its solfa name.

Of the later years of Bourgeois himself we know very little. Two years after the publication of *Le Droict Chemin*, and 10 years before the complete Genevan Psalter appeared, he went on leave of absence to see to the publication of his harmonised psalm-settings, and there is no evidence of his return to Geneva. His relations with the Council had not always been easy, and he may have had a natural wish to make fuller use of his musical skill than the Huguenot service required or allowed. The reader of *Le Droict Chemin* will perhaps feel that in certain passages towards the end of the book the professional musician gives way to the dutiful reformer, in obedience to what has been well described as the ‘spiritual martial law’ at Geneva. We are told, for example, that it is not the task [‘devoir’] of the Christian to sing other things than Psalms or Spiritual Songs, and that those musicians are to be blamed who, instead of composing to the glory of God, ‘prefer to puzzle their heads over verses so coarse that one should shrink from even uttering them, and still more from fitting them to music’.² Whether or not these opinions, and others in even stronger vein, were really characteristic of Bourgeois the man, we cannot tell; but there is nothing in the book to make us doubt his general loyalty to the Reformed Faith, or the sincerity of his closing words to his readers:

Vous pouvez bien maintenant cognoistre (mes freres) de combien ce chemin est plus droit, & plus court que celuy de la Gamme: & comment Dieu par sa bontcé infinie veult chasser toutes tenebres & erreurs de dessus la terre, & illuminer le monde de science & verité. Cela consideré, ne soyez ingratz envers luy de l’en remerier, en recognoissance d’un tel benefice: & dediez, non seulement vostre chant, mais aussi vostre vie totalement à sa gloire. Adorez le en esprit & verité. Invoquez le en confiance & il vous exaucera. Ne donnez point sa gloire à un autre. Croyez à sa parolle. Obeissez à ses commandementz. Tremblez à sez iugementz. Fuyez les ydoles, car ceux qui leurs serviront, seront confondus: mais ceux qui esperent en Dieu par Iesus Christ, seront sauvez.

¹ In the Genevan original of the OLD 100TH each of the first three lines ends with a semibreve rest. Modern versions which substitute a semibreve note and a pause-sign achieve almost the same effect. Other modern versions which merely suppress the Genevan rests should not be accepted uncritically. LES COMMANDEMENS, in modern books, usually appears with note-values halved, and is sometimes rhythmically corrupted. The version at *E.H.* 277 would be satisfactory without the triplet signs.

² *Ibid.* Ch. XI.

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