

## Chapter 4

### ORIENTALISM AS REPRESENTED IN THE SELECTED PIANO WORKS BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY

A prominent English scholar of French music, Roy Howat, claimed that, out of the many composers who were attracted by the Orient as subject matter, “Debussy is the one who made much of it his own language, even identity.”<sup>55</sup> Debussy and Hahn, despite being in the same social circle, never pursued an amicable relationship.<sup>56</sup> Even while keeping their distance, both composers were somewhat aware of the other’s career. Hahn, in a public statement from 1890, praised highly Debussy’s musical artistry in *L’Après-midi d’un faune*.<sup>57</sup>

#### Debussy’s Exposure to Oriental Cultures

Debussy’s first exposure to oriental art and philosophy began at Mallarmé’s Symbolist gatherings he frequented in 1887 upon his return to Paris from Rome.<sup>58</sup> At the Universal Exposition of 1889, he had his first experience in the theater of Annam (Vietnam) and the Javanese *Gamelan* orchestra (Indonesia), which is said to be a catalyst

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<sup>55</sup>Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 110

<sup>56</sup>Gavoty, 142.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>58</sup>François Lesure and Roy Howat. "Debussy, Claude." In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/07353> (accessed April 4, 2011).

in his artistic direction.<sup>59</sup> In 1890, Debussy was acquainted with Edmond Bailly, esoteric and oriental scholar, who took part in publishing and selling some of Debussy's music at his bookstore *L'Art Indépendant*.<sup>60</sup> In 1902, Debussy met Louis Laloy, an ethnomusicologist and music critic who eventually became Debussy's most trusted friend and encouraged his use of Oriental themes.<sup>61</sup>

After the Universal Exposition in 1889, Debussy had another opportunity to listen to a *Gamelan* orchestra 11 years later in 1900.<sup>62</sup> If his first listening of a *Gamelan* orchestra only served as catalyst, then his second listening in 1900 was the time of conception, as reflected on an abundant *Gamelan*-inspired figurations in Debussy's solo piano works composed in the following decade.

### **Adapting the *Gamelan* on Piano**

Debussy was enchanted by the sound of the *Gamelan* orchestra, and attempted to re-create the sound on the piano, which is strongly reflected on his piano piece "Pagodes." In comparison with traditional Western symphonic orchestras, *Gamelan* orchestras are known for their predominant use of percussion instruments with different pitch levels, including gongs, drums, chimes and marimbas.<sup>63</sup> Debussy, in his attempt to imitate the *Gamelan* sound, focused on the following two elements: (1) interplaying of

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<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>Howat, 110.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 115-116

<sup>63</sup>"Gamelan." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev., edited by Michael Kennedy. *Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e4120> (accessed April 10, 2011).

the two different *Gamelan* tunings and (2) the effect created by varied sizes and pitch-levels of gongs that served different musical functions.<sup>64</sup>

Predominant instruments in *Gamelan* orchestras are pitched percussions, and they are generally tuned in one of two temperaments, *pelog* and *slendro*. They could be roughly transcribed into Western notation as follows;<sup>65</sup>

Example 2.1 *Slendro* (Above) and *Pelog* (Below) scales (approximate pitches)



\*Smaller noteheads indicate less frequently used pitches

*Slendro* (Example 2.1, Above) is similar to the pentatonic scale. The process of using pentatonic scales, especially focusing on the intervals of fourths and minor thirds, to evoke Asia is not specific to Debussy, and has been used by other French composers such as Ravel, in his “*Asie*” from *Shéhérazade*, “*Laideronnet*” from *Ma mere l’Oye* and the surreal Chinese teacup foxtrot in *L’Enfant et les sortilege*. Emulating *Pelog*, which is closer to the Western whole-tone scale, was accomplished in Poulenc’s *Concerto for Two Pianos*, composed right after the 1931 Universal Exposition.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Howat, 111.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

Of many Debussy's solo piano works, "Pagodes" from *Estampes* distinctively echoes the characteristics of *Gamelan* music. Common elements being applied throughout Debussy's 'Pagodes' include pentatonic scales (an imitation of *Slendro*), arabesque figurations (an element of Locke's submerged exoticism) and an infrequent use of diatonic cadence that suggested non-Western context. What makes Debussy's "Pagodes" exceptional, in Roy Howat's opinion, is the level in which the piano is being adapted to the practice of *Gamelan* orchestra, especially in its rhythmical and pitch-level imitations of varied gongs.<sup>67</sup> The first two measures of "Pagodes" suggests a simplified version of the rhythmical interaction between the large-plate gong and small-sized bells/gongs.<sup>68</sup>

Example 2.2 Debussy, "Pagodes" (from *Estampes*), mm. 1-2

**Modérément animé**  
*m.g.*

*pp* *m.d.* *(m.d.)*

*2 Ped.*

The third and fourth measures reflect a more accurate rhythmic interaction between the *gong* (a large single-disc) and the *kempul* (a set of hanging medium-sized gongs) as performed in a Javanese orchestra.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 112; Locke, 217.

<sup>68</sup>Howat, 112.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

Example 2.3 Debussy, “Pagodes” (from *Estampes*), mm. 3-4

Example 2.4 Debussy “Pagodes” (from *Estampes*), mm. 11-12

In Measures 11-12, the right-hand figures that contain varied syncopated rhythmic units (duplets, triplets and off-beats) evoke the typical gestures played on the *bonang*, a collection of small gongs placed horizontally onto strings fixed in a wooden frame.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

Example 2.5, Debussy, “Pagodes” (from *Estampes*), mm. 97-98

“Pagodes” develops into fast-moving high voices layered against a progressively slower motion of the lower registers. Finally, it ends with a mumbling low register note, mimicking the *Gamelan* performance practice of hitting the large-plate gong at the end of a piece.<sup>71</sup>

Roy Howat advised that, in general, most of the right-hand figurations in “Pagodes” are to be treated less like the concept of Western phrasing of melodies and more like “a quieter, impassive decorative arabesque, sharing attention with the texture below and beyond.”<sup>72</sup> Other piano works of Debussy that demonstrate strong *Gamelan*-related figuration include “*Reflets dans l’eau*” (from *Images I*)” and “*Cloches à travers les feuilles*” (from *Images II*).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

### Influence from Indian Music

Debussy's documented exposure with Indian music does not appear until May of 1913 when Indian spiritual leader Inayat Khan, who had been performing in Europe and America with his family ensemble, was introduced to Debussy through their mutual pianist friend, Walter Rummel.<sup>74</sup> Prior to meeting Khan and his family members, Debussy had already been somewhat knowledgeable of Indian music.<sup>75</sup> Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, author of Inayat Khan's biography, points out that m. 12 to 14 in "*Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*" (1907) by Debussy reflects on a style of an authentic Indian music.<sup>76</sup>

Example 2.6 "*Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*" (from *Images 2*), mm. 12-14

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>76</sup>Andrew Gerstle and Anthony Milner, *Recovering the Orient: Artists, Scholars, Appropriations* (Chur [Switzerland]: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 57; Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, *Inayat Khan, A biography* (The Hague [Netherlands]: Postbus, 1975), 121.

Musicologist Howat stood against Jong-Keesing's statement, specifying more Indian style in Debussy's language by providing two examples of very similar melodic figures that evoke different Asian nationalities, (Japanese-inspired "Boudda" from Debussy's compositional sketch and Chinese-evoking *Le paon* [The Peacock] from the scene *Histoires naturelles*), which leads to the conclusion that a simple use of pentatonic scale will not suffice for a passage to be Indian, but a more contextual gesture of droning accompaniment directly stems from Indian *raga* music. Often Debussy's adaptation of drones departs from a traditional trilling of the broken triads or open fifths due to the nonconventional harmonic function he uses, and extends to a M/m-second interval as seen in the left-hand figures of *Des pas sur la neige*.<sup>77</sup>

Example 2.7, Debussy, "Des pas sur la neige" (from *Préludes I*), mm. 1-3

Triste et lent (♩=44)

*pp* *p* *più pp* *p expressif et douloureux*

Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé.

Years after Debussy met Inayat Khan in 1913, his youngest brother Musharaff Khan wrote that soon after Debussy listened to their music performed, he responded on the piano and did an impression of their performance on the keyboard.<sup>78</sup> The Dutch musician Hakiem van Lohuzen, who worked with Musharaff Khan, stated musical echoes

<sup>77</sup>Howat, 118.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.



of Inayat Khahn's music could be found in Debussy's *Berceuse héroïque* in 1914 or even in parts of *La boîte à jousjoux*, composed toward the end of 1913.<sup>79</sup>

The friendship between Debussy, Inayat and Musharaff Khan continued, with speculation that the two brothers helped Debussy emerge from his creative crisis between 1913 and 1915. Debussy's two-piano suite, *En blanc et noir*, published in 1915 is considered to have the influence of Indian *tampura*, a 4-6 stringed fretless instrument.<sup>80</sup>

### **Miscellaneous Influence from the Oriental Arts**

Debussy was both directly and indirectly influenced by the Oriental arts; he owned many art objects from many different countries. At the same time, he was also responsive to French paintings that were influenced by the techniques of the Oriental visual arts.

Debussy was knowledgeable of many Oriental artifacts, to which the names of some were adapted into the titles of his piano works.<sup>81</sup> His love of Egyptian arts is reflected on his tenth prelude from Book II entitled "*Canope*." The title is confusing in English, as it generally represents a fabric that provides shades, but here, it refers to an Egyptian 'canopic jar,' whose lid is carved into a shape of either human or animal head.<sup>82</sup>

Like many French painters of his time, Debussy was fascinated by *estampes*, directly translated in English as 'art prints,' particularly referring to the popular Japanese woodcut prints containing subtle colors that were made at the time. The word was

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<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 120-121.

<sup>82</sup>E. Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (Westport, Conn.; Greenwood Press: 1950), 181-182.

borrowed to entitle Debussy's three-movement suit (*Estampes*) with each movement depicting woodprint-worthy images, including tiered towers (*Pagodes*), Arabic nomads in Spain (Evening in Granada) and violent rainstorms (Garden in the Rain), respectively.<sup>83</sup>

Musicologist Roy Howat makes direct comparisons between Chinese pen-and-brush technique of ink drawings and Debussy's approach to piano writing; each subtle attack on the keyboard representing a pen stroke on the calligraphy paper. Then the clarity of lines in the pen stroke are washed over by a damp brush or sostenuto pedaling in the piano.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to the influences directly from Oriental art, Debussy was also influenced by French Impressionist paintings that were influenced by Oriental art. Water reflection, one of the common underlying themes used in many Impressionist paintings, is represented in Monet's *Water Lillies*, and *Seine at Giverny*. Debussy re-created the beauty of horizontal symmetry in his music, both visually and aurally.

Example 2.8, Debussy "Reflets dans l'eau" (from *Images I*), mm. 16-19

<sup>83</sup>Howat, 121.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

Visually, the score is approximately separated by the middle C, where the treble-clef staff represents the object above the water, and the bass clef represents its reflection on the water.

### Debussy's use of the Double Harmonic Scale

Debussy is more known for his use of whole-tone and pentatonic scales. He did use the Double Harmonic scale in his piano works, eminently heard in “*Sérénade interrompue*”.<sup>85</sup> In his “*Sérénade interrompue*,” the B-flat Spanish Gypsy scale is used over the percussive perfect-fifth accompaniment figure.

Example 2.9, Debussy “*Sérénade interrompue*” (from *Préludes I*), mm. 33-37

*expressif et un peu suppliant*

*(estompé et en suivant l'expression)*

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<sup>85</sup>Schmitz, 28.