Debussy: Connections to the Gamelan

Introduction

The essence of the music written by Claude Debussy is within the depths of his stylistic features. Debussy made impressions on our musical culture through his contributions to French song. Techniques of Debussy that remain impressionable through the time are his compositional techniques such as blurring musical accents and non-resolving harmonies, his depth of harmonic knowledge with an addition of 9th and 11th, parallelism, intimate connections to the Parnassians and Symbolist schools of thought, and his enthusiasm for medieval modes, organum, the music of Java and the orient. It is the music of Java and the Javanese gamelan, that is remembered of Debussy’s music since the Paris World Fair after 1889. Debussy first heard the Javanese gamelan music from a small booth at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universalle; and then a full ensemble at the 1900 exposition. Exposure to Javanese gamelan music was one of the important catalysts in the flowering of Debussy’s mature style, and it left its mark on his work in a much broader and more profound way than is generally supposed. I will further discuss the importance of the gamelan on Debussy’s compositions.
The 1889 Paris World Exposition: A Cultural Awakening

The Universal Exposition of 1889 (Exposition Universelle de 1889) was a highly successful international exhibition and one of the few world's fairs to make a profit. Its central attraction was the Eiffel Tower, a 300-meter high marvel of iron by Gustave Eiffel. Over eighty other structures on the Champ de Mars housed exhibits, including the impressive 1,452 foot long Galerie des Machines by Ferdinand Dutert. The fair attracted exhibits from Europe, South America, the United States, and the French colonies, yet in the final analysis it was a celebration of French achievements on the centennial of the French Revolution. (LOC) The 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle was an enormous affair, and started a trend of reproducing life-size portions of villages from other cultures — with real inhabitants. The Egyptian bazaar and Cairo Street from that year were among the most popular attractions. The only item more popular was the Eiffel Tower, which was built for that exposition and was the entrance to the enormous fair. Twenty-eight million people are said to have visited the six-month-long exposition that year. (In 1900, attendance reached 50 million.) (Megill) Achievements in architecture, the fine arts, and new technology were designed to be highlighted at the exposition.

Music and dance were important features of all of the major world’s fairs. But in the history of music, there are particular world’s fairs and expositions where the musical offerings famously lit a fire in some key Western composers, influencing the generations that followed. The 1889 and 1900 Paris expositions were two that had a particularly strong impact on modern world and classical music. As John MacKenzie describes in his book, Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts:
"In 1889, the Paris Exposition Universelle brought together innovative ideas in art, design, crafts, architecture, textiles, and also music. It was one of the first great cosmopolitan musical jamborees in which singers, dancers, and musicians from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia contributed to the traditional ethnic spectacle. European folk music was also celebrated, with performances by, among others, singers and instrumentalists from Hungary, Romania, Spain, Finland, and Norway." (Megill)

The kampong javanais was one of the most popular attractions at the 1889 Exposition Universelle, with over 875,000 visitors during the six months of the exposition. Journalists furiously tried to convey the novelty of the music to their readers describing the ensembles as “rudimentary pianos with a nasal and monotonous sound” or comparing them to the cowbells one might hear in the Alps. The music of the gamelan transfixed several prominent Parisian musicians, including Claude Debussy, who incorporated its sound into many of his compositions, and Camille Saint-Saëns, who famously described it as “dream music which had truly hypnotized people.” Others, such as Julien Tiersot, took interest in gamelan performances from an ethnographic perspective, attempting to describe the Javanese musical system with transcriptions and descriptions of performances at the exposition. Musicians, critics and spectators alike were fascinated by both the music of the gamelan and the spectacle of Javanese dance that it accompanied. (Eagen) Debussy wrote of its unique sound to a friend: “Do you not remember the Javanese music able to express every nuance of meaning, even unmentionable shades, and which makes our tonic and dominant seem like empty phantoms?” He attempted to capture something of this sound—its pentatonic scale and unusual timbre in a number of his compositions, including the famous symphonic poem La mer (The Sea, 1905), and also several piano preludes. (Forney & Machelis 10)
Debussy at the World Fair

Debussy may have first heard the instruments of the gamelan as early as 1887, when the Dutch government gave a gamelan to the Paris Conservatoire. But he first heard the complete gamelan orchestra, played by skilled native musicians, in 1889 at the Paris Exhibition. This 1889 gamelan was a small ensemble consisting mostly of the metallic percussion instruments. In 1900 Debussy again heard a gamelan orchestra at the Paris exhibition. The 1900 gamelan was considerably larger and had a more complete instrumentation. (Hugh 1) It is the influence of this javanese gamelan that so admittedly affected the music after 1900 in the works of Debussy. While he generally disapproved of the Orientalism of earlier Romantic-era composers, he found tremendous inspiration in gamelan music—not in its surface exoticism, but in the details of its structure, texture, and modality.

To Debussy, who at the time was exploring alternatives to the goal-driven European classical tradition, this Javanese music came as a revelation. In an 1895 letter to his friend Pierre Louÿs, Debussy wrote “But my poor friend! Do you remember the Javanese music, able to express every shade of meaning, even unmentionable shades . . . which make our tonic and dominant seem like ghosts, for use by naughty little children”. Characteristics of gamelan music interested Debussy: its freedom from rules of functional harmony, its free forms, unrelated to those of European music, the fascinating timbre of the percussive instruments, and the layered texture, free from the European rules of counterpoint. Most important, it is clear that Debussy was keenly interested in gamelan music, since he was thinking and writing about it many years after hearing the gamelan. (Hugh 2)
Javanese Influence in the Music of Debussy

How much did this gamelan music affect Debussy’s musical thought? Kiyoshi Tamagawa, in his dissertation *Echoes from the East*, suggests that ideas from gamelan music strongly influenced Debussy’s compositional style before and after his exposure at the world fair to the javanese gamelan. He lists five criteria for determining if a particular piece was influenced by gamelan music:

1. Titles suggestive of the orient or exoticism
2. Passages or formal structures built around ostinato techniques or large-scale repetition, including forms which are built on circular or symmetrical patterns, rather than on the tonal logic of western music.
3. Pitch materials, motives or scales suggestive of gamelan. Aside from the few examples of direct borrowing, this mostly consists of the use of non-diatomic scales (whole-tone and pentatonic, among others) which suggest slendro and pelog tunings used in gamelan music, or at least scales and tunings which are different from the major-minor system.
4. Timbres and tone colors evocative of the gamelan. The resonating piano is perhaps Western music’s closest approximation of the sound of the gamelan. Soft, pedalled, staccato notes, soft seconds, low fifths held in the pedal, and high, fast, ostinato-type figures all suggest aspects of the gamelan’s timbre.
5. Textures reminiscent of layered gamelan texture. The most characteristic texture is a low, slow-moving, sustained gong sound, overlaid by a moderately moving melody in the middle range of the piano, and faster-moving figures in the upper range of the piano. (Tamagawa 36-44)
Tamagawa also suggests that the presence of one or two of these criteria do not say that the piece is influenced by gamelan. It is however prevalent if all of these criteria fit the piece of music you are examining. It is clear that there are gamelan influences in Debussy’s piano works after 1890. Two pieces that exhibit these qualities are *Pagodes* and *L’isle joyeuse*.

**Pagodes and L’isle Joyeuse**

When Debussy began composing with elements of javanese gamelan, he did not seek to copy the music but to use its qualities within his own music. Debussy was able to effectively combine the compositional styles and techniques of both Western and Eastern music. While there are pieces before his exposure to the gamelan that use traits found in gamelan, he did not truly composing music influenced by Java until after the world fair. Two pieces written after this, *Pagodes* and *L’isle Joyeuse* use compositional techniques directly associated with the music of the gamelan.

“Pagodes,” from *Estampes* is the most clearly influenced by gamelan music of any of Debussy’s piano works. Its pentatonicism--reminiscent of the slendro tuning--is more thoroughgoing than any of Debussy’s other piano works. Sections which use only four notes of the pentatonic scale (for instance, mm. 37ff) are similar to gamelan pieces which mainly use four notes of the available five in slendro tuning. The evocations of gamelan timbre are more complete also, ranging from the suggestion of bells and gongs in the first two measures to many soft, pedaled staccatos, often in octaves, to cascades of 4ths and 5ths high on the keyboard. The main melody--which is expanded and developed in a manner suggestive of the nuclear melodies of gamelan music--is always presented in the middle range of the piano, in the same range a
gamelan’s nuclear melody would be heard. A layered texture is maintained throughout, and always in the configuration found in gamelan music, with low gongs sounding periodically, a moderately paced melody in the middle, and faster moving figurations in the upper range. (Hugh 7)

In a particular comparison to gamelan, the texture of Pagodes comprises stratified layers in the fashion of authentic gamelan music. The opening fourteen measures illustrate this. Measure 1 introduces an imaginary gong ageng, on the low B. At m. 3 a pentatonic motive begins in sixteenth notes at high register, perhaps calling to mind the timbre of a metallophone. Its agile cengkok-like pattern moves between and around notes of an imaginary skeleton that proceeds by conjunct motion in an arch up and back down. At m. 7 a central-register melody enters with a down-up arch in unadorned conjunct eighth notes, functioning perhaps as the balungan in this imaginary gamelan. The smooth contour and quietness might evoke the bowed string timbre of the rebab. At m. 11 another mid-register melody copies the stepwise down-up arching contour of its predecessor in m. 7, now in quarter notes and positioned higher in the pentatonic scale such that the "steps" are actually somewhat larger as in the slendro scale. Along with it appears another upper register rendition of the original cengkok pattern, only now in eighth notes instead of sixteenths. In sum, the first fourteen measures of Pagodes build up multiple layers in low, middle and high registers in slow, moderate and fast rhythmic activity, all layers presenting some plain or elaborated version of an arch-shaped conjunct skeleton. (Parker)

“Pagodes” uses many more gamelan effects than any of Debussy’s other gamelan influenced music. This suggests that Debussy was well aware of many other possibilities suggested by gamelan music. The five influences identified by Tamagawa are found throughout
Debussy’s post-gamelan works—a subset of gamelan influences found in “Pagodes”—are not all the possible aspects of gamelan music which Debussy could have imitated, but rather those aspects which resonated with his own proclivities, and which he made a permanent part of his own musical style. (Hugh 7) As earlier mentioned it was not Debussy’s intention to purely copy the music but to make it his own by using compositional techniques found in the gamelan music.

*L’isle joyeuse* is a fine example of music which is not intended to evoke an oriental or exotic context, yet which continually uses gamelan-inspired elements. Ostinato is used as a important structural component throughout the piece. Static rather than functional harmony prevails—for instance, a pedal A is continually renewed, with only small interruptions, for 92 measures beginning in m. 7. The form is made up of small episodes which blend into each other without a pause, and disappear and reappear without ever creating a discernible pattern of repetition. Whole tone and chromatic scales are interspersed with diatonic material. A layered texture is maintained throughout. (Hugh 8)

While these two pieces exhibit clear influence of the gamelan, this is only the very base of music that the gamelan has influenced in Debussy’s works.

**Conclusion**

While Debussy’s music has influenced ages of composition, it is clear that outside sources influenced his own stylistic features. The gamelan gamelan has continually influenced composers, and Debussy being one of them brings the gamelan’s eastern compositional features to the Western canon. Exposure to Javanese gamelan music was one of the important catalysts in
the flowering of Debussy’s mature style, and it left its mark on his work in a much broader and more profound way than is generally supposed.
Works Cited


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