

## 2. DEBUSSY'S *PRÉLUDES* AS CULTURAL MEDIATORS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Rossella Marisi<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *Each culture is characterized by specific values and ideas; but cultures change together with the related social systems, and new cultural divides are created and bridged in a circular flow. Music can act as a cultural mediator, helping individuals and groups to get rid of their differences and promoting a greater social harmony. This study analyzes Claude Debussy's Préludes, discussing how and why this work combines traits of Western and Eastern music cultures, and can therefore be considered as an example of cultural mediation.*

**Key words:** *exoticism, modes, Orientalist devices, non-Western scales, Said*

### 1. Introduction

Music and the arts have the capacity to act as mediators, bringing together elements of different origin and thus bridging cultural divides and promoting a greater social cohesiveness. This study analyzes some exotic devices included by Claude Debussy in the Western fabric of his *Préludes*, stressing how this work mediates Eastern and Western music styles. The study is structured as follows: section 1 introduces the subject matter; section 2 reflects on the mediating role of culture; section 3 deals with the special appeal for exoticism in European culture; section 4 discusses scholarly views on the exotic trend; section 5 analyzes exotic musical traits in Debussy's *Préludes*; and section 6 draws the conclusions of the study.

### 2. Culture as mediation

According to the dictionary, a social system is “*the patterned series of interrelationships existing between individuals, groups, and institutions and forming a coherent whole*” (Merriam-Webster, [2022]). Social systems are goal directed, purposive, not static (Greene, 1991), and therefore characterized by a dynamic stability; this dynamic stability depends on the society's own capability for adaptation and innovation (Mautner-Markhof, 1989).

To maintain this dynamic stability, the achievement of an optimal balance between the available options and constraints is required; in turn, this balance can be reached through social negotiation, which is an element of all human collaborative situations. According to a well-known definition, negotiation is the ability to “*mediate what may seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities*” (Bhabha, 1996: 8).

In Talcott Parsons and Alfred Kroeber's view, transmitted and created patterns of values and ideas characterize a specific culture, which shapes human behavior in the related social system (Parsons and Kroeber, 1958). However, as social systems are not static, also the related cultures change: new divides are constantly created, addressed, and then bridged in a circular flow. Art, encompassing within this term visual arts (such as painting, sculpting, ceramics, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Professor PhD., Conservatorio “Luisa D’Annunzio” from Pescara, Italy, email: rossellamarisi@hotmail.it

architecture), performing arts (such as music, dance, and theatre), and literary arts (such as poetry, prose, and drama), can become a bridge crossing the divides. Thanks to their ability to teach transcultural understanding, music and the arts can help to demolish barriers and provide a dialog between individuals, groups, and communities (Fowler, 2001; Keskey, 2016).

In this kind of dialogs different cultures encounter each other and exert a mutual influence by introducing elements of one culture into another one, creating new cultural phenomena: the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz calls this circumstance ‘transculturation’ (Ortiz, 1995). A famous work stimulating exchange between West and East is *West-Eastern Divan*, a poetic work by the German writer, poet, novelist, and playwright Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832): written between 1814 and 1819, it promotes the idea of cultural proximity between Occident and Orient, displaying openness to a foreign and exotic world (Goethe, 2019).

In the musical realm, a profound interest toward exotic subjects had already been manifested by Henry Purcell (1659-1695), who composed some acts of the unfinished semi-opera *The Indian Queen* (1695). Some years later, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) composed an entrée of his opéra-ballet *Les Indes Galantes* (1735-1736) being inspired by a Native American dance from Louisiana: in this work he mirrored the melodies and rhythms of the tribal dance performed by Metchigaema chiefs that he had witnessed in Paris in 1723 (Locke, 2019). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exoticism spread across Europe, characterizing many works of literature and art.

### **3. The special appeal for exoticism in European culture**

The term exoticism comes from the Latin term *exoticus*, meaning ‘from the outside, foreign’, and at the end of the nineteenth century the musicologist Camille Bellaigue defined exoticism as the taste and representation of distant and rare things (Bellaigue, 1898). What are the reasons for exoticism enjoying the favor of many artists and musicians? In the mid to late nineteenth century the European powers began to colonize a great part of Africa and Southeast Asia; this allowed the colonies’ art, culture, clothes, and furniture to come to the attention of the European public. The Asian style became fashionable in France, stimulating also French poets, artists, and musicians to take an interest in Asian culture. In this way, in the period straddling between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century many French art products, poems, and music pieces were inspired by Oriental culture.

Among the painters whose style got inspiration or confirmation by Oriental art are Jacques-Joseph *Tissot*, Edgard Degas, Claude Monet, and Édouard *Manet* (Chesneau, 1878). These painters moved away from specific elements characterizing Western art, such as the balance between light and shade, and the rules of perspective, choosing instead flat colors, and lack of three-dimensionality. In a similar way, some musicians expanded the major/minor tonality system using also non-Western scales, such as whole-tone and pentatonic scales which are typical of Oriental music and abandoned the Beethovenian motivic development in favor of Oriental-style sequences and repetitions (Scott, 2003): among them are Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), Leo Delibes (1836-1891), Georges Bizet (1838-1875),

and Claude Debussy (1862-1918).

#### 4. Scholarly views on the exotic trend

Research has posited that the fascination exerted by the Orient on the West, which was experiencing the swift changes related to industrialization, was due to the East's perceived stability and "*unchanging eternity*" (Said, 1979: 240). Indeed, one of the most influential nineteenth-century thinkers, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 –1831) claimed that non-Western continents have "*no movement or development of [their] own*" (Hegel, 1975: 190). Also the musicologist Lawrence Kramer remarked that "*one of the primary qualities of the exotic [was] its supposed preservation of values that the advanced cultures of Europe had superseded*", stressing that exotic cultures were considered to be static, and exotic lands were deemed similar to living museums (Kramer, 1995: 206).

In his *Essay on Exoticism*, written between 1904 and 1918, Victor Segalen considered exoticism as a "*manifestation of diversity*" (Segalen, 2002: 66), defining the adjective 'diverse' as indicating "*everything that until now was called foreign, strange, unexpected, surprising, mysterious, amorous, superhuman, heroic, and even divine, everything that is Other*" (Segalen, 2002: 67). Jonathan Bellman agreed with this view, affirming that exoticist works use "*characteristic and easily recognized musical gestures from the alien culture*" (Bellman, 1998: x).

However, these musical gestures often just added local color, without matching with distinctive music elements the specific foreign culture they were referring to. Indeed, Ralph Locke argued that Orientalist works of art and music use *cultural stereotypes* to evoke "*a place, people or social milieu that is (or is perceived or imagined to be) profoundly different from accepted local norms in its attitudes, customs, and morals*" (Locke, 2007-2014). For the same reason, Westerners often grouped all non-Western countries together under the concept of Orient. There was a perceived interchangeability between different 'exotic countries' and their cultures: consequently, Middle Eastern, Far Eastern, and even African music was rendered by means of the same exotic markers (McClary, 1992). Among the exoticist works composed in the second half of the nineteenth century, displaying stereotypical exotic traits, there are Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865), Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (1871), Léo Delibes's *Lakmé* (1883), and Arthur Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885).

Moreover, as by the end of the nineteenth century Western composers did not use ethnographic research methods, their compositions usually included exotic traits but at the same time adhered to general rules typical of the Western music culture. Henri Quittard wrote that Western composers were attracted by a far-off, fabulous Orient, where they searched for themes which they wrote down and treated according to Western compositional styles (Quittard, 1906). The entry *Exotisme* in *Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire* emphasized that, once exotic themes were transposed into Western musical language, they shared the general characteristics of Western music without losing their original outlandish feeling (de la Laurencie, 1913: VI, 99).

Thomas Betzwieser and Michael Stegemann stated that musical exoticism can be observed in the use of exotic musical materials, such as native instruments or

instruments *standing for them*, and native music or music which can be understood as *standing for it* (Betzwieser and Stegemann, 1994). Also Edward Said argued that the Orient and its characteristic traits are for the greatest part a Western creation, consisting of stereotypes and false assumptions: “*The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West*” (Said, 1979: 5), because “*it is Europe that articulates the Orient*” (Said, 1979: 57). Indeed, this scholar claimed, “*we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do (...) is at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors are for Europe, are only for Europe*” (Said, 1979: 71).

Carl Dahlhaus posited that Orientalist musical works might not be “*anthropologically or historically ‘genuine’*” (Dahlhaus, 1989: 305). Jean-Pierre Bartoli stressed that artists adhering to exoticism used specific procedures evoking cultural and geographical Otherness, availing themselves of meaning-units “*that seem borrowed from a foreign artistic language*” (Bartoli, 2000: 65). And Richard Taruskin even contended that, in exoticist pieces, “*verisimilitude had to be sacrificed to stereotype, the latter often lacking any authentic counterpart in ‘Oriental’ reality*” (Taruskin, 2007: III, 390). Summing up, several scholars underscored the circumstance that Western composers used foreign themes (real or imitated ones) transposing them into a Western musical language, in this way giving their pieces both Western and exotic musical traits and making them act as cultural mediators.

## **5. Exotic musical traits in Debussy’s *Préludes***

Already as a student, Debussy was driven by a strong desire for innovation, and was more and more reluctant to adhere to traditional composing techniques. This is shown, for example, in the discussions with his teacher Ernst Guiraud (1837-1892): on one occasion, Guiraud expressed the idea that block-chord successions were theoretically absurd, whereas the young Debussy affirmed they were lovely, although not compliant with traditional composition rules. Claude even dared to maintain that the only rule to be strictly followed in composing up to date music should be the pleasure experienced in listening to specific sounds and passages (Lockspeiser, 1962). Also as a professional musician, Debussy constantly searched for new harmonies and innovative compositional techniques, and the musical suggestions from the Orient were of great inspiration for him.

Being fascinated by Asian culture, and motivated not only by his personal taste, but also by the broad support enjoyed by Orientalist art and music, he often used exotic musical traits in his works, also in pieces not related to Oriental subjects, characters, monuments, or landscapes. In his works he combined Oriental and Western traits: among the latter are, for instance, his decision to not reject tonality but rather to expand it, the presence of melodies (albeit often fragmentary ones), the formation of chords whose tones are stacked vertically in thirds, and the use of fairly regular meters.

Basing on the list of Orientalist devices identified by Derek Scott, I will now examine the compositions included in Debussy's *Préludes*, to verify if and how this work displays traits of Orientalist music. Among the devices listed by Scott there are the following: pentatonic and whole-tone scales; Aeolian, Dorian, and Phrygian modes; trills; rapid scale passages especially of an irregular fit; ostinati; use of triplets in duple time; parallel movements in fifths and octaves; bare fifths; and pedal points (Scott, 2003).

**Pentatonic scales:** a pentatonic scale is a scale containing five different tones. The first measures of *La fille aux cheveux de lin* are based on the pentatonic scale Db, Eb, F, Gb, Bb.



Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, mm. 1-3

**Whole-tone scales:** a whole-tone scale is a scale in which each note is distant a whole tone from its neighbors, according to the sequence T T T T T T. The most part of *Voiles* is based on the whole-tone scale Bb, C, D, E, F#, G#.



Debussy, *Voiles*, mm. 1-4

**Dorian mode:** the Dorian mode can be thought of as a minor key with the sixth scale degree raised by a semitone, according to the sequence T S T T T S. The first measures of *La danse de Puck* are based on the Dorian mode F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D, Eb.



Debussy, *La danse de Puck*, mm. 1-6

**Aeolian and Phrygian modes:** in the Aeolian mode the sequence of intervals is T S T T S T. Some sections in *La Cathédrale engloutie* are based on the Aeolian mode G#, A#, B, C#, D#, E, (F#).



Debussy, *La Cathédrale engloutie*, mm. 47-54

Other sections are based on the Phrygian mode, identified by the sequence of intervals S T T T S T: the following excerpt is composed of the tones E, F, G, A, B, C, D.



Debussy, *La Cathédrale engloutie*, mm. 1-6

**Trills:** *La danse de Puck* displays a long trill to be performed by the left hand.



Debussy, *La danse de Puck*, mm. 87-89

**Rapid scale passages:** an example thereof can be found in *Voiles*.



Debussy, *Voiles*, mm. 62-64

**Ostinati.** Ostinati are short passages often repeated throughout a composition. An ostinato passage is shown in *Brouillards*.



Debussy, *Brouillards*, mm. 9-12

**Use of triplets in duple time.** Some examples can be found in *La Puerta del Vino*.



Debussy, *La Puerta del Vino*, mm. 33-36

**Parallel movements in fifths and octaves.** Whereas classical composition rules suggest that melodic lines should be preferably moved in contrary or oblique motion, the *Préludes* display many cases of parallel motion: one of them can be found in *Danseuses de Delphes*.



Debussy, *Danseuses de Delphes*, mm. 13-14

**Bare fifths.** Bare fifths can be thought of as chords lacking the third, and therefore indefinable in terms of major/minor tonality. Some sections of *La Sérénade interrompue* display bare fifths.



Debussy, *La Sérénade interrompue*, mm 25-30

**Pedal points.** A pedal point is a sustained tone, typically in the bass, during which several changes of harmony (both consonant and dissonant with it) occur in the other parts. *Voiles* includes many examples of pedal points, one of which is the following.



Debussy, *Voiles*, mm. 37-42

Summing up, in Debussy's *Préludes* typically Western traits, such as tonality and chords built in thirds, are harmoniously combined with Oriental traits alluded to by specific exotic devices. Moreover, the latter are often proposed in a form adhering to general rules typical of the Western music culture, as for instance a quite regular meter. In this way the Western musical fabric of this work is imbued with echoes and suggestions of a different origin. Therefore the *Préludes* can in some sense be considered by both Westerners and Easterners part of their own culture. Thanks to their dual nature, these pieces are able to bridge cultural divides contributing to promote social cohesion in a multicultural society.

## 6. Concluding remarks

In his *Préludes*, Debussy introduced exotic elements into the Western music tradition, making different music cultures interact and giving them the opportunity to exercise a mutual influence. His work shows that music can bridge socio-cultural divides, serving as a mediator between individuals, groups, and nations. In today's multicultural schools, Debussy's forward-looking example urges teachers to use

music and the arts as cultural mediators able to promote social inclusion, integration, and cohesion.

## References

1. Bartoli Jean-Pierre, (2000), Propositions pour une définitions de l'exotisme musical et pour l'application en musique de la notion d'isotopie sémantique, in "Musurgia" 7(2): 65
2. Bellaigue Camille, (1898), De l'Exotisme en Musique. In: Camille Bellaigue, Études Musicales et Nouvelles Silhouettes de Musiciens, Librairie Ch. Delagrave, Paris
3. Bellman Jonathan, (1998), Introduction. In: Jonathan Bellman, The Exotic in Western Music, *Exotic*, vol. X. Northeastern Univ. Press, Boston, i-xiii
4. Betzwieser Thomas and Michael Stegemann, (1994), Exotismus. In: Ludwig Finscher (ed.), *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd rev. ed., Bärenreiter and Metzler, Kassel and Stuttgart, vol. III, cols. 226–243
5. Bhabha Homi K., (1996), Aura and Agora: On Negotiating Rapture and Speaking Between. In: Richard Francis (ed.), *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 8-17
6. Chesneau Ernest, (1878), L'Exposition universelle. Le Japon à Paris, in "Gazette des Beaux Arts", 2nd series, vol. XVIII, September 1878, 385-396
7. Dahlhaus Carl, (1989), *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles
8. de la Laurencie Lionel (ed.), (1913), *Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire*, Librairie Delagrave, Paris
9. Fowler Charles, (2001), *Strong Arts, Strong Schools: The Promising Potential and Shortsighted Disregard of the Arts in American Schooling*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
10. Goethe Wolfgang Johann von, (2019), *West-Eastern Divan: Complete, annotated new translation, including Goethe's 'Notes and Essays' & the unpublished poems*, translated by Eric Ormsby, Gingko Library, London
11. Greene Roberta R. (1991), *Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice*, Routledge, Abingdon
12. Hegel Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, (1975), *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
13. Keskey Sophia, (2016), *Crossing The Divide: Art as Mediation and Pilgrimage*, Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers, 15, <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/15>, accessed 06.10.2022
14. Kramer Lawrence, (1995), *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, University of California Press, Berkeley
15. Locke Ralph, (2019), *Enlightened and Exotic: Ralph Locke Takes Rameau's World Tour in 'Les Indes galantes'*, in "Opera", September 2019, 1104-1109
16. Locke Ralphs P., (2007-2014), *Exoticism*, Grove Music Online, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>, accessed 06.10.2022
17. Lockspeiser Edward, (1962), *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. I, Cassel & Company, London, 204-208
18. Mautner-Markhof Frances, (1989), Introduction. In: Frances Mautner-Markhof



- (ed.), *Processes of International Negotiations*, Westview Press, Bolder, San Francisco & London, 1-4
19. McClary Susan (1992), *Carmen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
20. Merriam-Webster, (2022), Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20system>, accessed 06.110.2022
21. Ortiz Fernando, (1995), *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Duke University Press, Durham, and London
22. Parsons Talcott and A. L. Kroeber, (1958), *The Concepts of Culture and of Social System*, in “*American Sociological Review*”, 23, 582-583
23. Quittard Henri, (1906), *L’orientalisme musicale: Saint-Saëns orientaliste*, in “*La Revue Musicale*”, vol. VI, 107
24. Said Edward, (1979), *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York
25. Scott Derek B., (2003), *Orientalism and musical style*. In: Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 155-178
26. Segalen Victor (2002), *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetic of Diversity*. Translated and edited by Yaël Schlick, Duke University Press, Durham
27. Taruskin Richard, (2007), *Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. III, Oxford University Press, Oxford