

## 2. DEBUSSY AS A FORERUNNER OF INTERCULTURALISM

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**Abstract:** *Between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, when colonialism was in full force, Western composers expressed a deep interest in non-Western music, drawing on its structures, melodies, rhythms and timbres. Since 1901 Debussy wrote some pieces related to gamelan music. Should these pieces be considered as examples of colonialist exoticism, or rather as early models of interculturalism? In trying to answer this question, this paper highlights the educational role of music promoting respect and appraisal of cultural diversity.*  
**Key words:** *colonialism, exoticism, Debussy, gamelan, interculturalism, cultural diversity*

### Introduction

Although the very concept of exoticism dates at the seventeenth century, Westerners' interest in the non-western world can be traced back to more ancient times. The discovery of exotic peoples, artworks, plants, and minerals in the course of trips or military campaigns, and their description by merchant travelers, explorers, missionaries or soldiers<sup>9</sup> excited a feeling of difference between the West and the rest of the world, stimulating an attraction to all that was perceived as strange or remarkably unusual. The Westerners' quest of exoticism caused the production of artworks connected to far countries, in painting, decorative arts, and music. One of the earliest exotic representations in Western music can be found at the beginning of the sixteenth century: a pantomime dance, called *Moresca*, in which the executants wore Moorish costumes concludes Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607). Over the years, non-Western art and music attracted more and more interest: regions as Turkey, Persia, India and China were often set to operas<sup>10</sup>, exotic elements were incorporated in orchestral work<sup>11</sup> and even in shorter instrumental pieces<sup>12</sup>. These inclusions

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<sup>9</sup> Examples thereof are the literary works by Marco Polo (1299) and Matteo Ricci (1615)

<sup>10</sup> Examples thereof are the following operas and operettas: Antonio Vivaldi's *Juditha triumphans* (1716), Georg Friedrich Händel's *Tamerlano* (1724) and *Serse* (1738), Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* (1735–1736), Christopher Gluck's, *Le Cinesi* (1754) and *Le cadi dupé* (1761), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782), André Ernest Modeste Grétry's *La Caravane du Caire* (1782), Gioachino Rossini's *Semiramide* (1823), Giuseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842), Ambroise Thomas's *Le caïd* (1849), Jacques Offenbach's *Ba-ta-clan* (1855), Charles Gounod's *La reine de Saba* (1862), Georges Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (1863), Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865), Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (1871), Emmanuel Chabrier's *Fisch-Ton-Kan* (1875), César Cui's *The Mandarin's Son* (1878), Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor* (1890), Sidney Jones's *The Geisha* (1896) and *San Toy* (1899), Pietro Mascagni's *Iris* (1899), Howard Talbot's *A Chinese Honeymoon* (1896), Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926), Richard Strauss's *Salome* (1905) and *Die ägyptische Helena* (1929), Franz Lehár's *The Land of Smiles* (1929), Sigmund Romberg, Oscar Hammerstein II & Otto Harbach's *The Desert Song* (1926).

<sup>11</sup> Examples thereof are the following works: Mily Balakirev's *Tamara* (1882), Alexander Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia* (1880), and the "Polovetsian Dances" from *Prince Igor* (1887), Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov's *Caucasian Sketches* (1896), Modest Mussorgsky's "Dance of the Persian Slaves" from *Khovanshchina* (1880), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Antar* (1891); and *Scheherazade* (1888), Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (1909).

<sup>12</sup> Examples thereof are the following pieces: Mily Balakirev's *Islamey* (1869), Ludwig van Beethoven Turkish March from *The Ruins of Athens* (1811), Johann Joseph Fux's partita *Turcaria* (1683), Alexander Glazunov's *5 Novelettes* for String Quartet Op 15 (1886), Albert Ketëlbey's works *In a Persian Market* (1920), *In a Chinese Temple Garden* (1925), and *In the Mystic Land of Egypt* (1931), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's finales of the

were made according to different lines of thought: among them were colonialist exoticism, and interculturalism.

### **From colonialist exoticism to interculturalism**

The most significant contact between Western and non-Western music cultures occurred through colonization. On one hand, Western music was utilized as a vehicle to convert and control colonized peoples: the concepts of harmony, composition, technical mastery and music for music's sake influenced and transformed indigenous cultures. Sometimes, colonial policies had a direct effect on traditional music: in Bali, due to the Dutch ruling, court gamelan musicians returned to their villages, contributing to the spread of specific musical forms (Brunero, 2003). Although in some cases, colonialism attempted to erase or submerge the traditions which flourished in the colonies until the arrival of the European rulers (Kaiwar, 2007), in other cases western cultures incorporated genres and styles which were characteristic of Oriental or African peoples, promoting a fusion between Western and exotic arts and music (Brunero, 2003). This article focuses on some works by Claude Debussy linked to gamelan music, investigating the following research questions: are these works aimed at keeping a sharp distinction between the Western and non-Western worlds, or rather directed towards cultural and social integration? In short, may these pieces be considered as examples of exoticism, or rather as early models of interculturalism?

### **The Indonesian gamelan**

The gamelan is a traditional musical ensemble from the islands of Java and Bali. These islands are located in the Indonesian Archipelago, on the border of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, between Asia and Australia. Due to their location, they were subject to influence from a variety of cultures; in fact research highlighted that gamelan music originated as a combination of Buddhist musical instruments and styles from the Orient and the music and dance of the South Pacific islands (Hugh, 1998). The gamelan has an array of metallic instruments, ranging in pitch from low to high. The *gong ageng* is the largest and lowest instrument, and plays very low speed bass notes; medium sized instrument called *kenong* play medium speed melodies; the *bonang* is a series of medium sized bronze kettle gongs, which often play complicated interlocking patterns. Higher instruments, such as the *saron* and the *gender*, play faster moving melodies, in the range of one or two octaves, respectively.

There are also other percussion instruments, as wooden xylophones called *gambang*, and drums called *kendang*. Besides percussion instruments, the gamelan includes bamboo flutes, called *suling*, bowed string instruments, called *rebab*, zithers, called *celempung*, and female singers, called *pesinden*. All the instruments and singers weave their parts together to form a complex music

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Violin Concerto K. 219 (1775) and the Piano Sonata K. 331 (1883), Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Oriental Sketch* (1917).

structure in which each instrument or singer has the same importance as the others. The gamelan and its music are an integral part of Indonesian culture (Prijosusilo, 2011) and the entire gamelan and particularly the large gongs are considered sacred. Gamelan is based on the traditional Javanese *slendro* scale, which has five pitches spaced approximately equally over the octave. As a consequence, each interval is larger than a major second and smaller than a minor third. The approximate nature of the "equal" spacing creates little differences in tuning between unison instruments within the gamelan, and between different gamelans. This produces a shimmering timbre when all the instruments are played together (Sorrell, 1990, 27).

Gamelan music is built of blended melodic layers, which researchers consider to be symbolically related to social classes: the orchestral complexity is connected to the high social formality, and the improvisations of each member of the gamelan shall abide by strong rules, as the behavior of each individual shall obey to rigid norms of social stratification (Lomax, 1968, 151). Likewise, the regularity of rhythm is considered to reflect the natural, well-organized order of the universe (Becker, 1980, 62). It is not a case that endings, which provide the most important rhythmic events in gamelan music, are always guided by the rich timbre of the large *gong ageng*. Indeed, at the end of the performance, all members of the gamelan ensemble adjust the timing of their final notes in deference to this low instrument (Parker, 2012).

### **Debussy and the gamelan: *Pagodes, Pour le piano, L'isle joyeuse***

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 in 1889 and in 1900 he heard the complete gamelan orchestra, played by skilled native musicians, when he visited the Paris Exhibition. The 1889 gamelan was a small ensemble consisting mostly of metallic percussion instruments; the 1900 gamelan was considerably larger and had a more complete instrumentation. He was really moved by the music heard, and wrote in to his friend Pierre Louÿs in 1895: "the Javanese music is able to express every shade of meaning, even unmentionable shades" (Borgeaud, 1945, 41). And in 1913 he expressed again his appreciation of Javanese music: "Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint which make Palestrina seem like child's play. And if one listens to it without being prejudiced by one's European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise more fit for a traveling circus" (Langham Smith, 1977, 74). These quotations prove that Debussy was keenly interested in this kind of music, and give the reader important indications about what characteristics the French musician mostly appreciated in gamelan music: great freedom in forms and harmony, fascinating timbres, and layered texture.

Indeed, research has shown that, although Debussy did not directly borrow gamelan melodies, his compositional style was strongly influenced by gamelan music. In fact, since 1900 he wrote many pieces "translating" into piano music some characteristics of traditional works for gamelan, capturing their

atmosphere without imitating their salient features in an unoriginal manner. Tamagawa lists five criteria for determining if a particular piece was influenced by gamelan music: 1) a title suggesting the orient or exoticism; 2) formal structures built on ostinato techniques, circular or symmetrical patterns; 3) pitch materials, motives, whole-tone scales or pentatonic scales<sup>13</sup>, suggestive of gamelan; 4) performing peculiarities, such soft, pedaled staccato notes resembling the timbres of some gamelan instruments; 5) a layered texture, set up by low, slow-moving gong sound, moderately moving melodies in the middle range of the piano, and faster-moving figurations in the upper range of the piano (Tamagawa, 1988). Although most of these elements were present, at least occasionally and in isolation, in Debussy's music prior to 1900, after this date their number increased dramatically (Tamagawa, 1988). Debussy used elements of the gamelan in some of his pieces: among them *Pagodes*, the *Prelude* from the *Suite Pour le piano*, and *L'isle joyeuse*<sup>14</sup>. Let us briefly examine their most relevant characteristics.

*Pagodes*. It is the first in a set of three pieces entitled *Estampes*<sup>7</sup> meaning prints made by pressing a carved block into ink and then stamping it onto paper. In *Pagodes* he presents an aural rather than visual print of the gamelan. The piano simulates the timbre of the diverse instruments constituting a gamelan. Musicologist Robert Schmitz pointed out that Debussy was interested not so much in the single tones, as in the patterns of resonance which those tones set up around themselves (Schmitz, 1937, 782). The performer can obtain the effect of vibrating resonances on the piano by using both pedals in an appropriate way. The black-key scale roughly simulates the pentatonic *slendro* scale, and the different layers allude to the different instruments of the gamelan, with low gongs sounding periodically, a moderately paced melody in the middle, and faster moving figurations in the upper range. A *ritardando* leads to the final bar of the piece, in which the lowest B simulates the sound of the *gong ageng*.

*Prelude* from the *Suite Pour le piano*. The ostinato figurations often suggest layered textures similar to gamelan music. The timbres evoke gamelan sonorities, with pedaled trills overlaid with a slow melody. The tonal scheme suggests symmetrical, rather than functional relationships between the main sections, so that an oscillation may be posited between A minor and C major.

*L'isle joyeuse*. Ostinato is an important structural component of the piece; a layered texture is maintained throughout, and static harmony prevails.

### **An intercultural approach merging Eastern and Western elements**

Coming back to the research questions of this paper, may Debussy's compositional procedures be considered early models of interculturalism, or

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<sup>13</sup> Research highlighted that other composers used pentatonic scales with the aim of evoking Asia: among them, Ravel used these scales in *Shéhérazade*, *Ma mere l'Oye*, and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges on the notes of pentatonic scales*. Roy Howat, *The Art of French Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, 111-112.

<sup>14</sup> Musicologist Roy Howat claimed that also other works, such as *Reflets dans l'eau* and *Cloches à travers le feuilles*, demonstrate strong gamelan-related figurations. Howat, *The Art of French Music*, cit., 116.

rather mere examples of colonialist exoticism? In my opinion, Debussy neither showed to appreciate Western music more than non-Western, nor kept a sharp distinction between the two. Rather, he used elements of both Eastern and Western musical thinking, merging them in a whole. For instance, gamelan music is polyphonic and not chordal, but Debussy employed chords in *Pagodes*, unifying the gamelan timbre and exotic sound with the Western chords' tonal functions. Moreover, the contrary motion and intervallic diminution used in *Pagodes* at measures 15-18 are Western polyphonic techniques, but the shimmering quality of the discords evokes also the intentional mistuning of gamelan unisons (Parker, 2012). As Debussy did not simply imitate or borrow gamelan music, it can be inferred that his music is not a mere example of colonialist exoticism. He rather selected from a gamelan those procedures and sounds which resonated with his own aesthetic sensibility, and incorporated them into his own composition thought, with the aim of expressing his inner world.

For this reason, although the pieces cited in this paper belong to the colonial period, in my opinion they may be considered as models of an up-to-date intercultural educational intervention. Indeed, the aim of interculturalism is to articulate teaching and learning processes where cultural diversity is not eliminated, but rather perceived as a value, respected and appreciated (Aguado, 2003). The main objectives of an intercultural education are to understand culture as something that is learned and transmitted socially, and for this very reason unfinished and in constant movement. Even individuals may have more than one identity, according to factors such as their gender, ethnicity, marital status, religion, spoken language, and job. If identity is conceived as static and unchangeable, conflict and discrimination could occur as a result of any of these attributes. On the contrary, an intercultural approach takes account of the "whole" person (Warmington, 2012).

Likewise, it communities are considered as monolithic entities, individuals and groups might only opt for assimilation or competition. The intercultural approach rejects this oversimplification, believing that a kind of cultural fusion may be a natural by-product of human interaction. Nowadays, as thousands of individuals from far countries and societies come to Europe, both immigrants and natives can contribute in shaping a community which accepts, uses, and respects differences, sharing the responsibility of creating a more equitable society. Debussy's pieces show that music, and generally speaking the arts, can make a significant contribution to the achievement of these objectives.

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