

Claude Debussy and the Javanese Gamelan

Debussy's Exposure to the Gamelan

The 1889 Paris Universal Exposition was an eye-opening experience for Claude Debussy, who was at that time a young composer just beginning to make himself known and publish his first compositions.

At this 1889 Exposition, groups from around the world displayed the best of their countries' art, music, culture, and way of life. Particularly interesting to the Debussy and the other musicians who visited the Exposition was the exhibit from Java, an island in the Malay Archipelago. The Java exhibit was a model *kampung*, or village, which demonstrated all aspects of communal village life from agricultural practices to religion and entertainment.

The European musicians were especially interested in Java's famous *gamelan* orchestra. The gamelan was an important part of the religious and social life of the Javanese village, and so was on prominent display as part of the Javanese *kampung*. The gamelan, a collection of musical instruments, many metallic and with gong- or bell-like sounds, plays the traditional music of Java, a music that has been passed down by oral tradition for well over a thousand years.

This Javanese gamelan music created a sensation among European musicians. Here was a well-developed, powerful, and beautiful music that was completely outside the western idea of what music could and should be. European musicians spent hours listening to the gamelan, transcribing melodies, and examining the instruments and their tunings.

Like many musicians, Debussy was quite taken with gamelan music. His friend, Robert Godet, reports that "Many fruitful hours for Debussy were spent in the Javanese *kampung* . . . listening to the percussive rhythmic complexities of the gamelan with its inexhaustible combinations of ethereal, flashing timbres."¹

The Gamelan

There used to be—indeed, despite the troubles that civilization has brought, there still are—some wonderful peoples who learn music as easily as one learns to breathe. —Claude Debussy

The island of Java is located in the Malay Archipelago. Part of present-day Indonesia, Java is located on the border of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and between Asia to the northwest and Australia to the southeast. In this location, Java is subject to influence from a variety of cultures. Most scholars believe

¹ Robert Godet, 'En Marge de la Marge' in *La Revue Musicale*, May 1926, quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol I, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1978) p. 113.

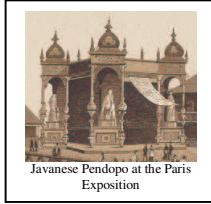
gamelan music originated as a combination of Buddhist musical instruments and styles from the Orient and the music and dance of the South Pacific islands. The music of India and the Hindu philosophy exercised an influence as well, particularly on music theory and terminology. During the 15th and 16th Centuries, Java gradually came under the influence of Islam; today more than 90% of the island's inhabitants are Islamic. So Moslem philosophy and musical ideas overlaid the others. In Java today, gamelan music forms an integral part of the local Islamic rituals and festivals.

[Javanese] traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century — Claude Debussy²

Traditionally, gamelan music was learned quite naturally and as a part of everyday life. Gamelan music was taught by oral tradition and passed along in much the same way as methods for sowing and harvesting crops, preparing meals, or building traditional dwellings. Starting from the youngest age, villagers absorbed the conventions and style of gamelan music, gradually and by osmosis as much as formal teaching, learning to play the various instruments.

The gamelan and its music are an integral part of the ritual life of the Javanese village and indeed the entire gamelan (and particularly the large gongs) are considered sacred. The instruments of the gamelan are typically housed in their own open-walled building, known as a *pendopo*.

Javanese gamelan music often accompanies dance or the shadow puppet plays known as Wayang kulit.



Javanese Pendopo at the Paris Exposition

Gamelan Music

The gamelan is divided into punctuating instruments, balungan instruments, and elaborating instruments.

- Several varieties of gongs, usually situated near the back of the gamelan, are the *punctuating instruments*. They play periodically to divide and subdivide the large phrases.

² *Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22

- The middle- sized instruments, including pot gongs and xylophone-like instruments, are placed in the middle of the gamelan and form the *balungan instruments*. These instruments play the *balungan*—the melodic nucleus from which all melodies in a particular section of a gamelan piece grow—at a medium speed.
- The small instruments at the front of the gamelan, including the singer, the flute, and the bowed rebab, are the *elaborating instruments*. They elaborate on the balungan at a faster speed.

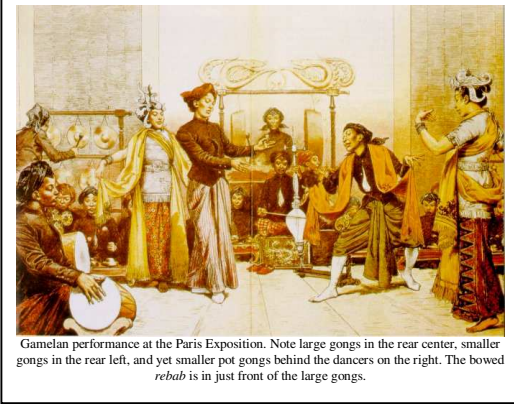
This texture, with low instruments moving slowly and higher instruments moving at progressively faster speeds, is an important characteristic of gamelan music—and a texture that Debussy admired and imitated in his music.

Aside from the beautiful sound produced by the instruments themselves, the most immediately striking element of gamelan music is the cycle. A cycle is simply a section in a gamelan piece that repeats, either a few times or many times. The number of beats in a cycle is always a power of two: typical cycles are 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64 beats long. Occasionally cycles as long as 128, 256, or even 512 beats are used.

Cycles are known as *gongan* because they are punctuated by strikes of the gongs (the *punctuating instruments*). For instance the gong strokes in an 8 beat cycle might go something like this:

Beat:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	...
Gong:	L	s	m	s	L	s	m	s	L	s	m	s	L	...				

L=large gong, m=medium gong, s=small gong



Gamelan performance at the Paris Exposition. Note large gongs in the rear center, smaller gongs in the rear left, and yet smaller pot gongs behind the dancers on the right. The bowed *rebab* is in just front of the large gongs.

Gamelan Music's Influence on Debussy

Javanese rhapsodies, . . . instead of confining themselves in a traditional form, develop according to the fantasy of countless arabesques.—Claude Debussy, writing in 1910³

Western tonal music—the “traditional form” Debussy refers to—is goal oriented; musical forms are carefully designed to “develop” ideas and to move towards climaxes. By contrast, the cycles in gamelan music represent not movement forward in time—progress—but rather the oriental view of endless cycles of history, of death and rebirth, of the rise and fall of empires, cycles that have continued since eternity and will continue into eternity. The gamelan cycle, which may be repeated any number of times and does not develop at all in (at least, not according the traditional European notions of musical “development”), is a perfect analogue of this static view of history.

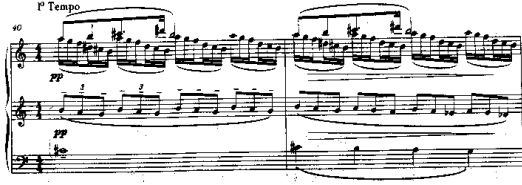
This static, timeless element became a part of Debussy's music as well. Debussy often used repetitive figures, reminiscent of the gamelan *gongan*, to create this static effect. These figures often “cycle” back and forth through a few different pitches, and often form a backdrop above which Debussy's distinctive melodies are placed. A simple example can be found in the opening measures of *Bells Through the Leaves*, from *Images II*:



³ *Claude Debussy*, (Paris: Bibliotheque Nationale, 1962), p. 30, quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22

If one listens to [gamelan music] 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.—Claude Debussy⁴

Debussy often writes in a unique style of layered counterpoint, which seems to have affinities with the layered texture of gamelan music. A fine example is found in *Bells Through the Leaves*:



Here, as in gamelan music, the lower voices are generally moving more slowly, and the upper voices at a faster pace. Interestingly, this configuration does not occur in Debussy's piano music written before his exposure to gamelan music—in Debussy's early music there is layered counterpoint, but in a texture typical of Romantic era piano music: the outer voices move at approximately the same pace, while the inner, accompanimental, voice moves at a faster rate. But in Debussy's pieces written after 1890, this gamelan-like texture, with lower voices moving more slowly, and upper voices moving progressively faster, occurs with some regularity.

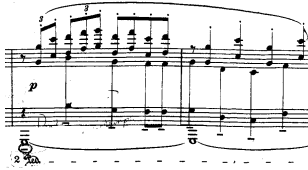
This example from *Bells Through the Leaves* also shows another striking similarity to gamelan music: all four voices are based on a single melodic cell (a 3-note motive moving stepwise downward, seen in simplest form on the middle staff). Some voices play a slow simple version of this motive, some play a faster, more elaborate version, and one voice plays an inverted version (moving upward, not downward). This treatment is very similar to the way a *balungan*, or melodic nucleus, is used in gamelan music.

⁴ *Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22

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?—Claude Debussy, writing in 1895⁵

Javanese gamelan music is based on two scales, the five-note *slendro* scale and the seven-note *pelog*. Neither scale conforms precisely to any group of notes in the European tuning system, because some gamelan notes fall in between the 12 chromatic notes in the western scale. For this reason, it was not practical for Debussy to use these precise tunings in his piano music. However, it was possible to evoke the general sound and feeling of these tunings by departing from the European standard major/minor system (the “tonic and dominant” Debussy refers to so disparagingly) to use various exotic scales.

Pagodas, which many commentators feel is the one piece of Debussy most strongly influenced by gamelan music, is, not surprisingly, also the most thoroughly pentatonic piece he wrote. The various pentatonic (five-note) scales Debussy used in *Pagodas* may be intended to reproduce the sound and feeling of the five-note *slendro* tuning used in Javanese music. The contrapuntal, pentonic melodies in this excerpt would certainly have evoked oriental images in the mind of the European listener of the 1890s:



⁵ *Correspondence de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs (1893-1904)*, ed. Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie Jose Corti, 1945), p. 41, quoted in Tamagawa, p. 21

Different Uses Debussy Made of Gamelan Materials

The pieces on *Fantastic Rhapsodies* were selected to show the range of approaches Debussy took to gamelan-inspired material. The pieces on *Fantastic Rhapsodies* range from one with no direct influence from gamelan music ("Clair de lune") all the way to one that directly imitates the sound of the gamelan on the piano ("Pagodas").

"Clair de lune" from *Suite Bergamasque* was written before Debussy was exposed to gamelan music. Nevertheless, it has a few characteristics often associated with gamelan music, most notably a concern with sound and atmosphere. One reason Debussy was so enthusiastic about gamelan music is that he found in it many of the musical qualities he was already cultivating in his own music.

"Prélude" from *Pour le piano* is an early response to the gamelan techniques. Its prevailing texture, with slow moving bass, moderately moving tenor, and fast moving treble, is often suggestive of the gamelan sound. The use of exotic scales in "Prélude"—modal and whole-tone scales—may also owe some debt to the exotic tunings and scales of gamelan instruments. As with most of Debussy's music, "Prélude" has many influences beyond gamelan music (a layered texture similar to that found in "Prélude" is used by J.S. Bach in many of his organ works, and Debussy heard experiments in whole-tone scale composition during a visit to Russia). But Debussy's writings leave little doubt that the ideas and sounds of gamelan music were weighing on his mind, although there were certainly many other interesting ideas on his mind as well.

"Pagodas," from *Estampes*, is a direct representation of a gamelan performance. Apparently "Pagodas" represents a performance of a gamelan in the same way that, for instance, Debussy's "Fireworks" represents a fireworks exhibition. Careful listening will reveal gong sounds, *punctuating*, *balungan*, and *elaborating* instruments playing in layers (this is particularly clear in both the



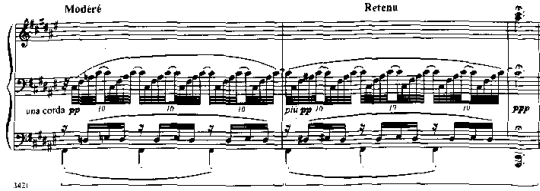
A Javanese hut from the Chicago Exposition of 1893 (many of the villagers and musicians who presented the *kampong* at the 1889 Paris Exposition were also present at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, so both the music and the architecture were very similar)

opening and the ending), and pentatonic melodies suggestive of the *pelog* tuning. (The term “pagodas” is generally used today to refer to a certain style of architecture found in China and other oriental countries, but not on the island of Java. However, recent research by Jean-Pierre Chazal has shown that the French term *pagodes* was used in the 1890s vaguely to describe any oriental-style architecture, and particularly to describe the Javanese architecture of the *kampong* at the 1889 Paris Exposition).⁶

“Bells Through the Leaves” uses many gamelan techniques, including bell-like sonorities and layered textures.

“And the Moon Descends Over the Ruins of the Temple” shares much of the timeless, oriental feeling found in gamelan music, without specifically using many of the techniques.

“Goldfish” may have been inspired by a Japanese (not Javanese!) print owned by Debussy (a detail from this print is shown on the cover of *Fantastic Rhapsodies*). Despite this initial oriental inspiration, Debussy—surprisingly—uses few specific gamelan techniques in “Goldfish.” Only in the final measures is there a hint of the typical gamelan texture:



The other works on *Fantastic Rhapsodies* show a similar variety in their relationships with gamelan music. Some show no particular gamelan influence, others have flashes of textures or sonorities that could show the strong influence of gamelan music—or could simply show the range and power of Debussy’s musical imagination, able to suggest a thousand images with a few notes.

—Brent Hugh

⁶ Email correspondence with Jean-Pierre Chazal, in my possession. Chazal finds the term used in a contemporary description of the 1889 Javanese *kampong* found in the magazine *L'Illustration*. For more information, see Chazal’s web page at <<http://www.chez.com/gamelan/expo1889.htm>>.

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