

Claude Debussy and the Javanese Gamelan

Debussy's Exposure to the Gamelan

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.

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

In another letter from the year 1910 he writes of “. . . Javanese rhapsodies, which instead of confining themselves in a traditional form, develop according to the fantasy of countless arabesques.” (*Claude Debussy*, [Paris: Bibliotheque Nationale, 1962], p. 30, quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22)

In a 1913 *Revue S.I.M.* article, Debussy writes:

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. Their school consists of the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind in the

leaves, and a thousand other tiny noises, which they listen to with great care, without ever having consulted any of those dubious treatises. Their traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century. Thus 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. (*Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977], quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22)

These quotations, few as they are, tell quite a lot about what 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.

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. 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-diatonic 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 suggest that one or two of these characteristics alone does not necessarily indicated the presence of gamelan influence. However, when most of these factors are strongly present in a particular piece or section of music, it is a good indication of gamelan influence (Tamagawa, p. 32-35). Tamagawa claims that these most of these factors were present, at least occasionally and in isolation, in Debussy's music prior to 1890, but soon after 1890 the factors increase dramatically (Tamagawa, p. 35).

Despite Tamagawa's encyclopedic discussion of nearly every possible instance of gamelan influence in Debussy's music, however, the dissertation is less than convincing on this point, perhaps because Tamagawa fails to contrast the non-gamelan influenced music with the gamelan-influenced music, and perhaps because the argument is spread over the course of a 152 document and never succinctly summarized.

The purpose of this paper is to compare a group of pre-gamelan pieces with a group of post-gamelan pieces, rating them according to Tamagawa's five criteria, and

determining conclusively whether Tamagawa's five factors increased after Debussy's exposure to gamelan music.

Four pieces were selected from 1890 or before, and four pieces from after 1890. Solo piano works were selected simply because the scores were easily available. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1 and discussed in more detail below.

Pre-Gamelan works

Danse bohémienne

Danse bohémienne, written when Debussy was 18 years old, displays no unusual characteristics. It is a straightforward piano work in ABA form with functional chord progressions and no unusual textures.

Arabesque #1

Arabesque #1 is again quite straightforward. The ABA form is unusual only in that it moves to the IV in the B section. Some modal harmony is evident, although functional harmony predominates. A layered 3 against 2 texture briefly appears as part of the main theme.

Arabesque #2

Arabesque #2 is again in ABA form, and again the B section moves to IV rather than the expected V. The characteristic rhythm, extended for 11 measures at the beginning of the piece, and cropping up regularly throughout the rest, forms an ostinato-like effect. A two layered texture is prominent at the beginning and a three-layered texture appears just before the return to A.

Rêverie

Rêverie begins with an ostinato in the left hand. The harmony is mostly functional and the form ABA. The B includes an instance of a pentatonic melody over a static pedal point lasting eight measures.

Conclusion

It is clear that a few of the gamelan factors appear from time to time in these early works. However, their use is definitely occasional and not systematic.

Post-gamelan Works

Pour le piano- "Prelude"

The "Prelude" from *Pour le piano* is the first striking instance of the use of gamelan effects in Debussy's piano music. The toccata-like figurations often suggest layered textures similar to gamelan music. For instance, starting in m. 6 is a 32-measure-long A pedal point. Above this is a melody moving in quarter notes and above this, a fast figuration moving in 16th notes. The middle section evokes gamelan sonorities, too, with 32 measures of trills (held in the pedal) overlaid with a slower melody, beginning in measure 59.

The form, too, is strikingly different than the simple ABA forms previously encountered. When analyzed by motive, it is A" B B A A' B' B A Coda. Overall, ABA form is suggested, because the BA motives return in exactly the same form each time, while the A'B' section (with the trills) has a developmental feel, and the six-measure long A" is introductory and in fact has the same figuration as the B motive which follows

Tonally, the movement is striking as well, and closely approaches the idea of symmetrical, rather than functional, key relationships:

Motive	A''	B	B	A	A'		B'	B	A	Coda
Key center	a	a	a	C	d-eb-e-f-f#		ab	a	C	a

The dual a minor/C major center forms the basis which is returned to at the end, and middle section fills in the distance from C up to A.

Unusual, too, in this tonal scheme, is the fact that the A motive remains in C major, never resolving into the a minor which concludes the work. This again suggests that the tonality really is a duality of a minor/C major.

***Pour le piano*–“Sarabande”**

The “Sarabande” from *Pour le piano* is a reminder that not all of Debussy’s music from the post-gamelan period used gamelan-inspired textures and techniques. The “Sarabande” is in what some have called Debussy’s “ancient style,” with many chords moving in parallel and a definite modal flavor. The texture is mostly chordal, with little layering. The form is a simple ABA, although the tonal scheme is unusual:

Section:	A	B	A
Key center:	g# → c#	c# → E → f#	g# → c#

“Pagodes”

“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.

"Pagodes" evokes the cycles of gamelan music, which often end with a ritardando leading into the solo gong beat which begins the following cycle. This arrangement is found in m. 4, 6, 8, and 10, for instance. "Pagodes," more than most of Debussy's works, suggests the rhythmic complexity and interplay among the various gamelan instruments, for instance in the 3 against 2 rhythms of mm. 21ff and in the more complex overlaid rhythms of mm. 37ff.

All in all, "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 and 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.

L'isle joyeuse

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 an 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.

Conclusion

Table 2 summarizes all of Debussy solo piano music through 1903. Although the analysis of these works is not as detailed as were the analyses in Table 1, it points to the same general conclusion as did the more detailed analyses: The five elements of gamelan influence were occasionally and weakly evident before 1890, but become much stronger and are evident in a much higher percentage of Debussy's works after 1890. This is strong evidence that Debussy was, in fact, powerfully influenced by his exposure to gamelan music.

It is clear as well that, except in a few isolated cases, Debussy was not trying to simply transfer gamelan music into a western form, nor was he using specific motives or melodies from gamelan music. Rather, Debussy selected few of the procedures, ideas, and sounds found in gamelan music that resonated with his own aesthetic sensibilities and which found a place in his repertoire of compositional devices and ideals.

Why a delay in the Gamalan influence? (Debussy heard Gamelan 1889, still composed music apparently not inspired by gamelan music in 1890) Possibly because some of the 1890 compositions were written, or at least gestated, before the exposure to gamelan music (Tamagawa suggests this). But also, even more probably, because Debussy's use of the gamelan technique was not simple imitation or wholesale borrowing, but rather a process of assimilation and of making the ideas and sounds prominent in gamelan music a part of his own way of making music and expressing himself. This process of assimilation is shown in the history of the *Fantasie* for piano and orchestra, the earliest music Debussy wrote under the influence of gamelan sound. The *Fantasie* is the only of Debussy's compositions to directly use gamelan motives. Despite the use of these motives and a few gamelan-inspired techniques as well, the gamelan influence on *Fantasie* is a thin veneer. Functional harmony and form predominate (ex.). Within a short time (date?), Debussy realized that this was not the way to use the gamelan techniques. He withdrew the *Fantasie*, reportedly for exactly that reason—he was displeased with the way gamelan techniques were addressed (cite). The withdrawal of *Fantasie* represents a shift in Debussy's thinking, and a signal that he was incorporating the gamelan ideals into the fabric of his compositional thought in a much deeper and more fundamental way. It is from the date of this withdrawal of *Fantasie*, and not from 1889, the date of mere exposure to gamelan music, that

One question remains: Could these factors have arisen from other influences than gamelan music? Undoubtedly, Debussy learned of many of these elements in other contexts. For instance, he heard pentatonic and whole tone scales during his visits to Russia. Static harmony, extended pedal points, and pentatonicism were aspects of Grieg's

music which Debussy knew well (Tamagawa, p. 42-43). But to these rather isolated and experimental examples of these techniques, Debussy's experience with gamelan music brought something unique: exposure to a well-developed and complete system of music-making, capable of powerfully expressing a wide variety of moods and emotions, which made continual use of these ideas as important structural elements. Seeing these elements--ostinato, static harmony, symmetrical forms, exotic scales, unusual timbres, and layered textures--used as important elements of a complete system is what sets gamelan influence apart and makes it arguably much more important to Debussy's development than other, isolated, examples of exposure to these elements. Finding these ideas embedded in a well-developed system of music ignited Debussy's imagination and inspired him to make them work in his own music.

Bibliography

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3 May 1997