

During entire program,
House LightsUP
enough that audience can read notes, but dim
enough so as to not ruin the slides

CD Tracks 7,8,9
(may use 6,7,8 on
OLD CD)
Slide A1
Javanese Court
Gamelan
(beginning 15
minutes before
start time)

Slide A2
Eiffel Tower

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, a young composer just beginning to make himself known and get his first compositions published. At the 1889 Exposition, groups from around the world displayed the best of their countries' art, music, culture, and way of life. (The recently completed Eiffel Tower was the centerpiece of the Exposition.)

Slide A3
Entire Kampong

Particularly interesting to the musicians who visited the Exposition was the exhibit from Java, an island in the Malay Archipelago. The Java exhibit was a model *kampong*, or village, which demonstrated all aspects of communal village life from agricultural practices to religion and entertainment.

Slide A4
Kampong scene

An important part of the religious and social life of the village is the gamelan. The gamelan is a collection of musical instruments, mostly metallic and with gong- or bell-like sounds. The gamelan plays the traditional music of Java, a music that has been passed down by oral tradition for well over a thousand years.

Slide A5
Sundanese
Regiment Gamelan

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.

Slide A6
Debussy portrait

Debussy was quite taken with gamelan music as well. His friend, Robert Godet, reports that

Many fruitful hours for Debussy were spent in the Javanese *kampong* . . . listening to the percussive rhythmic complexities of the gamelan with its inexhaustible combinations of ethereal, flashing timbres.¹

Slide A7
Pendopo

(Here we see the *pendopo* built to house the gamelan at an exposition in Amsterdam. It must be very similar, if not identical, to the *pendopo* at the Paris Exposition, in which Debussy spent so many hours.)

What exactly is gamelan music like? And why was it so interesting to Debussy and the other European musicians? What facets of gamelan music did Debussy appropriate and make a part of his own style?

The rest of this presentation will focus on answering these questions.

Gamelan Music

The Instruments

Slide B1
Children's
gamelan class

Concerning Gamelan music, Debussy wrote:

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. . . .²

Here Debussy hit upon one of the most important points about gamelan music: traditionally it is learned quite naturally and as a part of everyday life, in much the same

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.

² *Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), quoted in Kiyoshi Tamagawa, *Echoes From the East: The Javanese Gamelan and its Influence on the Music of Claude Debussy*, (D.M.A. document, The University of Texas at Austin, 1988), p. 22

way villagers learn to sow and harvest crops, prepare a meal, or build a traditional dwelling. Starting from the youngest age villagers begin to absorb the conventions and style of gamelan music, gradually and by osmosis as much as formal teaching, learning to play the various instruments.

Slide B2
Gamlan in
Pendopo

The gamelan and its music are an integral part of the ritual life of the 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.

Slide B14
Entire Gamelan

The gamelan is divided into punctuating instruments, *balungan* instruments, and elaborating instruments. The large instruments in the back of the gamelan are punctuating instruments. They play periodically to divide and subdivide the large phrases. The middle-sized instruments, in the middle of the gamelan, play the *balungan* at a medium speed. The *balungan* is the melodic nucleus from which all melodies in a particular section of a gamelan piece grow. The small instruments, including the singer, the flute, and the bowed rebab, 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.

Now we will take a closer look at the individual instruments of the gamelan, moving from the lowest, slowest instruments to the highest and fastest moving.

Slide B3
4. Gong Ageng

The largest and lowest instrument of the gamelan is the *gong ageng*—it is from this instrument that we get our English word “gong.”

Slide B4
5. Kenong

The *kenong* is a smaller pot gong.

Slide B5
6. Bonang

The *bonang* is a series of medium sized bronze kettle gongs. Two *bonang* often work together to play complicated interlocking patterns.

Slide B6
21. Saron

The *saron* is a metallophone.

Slide B7
20. Gender

The *gender* is a high metallophone.

Slide B8
Gambang

The *gambang* is a wooden xylophone.

Slide B9
8. Suling

The *suling* is a bamboo flute.

Slide B10
9. Rebab

The rebab is a bowed stringed instrument.

Slide B11
Celempung

The *celempung* is a zither.

Slide B12
Kendang

The *kendang* are drums. The *kendang* are particularly important in giving signals to the rest of the group.

Slide B13
Pesinden

Here we see a dancer and three singers, or *pesinden*, dressed in black. In gamelan music, all instruments and singers weave their parts together to form a complicated counterpoint in which no one instrument or singer is featured above the rest.

Slide B15
Map of Malay Archipelago

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 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. Later, most

residents of Java converted to the Moslem religion, so Moslem philosophy and musical ideas overlaid the others.

Slide B16
Dancers

“[Javanese] traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century,” wrote Debussy.³ Javanese music does often accompany dance or the shadow puppet plays

Slide B17
19. Gamelan
accomp. Wayang
kulit

known as Wayang kulit.

The Music

Slide C1
of circle
illustrating gongan

What does gamelan music sound like?

The most striking element of gamelan music is the cycle. Cycles are known as “gongan” because they are punctuated by strikes of the gong.

As an example, let us consider a cycle with eight beats. A cycle may be repeated any number of times, and so is best visualized as a circle. In this example, we will build a cycle starting with the lowest instruments and gradually adding the others in turn. For purposes of illustration, a tone will mark each beat.

³ *Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), quoted in

<p>CD Track 1 Example of Cycle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (2x) The large gong plays every eight beats, marking the beginning of the cycle. • (4x) A smaller gong divides the cycle in half, playing every four beats. • (4x) Yet smaller gongs divide the cycle into fourths. • (8x) An even higher gong will divide the cycle into eighths. • What we hear now are the punctuating instruments. • After a cycle is repeated several times, the drummer gives a signal, and at the large gong beat a new cycle begins.
<p>Slide C2 Transition between two gongan</p>	
<p>House Lights UP</p>	

We will now listen to a gamelan piece entitled *Topeng Cirebon*. As we listen, please follow along in your handout, which outlines the form of the piece and mentions several important events to listen for.

Handout
outline of form of Topeng Cirebon

We will listen to an excerpt from Topeng Cirebon twice. The first time I will count each beat of each cycle. You might want to follow the number line in the middle of your page and see if you can hear the larger gongs on the most important beats.

<p>CD Track 3 Topeng Cirebon (First 2:05)</p>	<p>Example: play Topeng Cirebon</p>
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This time I will call out the first beat of each cycle (A, B1, B2, etc). You might want to follow the outline on your handout and see if you can notice the different characteristics (under “Notes”)

<p>CD Track 3 Topeng Cirebon (first 2:05)</p>	<p>Example: play Topeng Cirebon</p>
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Topeng Cirebon is a traditional gamelan piece and would be very similar to the gamelan music Debussy actually heard at the 1889 exposition.

Aspects of Gamelan Music that Influenced Debussy

Turn Off
Slide Projector

House Lights
DOWN

Now we will examine some of the particular aspects of gamelan music that Debussy admired, and see how he appropriated them and adapted them to his own purposes.

Form

In the year 1910, over twenty years after he first heard the gamelan at the Paris Exposition, Debussy wrote of “Javanese rhapsodies, which instead of confining themselves in a traditional form, develop according to the fantasy of countless arabesques.”⁴

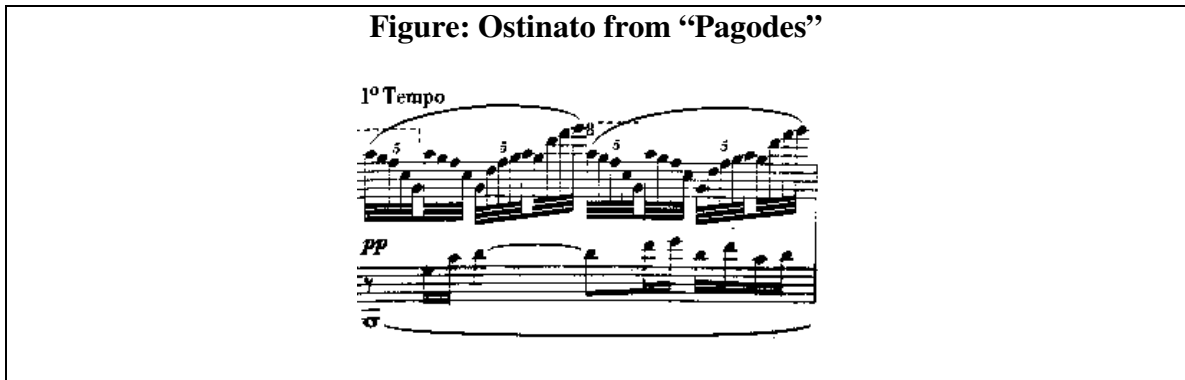
Western tonal music—the “traditional forms” Debussy refers to—is goal oriented; musical forms are carefully designed to “develop” ideas and to move towards climaxes. By contrast, the cycles in gamelan music represent not movement forward in time—progress—but rather the oriental view of endless cycles 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 the Western sense of the word, is a perfect analogue of this static view of history.

This static, timeless element became a part of Debussy's music as well. One device that Debussy commonly uses to give this static quality to his music is ostinato.

⁴ *Claude Debussy*, (Paris: Bibliotheque Nationale, 1962), p. 30, quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22

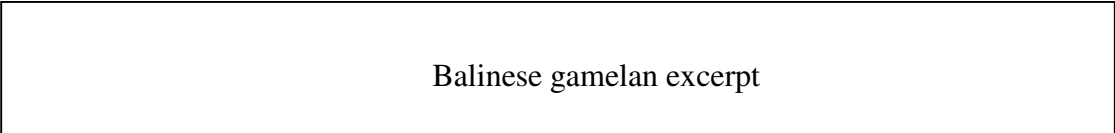
Ostinato

An ostinato is a figure which is usually rather short and repeats many times. An example of Debussy’s use of ostinato is from “Pagodas.” The ostinato is the fast-moving notes in the highest part:



The idea of an ostinato is very close to that of a gamelan cycle. The ostinato we just heard was apparently designed to reproduce a particular typical gamelan sound. It may have been inspired by something like this:

CD Track 4
Balinese gamelan
excerpt



**Turn Off Slide
Projector**

Counterpoint

Referring to the complicated layered texture of Javanese gamelan music, Debussy wrote, “Thus Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint which make Palestrina seem like child’s play.”⁵

Debussy’s counterpoint has been described as having three characteristics that differentiate it from the traditional European style of counterpoint: it is layered,

⁵ *Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22

fragmentary, and ornamental.⁶ Not coincidentally, these three characteristics apply equally well to gamelan music.

- **Layered and Fragmentary Counterpoint** Like gamelan music, Debussy's counterpoint is concerned not simply with melodies overlaying each other, but with entire separate and independent planes of sound which are stacked on top of each other. These planes of sound often suggest the tone quality of different instruments being layered on top of each other. Often the layers are made up of brief motivic fragments which are repeated without any particular sort of development. For instance, in "Bells Through the Leaves," Debussy writes in four distinct layers:

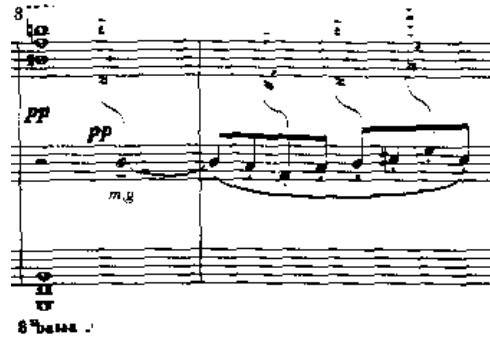
⁶ Raymond Roy Park, *The Later Style of Claude Debussy* (Ph.D. diss., University Microfilms reprint, The University of Michigan, 1967), p. 72.

Figure: “Cloches”

The musical score for "Cloches" is presented in four staves. The top staff is marked with a tempo of *P* (Piano) and a dynamic of *pp* (pianissimo). It features a complex, fast-moving melodic line with many slurs and ties. The second staff is marked with a dynamic of *pp* and contains a triplet of eighth notes. The third and fourth staves are also marked with a dynamic of *pp* and contain simpler, slower-moving melodic lines. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line.

- The bass moves at the slowest speed
 - The tenor moves faster
 - Moves yet faster
 - The soprano has the main melody
 - All four melodies are fragmentary—made up of little snippets that repeat without developing
 - [play all together]
 - Another similarity: Like the *balungan* in gamelan music, all four voices are based on the same descending scale pattern.
- **Ornamental Counterpoint** Debussy’s melodies often have various kinds of ornaments and embellishments. This melody from “The Moon Descends Over the Ruins of the Temple” has ornamentation in octaves suggestive of the way gamelan instruments an octave apart will work together to play or embellish a melody.

Figure: "Lune"



- The melody begins with a gong stroke.
- Octave ornamentation, like *bonang* interlocking in octaves

Sound

Debussy said about gamelan music, "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."⁷ Debussy was fascinated with the sound of bells and gongs, so it is no surprise that the sound of the gamelan attracted him.

The bell-like sounds of the gamelan can be imitated most readily on the piano of any European instrument. For instance, if notes are played soft and staccato but held in the pedal, the ringing sound is reminiscent to the gamelan.

⁷ *Debussy on Music*, trans. Richard Langham Smith, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), quoted in Tamagawa, p. 22

Figure: “Cloches”



- Soft, staccato, pedalled

This pedaled staccato effect is very common in Debussy's piano music

Tonalities

In 1895 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?”⁸

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.

⁸ *Correspondence de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs (1893-1904)*, ed. Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie Jose Corti, 1945), p. 41, quoted in Tamagawa, p. 21

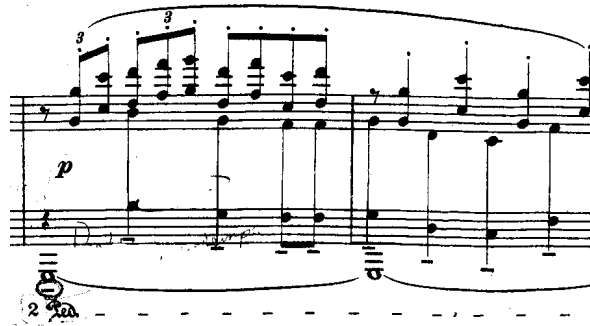
CD Track 5
Slendro Scale
(plays twice)

- Here is what the 5-note *slendro* sounds like on a real gamelan (tunings vary).
- Here is what the 7-note *pelog* sounds like on a real gamelan (tunings vary).

Since neither of these gamelan tunings can be exactly duplicated on the piano, what did Debussy do when, for instance, he wanted to evoke the five-note *slendro* in his music?

First, he used pentatonic scales to suggest *slendro*. But to better suggest the “out of tune” notes of *slendro*, he uses several *different* pentatonic scales within one piece. In “Pagodas,” for instance, we hear this pentatonic scale:

Figure: “Pagodes”



- Uses B C# D# F# G# pentatonic scale

And later this one:

Figure: “Pagodes”



- This theme uses a different pentatonic scale.
- [Play G#-B-C#-D#-F]
- In all, Debussy uses five or six different versions of the pentatonic scale in “Pagodas.”
- To further evoke the feeling of slendro, Debussy often adds in one non-pentatonic note to the pentatonic scale. This makes the scale sound a little off-kilter or out of tune—more like slendro. (The F# here in the LH.)

House Lights
UP

Different Uses Debussy Made of Gamelan Materials

Handout
Summary of
gamelan influences
on each piece

The pieces in this lecture-recital were selected to show the range of approaches Debussy took to gamelan-inspired material (see handout).

“Clair de lune” from *Suite Bergamasque* was written before Debussy was exposed to gamelan music. Nevertheless, it has a few of the gamelan characteristics we have discussed tonight, 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 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.

“Pagodas,” from *Estampes*, is a direct representation of a gamelan performance. It uses every gamelan technique we’ve discussed tonight.

“Bells Through the Leaves” uses many gamelan techniques, although it does not specifically represent gamelan music as “Pagodas” does.

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

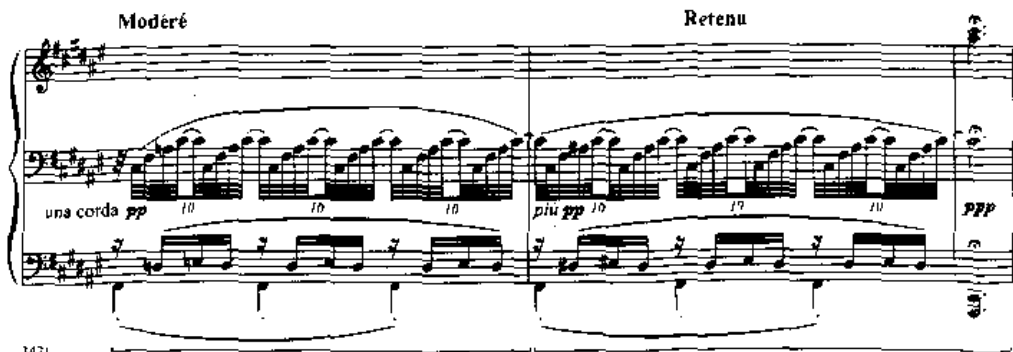
“Goldfish” may have been inspired by a Japanese (not Javanese!) print owned by Debussy. Despite the initial inspiration from an oriental artwork, Debussy—

surprisingly—uses few specific gamelan techniques in “Goldfish.”

Only in the final measures is there a hint of the typical gamelan texture.

Slide
Goldfish Print

Figure: “Poissons d’or”



- Gamelan texture: slow gongs, moderate speed middle melody, fast upper melody

5 Minute Intermission

During intermission:

- Move podium
- Take down slide screen
- (possibly center piano on stage)
- (Possibly re-adjust lights)
- Turn off slide projector

**After
Intermission,
House Lights
UP enough that
audience can read
notes.**

Bibliography

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Claude Debussy
and the
Javanese Gamelan

by
Brent Hugh