

Percussion, Passion, and Painting for the Piano: An Exploratory Essay Examining Claude Debussy's use of External Influences.

The allure of the East, a passion for Spanish colour, and a curiosity for Asian culture: three distant worlds that all convened in the mind of one man. Metallophones, castanets, brushworks and more all hovered over staves of music, elements that wished to be transcribed onto a piano score. By using distinguishable components derived from either instruments or artwork, Claude Debussy channelled the exotic and fashioned new sounds and ideas ripe for the era. However, how do these exotic elements manifest in Debussy's solo piano compositions? How did he happen upon these new sources of inspiration? Debussy evokes the exoticism of the East and of Spain in his solo works through the percussive timbres and pentatonic scales of the Indonesian *gamelan*, simulation of Spanish colour by means of guitar and dance rhythms, and delicacy and clarity, which are indicative of his interest in Asian culture.

Debussy was able to create an accurate imitation of these cultures through exposure thereto, whether at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition or through close friendships with Spanish composers and performers, which provided him with an intimate knowledge of compositional techniques and inspiration. Additionally, he was able to create Asian inspired compositions by simply cultivating his own interest in said culture through art collection and applying his artistic understanding to music. Debussy handled outside influences carefully. Though this is also demonstrative of his awareness that grew out of the Romantic era's fascination with the East, it is further suggestive that his integration of exotic influences goes deeper than a compositional technique; it is a sincere admiration for other cultures. In accordance

with his wholehearted appreciation for cultures other than his own, he once remarked that, “even Palestrina’s counterpoint is child’s play when compared with that found in Javanese music”¹.

Through his introduction to and exploration of timbre and sonority at the Indonesian *gamelan*, Debussy was able to escape from the constraints of his traditional education at the Paris Conservatory and consequently able to compose with new sounds.² In his conservatory days, Debussy was heavily influenced by the music of Saint-Saëns, Delibes, and Lalo. He was attracted to their use of exotic influences in their ballets and operas.³ Though the compositions of his peers at the Paris Conservatory would have impacted and contributed to Debussy’s compositions, the acquiring of an authentic exotic instrument was key to his inspired works. The Paris Conservatory had received a small *gamelan* two years before the 1889 Universal Exposition, and some scholars believe that this was Debussy’s first encounter with the instrument.⁴ This would have had innumerable merits for Debussy and his obsession with incorporating exotic sounds into his music. The Conservatory having access to such an instrument was quite beneficial because of its hands-on advantages. Students would have been able to try out different scales and work out the many sonorities that could be achieved on these instruments. One would also have not been able to hear a *gamelan* unless one made a trip to Bali or Java.⁵ However, one would have also been able to hear the *gamelan* performed at the 1889

¹ E. Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), 83.

² Kathleen Martha Randles, “Exoticism in the mélodie: The evolution of exotic techniques as used in songs by David, Bizet, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Roussel, Delage, Milhaud, and Messiaen”, (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1992), 49.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland OR: Amadeus Press, 1996), 155.

⁵ Ibid., 154.

Universal Exposition, which some scholars believe is the true origin of Debussy's fascination with the *gamelan*.

As previously mentioned, some scholars believe that at age twenty-seven Debussy heard the percussive timbres of the Javanese *gamelan* at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition.⁶ A friend of his remarked, "Many fruitful hours for Debussy were spent (...) listening to the percussive rhythmic complexities of the *gamelan* with its inexhaustible combinations of ethereal, flashing timbres".⁷ And though some of his pieces before 1889 possess traits similar to those exemplified in the *gamelan*, such as pentatonicism and extreme resonance, the *gamelan*'s use of these musical features would have prepared Debussy's ear to understand and hear these unique sounds. He could then use this newfound knowledge and unique sounds in his upcoming works. Accounts also tell of Debussy being "thunderstruck" by what he heard and spending multiple hours on many visits simply "listening and absorbing the music".⁸ However, it was not only the properties and sounds of the *gamelan* that delighted Debussy; many drawings depicted Javanese dancers (see: figure 1) as a source of fascination and inspiration to those who witnessed their "alluring" movement.⁹ The exotic movement paired with new sounds created a unfamiliar musical landscape that later appeared in Debussy's solo piano work through key features pulled from his observational experience.

⁶ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 153.

⁷ Jeremy Day-O'Connell, "Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition", *Music Theory Spectrum* 31, no. 2 (2009): 226, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mts.2009.31.2.225>.

⁸ Randles, "Exoticism in the *mélodie*: The evolution of exotic techniques as used in songs by David, Bizet, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Roussel, Delage, Milhaud, and Messiaen", 52.

⁹ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 154.



Figure 1 Javanese dancers at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889.
Drawing by Emile Bayard in *L'exposition de Paris, 1889*. Source: *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, Paul Roberts. 154.

Through his multiple visits to the Universal Exposition, Debussy undoubtedly picked up on the properties and sounds of the *gamelan*. For instance, the *gamelan* possessed a richer, fuller sounding collection of instruments and had the unique ability to create complex rhythms. The instruments together were also able to simultaneously sound quite fast rhythms along with slower motives, like duplets against triplets in varying tempos, a musical technique that was not common in European music at the time.¹⁰ On top of this, the scales used to create resonance within the *gamelan* were different. The *slendro* and *pelog* scales were characteristic of the *gamelan*, however, it is believed that Debussy heard the *slendro* variety.¹¹ The *slendro* scale is a series of five scale degrees that are separated by more than a whole step and not all the intervals are equal.¹² One could say this is similar to pentatonicism. This scale would have presented Debussy alternative scale patterns and released him from the confining major, minor or more traditional modes. He also heard chords unique to the sonority of the *gamelan*. These were

¹⁰ Randles, “Exoticism in the mélodie: The evolution of exotic techniques as used in songs by David, Bizet, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Roussel, Delage, Milhaud, and Messiaen”, 53.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

sevenths, ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths that did not resolve by Western rules.¹³

Fundamentally, these musical aspects offered Debussy freedom from traditional constraints and provided new sounds for him to work with.

However, it was not only the technical aspects of the *gamelan* that beguiled Debussy. He was also interested in the sounds that could be achieved from such instruments. The *gamelan* was mainly made up of metallophones, any instrument with tuned metal bars, like gongs and vibraphones. As mentioned above, the *gamelan* was able to play multiple rhythms in different tempos. This offered the interesting effect of overtones and precise voicing.¹⁴ Two gongs that offered such effects were the *pencon* and *pangkon*. The *pencon* and *pangkon* were cradled gongs arranged in rows and they have been described as, “mellifluous” or harmonious and dulcet, and “otherworldly”.¹⁵ Understanding these sonorities is fundamental to hearing and observing them in Debussy’s piano transcriptions of these sounds. He was careful to balance dynamics, through touch, with the percussive timbres of the piano, which was controlled through precise pedaling.¹⁶ The combination of these sonorities and Debussy’s transformation of these sounds into pianistic

¹³ Randles, “Exoticism in the *mélodie*: The evolution of exotic techniques as used in songs by David, Bizet, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Roussel, Delage, Milhaud, and Messiaen”, 53.

¹⁴ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

elements is indicative of his interest in preserving as much as he possibly could from the *gamelan* while also making a unique, pianistic work.

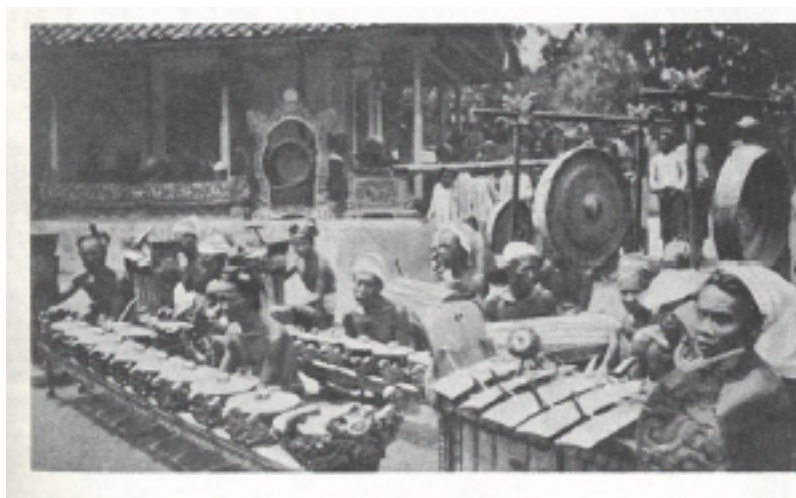


Figure 2 Gamelang orchestra (Bali). Source: *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*, E. Robert Schmitz. 46.

Pagodes, composed in 1903, is often described as imitating the *gamelan* at the deepest level. Some scholars also believe that it is a deliberate transcription of the *gamelan*.¹⁷ The style throughout the piece is quite percussive, simulating the attack of mallets on metallophones, however, it also possesses the delicacy and brilliance of the *gamelan*. This percussiveness sometimes is referred to as “chant-like” in sound.¹⁸ In this sense, the piece is meant to create the many contrasting sounds of a full orchestra, like the multi-piece *gamelan*. One can observe this sound quality throughout the piece, however, it is heard most clearly in bars eleven and twelve (see: figure 3). Here, there is a sustained bass note, whilst a melody and accompaniment occur over top.¹⁹ This offers the floating and ringing vividness of the higher pitched gongs paired with the low resonance of the larger gong, the *gong ageng*. In its overtones, the *gong ageng* contains

¹⁷ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 156.

¹⁸ Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*, 83.

¹⁹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 113.

all the notes that can be played on instruments.²⁰ On top of this, the use of three distinct lines further uses the piano's capacity to create the utmost resonance.²¹



Figure 3 Debussy. *Pagodes* mm. 11-12.

Many of Debussy's articulations also alluded to certain gongs within the *gamelan*. For example, rhythmic sections, in bars three and four, imitate the *gong* and *kempul* (see: figure 4).²² These gongs were present in the *gamelan*'s orchestration and have a direct correlation to *Pagodes*. The *gong* and *kempul* are realized through the middle, off-beat chordal material in the below figure. Though impossible to entirely recreate the sonorities of the *gamelan*, Debussy's use of the piano as a fundamentally percussive instrument, in this instant, works in his favour.



Figure 4 Debussy. *Pagodes* mm. 3.

²⁰ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 158.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²² Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 112.

Another piece that encompasses these traits is *Cloches à travers les feuilles*. Literally translated as “Bells Through Leaves”, scholars have speculated that the title refers to Debussy’s supposed knowledge that Javanese *gamelans* are heard outside and that the title makes reference to the sonorities heard through foliage.²³ The first four bars of music are presented on three staves and this feature creates the ringing brilliance of the *gamelan* (see: figure 5). The three staves also create a layered texture, which identically imitates the *gamelan*. One can also observe a whole-tone scale starting off the piece, and although not a tuning feature of the *gamelan*, it is still imitative of the scalar properties of the instruments and is the closest one can get to the sonorities of the *gamelan* on the modern piano.²⁴ Secondly, at the crux of *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, Debussy calls for pianissimo and fortissimo simultaneously, the result being this immense reverberation of energy and sound emulating the full and varied sound of the *gamelan*.²⁵ Debussy’s keen ear for the traits of the Javanese *gamelan* is evident throughout these works and in conjuncture with the sonorities made possible by the piano, a picture of Java is clearly made in the mind.

Figure 5 Debussy. *Cloches à Travers Les Feuilles*. mm. 1-4.

²³ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 168.

²⁴ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 114.

²⁵ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 167.

Through close friendships and a personal interest in Spanish culture, Debussy was able to accurately compose pieces with an authentic Spanish colour. Furthermore, much of Debussy's Spanish influence was received through second-hand sources. He had never visited the Spanish locations alluded to in his compositions; however, many composers like Manuel de Falla claimed that he took Spanish content to deeper creative and structural levels.²⁶ His long-lasting friendship with Manuel de Falla also led him to attend many concerts by Spanish performers. In 1889, Debussy was present, along with Ravel, Fauré, Dukas and Ricardo Viñes, at Isaac Albeniz's Parisian debut concert, which featured all original works.²⁷ In the same year, at the Paris Universal Exposition, Debussy was also witness to Andalusian music and de Falla ascribed his comfort and ease in writing Spanish idioms to this fact.²⁸ Debussy had also hoped to visit Grenada in the late 1890's and some scholars attribute his wish to visit Grenada with Santiago Russeñol's paintings. During the 1890's, Russeñol's paintings depicted scenes of Grenada.²⁹ Debussy was also particularly interested in the Alhambra. The Alhambra was a palace and fortress located in Grenada and this large complex was often visual inspiration for his solo works.

Furthermore, Debussy often used visual representations as basis for his compositions, such as *The Wine Gate* postcard. Though multiple sources list both Manuel de Falla and Ricardo Viñes as possible senders, the photograph is the source of inspiration, not the person.³⁰ This

²⁶ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 138.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pentagon Press, 1997), 44.

postcard depicted a palace gate at the Alhambra under the gleaming Spanish sun. This is famously known as the inspiration for his solo piano work *La Puerta del Vino*. As well as photographic inspiration, Debussy was drawn in by other performers and their interpretation of Spanish idioms. Pauline Viardot-Garcia's role in *Carmen* in 1875 was largely responsible for the Parisian adoration of the *habañera* and Debussy was not immune to this fondness.³¹ *Habañera* rhythms and stylistic elements can be observed throughout his many Spanish inspired works. Ultimately, the intersection of location, visual representation and influential friendships aided Debussy as he tackled incorporating Spanish idioms into his solo works.



Figure 6 The Wine Gate. Alhambra, Grenada. Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife. Consejería de Cultura.

To create this Spanish colour, Debussy utilized different musical techniques to emulate Spanish sounds, like castanets and guitar strumming. He simulated the strums of a guitar by arpeggiating through chords built upon intervals of fifths and seconds.³² To further create guitar-

³¹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 137.

³² Virginia Raad, "Debussy and the magic of Spain," *Clavier* 18, no. 3 (1979): 13, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rih&AN=A410046&site=ehost-live>

like sounds, he would often embellish single notes with appoggiaturas, lending an ear to the sliding guitarists often employ when moving between pitches. Next, the repetitive notes and pedal tones present in *La Soirée dans Grenade* are similar to the pedal tones used when guitarists emphasize and sustain certain pitches while articulating over top. Furthermore, he uses ornaments known as *acciaccaturas* as a way to notate the sound of castanets or other light and quick percussive instruments.³³ *Acciaccaturas* are notes that are either a semi-tone above or below a given note that are played crushed and quickly. They are usually unprepared and dissonant.³⁴ Nevertheless, the realization of this *couleur locale* lies in the performer. The notation of these elements only goes so far and though Debussy used these musical motives to evoke certain aspects of Spanish culture, it ultimately rests in the performer to take these traits and create an authentic Spanish sensation.

Secondly, Debussy uses *habañera* and tango rhythms to both enforce a firm, steady and rhythmic baseline whilst also infusing certain passages with more *couleur locale*. The *Habañera*, named after Cuba's capital, Havana, is the Latin American and Cuban version of the tango.³⁵ This motive is represented throughout many of Debussy's Spanish influenced pieces and can be recognized through a dotted eighth, sixteenth and two eighth notes motive (see: figure 7).



Figure 7 Dotted eighth, sixteenth and two eighths figure.

³³ Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen*, 47.

³⁴ Robert E. Seletsky, "Acciaccatura," in *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.00101>.

³⁵ Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen*, 45.

The syncopated feel of this dotted rhythm further adds to the *couleur locale* of the castanets and guitar simulation. The melodies within his Spanish influenced works are also described as “languid” with roots in *flamenco* dancing.³⁶ Though these dances may only relate by cultural similarities, Debussy’s use of their rhythmic ideas and characters together functions to create a work overflowing with passion.

One can observe these traits in *La Puerta del Vino* and *La Soirée dans Grenade*. As de Falla deemed, *La Soirée dans Grenade* was the piece most expressive of Spain.³⁷ He then went on to say that it, “contains in a marvellously distilled way the most concentrated atmosphere of Andalusia”.³⁸ One can also observe that *La Soirée dans Grenade* has the tempo marking of *movement de Habañera*. This points to the dotted, eighth note rhythm that is so prevalent in the *habañera*. *La Soirée dans Grenade*, unlike *La Puerta del Vino*, has a far more consistent use of the *habañera* rhythm. One can perceive it keeping the beat throughout the majority of the piece, save the final section at *Léger et lointain*. As well as giving the indication of *movement de Habañera*, Debussy also includes, “commencer lentement dans un rythme nonchalamment gracieux”. Essentially, this means to start off slower than what the typical *habañera* tempo would be and gradually return to the faster, *habañera* rhythm at bar seventeen, where *tempo giusto* is indicated.³⁹ Much of the same thought is applied to the several other tempo markings throughout the piece. This piece also leans more into the *habañera* rhythm than others. At measure thirty-eight, or where it is indicated to play *très rythmé*, Debussy places tenutos and stresses on the first beat and accents on the fourth eighth note, giving weight to the syncopated

³⁶ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 62.

³⁷ Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*, 85.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

feel of the *habañera* rhythm.⁴⁰ Bars five through fourteen offer more of a melodic interpretation of the Grenada Debussy envisioned. This entire section has been interpreted as a reference to the nocturnal life of Grenada. The C-sharps alluding to the bells of donkeys wandering through the streets and the left hand melody, with the anticipations leading to beat two, are said to represent the languid, song melodies of the Muslim communities in Grenada.⁴¹ This melodic reference to the Muslim communities of Andalusia returns throughout the piece. By de Falla's account, Debussy's use of these elements together ensures a complete picture of Andalusian life and fundamentally embodies an authentic *couleur locale*.

Similarly, in *La Puerta del Vino*, the tempo indication is *movement de Habañera*. This indication sets the stage for the upcoming tango rhythm and is a distinct characteristic of the piece.⁴² Furthermore, as mentioned above, the distinct dotted note *habañera* rhythm is heard throughout the piece. Specifically, it can be seen in the opening bars, starting in bar three and continuing until bar forty-one (see: figure 7).



Figure 8 Debussy. *La Puerta del Vino*. mm. 1-6.

This rhythm is interspersed throughout, however, it returns quite strongly at the end, from around bar sixty-six to the end. To further augment this extremely metrical figure, Debussy uses

⁴⁰ Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*, 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴² Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen*, 45.

acciaccaturas to emulate castanets in bars one through four. He also simulates guitar sounds in bars thirteen through sixteen, twenty-one and twenty-five through thirty with flourishes and arpeggiated chords. The sustained notes before these flourishes and arpeggiated chords could also be interpreted as pedal tones commonly used by guitarists as a method of maintaining a pitch centre as multiple notes ensue overtop.⁴³ Debussy's masterful transformation of Spanish sounds into pianistic, musical elements is not only indicative of a talented composer, but of someone who truly understood the *couleur locale*.

Through a combination of the previously fashionable Romantic fascination with the East and Debussy's interest in Asian art, brush strokes and connections to visual art, such as clarity and sharpness, can be observed. Debussy's attraction to the East could be linked to *Le Japonisme*, a popular subject in the 1850's that grew out of a fascination with exotic locales, which Paul Roberts defines as, "anywhere south or east of Europe".⁴⁴ There were clubs devoted entirely to Japanese culture, for example the *Jinglar* that served all Japanese food with chopsticks. Artists were also starting to collect prints that were becoming available as a consequence of trade relations.⁴⁵ Despite peoples' growing knowledge of other cultures, many instances of nineteenth century *Japonisme* seem steeped with racism and misunderstanding, however, Debussy's interest appears authentic and without prejudice. It is quite possible that Debussy took in this artwork at clubs, world fairs and shops around Paris. There are accounts of Debussy being first introduced to Japanese art during the 1880's by the sculptress, Camille

⁴³ Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen*, 45-47.

⁴⁴ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 47.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

Claudel, who famously sculpted *The Wave* in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁶ Robert Godet retells how Claudel and Debussy would both enthuse over *Manga* and marvel at the, “miracles of composition and paradoxes of perspective”.⁴⁷ He was clearly inspired, and enthralled, by the picturesque qualities of Japanese art.

In partnership with his awe of Asian art, Debussy himself often made sketches prior to composing as a method of working out continuity and closure within his works.⁴⁸ These sketches, some of which were discovered on the back of train stubs, often affected Debussy’s decisions and his final outcomes. The interaction between Debussy’s fascination with visual art and sketches can also be understood through “painting in sound”.⁴⁹ Although he actively rejected the mainstream term for this: impressionism. However, this key concept can be directly applied to the external influences present in his life. Debussy, for example, possessed many Japanese engravings, photographs and artifacts and they were scattered about his studio.⁵⁰ Among these artifacts one could find rare Japanese instruments, jade animals and a lacquered Japanese cigarette case depicting carp.⁵¹ These factors all contribute to how Debussy viewed Asia and utilised outside influences as methods of composition rooted in sincere admiration and appreciation.

⁴⁶ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 53.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jann Pasler, “Debussy, The Man, His Music, and His Legacy: An Overview of Current Research,” *Notes* 69, no. 2 (2012): 204, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23358736>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 121.

Such appreciation can be observed through “painting in sound”. Though difficult to explain in concise musical terms, it can be described through artistic and musical ideas used in conjunction. For instance, Monet characterized Japanese art as a fragment of a large picture and Van Gogh described the prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige as “simple as breathing” and, “[the paintings possess an] extreme clearness which everything has in their work”.⁵² Debussy himself also used to peruse the artwork albums of Hokusai as they became available to him.⁵³ Debussy, as a contemporary musician of these artists and an admirer of Asian art, used these qualities when developing his musical representations. However, like his Spanish influenced pieces, the interpretation of these aspects lies in the performer. The clarity and sharpness of prints must be realized by the performer. Though easily picked out through analysis, one must possess the capacity for strong characterization in order to create an authentic representation of the Japanese artwork Debussy was referencing. The way in which Asian art is framed and presented is also key to understanding the sometimes hidden aspects of Debussy’s music. The artwork was sometimes distorted, a miniature or framed in a way that it seems like the artist has intentionally left something just off the canvas or out of view.⁵⁴ Debussy employs this in many instances; for example, at first the listener may not initially recognize these nods to Asian cultures, but they emerge as one is given glimpses of a full picture or samples of simulated Japanese instruments.⁵⁵

Another way that Debussy incorporated visual art through music is through what he called the “divine arabesque”. He described it as the art of the decorative and the ornamental line

⁵² Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 59.

⁵³ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 121.

⁵⁴ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

which “is at the root of all kinds of art”.⁵⁶ He also found this to be true in the work of Palestrina and Bach, who he was also inspired by. He said of Bach’s work, “it is not the character of the melody which affects us, but rather the curve”.⁵⁷ In this sense, one can understand the flowing lines in his Eastern influenced pieces in a much clearer way. The decorative arc of these arabesques relates both to the brushstrokes key to a creative process as well as evoking a musical image. It is also something that is easily imprinted onto the mind of the listener through pianistic motives. As Debussy observed, “music will stamp itself with precision on the public imagination, filling the mind with pictures”.⁵⁸ Debussy evidently had great concern for visual representation and his talent for impressing these images onto the listener’s mind cannot be ignored.

As previously mentioned, Debussy often worked from sketches and usually these drawings can be directly related to miniatures of ensuing pieces. The opening bars often reveal this visual thinking.⁵⁹ The flourishes and rises and falls in his piano works are representative of this fact. Having said that, Debussy also attempted to mimic brush strokes in his musical practice. One that scholars have deemed quite visible is the imitation of pen-and-brush Chinese ink drawing. Here, the pen first etches a line and then it is passed over in water with a damp brush.⁶⁰ This visualization can be notably heard through a number of Debussy’s Eastern influenced pieces. In *Canope*, one can hear an allusion to this water-like sound in the opening,

⁵⁶ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

which is also paired with fifths, creating the sound of a plucked instrument from Japan or China.⁶¹ It has also been theorized that this may be the sound of Chinese cymbals. In bars twenty-four through twenty-five, one can observe rapid notation, perhaps the plucked instrument, followed by a pianissimo trichord (see: figure 8).⁶² Chinese cymbals are small brass discs, held by silk strings, that ring quite softly when pressed lightly together. This is easily recognized in the pianissimo trichord present in the aforementioned bars.



Figure 9 Debussy. *Canope*. mm. 24-25.

Next, in *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*, one can see a more direct relation to Asian cultures as it is dedicated to his close friend Louis Laloy, who was an expert in the East. The title translates to, “And the Moon Sets Over the Temple That Was”. The image of the temple is the strongest connection to Eastern culture one can draw from this piece, however, there are some stylistic elements that can be gleaned from a listen and close look. Alfred Corrot also takes it a step further describing it as, “a place on which Time has set his hand, as the misty night falls on the dreamy silence of its ruins”.⁶³ On top of this, Pierre Boulez deemed *Et la lune* as, “the transmutation of oriental influences at the deepest level, a piece in which [oriental] concepts of

⁶¹ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 164.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 170.

time and sonority are clearly determined”.⁶⁴ However, these long-winded descriptions are not the only aspect of *Et la lune* that are suggestive of an Eastern influence. One of the defining characteristics of *Et la lune* is its melodic structuring; it is made of almost entirely single melodic lines and the harmonic material provides texture and sonority.⁶⁵ There is little developing harmony throughout and just small sections of polyphony are present. In bars twenty-five and six, clarity in texture can be heard. There is a simple upper line, paired with counterpoint and harmonized with B and F-sharp tetrachords.⁶⁶ To relate this back to Asian art, one could say that it correlates with the clarity and sharpness often portrayed in Japanese wood engravings or in the clearness and simplicity of Japanese prints. It is simple beauty in sound.

In conclusion, Debussy is able to arouse imagery of the exotic through impressions created by pianistic motives.⁶⁷ He evokes the distant lands of the East through percussive timbres and pentatonic scales, captures Spanish colour through guitar and dance rhythms by using *acciaccaturas* and arpeggios, and conjures Asian sonorities through clarity and delicacy of line. His talent for navigating and incorporating these external influences is also suggestive of a genuine interest and appreciation for distinct cultures aside of his own. Though sometimes these allusions are not initially clear, upon deeper examination one can identify many nods to these cultures that go further than the descriptive titles. As Debussy remarked, “I’m trying to do ‘something else’ - in a way realities- what imbeciles call ‘impressionism’, a term as misused as it could possibly be”.⁶⁸ Here, he is rejecting the term impressionism as a way to describe his music

⁶⁴ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 165.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁷ Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*, 111.

⁶⁸ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 113.

and instead calling it realism or the idea that his music is an authentic representation of life.

Though Debussy never visited any of the locales he made reference to in his pieces, his aptitude for reproducing the sounds and sensations of these places is truly emblematic of a seasoned composer looking to external influences to augment and inspire their creations.

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