

## Shades of Indonesia in the Works of Claude Debussy

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the present paper is to analyse the influence Indonesian music (mainly from Java and Bali) had on the compositional technique of French composer Claude Debussy. First encountered by the composer at the Exposition Universelle of 1889, the originality of the gamelan, its instruments, timbres, and complex structure fascinated Debussy, who would often recall this music and refer to it later in his life. The analysis of certain musical works composed after this musical encounter and the comparison with previous compositions revealed that the gamelan inspired Debussy to explore new techniques of music composition and introduce novel sounds and structures in his works. The present study mentions several features that are particular for gamelan music and analyses the manner in which Debussy employs these in his compositions. Throughout this study the authors also seek to find an answer to the question whether Debussy employed these gamelan influences because he aimed for innovation in sound and composition, or because he desired to create a deeper connection between gamelan evocations and the images or concepts depicted in his music, revealing their hidden meaning through particular musical structures.*

**Keywords:** *gamelan; Indonesian; Javanese; exoticism; orientalism; Debussy;*

### Introduction – French Music and Exoticism in the Nineteenth Century

The fascination of nineteenth century French musicians with East-Asian cultures is closely related to the evolution of orientalism and exoticism in France. The incorporation by French composers of musical elements representing the Turkish, and later Middle Eastern or North-African cultures was followed by the development of musical *chinoiserie* in the final decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even though it is important to emphasize the distinction between the two terms, *exoticism* and *orientalism*, according to Lacombe both categories are governed by the idea of creating *an exotic world on the basis of a generalized image of a colourful, highly distinctive “elsewhere.”*<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century exotic subjects served as sources of inspiration for musical works that were primarily exotic in their visual representation, such as operas, but gradually composers became interested in devising a musical language that could express this visual exoticism.<sup>3</sup> The evocation of distant lands and foreign cultures was accomplished by using certain musical stereotypes, such as particular music intervals, scales, or instruments (mostly

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percussion and wind instruments), and a precise type of musical accompaniment (often consisting of ostinato formulae). However, gradually the composers relinquished the idea of composing for the purpose of obtaining an exotic sound. In accordance with the evolution of certain sciences, such as anthropology or ethnomusicology, musicians began to strive for authenticity and a more accurate musical depiction of the oriental and exotic.

Often, the encounter with the music of oriental cultures inspired Western composers and had a transformative effect on their works, as was the case with Claude Debussy (1862–1918). In his works, Debussy evoked effortlessly the exoticism of Spain, Africa, or South-East Asia, his music seeming to assimilate the particularities of these regions. Debussy's creation marks the transition from Romanticism to modern art movements, the Impressionist features of his compositions representing the dawn of new horizons, the musician's venture beyond the musical tradition inherited from his forebearers.

Regarding Debussy's affiliation with certain artistic and musical movements, musicologists point to several orientations. Some (Marguerite Long and André Suarès) regard Claude Debussy rather as Symbolist than Impressionist, owing to the fact that in his works the composer focuses on highlighting emotions, while other musicologists (Roland-Manuel and Émile Vuillermoz) indicate the Impressionist traits in Debussy's works. At the same time, Charles Koechlin regards the Impressionist denomination with disapproval, owing to the endless aesthetic disputes between those who supported Debussy's music and those who were against it.<sup>4</sup> Another current speaks about the *Debussy style*, thus defining a new style, the boundaries of which are not clearly delimited between Impressionism and Symbolism.

The present study focuses on Debussy's use of the *gamelan*, as a means of emphasizing *exoticism* and creating *local color*. However, the evocation of Indonesian music (particularly Javanese and Balinese) in the works of Debussy is not limited to the idea of musical exoticism, the composer striving to create a more profound connection between *gamelan* evocations, a broader range of natural images and sensations associated with these, and the philosophic concepts that lie at the core of Asian philosophy, as Tamagawa also observes.<sup>5</sup> Debussy's encounter with Javanese music at the *Exposition Universelle* in 1889 and his admiration for the complexity of the *gamelan* ensemble and its musical structures influenced his subsequent works, contributing to the evolution and maturing of the composer's style. The juxtaposition of contrasting textures, polyrhythms, pentatonic scales, and the use of various timbres represent some of the compositional approaches that define Debussy's style. His musical language seems imbued by certain features that are characteristic of Javanese music, however Debussy takes a step forward from using exotic sounds for the sake of musical innovation: he creates a musical language that is truly personal and evocative, suggesting the hidden meaning beyond the images or concepts that he desires to depict through sound.

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<sup>4</sup> Bulancea, Gabriel. 2008. *Gândirea creatoare și estetică a lui Claude Debussy*. Cluj Napoca: Editura Media Musica, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Tamagawa, Kiyoshi. 2020. *Echoes from the East. The Javanese Gamelan and its Influence on the Music of Claude Debussy*. Lexington Books, p. xv.

## 1. A Brief Presentation of the *Gamelan*

Derived from the Javanese verb *gamel* (to handle)<sup>6</sup>, the term *gamelan* generally refers to the traditional ensemble of bronze percussion instruments in Indonesia. Another meaning of the word *gamel* refers to a particular type of hammer<sup>7</sup> (mallet), or to the act of hammering or hitting something (alluding to the manner in which different instruments of this percussion ensemble are sounded). The instruments within this ensemble are grouped according to their function. Bronze instruments similar to those within the *gamelan* can be found in the culture of other southeast nations as well (the Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, or Thailand), however these are used in different settings, which makes the *gamelan* ensemble of Indonesia (particularly the islands of Java and Bali), unique. The Balinese refer to their *gamelan* ensemble as *gong*, while the Javanese prefer the term *gamelan*, in order to avoid confusion with the *gong ageng* instrument or other types of *gongs* within the ensemble.

According to Javanese mythology, the *gamelan* was created by Sang Hyang Guru, during the Saka period (around 230 CE). Documents dating from the period between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries mention that the *gamelan* was deemed important and used at the royal courts, as the relief sculptures in various Hindu or Buddhist temples also suggest. The instruments of this percussion ensemble developed and reached their actual form during the Majapahit period (1293–1597), consisting mainly of double-headed drums, metallophones sounded by the aid of mallets, gongs, and cymbals, to which xylophones, flutes, or the *rebab* can be added. The Javanese *gamelan* may also include male or female singers, while Balinese ensembles are made up exclusively of percussion instruments.

The tuning of the *gamelan* is not standardized, the instruments within one ensemble are tuned in relation to each other, which means that one instrument cannot be used in another *gamelan*. When tuning, musicians do not aim for individual sounds, but rather for obtaining different sound vibrations (a particular resonance).<sup>8</sup> Because tuning is not standardized and there is a variety of tunings available (depending on the instruments of the ensemble), the two scales employed in the Balinese and Javanese music will have different sounds and nuances, according to the playing *gamelan*.

The two scales used in Balinese and Javanese *gamelan* are *pélog* (consisting of 7 pitches with almost equal distance between the pitches – Fig. 1) and *slendro* (5 roughly equal pitches – Fig. 2). When using the *pélog* scale, Balinese musicians can choose to eliminate two pitches. According to which pitches were eliminated, various modes are obtained: for example, in the *selisir mode* the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> pitches are eliminated, while in the *tembung mode* the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> pitches are relinquished. Thus, each of the two possible scales becomes pentatonic (consisting of 5 pitches), yet only thorough knowledge of Balinese and Javanese music can help in distinguishing between the two.

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<sup>6</sup> Sumarsam. 1995. *Gamelan: Cultural Interaction and Musical Development in Central Java*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 319-320.

<sup>7</sup> Lindsay, Jennifer. 1979. *Javanese Gamelan*. Kuala Lumpur – New York: Oxford University Press, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Tenzer, Michael. 1998. *Balinese Music*. Hongkong: Periplus, p. 41.

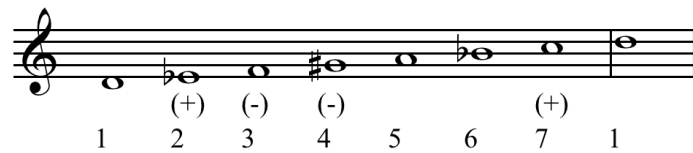


Fig. 1: *Pélog* scale in corresponding Western notation



Fig. 2: *Slendro* scale in corresponding Western notation

The *gamelan* mirrors the Indonesian philosophy and perspective on life, the cyclical nature of time (related to the Hindu faith in reincarnation), and the duality of the physical world (as can be observed in the fact that the majority of instruments in the *gamelan* exist in pairs, male and female). Performing is a sacred act, the instruments are considered holy, and the entire ensemble is viewed as a small-scale model of the cosmos (Universe).

## 2. The Gamelan in France at the end of the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, beginning with Félicien David's *Le Désert* (1844) French musicians became preoccupied with the truthfulness of their musical representations of the Orient. Until David's *ode-symphonie*, composers suggested the placement of their musical depictions in a faraway, exotic elsewhere through the use of evocative titles, certain melodic or rhythmic suggestions, or costumes and stage props (in the case of operas). However, these means of suggesting the oriental were not quite accurate from a musical point of view. With David's arrival composers began to take timid steps towards the incorporation of accurate oriental sounds into their works, which eventually led to the development of musical orientalism and exoticism. Exoticist or orientalist works shared certain common features, such as the use of augmented seconds and ostinato patterns for the representation of the Middle East and North Africa, pentatonic scales for the evocation of East Asia, or certain effects and scales for the depiction of South Asia. The choice of musical portrayal on behalf of the composers was also oriented towards making clear distinctions between various geographic regions. It is debatable whether the techniques employed for portraying oriental cultures were accurate or not (owing to the fact that it is difficult to fully grasp the sound and particularities of oriental music using Western notation and compositional techniques), but it is certain that these served to creating imaginary exotic landscapes.

Representations of the Middle East and North Africa were at first more common among French composers, while East Asian depictions were idealized, because the geographical remoteness that prevented the lack of contact with original music from the region. However, East Asian elements gradually became available in Europe and in a manner similar to the music of the Middle East, its main features were adapted in order to be more easily accepted and understood

by nineteenth century audiences. This adaptation of East Asian music was the one Debussy was probably familiar with before his encounter of genuine Javanese music at the 1899 *Exposition Universelle*.

Music of foreign cultures, deemed exotic, was performed in Europe and France even before the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris. Javanese *gamelan* ensembles performed in the Netherlands, at the National Exhibition of Dutch and Colonial Industry in Arnhem in 1879 and in England, at the Royal Aquarium in Westminster in 1882.<sup>9</sup> Certain researchers even believe that these earlier performances were of a higher quality than the 1889 *gamelan* performances within the Exposition in Paris.<sup>10</sup>

The 1889 *Exposition Universelle* presented several exotic pavilions, including a Javanese village. During this edition of the World Fair, the work of French composer Louis-Albert-Bourgault-Ducoudray (1840–1940), the *Rhapsodie Cambodgienne* (1882) was first performed. Other French composers, like Claude Debussy or Erik Satie heard this work and were impressed by its sound, as well as the compositional techniques employed by the composer. Deeply interested in pentatonic Eastern scales, Bourgault-Ducoudray included in this work pentatonic constructions with a strong exotic flavour, paying special attention to his treatment of the flutes and percussion instruments (that suggest the *gamelan*). Certain sources mention the fact that in the *Rhapsodie Cambodgienne* Bourgault-Ducoudray employed a Javanese *gamelan* in the *slendro scale*, played by Javanese musicians.<sup>11</sup> However, the authenticity of this information is questionable. Moreover, the orchestral score does not offer a clear image on the percussion instruments first used, nor regarding their tuning, simply mentioning the existence of timpani, tam-tam, triangle, glockenspiel, and bass drum/cymbals.

The *Rhapsodie Cambodgienne* has two parts: *Introduction – Légende* and *Fête*. Both parts feature musical themes that seem foreign in the context of nineteenth century French music, as presented in the following excerpt from the first part of the work. The composer employs pentatonic scales that are developed or paraphrased throughout the work. The first theme presented in the *Introduction – Légende* is also pentatonic. Following its first presentation by the flutes (an instrument also used in the *gamelan* ensemble, as explained in the previous chapter), the theme will be reiterated by the other instruments.

Fig. 3: Louis-Albert-Bourgault-Ducoudray: *Rhapsodie Cambodgienne* (1882)  
Excerpt from the *Introduction – Légende*, the first theme (pentatonic structure)

<sup>9</sup> Tamagawa, Kiyoshi, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Sumarsam. 2013. *Javanese Gamelan and the West*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Sorrell, Neil. 2000. *A Guide to the Gamelan*. London: Faber and Faber.

Tiersot admired the way Bourgault-Ducodray employs exotic themes in his work, the manner in which these are developed and assimilated to the musical discourse devised according to Western rules.<sup>12</sup> A pupil of Bourgault-Ducodray, Debussy's interest in pentatonic scales and East Asian music may also be related to his teacher's influence.

### 3. The *Gamelan* and Debussy

Romanian musicologists regard Debussy as an Impressionist composer, pointing to the musician's endeavors to suggest (convey) the effects of the surrounding world on one's senses using a novel and authentic musical language, which delicately unites the intensity of Romantic emotions with a more reasoned and calm expression.<sup>13</sup> One may venture to say that in his works Debussy does not describe but *evoke*, he does not represent but *suggest*, using a musical language that he permanently sought to enhance. The uniqueness and novelty of Debussy's musical language derives from various sources: the Medieval Gregorian chant and plainsong, ecclesiastical modes, folk songs of various origin, Oriental and African music, pentatonic scales, and complex harmonic constructions of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> In his works, Debussy uses a multitude of instrumental combinations resulting in a colored and rich musical language, filled with subtle suggestions, thus justifying the analogy between the composer and Impressionist painters.<sup>15</sup>

Debussy's attraction to the music of Java may be linked to his love of Asian visual arts, as Tamagawa observes.<sup>16</sup> Apart from Bourgault-Ducodray's *Rhapsodie cambodgienne*, rich in exotic pentatonic scales and elements suggesting South-East Asian influences, Debussy first listened to genuine Javanese music at the Parisian *Exposition Universelle* in 1889, an experience that impressed him and which he would often recall, as Robert Godet mentions: "*Les heures vraiment fécondes pour Debussy, c'est dans le campong javanais de la section néerlandaise qu'il les gouta sans nombre, attentif à la polyrythmie percutée d'un gamelan qui se montrait inépuisable en combinaisons de timbres éthérées ou fulgurantes, tandis qu'évoluaient, musique faite image, les prestigieuses Bedayas.*"<sup>17</sup>

The 1889 Exposition marked one hundred years from the beginning of the French Revolution and the end of the monarchy. However, the Exposition could be regarded as a *colonial exhibition*, similar to other expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that aimed to exhibit the results of imperialism and its policies, thus departing from the ideas originally promoted by the Revolution (freedom from oppression and equality).<sup>18</sup> Fauser argues that Debussy's appropriation of elements from exotic performances, such as the *gamelan*, and their role in the evolution of French music, were *part of the colonial enterprise* that can be identified in other exoticist compositions of the period.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Debussy's encounter with

<sup>12</sup> Tiersot, Julien. 1905. *Notes d'Ethnographie Musicale*. Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, p. 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> Alexandrescu, Romeo. 1967. *Claude Debussy*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Lockspeiser, Edward. 1978. *Debussy: His Life and Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Vancea, Zeno. 1984. *Dicționar de termeni muzicali* [Dictionary of Musical Terms]. București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, p. 236.

<sup>16</sup> Tamagawa, Kiyoshi, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Godet, Robert. 1926. "En marge de la marge". *La Revue Musicale*, May: 147-182, p.152.

<sup>18</sup> Tamagawa, Kiyoshi, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Fauser, Annegret. 2005. *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, p. 205.

exotic music provided the composer with new melodic and rhythmic ideas, and a new approach regarding the structure and expressiveness of music.

At the 1889 Exposition, Debussy encountered singers, dancers, and musicians from Africa, Arabic countries, the Middle East, and East Asia, as well as from Scandinavia, Russia, Spain, but also Hungarian gipsy musicians or the Romanian *lăutar*. Certainly, Debussy was impressed by the improvisatory character of Javanese music, the variety of instruments with particular timbres and exotic sound, the melodies based on continuous variation, the complexity of rhythmic formulae employed by the percussion instruments that doubled the accompaniment, creating the sensation of total freedom (in performance and construction of the musical discourse alike).<sup>20</sup>

Debussy's encounter with the *gamelan* influenced his compositional technique and musical language, manifesting in various ways, as Tamagawa observes:

- The integration of novel pitch sets, other than the major and minor scales;
- Gradual departure from the Western musical structures and a novel approach to form, based on the use of symmetrical and repetitive constructions, ostinato techniques, and arch forms;
- The introduction of new textures into his music.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Echoes of the *Gamelan* in Debussy's Works

Despite the fact that he wrote about a wide variety of topics, Debussy left behind a small number of writings about the music of Java. Nonetheless, in these the composer discusses the features of Javanese music, thus easing our understanding of the manner in which *gamelan* influences can be recognized in his works.

One of the main modalities for suggesting Javanese images and influences in Debussy's music is the composer's use of titles that evoke Asian or exotic images, such as *Pagodes*, *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût*, or *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*.

Like French musicologist and ethnomusicologist Julien Tiersot<sup>22</sup>, Debussy remarks the similarities between the counterpoint of the *gamelan* and Western polyphony, emphasising the complexity of Javanese music: *gamelan* music is polyphonic, containing a *nuclear theme* (that will be elaborated by the instruments), and a *counter melody*. Related to these observations is the composer's use in his works of a *nuclear theme* (a primary melody similar to a *cantus firmus*) and *counter melody*, employed in a manner that resembles the *gamelan*.

The instruments of the *gamelan* are usually divided into groups, according to their function, and the sound material is distributed into distinct layers of writing. Throughout the performance, the nuclear theme is not developed, but paraphrased, a technique that will be employed by Debussy as well. *The nuclear theme* (primary melody) is employed in a manner that suggests polyphonic treatment, the composition representing a mixture of the various facets of the nuclear theme (melodic, rhythmic, and registral aspects). Debussy's use of the nuclear

<sup>20</sup> Bulancea, Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> Tamagawa, Kiyoshi, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> Tiersot, Julien. 1889. *Musiques Pittoresques: Promenades Musicales à L'Exposition de 1889*. Paris: Fischbacher, p. 43.

theme strives to surpass the manner in which it is used in Western polyphony, rather resembling the Javanese polyphonic constructions.

In the works composed before 1889, Debussy employs at least two melodic ideas that are polyphonically treated, developed, and varied throughout the work, as illustrated in the following example from the *2 Arabesques*, No. 2. In the fragment from the second of the *2 Arabesques*, composed between 1888-91, there is no clear trace of a nuclear theme (similar to the ones in the *gamelan*). The composer employs two melodic ideas that are developed and varied, supporting these by an accompaniment of chords or arpeggio:

Fig. 4: Claude Debussy: *2 Arabesques* (1888-91)<sup>23</sup>  
Excerpt from No. 2, bars 9-14

In works composed after 1890, even though the composer employs more than one nuclear theme, these are treated as the center of the entire musical unfolding: the themes are paraphrased in a manner that mirrors the *gamelan* practices. Apart from presenting the themes constructed over an accompaniment, Debussy uses various methods to double and imitate the parts, thus suggesting the *gamelan* concept of the nuclear theme, as shown in the following excerpt from *Nocturne* (1892): here, the motif presented in bars 65-66 (second and third bar of the example) is doubled in the left hand, then it is paraphrased in the following measures (the left hand imitates the discourse of the right). Thus, the composer obtains an interesting juxtaposition of textures.

<sup>23</sup> Reprint after the first edition of the score, published in Paris by Durand et Schoenewerk in 1891.



Fig. 5: Claude Debussy: *Nocturne* (1892)<sup>24</sup>  
Excerpt, bars 64-69

*The melodic material is doubled and imitated by all parts, suggesting the gamelan treatment of the nuclear theme*

Secondary to the nuclear theme are the *counter melodies*, with a melodic material that is independent from the one expressed in the nuclear theme. These may appear in various forms (paraphrased, elaborated), but their importance is secondary to the nuclear theme, thus making inappropriate the comparison with the secondary theme (second melody) from traditional forms of Western music. Counter melodies introduce polyphonous elements into the texture of the composition, as may be observed in Debussy's works composed after 1890 (in works composed prior to this period, Debussy usually employs two main themes that contribute to the development of the entire piece) – after the composer's encounter with Javanese music at the *Exposition Universelle*. Counter melodies, as employed in the works composed after 1890, are not related to the nuclear theme, their main function residing in the fact that these provide

<sup>24</sup> After the 1907 edition of the score, published in Paris by the Société d'Édition Musicales.

*distinct layers of writing*. These counter melodies are not related to the nuclear theme and their appearance is brief, as may be observed in the following example from *Pagodes* (1903). Here, the composer employs counter melodies in a manner that suggests once again the influence of the *gamelan*. The first counter melody (in the left hand) appears beneath the nuclear theme (in the right hand) and is repeated once more below the nuclear theme (Fig. 6). Throughout the work, both the nuclear theme and the counter melody appear paraphrased, and in the final section the counter melody appears again in its original form, this time beneath a paraphrase of the nuclear theme. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting musical materials, together with the melodic material employed by the composer, suggests the sound of the *gamelan*.

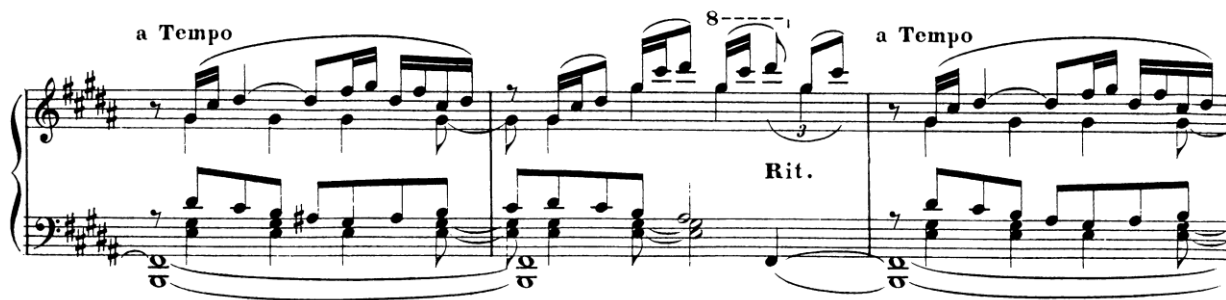


Fig. 6: Claude Debussy: *Estampes* (1903)<sup>25</sup>  
I. *Pagodes* (Excerpt, bars 7-9)

The counter melody appears in the left hand, below the nuclear theme, and is repeated in bars 9-10

The musical textures employed by Debussy, as shown in the previous example from *Pagodes*, aim to reproduce the layered structure of the *gamelan*. Undoubtedly, this is one of the most important proofs of the Javanese influence on Debussy's composition.

A common trait of Oriental music is the presence of a rhythmic and/or melodic *ostinato*. In their efforts to create novel musical languages inspired by the music of the East or striving to create an authentic sound inspired by this music, Western composers often employed *ostinato* structures, static harmonies, and large-scale repetition, techniques that contradict the linear, progressive quality of Western music. Debussy also resorts to these techniques and the musical language thus obtained desires to capture the apparent aimlessness of the Javanese music that inspired him. The close connection between music and spirituality in the Javanese culture may explain the particular structure of this music: in contrast to the Western perspective, for the Javanese the essence lies not in the process of doing or becoming, but in the total abandonment to *the act of being*.

The use of ostinato patterns along with modal harmony (and pentatonic structures in the works of Debussy) leads to the functional harmonic relations losing their importance. Striving to assimilate the color and sound of the *gamelan* in his works, Debussy resorts to the use of ostinato structures evoking Javanese percussion ensembles. In the *Prélude* from the work *Pour le piano* (1901) Debussy employs *long-held pedals and static harmonies*, that seem to halt the forward movement of the musical discourse, as does his choice of repeating large sections of music without change. By placing these held pedals at the foundation of the rhythmic structure of his

<sup>25</sup> After the first edition of the score, published in 1900 in Paris by Durand & Fils.

discourse, Debussy strives to recreate the function of certain instruments in the *gamelan*, for example the gongs that provide a support for rhythmic patterns played at a faster speed by other instruments. The *rhythmic and melodic structures* that are repeated with insistence may also suggest the idea of ostinato accompaniment typical for Eastern music. In the *Prélude* held pedals are employed beginning with measure 6 of the work, however it is interesting to observe the polyrhythmic texture in measures 74-82 (illustrated in the following example, Fig. 7), where Debussy places a static pedal on A-flat 1 and A-flat 2 (in a higher register than the pedal in the opening), juxtaposed to the ostinato-like sixteenth-notes that suggest a trill between D and E (and also evoking the rhythmic patterns played at a faster speed by other instruments of the *gamelan*), the paraphrase of the nuclear melody in the right hand (first presented in bars 6-7), and triplet formulae (likewise in the right hand):

The image displays a musical score for piano, specifically an excerpt from Claude Debussy's Suite – Pour le Piano (1901), Prélude (Excerpt, bars 74-79). The score is written for two staves, treble and bass clef. It features a complex polyrhythmic texture. The left hand plays a steady stream of sixteenth notes, while the right hand plays a paraphrase of the nuclear melody, including triplet formulae. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *mf*, and various articulation marks like accents and slurs. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor).

Fig. 7: Claude Debussy: Suite – Pour le Piano (1901)<sup>26</sup>  
Prélude (Excerpt, bars 74-79)

*Polyrhythmic texture: static pedal, ostinato-like sixteenth-notes, paraphrase of the nuclear-melody, triplets*

This complex polyrhythmic texture evokes the sound of the Javanese ensembles. Tamagawa considers that the *Prélude* may be considered “a culmination of Debussy’s early attempts to integrate gamelan evocations into non-programmatic compositions”.<sup>27</sup>

Debussy endeavored to assimilate the sound of the *gamelan* in his orchestral works as well, as suggested by the *Trois Nocturnes* (1899) for orchestra. Striving to evoke the beauty of nature and the emotions it arouses, Debussy employs formal structures, timbres, and compositional techniques that suggest *gamelan* sonorities. The layered textures employed in the

<sup>26</sup> After the first edition of the score, published in 1901 in Paris by E. Fromont.

<sup>27</sup> Tamagawa, Kiyoshi, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

orchestral score of the first *Nocturne*, *Nuages*, after number 4 evoke the sound of a Javanese ensemble: an unchanging bass pedal on the note B held for ten measures, above which an ostinato accompaniment is presented by the strings (*pizzicato*), and a melody is played by the English horn suggesting the nuclear theme (or core-melody in the *gamelan* ensemble).

Fig. 8: Claude Debussy: *Trois Nocturnes* (1899)<sup>28</sup>

Excerpt from *Nuages*, bars 42-45

The melody played by the horn, fragment from the strings section playing the ostinato accompaniment (*pizzicato*), and the bass pedal.

Fig. 9: Claude Debussy: *Trois Nocturnes*

Excerpt from *Nuages*, bars 59-63

<sup>28</sup> After the first edition of the score, published in 1900 in Paris by E. Fromont.

*Pentatonic melody played by the flute and harp, supported by held chords in the strings (not shown).*

The melodic structures and pentatonic scales employed by Debussy, features that are often associated with his music, are also of Javanese inspiration. In *Nuages*, for example, Debussy incorporated a pentatonic melody at number 7 of the orchestral score (Fig. 9), supported by held chords in the strings. The sound and resonance of the Javanese percussion instruments is suggested by the combination of the flute and harp.

*Gamelan* influences are discernible in the works of Debussy when analyzing the structure of his works, the textures employed (polyrhythmic textures, juxtaposition of contrasting layers), the pentatonic melodies incorporated, but also the manner in which the composer strives to combine the timbre of various instruments in a manner that suggests the sound and resonance of the Javanese percussion instruments, as illustrated in the previous example (the combination of flute and harp in *Nuages*).

The manner in which Debussy strives to recreate the sound of *gamelan* in his works mirrors the particularities of this music, in which various sound layers coexist in polyphonic and heterophonic structures that result in a rich timbre, and structural tones are conceived in close relation to the main functions of the composition, as McPhee observes.<sup>29</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

Claude Debussy did not travel to South-East Asia, as other French composers did (Albert Roussel or Maurice Delage), therefore he never had the chance to transcribe genuine Indonesian music. His contact with Javanese music and dance occurred during the Parisian Exposition, nonetheless the sound of the *gamelan* continued to inspire the composer throughout his life, influencing the compositional techniques he employed, as well as the form of certain works. Indonesian colours were gradually assimilated into his works, giving birth to a unique style and sound that came to be associated with Debussy.

Despite the fact that he was not an ethnomusicologist or folklorist, particular features of the *gamelan* influenced Debussy and are clearly discernible in his works, as the present analysis endeavoured to explain. The division of the instruments of the *gamelan* into groups and the distribution of sound into distinct layers can be recognized in Debussy's juxtaposition of contrasting musical layers and his use of polyrhythmic textures. The stalling of the musical discourse through recurring formulae, the repetition of entire sections of the discourse, or the use of static pedals suggests the lack of climax and development in Javanese music. In the works composed after 1890, Debussy employs one nuclear theme and counter melodies, which he repeats, paraphrases, doubles or imitates, but rarely develops – a concept borrowed from Javanese music. The use of pentatonic scales in Debussy's works is also reminiscent of South-East Asian music.

Apart from the previously mentioned compositional techniques, that inspired Debussy and influenced the evolution of his musical language, Javanese music is also characterized by other features, such as: the existence of a colotomic structure, which describes the rhythmic and metric patterns of *gamelan* music; the preference for improvisation; the particular form of the pieces (introduction, main section, final section); the use of dynamics, in which longer sections

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<sup>29</sup> McPhee, Colin. 1949. "The Five-tone Gamelan music of Bali". *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2, April: 250-281, p. 261.

of either loud or soft dynamics are employed. These features are discernible in Debussy's music as well, however, the present analysis focused mainly on the previously mentioned compositional techniques.

Indonesian colours are present in Debussy's works, employed in various ways by the composer: with the purpose of evoking a mysterious East (through the titles of certain works, which despite being exotic, often bear no clear geographical connotations) in the works that are explicitly exotic (such as *Pagodes*); for pictorial ends, in order to suggest the hidden meaning beyond certain concepts or natural phenomena (*Nocturne*); or with purely musical purposes, in which cases the *gamelan* style and compositional techniques enabled the composer to undertake musical experiments.

Debussy's encounter with the Javanese *gamelan* led to his assimilation of particularities characteristic for this music and the development of a novel musical language that marked the dawn of new musical styles and means of expression in Western music. Debussy's figure and original musical language contributed to the emergence of the Neo-Classical trend in French music and inspired composer such as Albert Roussel, who would produce a series of works inspired by his personal contact with Classical Indian music.<sup>30</sup> Indonesian art and culture gradually became more famous in the Western world, due to an increased interest in anthropology and ethnomusicology, while the *gamelan* continued to inspire French and European composers at the beginning of the twentieth century, contributing to the emergence of novel techniques and sounds.

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<sup>30</sup> Karácsony, Noémi; Rucsanda, Mădălina Dana. 2021. "Influences of Classical Indian Music in Albert Roussel's Evocations". *Studia UBB Musica*, LXVI, 1: 125-141, p. 126.

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