Analysing the Oriental Elements in Debussy's *Pagodes*

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Abstract. This study focuses on an in-depth analysis of the oriental elements contained in Claude Debussy's piano work *Pagodes*, exploring its musical style and compositional qualities. Debussy, as a typical representative of Impressionist music, was deeply imbued with Eastern culture in his compositions. *Pagodes* is a work that demonstrates to the fullest extent his subtle grasp of the elements of Oriental music and his distinctive use of them. Through careful analyses of the score of *Pagodes*, an extensive review of relevant literature, and observation of videos of performers in action, this study reveals how Debussy incorporated Oriental elements such as the pentatonic scale and gamelan music into his musical compositions, and the role that these elements have played in the Western musical tradition. The research results show that *Pagodes* not only highlights the cross-cultural fusion characteristics of Debussy's musical language, but also reflects his innovative use of Oriental music, which is of key significance in understanding the historical background and artistic achievements of the fusion of East and West at the beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: Debussy, Oriental Elements, *Pagodes.*

1 Introduction

Claude Debussy, as a representative of Impressionist music, has an important position in the history of Western music. His compositions are known for their distinctive timbres, harmonies and rhythms, demonstrating breakthroughs and innovations in traditional musical forms. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Eastern cultures and music had a profound influence on Western music, and Debussy's works also incorporated a large number of Eastern elements, which gave his music a unique charm and cross-cultural artistic value. In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of studies on the oriental elements in Debussy's music, but relatively few studies have been devoted to the oriental elements in *Pagodes*. Some scholars have analysed the oriental scales, rhythms and melodic elements used in The *Pagodes*, such as pentatonic scales, asymmetrical rhythms and ornamental tones. Some scholars have also studied and explored the influence of oriental aesthetics, such as 'ethereal' and 'mood',

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on the composition of *Pagodes*, and compared *Pagodes* with oriental music works, analysing the similarities and differences between the two in terms of musical language and expressive techniques. However, there is a relative lack of in-depth excavation and interpretation of the cultural connotations behind the oriental elements through the observation method in the course of these studies. This paper discusses the characteristics of the oriental elements in *Pagodes* and the interpretation of the oriental elements through musical analysis and interpretation analysis in the research process, aiming at analysing and exploring the influence of the oriental elements on Debussy's piano music style and creation, as well as the absorption, fusion and recreation of the oriental elements in Debussy's piano works.

2 Debussy's Imagination of the Oriental Culture

2.1 Historical Contexts and Cultural Convergence of Orientalism

In his study, Howat analyses cultural exchanges in the context of Orientalism, in particular how Debussy embodied Oriental elements in his music [1]. Howat points out that 'Orientalism' at the end of the nineteenth century was not only an artistic trend, but also an imaginative reconstruction of the West's colonies [1]. Although Debussy had not travelled to the Orient himself, he constructed an aesthetic perception of the Orient through the Paris Exposition, the Japanese print collection and translations of Oriental literature. The oriental elements in his creations are not a direct observation of the original culture, but rather a reimagining through a Western lens. For example, the 'asymmetric rhythm' and 'veiled timbres' in *Pagodes* simultaneously evoke Gamelan music and align with the Impressionist pursuit of transient sensory experiences.

2.2 The Transformation of Debussy's Musical Language

Debussy abandoned the tonal logic and structural regularity of Western musical tradition, embracing the negative space and fluidity characteristic of Eastern art. His works frequently feature ambiguous harmonies, free rhythms, and a rich timbral palette—elements that collectively resonate with the aesthetic sensibilities of Eastern music.

In bars 17-20 of *Pagodes* (as shown in Figure 1), the triplets in the left hand and the two eighth notes in the right hand form a rhythmic cross (e.g., a 3:2 ratio), disrupting the metrical rigidity and evoking the elastic temporality characteristic of Gamelan music. The chords and ornamental patterns (such as rapid arpeggios or vibrato) in the right hand are concentrated in the upper register, with a bright, grainy tone, similar to that of the Gamelan's metal piano. The harmonic progression is rendered with ambiguity, while the intervallic distance between the notes heightens the harmonic tension.

Tianqi Huang points out that the use of the pentatonic scale in *Pagodes* diminishes the tonal tendency of the leading tone, resulting in an open harmonic space [3]. Tamagawa notes that the multilayered rhythmic superimposition (such as three-against-two patterns) mimics the "cyclic temporal conception" inherent in Gamelan music [4]. In addition, Liu Chang notes in his research that Debussy's use of the piano's soft pedal

and harmonic playing techniques simulates the resonant afterglow of Eastern percussion instruments (such as bells and gongs), further blurring the boundaries between Eastern and Western music [5].

Fig. 1. Rhythmic interlocking [2].

3 The Oriental Musical Elements in *Pagodes*

3.1 The Use of Pentatonic Mode

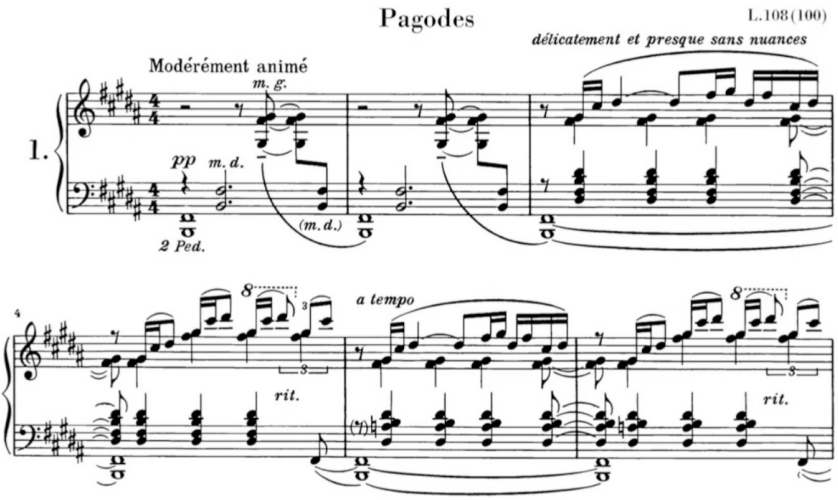

Fig. 2. Melodic lines of alternating progression and jump [2].

Xia explored in her research how the pentatonic mode of Chinese music influenced Debussy's composition [6]. She pointed out that the opening theme of the work is centered on the D House pentatonic scale (shown in Figure 2), and the melody is based on the B major pentatonic scale (B-C#-D#-F#-G#),through the alternating melodic lines of progression and jump, imitating the virtual reality of Chinese landscape painting. The use of this pentatonic scale gives the melody a strong Oriental color.

Xiaolu Li further found that Debussy's embedding of semi-chromatic grace notes within the pentatonic framework (e.g. in bars 12-15) not only retained the purity of the Eastern melody, but also enriched the auditory level of Western listeners [7].

Yuxiao Huang interprets it from the perspective of cultural symbolism, and thinks that the "conflict-free" of the five-tone mode is a metaphor for the Taoist philosophy of "unity of heaven and man" [8].

3.2 The Influence of Gamelan Music

At the 1889 Paris World Expo, Debussy was first exposed to Indonesian Gamelan music. Its complex poly-rhythms (such as the core rhythm type "kotekan") and unique "slendro" pentatonic mode became the core inspiration for *Pagodes*.

Through comparative research, Tamagawa found that the superposition of the right-handed continuous triplet pattern, such as bars 24-30, and the syncopated rhythm of the left hand in "*Pagodes*" directly borrows from Gamelan's "layered rhythm" structure; The repeated single note in the upper register simulates the crisp sound of the "saron" (metal platen) [4]. Qin Qin added that Debussy reproduced the continuous resonance of the "gong" (gong) in gamelan music through pedal extension and touch force changes, making the Western instrument a medium of cross-cultural expression [9].

3.3 The Strategy of Fusion

Song Yixiao stressed that Debussy's innovation lies in the "grammaticalization" of Oriental elements rather than superficial references [10]. For example, the extensive use of parallel fourth and fifth harmonies in the *Pagodes* (e.g. in bars 45-50) not only echoes the "empty fifth harmonies" of traditional Chinese music, but also dispels the tension of Western tonality through non-functional connections. In addition, Pan Yuan Chuan and Sha Li Jing pointed out that the structural breakthrough of the work (such as the "block structure" without a clear development part) and the "improvisation" of Eastern music formed a confluent [11]. From the perspective of performance, Liu Chang pointed out that Debussy requires players to handle legato passages in a way that "touches keys like touching silk", further strengthening the "soft" and "quiet" in Eastern aesthetics [5].

4 The Artistry and Historical Significance of Oriental Elements

4.1 Multi-Dimensional Cultural Symbolism and Emotional Expression

Huang Yuxiao believes that *Pagodes* does not simply imitate Oriental sound, but constructs "Oriental image" through musical metaphor [8].For example, in the middle part of the work (bars 60-75), the continuous notes in the low register symbolize the gravity of the "pagoda", while the rapid notes in the high register suggest the spirit of the "wind chimes", and the two are intertwined to form a "Zen" space. This symbolism allows the work to transcend geographical boundaries and become a common emotional carrier for Eastern and Western listeners.

4.2 Subversion and Expansion of Western Tradition

Parker notes that the *Pagodes* is full of melodic lines inspired by Eastern music, with a leaping structure that mimics some of the melodic forms found in Gamelan: in addition, the rhythm in the work is free and irregular [12].

Howat analyzed Debussy's ambiguous treatment of harmony and the influence of eastern music on the tonal structure1. Debussy used a large number of non-traditional chords and harmonic progressions in the *Pagodes* to enrich the harmonic color of the work.At the same time, through the clever use of timbre, he also simulated the effect of eastern instruments, such as bells, cymbals, etc., so that the work has a unique sound color.

By comparing the compositions of Debussy and McPhee, Pan and Saarijin point out that the former laid the foundation for the pluralistic development of 20th-century music (such as Messiaen and Boulez) by "blending" rather than "referencing" Eastern elements [11].

4.3 Reflection on Cross-Cultural Practice

Some scholars criticized Debussy's orientalist tendency. Zhang Jing pointed out that Debussy's reference to Gamelan music is still "curious", and the East in his works is actually "the imagined other" [13]. However, Long Shiyu countered that Debussy's creative essence is"cultural dialogue", and the uncertainty in his music precisely breaks the Western-centric narrative and provides a model for cross-cultural studies in the post-colonial era [14].

5 Gamelan Elements in *Pagodes* from Performative Perspective

5.1 Interpretation of Harmony and Rhythm

Gamelan music is renowned for its distinctive metallic percussion timbres and rich harmonic effects. The score of *Pagodes* attempts to emulate the tonal characteristics of Gamelan music through certain note combinations and performance instructions. For example, it creates bright, crisp, and resonant tonal effects similar to Gamelan instruments through specific chord combinations and the utilization of different registers. A careful analysis of the score reveals rhythmic patterns characteristic of Gamelan music, such as complex syncopations or irregular metric combinations. When performing, one must precisely express the features of these rhythmic patterns, emphasizing the dynamic variations and rhythmic sensibility, similar to the staggered rhythmic sensation produced when different instruments alternate in Gamelan music.

5.2 Touch Technique and Pedal Application

To imitate the timbre of Gamelan instruments when performing *Pagodes*, attention must be paid to the touch technique. The bright tones produced by Gamelan metal instruments can be achieved on the piano through crisp, clean keystrokes, using fingertip strength to strike the keys rapidly, resulting in clear and bright articulation. For sections requiring soft and rounded tones, one can draw inspiration from the timbral characteristics of wooden instruments in Gamelan music by adopting a gentler, slower touch technique, lightly pressing the keys with the finger pads to create a softer, warmer sound.

Reasonable use of the pedal is also key to creating the Gamelan music timbre. For instance, using the sustain pedal to extend the resonance of notes simulates the lingering sound effects of Gamelan instruments, making the sound fuller and more spacious. Simultaneously, skillfully controlling the timing and depth of pedal application according to musical requirements avoids muddy tones, maintaining pure and clear timbres, similar to how in Gamelan music each instrument's sound remains independent yet harmoniously unified.

6 The Interpretation of *Pagodes* from Chinese Perspective

6.1 Deconstruction of the Oriental Fantasy in *Pagodes*

The Eastern elements in *Pagodes* are products filtered through Western aesthetics. For example, Debussy's pentatonic mode is not strictly a Chinese pentatonic scale, but rather an interwoven combination of whole-tone scales, parallel chords, and pentatonic fragments—an abstract reorganization of Oriental scales by Debussy.

The sustained bass imitates the gong sounds of Gamelan, while the ornamental patterns in the higher register subtly incorporate the granular quality of Asian plucked

instruments. This imitation of exotic timbres is essentially a "distant gaze" of the East by Westerners, carrying a hazy, imaginative quality.

6.2 The Intervention and Integration of Chinese Aesthetics

From the perspective of Chinese pianists, there exists a subtle tension between the exoticized Oriental expressions in *Pagodes* and native ethnic aesthetics. In the interpretation process, one should focus on extracting the "spirit" rather than the "form" of ethnic aesthetics. Chinese music emphasizes "vital rhythmic force"; performers can insert subtle breath pauses in Debussy's sustained phrases, such as releasing the sustain pedal slightly earlier for the left-hand bass notes to imitate the lingering resonance of the 'guqin's echoing sound'. When performing rapid touch segments, instead of legato singing style, one can use a "pointillistic" touch technique with light fingertips that quickly leave the keys, mimicking the harmonics of the guzheng or the tremolo of the pipa, highlighting the transparency and ethereal quality of the sound.

The cyclical nature of Gamelan rhythms already carries a sense of looseness in Debussy's writing. Chinese performers can further weaken the constraints of bar lines by referencing the "Cymbal Roll-off" technique from Peking Opera percussion, allowing the right-hand melody to flow freely like the "water-grinding aria" style of Kunqu. The fixed bass patterns in the left hand can be rendered with more percussive qualities, such as imitating the sound of the wooden fish (mokugyo), creating a contrast of "stillness and motion" or "substance and emptiness" with the right-hand melody.

Debussy's *Pagodes* is itself a product of cultural hybridization. The tasks of Chinese musicians are not to recreate the "Orient", but to reactivate the openness within the music through their own cultural DNA.

7 Conclusion

It is evident that *Pagodes* is not only a representative work of Debussy's exploration of Oriental elements but also an exemplary model of the integration of Oriental musical elements into Western music. Through the creative fusion of pentatonic modes, Gamelan rhythms, and impressionistic harmonies, Debussy created a unique musical style that gives this work its distinctive artistic charm. Future research could further explore Oriental influences in Debussy's other works and analyze his impact on global music history. Additionally, further in-depth studies could be conducted from transcultuality and digitality to better understand and preserve Debussy's musical legacy.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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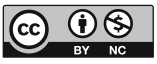
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