

A discussion on the influences of different parts of the world in Claude Debussy's '*Estampes*': I and II

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Claude Debussy's '*Estampes*' is a collection of three piano works, which all convey cultures from different parts of the world. While a lot of Debussy's influence was drawn from eastern music in '*Pagodas*' and classical Spanish flamenco style in '*The evening in Granada*', one cannot ignore his influence by mainstream western music, and this is what gives his work its fusion quality. Debussy provides the listener with new and exotic sounds through his use of modally inflected tonalities, layered textures and distinctive habanera rhythms, which all draw from his influences of music from different parts of the world.

Debussy immediately sets us up with a sense of oriental sounds in '*Pagodas*' with his use of low open fifths in the piano blurred with the use of pedal. This first note low in the piano's tessitura mimics the sound of a gong and this is reinforced by the choice of both *una corda* and sustain pedals which make the piano sound as though it had no hammers imitating the way in which a gong is struck by a soft beater. Not only this, but the shape of the music in the score at the start of '*Pagodas*' is somewhat resembling of the slanted, pointing roofs of Japanese pagodas themselves. The use of open fifths creates a rather empty sound as one would tend to hear from metallic oriental percussion. These gong-like sounds are also used by Debussy in his other works, for instance '*Prelude*' from '*Pour le Piano*' which employs long, gong-like pedal notes together with modal and whole tone themes.

In '*The evening in Granada*', Debussy uses distinctive rhythms to show his influence from Spanish cultures. He openly incorporates staccato habanera dance rhythms as an ostinato in the middle of the texture, in order to give his piano piece the sense of a southern Spanish dance. Furthermore, like the allusion to the gong in '*Pagodas*', here Debussy makes reference to a fast guitar strumming style, which is typical of Spanish dance music. For instance, the fast triplet figures towards the end of the piece sound like a guitar being picked and strummed alternately. The chords being 'strummed' also create parallel harmonies which suit the flamenco style of the song. A comparison can be made to Roland Dyens' '*Tango en Skai*' for guitar, which uses similar dance rhythms of alternating dotted quavers and quavers of strummed extended chords also creating parallel harmonies to evoke the Spanish tango which originates from the Habanera style.

There is a significantly slow harmonic rhythm in Debussy's '*Pagodas*' which is very suitable for the piece in creating the percussive sounds of the Javanese gamelan. Furthermore, in the harmony there is use of conventional major and minor chords as well as suspended chords at times which sound more mellow. These conventional chords indicate to us that Debussy not only had eastern influences, but was also influenced by western music through his choice of chords and the use of French sounding whole-tone melodies, though he tries to avoid some of the traditional western techniques such as having no

cadences. One may make the link to Gustav Holst's 'Beni Mora', which uses a short, cyclical Arabic folk motif for the basis of the piece, although a lot of the piece is influenced by Holst's western background, namely the use of orchestra and prominent use of strings and woodwind.

From an Arabic motif in Holst's piece, Debussy was also inspired by music from the Arabic culture in reference to the Moorish past of Granada. He does this through the use of modally inflected melodies and dissonances such as chromatic appoggiaturas and flattened 3rds. The melodic ideas are predominantly based in the Phrygian mode which sound similar to Islamic melodies with the use of the flattened 2nd, and also the augmented 2nd interval is very common throughout the piece which is characteristic of a Moorish lament. There is also modality in 'Pagodas' which uses pentatonicism very commonly throughout its melodies, evoking the sounds of the Far East. However, the overall conjunct and descending nature of the melody in 'The evening in Granada' makes it sound plaintive and melismatic, vaguely reminiscent of an Islamic call to prayer. Another French composer, Maurice Ravel, has had similar influences by music from different parts of the world and in his ballet 'Mother Goose' he depicts music of Asian origin through his use of pentatonic ideas and woodwind sonorities to create the sense of a story from a distant land.

In 'Pagodas', Debussy uses a layered texture in the piano part, consisting of accompanying block chords in the left hand, high pentatonic melodies in the right hand and usually a conjunct melody in the middle of the texture which alludes to the core melody usually in the middle of the texture in Gamelan music. This makes the music sound like a busy Gamelan group with all the different layers complementing each other to decorate the core melody. Often, Debussy also uses a polarised texture, where the right hand plays extremely high in its tessitura with delicate staccato notes in octaves. Comparison could be drawn with John Cage's 'Three dances for two prepared pianos' which similarly uses the piano to create the effect of a Javanese gamelan group with an extremely busy layered texture reinforced by polyrhythms, and the piece also uses the *una corda* pedal extensively similar to 'Pagodas'.

Overall, Debussy was influenced by music from different parts of the world and these influences are made clear in his music where he successfully conveys styles of music from different cultures in his piece 'Estampes'.