

# Debussy and the Javanese gamelan

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The truly fruitful hours for Debussy were spent in the Javanese campong of the Dutch section, which he enjoyed without number, his attention riveted on the percussive polyrhythm of a gamelan which proved inexhaustible in combinations of ethereal and fleeting timbres . . . the total absorption of his contemplation, that also of his silence constantly listening, already predicted that that kind of "music-image" would leave more than one imprint on his brain and perhaps on his art; but which ones?<sup>1</sup>

Robert Godet (1926)

There were, and there still are, despite the evils of civilisation, some delightful native peoples for whom music is as natural as breathing. Their conservatoire is the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind among the leaves and the thousand sounds of nature which they understand without consulting an arbitrary treatise. Their traditions reside in old songs, combined with dances, built up throughout the centuries. Yet Javanese music is based on a type of counterpoint by comparison with which that of Palestrina is child's play. And if we listen without European prejudice to the charm of their percussion we must confess that our percussion is like primitive noises of a country fair.<sup>2</sup>

Claude Debussy, *Revue S.I.M.* (1913)

## I

The first European account of Javanese music is found in the log-book of Sir Francis Drake, who on his voyage around the world in *The Golden Hind* in 1580 visited the South coast of Java where he had his ship's musicians perform in honour of 'Raia Donan, King of Java'. The Javanese king responded with a performance by his own musicians. Drake notes 'though it were of a very strange kind, yet the sound was pleasant and delightful'.<sup>3</sup>

It was another Englishman, Sir Stamford Raffles,<sup>4</sup> lieutenant-governor of Java from 1811-1816,<sup>5</sup> who was responsible for what was probably the first performance of Javanese music in Europe itself. When Raffles returned to England in 1816, amongst his personal possessions were two complete *gamelans*.<sup>6</sup> Travelling with him was a high ranking Javanese, Ráden Rána Dipúra,<sup>7</sup> an accomplished musician who was probably responsible for checking the information on music contained in Raffles's remarkable *History of Java*.<sup>8</sup>

Raffles writes:

Raden Rana Dipura, a native of Java, who accompanied me to England, played on this instrument [the *gambang kayu* - a kind of xylophone] several of his national melodies before an eminent composer, all of which were found to bear a strong resemblance to the oldest music of Scotland, the distinctive character of both, as well as of Indian music in general, being determined by the want of the fourth and seventh of the key and of all the semitones.

A footnote to this passage adds: 'The same observation has, I believe, been made on the character of Grecian music'.<sup>9</sup>

The inaccuracy of this "observation" is less important than the association made between the music of the Far East, European folk music and that of ancient Greece. These ideas were still current a century later, for the content of this passage is clearly the basis for the entire section on music written by Donald Maclaine Campbell, a British Vice-Consul to Java, in his *Java: Past and Present*. (1915) He reinforces the association between the music of ancient Greece and that of Java in two further footnotes suggesting that this 'fact' can scarcely be a coincidence and by pointing out that there was a race of people in Greece called Javan.<sup>10</sup>

This idea may, or may not have been known to Claude Debussy whose 'imaginative geography'<sup>11</sup> embraces all three worlds in works such as 'Danseuses de Delphes' (*Préludes*, Book I), 'Pagodes' (*Estampes*) and *Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire*.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to Debussy's wide ranging eclecticism, important because of the programmatic nature of much of his music, it is worth noting that, in defining orientalism in the period 1765 to 1850, Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance orientale* (1950)<sup>13</sup> identifies

an amateur or professional enthusiasm for everything Asiatic, which was wonderfully synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the seminal; this is a later transposition eastwards of a similar enthusiasm in Europe for Greek and Latin antiquity during the High Renaissance.<sup>14</sup>

Interpreted in this light a large portion of Debussy's output becomes 'oriental' including, even, his opera *Pélleas et Mélisande*, which still stands alone in the theatre for its archetypal freshness and simplicity.

In Raffles's early account of Javanese music it is interesting, too, to observe his farsightedness in considering a potential use for Javanese musical instruments in a western musical context:

The gongs<sup>15</sup> are perhaps the noblest instruments of the kind that have been brought to Europe: I am assured that they are very superior to that which was admitted in the terrific scenes of the serious ballet representing the death of Captain Cook. Suspended in frames, and struck by a mallet covered with cloth or elastic gum, they sustain the harmonious triad in a very perfect manner, and are probably the most powerful and musical of all monotonous instruments. They might be introduced with advantage in lieu of large drums. They have the advantage of being mellifluous, and capable of accompanying pathetic strains. The two gongs differ from each other by one note.<sup>16</sup>

Yet despite the wide dissemination of *gamelans* throughout the world today, and despite a number of successful works by twentieth century composers influenced by the *gamelan*, principally by Britten (1913-76),<sup>17</sup> Colin McPhee (1900-64)<sup>18</sup> and Peter Sculthorpe (b.1929),<sup>19</sup> Indonesian musical instruments *per se* have yet to establish a permanent position within Western ensembles.

## II

Ráden Rána Dipúra may have demonstrated all the various instruments of the Raffles *gamelan* to the unnamed 'eminent' composer, but it was not until 1889, the year of the International Exhibition in Paris which marked the centenary of the French Revolution, that the first full *gamelan* performance took place in Europe. This event was part of the Javanese exhibition set out as a kind of village, designed to illustrate the customs and way of life of the Javanese. Situated within the section of the Exhibition dedicated to the French colonies and protectorates, the *Kampong javanaise* was on *l'esplanade des Invalides* not far from the Ammanite Theatre.<sup>20</sup> The cultural events associated with these two

countries proved extremely popular attracting many visitors, amongst whom was the composer Claude Debussy<sup>21</sup> accompanied, according to contemporary documents, by another French composer, Paul Dukas,<sup>22</sup> and a close friend, Robert Godet.<sup>23</sup>

All Debussy's biographers have attached considerable importance to Debussy's first encounter with this music, based principally on accounts given of his experience by three of Debussy's friends, Robert Godet,<sup>24</sup> Julian Tiersot and Judith Gautier,<sup>25</sup> and on several statements made by Debussy himself dating from a letter of 1895 written to Pierre Louÿs who was then travelling to Spain: 'Do you not remember the Javanese music, able to express every shade of meaning, even unmentionable shades and which make our tonic and dominant seem like ghosts?'<sup>26</sup>

Musical evidence of the influence of Javanese *gamelan* is believed to be found in several of Debussy's works, principally 'Pagodes' (1903), 'Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût' (1907) and perhaps also in the *Prélude*, 'Terrasse des audiences au clair de lune' (1913).<sup>27</sup> French ethnomusicologist Constantin Brailoiu is frequently cited for his reference to the orchestra of the *Nocturnes* (1897-9) and *La Mer* (1903-5) as *gamelan stylise*.<sup>28</sup> Traces of *gamelan* influence, it is said, are also to be found in the String Quartet,<sup>29</sup> whilst in the most specific study so far undertaken of this complex subject, Richard Mueller establishes the use of borrowed and stylised Javanese material in the first version of the *Fantaisie* (1889-90) for piano and orchestra, the piano work *Tarantelle styrienne* (1890), the song 'L'échelonnement des haies' (1891), and 'Clair de lune' (1891), the sketches for the uncompleted Chinese ballet *No-ja-li* (1914), as well as in 'Et la lune', already mentioned.<sup>30</sup> To this list, because of its extensive use of the whole-tone scale combined with a paraphrasing technique typical of Javanese music, Jens Peter Reiche adds 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' (1908) from *Images*, Book II.<sup>31</sup>

Detailed analytical studies of Debussy's musical language undertaken by Berman<sup>32</sup> and Ringgold<sup>33</sup> also make considerable claims, based on what is already accepted as sufficient documentation, for the importance of Debussy's contact with the *gamelan*. Typically, Berman writes:

In answer to Robert Godet's question [see prefatory statement], one could cite a whole host of pentatonically inspired, orientally coloured passages in the Debussy literature of which the introduction to 'Sirenes', the opening of *La Mer* and the piano pieces 'Pagodes', 'La Lune qui descend sur le temple qui fût' and 'Voiles' are the most striking.<sup>34</sup>

Even more emphatically, in discussing Debussy's use of harmony in a heterophonic context, he writes:

the motivation for anti-functionality was already alive in Debussy's thought before his critical encounter with Javanese music in 1889. But this motivation would have taken quite a different turn without it; we not only would not have the Debussy we know, but one may well ask whether another Debussyan music - one with the stimulus of the gamelan missing - would have been able to transform the elements of the Romantic legacy into a style as consequential for the evolution of tonality as the one we have. It is doubtful.<sup>35</sup>

Such claims made by a younger generation of scholars become less surprising, though hardly more acceptable, when received in the light of remarks such as those made by Martin Cooper in his influential book, *French Music*, one of the few to appear in the English language. After discussing the, to my mind, much more significant fact of Debussy's possession of an original score (i.e. *not* the Rimsky-Korsakov version) of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, Cooper writes:

Still more radical in their influence were the concerts given by the Javanese *gamelan* orchestras at the Exhibition, where Debussy heard for the first time the pentatonic Oriental scale and sonorities from which string tone was completely absent and the whole musical effect was produced by instruments of percussion. New rhythmic and melodic ideas and, generally, a new approach to musical structure and feeling, were revealed to him by these concerts which left a permanent mark on his writing for the pianoforte and the development of his musical ideals.<sup>36</sup>

To correct one small factual error, the *gamelan* music which Debussy heard did include a string instrument, the two-stringed *rebab*, as will be seen later.<sup>37</sup> As for the larger claims for new rhythmic and melodic ideas and, generally, a new approach to musical structure emanating from this contact, there is not a shred of musical

evidence for any kind of influence which cannot be attributed with much greater validity to more specifically European musical sources including the music of Wagner, Mussorgsky and the other Russian nationalist composers (also heard at the 1889 Exhibition), the piano works of Greig, Liszt and Chopin, plainsong, gypsy music and Spanish folk music, with which Debussy was acquainted all his life.

The Cooper passage quoted above is presumably an imaginative elaboration of an even earlier account given by one of Debussy's principal early biographers, Oscar Thompson:

New musical vistas were opened for him, not by the printed pages of imported or domestic scores, but by unfamiliar sounds that attracted his sensitive ear at the Exposition Universelle of 1889-90 . . . where in open air, or in tents or booths, native musicians from the Far East brought to Paris a medley of the exotic. For most visitors, this was merely "atmosphere". For Debussy, some of it, at least, was a revelation. Javanese and Annamite orchestras chiefly fascinated him . . . the tuned drums of the East were a new source by rhythmic subtlety and excitement. The persistent use of the pentatonic scale altered and, for the moment, freshened melodic utterance. In long-drawn tremolos of the percussion instruments, with their peculiar tuning, were promptings for those successions of ninths that subsequently were to become fingerprints on Debussy's manuscripts. In the minor pulsations of the *Gamelang*, Debussy found an antidote for the great surges of the Wagnerian orchestra.<sup>38</sup>

As a possible source of much confusion the above passage requires some brief commentary, for the writer, perhaps drawing on Julien Tiersot,<sup>39</sup> clearly has no first-hand knowledge of Javanese *gamelan* music, nor indeed of what Debussy actually heard at the Exposition - to date, no-one has clarified this second area (see section III of this paper). To refute some of the inaccuracies in this passage: firstly, Debussy's earliest knowledge of Wagner, a genuinely profound influence, came through the score of the *Tannhäuser* overture, introduced to the young Debussy by his teacher at the Conservatoire, Albert Lavignac. Lockspeiser writes:

The young professor and his eager pupil became so absorbed in the novel Wagnerian harmonies that they forgot all sense of time. When they eventually decided to leave they found themselves locked in and were obliged to grope their way out,

arm in arm, down the rickety stairs and the dark corridors of the crumbling scholastic building.<sup>40</sup>

By the time Debussy was the winner of the *Prix de Rome* (1885) he was madly 'Wagnerian to the pitch of forgetting the simplest rules of courtesy'.<sup>41</sup> He did not, however, attend a performance of a Wagner opera until *Lohengrin* was given in Paris in 1887 (also the year in which the Dutch government presented a complete *gamelan* to the Conservatoire). In the two summers following, 1888 and 1889, in the company of Robert Godet, Debussy travelled to Bayreuth where he heard *Tristan*, *Parsifal* and *Die Meistersinger*.<sup>42</sup>

Wagner's music itself provides a number of instances of the prolonged use of a major triad with added sixth and ninth, the delicious pentatonic harmony so much used by Debussy and which is often wrongly attributed to the influence of his encounter with the *gamelan*; see, for example, the 'Waldweben' of *Siegfried*.<sup>43</sup> As for considering the *gamelan* as the source for the chains of ninth chords found in Debussy's music, this idea borders on silliness. It is presumably based on Tiersot's account of the tremolo chord formed by the Javanese *angklung* ensemble, reinforced by the tuned drum which accompanied it, as shown in Example 1. Amusingly, Tiersot himself relates this chord to Wagner: 'And what is this chord? A chord of the ninth, a full, rich harmony, absolutely modern, a Wagnerian chord, of which one can find characteristic examples in *Tristan and Isolde* and the *Meistersingers*. Here is proof of the artistic sentiment of the Javanese'.<sup>44</sup>

The clue to what is possibly the main reason for such an exaggerated invocation of the *gamelan* as an important influence upon Debussy's music lies in Thompson's final absurd sentence; the *gamelan* provides a convenient, and at that period, incontrovertible foil for Wagner's continuing influence in Debussy's music at the very beginning of the period of the composer's publicly expressed dissatisfaction with Wagner's ideas



Example 1: *Angklung* tremolo (Tiersot, p.35)

and techniques and his hold upon French music. This dissatisfaction in later years grew into outright hostility. It is possibly this attitude which in the eyes of Debussy's commentators cast a view across a continuing, subtle, if not all-pervasive Wagnerian influence, which threads its way, however finely disguised, through precisely those compositions generally regarded as Debussy's most mysterious, most exotic and therefore most orientally inspired. The origins of Debussy's static, impressionistic textures surely flow more convincingly as tributaries from the larger river of Wagner's *Rheingold* Prelude than from any other source.

### III

A considerable part of the research for this paper has been an attempt to answer the question of what *gamelans* Debussy heard at the International Expositions of 1889 and 1900. The findings add to the confusion but perhaps also clear the path for a Javanese musical expert to answer the remaining unresolved questions.

All the accounts, including the normally irreproachable Edward Lockspeiser, firstly, mention that the *gamelan* which Debussy heard was from Jogjakarta<sup>45</sup> and, secondly, refer to the amazing *bedayas*<sup>46</sup> as the quartet of young girl dancers who so captured the imaginations of Parisian audiences at the Exposition of 1889.<sup>47</sup>

Neither the origin of the *gamelan* nor the description of the dancers as *bedayas* is supported in evidence unearthed by Anik Devries in his historical article on the music of the Far East presented at the 1889 Exhibition.<sup>48</sup> Devries states that there were sixty Javanese of whom twenty were women drawn from five different provinces in Java. Quoting from the *Dossier estampe Va 271 h (tome IX) de la Bibliotheque nationale*, he gives the distribution as follows:

Thirty-two were from Preanger [a mountainous region South East of Batavia], known for its coffee, eleven came from Batavia [now Djakarta], seventeen were residents of Bantam, an area further west in the island. From the point of view of race, fifty of the natives were Sundanese, a tribe living in the western part, the ten others were from central Java, eight from Surakarta and two from the sultanate of Djogjakarta.<sup>49</sup>

If these statistics are taken to include the four dancers, their two attendants, the girls' parents -

all mentioned by Devries - as well as the gamelan musicians, Jogjakarta becomes an impossible place of origin for the *gamelan*. Two musicians can scarcely have produced the 'full and powerful orchestral tone' described by Judith Gautier.<sup>50</sup>

The descriptions of the four dancers provide some further interesting evidence. According to Devries's findings, 'these were attached to a ballet troupe (composed of twenty-eight dancers) of Prince Mangko-Negoro,<sup>51</sup> a Javanese king living at Solo (actually Surakarta seat of the ancient Mataram kingdom)'.<sup>52</sup> From Arthur Pougin's description we learn that 'all four were drawn from the top class of their profession, *les Serimpi*, a privileged cast, whose members were born, lived and died in the prince's household. They are trained in their particular dance from early childhood, remain virgins and enjoy great respect . . .'.<sup>53</sup>

The central Javanese courtly tradition supports two distinct [female] dance forms,<sup>54</sup> the *bedaya*, a group dance performed by seven or nine dancers and the *serimpi*, performed by two or four dancers:

These dances are also dramatic expressions of portions of a mythical story; often the part chosen is a battle scene, and consequently the *serimpi* dances usually end in a dance-fight . . . The compositions are arranged symmetrically with symmetrical ground-plans, that is, all dancers in the group continuously perform similar movements. The choreography and formations are less symbolic than those of the more abstract *bedaya* form. Thus the *serimpi* arrangements are closer to actual human behaviour and actions such as fighting, offering and receiving, weeping etc. . . the story is explained and recited by a story teller and the chorus is accompanied by the *gamelan* music.<sup>55</sup>

All the contemporary evidence (including a photograph) supports the fact that the dancers were not the *bedayas* at all but the *serimpi* described above.

Another descriptive account of the *serimpi* dance which goes much further in capturing the refined sensuality and exoticism of this dance is given by Donald Maclaine Campbell. From him we learn that

The music is slow, and the performance is on the *gamelan salendro*,<sup>56</sup> verses from the romances of Panji, descriptive of the attire and beauty of the wives and concubines of that hero, are chanted as a prelude to the entertainment and during its

performance. When the *serimpi* perform they glide forth from their chambers across the courts into the centre of the gilded audience-hall, led by two elderly matrons, who are their caretakers, teachers and their admonishers if the sultan desires their punishment . . . The dancers are in the age from ten to fourteen . . . They are the choicest beauties of Java, selected for the royal bed . . . Throughout the whole performance their eyes are directed modestly to the ground, and their body and limbs are by slow movements thrown into every graceful attitude that the most flexible form is capable of. . .<sup>57</sup> The *bedayas*, who perform a figure dance by eight persons, are in some respect to the nobles what the *serimpi* are to the sovereign. They are dressed nearly in the same manner as the *serimpi*, though not so richly or expressively.<sup>58</sup>

If these dancers were accompanied by a *gamelan* other than one from the court at Surakarta, and anything in this Javanese musical medley may have been possible, it is more likely, based on Devries's statistics, that the *gamelan* which Debussy heard on this occasion was of Batavian origin.<sup>59</sup> Could it be that these musicians had been especially trained in the music of the sacred *serimpi* dances of Prince Mangkunegara's court and these were performed without the parts of narrator and chorus? Nowhere in the accessible literature have I found any description of what is to Western ears the most prominent characteristic of all in performances by the central Javanese court *gamelans*, the singing.<sup>60</sup>

For example, in discussing *Sindénan lampah sekar*, a customary form of music accompanying the *bedaya* and *serimpi* dances, Jaap Kunst writes: 'In this, the singing is accompanied only by the colotomic instruments (i.e. *Ketak*, *kenong*, and *gong*); a purely rhythmic instrument (*Kemanak*) a few paraphrasing instruments (*gambang*, *gender*), and an agogic instrument (the *Ketipung*). The cantus firmus instruments, however, (*sorons* etc.) remain silent'.<sup>61</sup>

This, however, does not sound at all like the *gamelan* described<sup>62</sup> and transcribed<sup>63</sup> (see Example 2 overleaf) by Tiersot, who specifically mentions the use of the *bonang-grave* (see line 4 of Example 2) which he perceives as the principal instrument of the orchestra. Could it be that, influenced by Western distaste for the particularly nasal tones of Javanese singing, especially that of the female voice,<sup>64</sup> the Dutch organisers had persuaded the musicians to omit the vocal parts

in favour of the only string instrument, the *rebab*, a kind of two-stringed bowed fiddle, an instrument featured prominently in Tiersot's transcription (see line 2 of Example 2) and in descriptions of the music?<sup>65</sup>

Quite uncharacteristic, too, of traditional Javanese performance practice, was the 'overture' performed by an *angklung* ensemble of eight musicians and a drum, probably of Sundanese origin<sup>66</sup> which at the 1889 Exposition signalled the beginning of every *gamelan* performance.<sup>67</sup>

The *angklung* are instruments comprising two or three bamboo pipes suspended in a bamboo

Example 2: Tiersot's transcription of *gamelan*. The subtitle reads: 'La première ligne renferme le contrepoint du bonang; la seconde, le chant du rebab; la troisième, les parties d'harmonicas et de xilophones; la quatrième, le bonang grave et les gongs; enfin, la cinquième, les instruments à percussion: une sorte de sistre et un tambour frappé par une seule baquette'.

frame held in the hand and shaken, each instrument sounding one note:

The marches performed by the *angklung* are very characteristic. Their interest is purely harmonic and rhythmic, not melodic. The successive entries begin in the character of a slow march, gradually becoming more animated as each of the instruments enter, then the tempo becomes quicker . . . the drum acts as the time keeper for the ensemble masking the strong beats with a fundamental note.<sup>68</sup>

It is possible to imagine that the unusual sound of these instruments whose spirit is captured in a contemporary 'transcription' by Louis Benedictus (see Example 3), might have suggested to Debussy the pizzicato textures in the scherzo movement of the String Quartet. However it is interesting to note a counter claim for the influence of Spanish music by Manuel de Falla: 'the second movement of the String Quartet, the greater part of which, if only because of its texture, might well be one of the most beautiful Andalusian dances ever written'.<sup>69</sup> Another striking correspondence between a Benedictus 'transcription' of music heard at the 1900 Exhibition, and Debussy's 'Et la lune' is given by Mueller (see Example 4).<sup>70</sup>

(Ce morceau doit être joué piano jusqu'à la fin)  
Allegretto moderato.

Example 3: Benedictus, *Les Musiques Bizarres à l'Exposition*, I: 'Le Gamelang: Procession des musiciens javanais'.



1. Debussy, *Et la lune*.



2. 'Danse javanaise' (Benedictus, 1900).



3. 'Danse javanaise' (Benedictus, 1889).



Example 4

I have been able to locate only the Benedictus transcriptions of Javanese music heard at the 1889 Exhibition. This set, which, incidentally, bears only the most superficial resemblance to Javanese music, was published by G. Hartmann in 1889, a generous and farsighted publisher whom Debussy met around 1890 and who, from about 1894, provided the composer with a yearly income of 6,000 francs until the publisher's death in the spring of 1900. It is surely possible in these circumstances that Debussy had in his possession the Benedictus 'transcriptions'.

Mueller's 1986 paper, so far the only serious and scholarly attempt to shed light on the musical influence of the *gamelan* on Debussy's work, identifies a Javanese melody, *Wani-Wani*,<sup>71</sup> which he suggests was borrowed by Debussy in the first manuscript version of the piano *Fantaisie* which Debussy composed in 1889. In substantial revisions Debussy made to printer's proofs of the work in 1890,<sup>72</sup> the passage which contains *Wani-Wani* is deleted, although the melody crops up in two subsequent works *Tarantelle styrienne* (1890) and *L'Echelonement des haies* (1891) (see Examples 5a & b). The second use of this melody in particular puts me in mind of the much more familiar melody of the same family quoted in Example 5c. It has been said that Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* suggested to Debussy the idea of using programmatic titles for his two sets of piano *Préludes*.<sup>73</sup>

Two further frequently-cited technical correspondences between the *gamelan* and Debussy's music need comment: firstly, the use



Example 5a: Debussy, melody from *Tarantelle styrienne* (1890), bars 1-4.



Example 5b: Debussy, melody from *L'echelonnement des haies* (1891), bars 1-6.



Example 5c

of the whole-tone scale and, secondly, the heterophonic characteristics of the later works.

Discussing the second of these two 'influences', the term 'heterophony' implies an inner structural melody to which every surface detail or elaboration is subservient. 'Heterophonic' describes a means of organising musical materials in a linear or horizontal manner, rather than in the vertical relationships implicit in functional harmony. Such textures are commonly found in the courtly musical traditions



Example 6: Debussy, *Cloches à travers les feuilles* (*Images*, Book II, 1903-5), bars 1-4.

of China and Japan and indeed, to some extent seem to inform the idea of *lagu* in Javanese *gamelan* music.

I can find no examples of heterophonic textures of this kind in Debussy's works, although striking instances of passages based on the prolongation of a single harmony can be found as early as in the setting of the Verlaine poem 'C'est l'extase' (1887). In this example, a lingering ninth, eleventh and thirteenth chord remains unresolved for the first eight bars until after the line 'C'est la fatigue amoureuse'. Clutching at further straws, there are also passages in several of Debussy's works in which rhythmic stratification bears a superficial resemblance to a similar technique found in Indonesian musical practice. A familiar example can be found in bars 68-9 of 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer' in *La Mer* (1903-5).

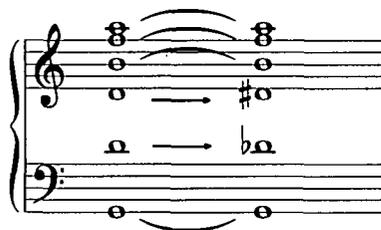
A further technique referred to, related to heterophonic practice is that of paraphrasing of the kind which can be found in, for example, the opening of 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' (see Example 6). But surely such ideas, diatonically based, can be found even in certain of Czerny's scale studies.

There are no instances of heterophonic textures such as those used in Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River*, where the influences of Japanese *noh* and *gagaku* traditions are remarkably contained within the cradle of the European medieval mystery play.

In his illuminating study, *Impressionism in*

*Music*, Christopher Palmer writes: 'Also of oriental origin is that most elusive and evocative of scale formations, that of the whole-tone scale, which never before had attained such pre-eminence in Western music.'<sup>74</sup> Palmer's confusion arises probably from descriptions of the Javanese *slendro* as a scale consisting of nearly equi-distant intervals, as distinct from the *pelog* which is made up of much larger and smaller intervals.<sup>75</sup>

Contemporary evidence supports the idea that Debussy heard a *gamelan* in *slendro* tuning at the Exposition in 1889. Even allowing for the distinct regional variations of tuning shown in various studies of Indonesian music,<sup>76</sup> and for internal variations in tuning within different octaves in individual *gamelans*, nowhere does a sonority emerge which is remotely like that of the whole-tone scale. Schoenberg is surely much closer to the mark when he shows in his *Theory of Harmony* how the whole-tone scale can be derived from the chord of the dominant ninth, much favoured by Debussy, by simultaneously raising and lowering the fifth degree.<sup>77</sup>



Example 7

This derivation is supported by Berman who draws attention to Debussy's use of this scale as a kind of dominant. He writes:

Even in 'Voiles' (*Préludes*, I, 1910), traditionally considered the most "aimless" evocation of the whole-tone scale, there is a perceptible dominant function in the measures just preceding the pentatonic passage on E-flat [see bars 38-47]. The recognition of this dominant preparation for E-flat more than helps to explain why the B-flat has acted as a pedal from the beginning of the piece.<sup>78</sup>

The whole-tone scale has been in existence in Western musical literature from a considerably earlier period, its tonally disruptive function noted as early as Mozart's *Musical Joke*, K.522.<sup>79</sup> Other examples are commonly found in the music of the Russian nationalists, as well as in piano works by Chopin<sup>80</sup> and Liszt.<sup>81</sup>

The *slendro* scale corresponds more nearly with the anhemitonic pentatonic scale, the sonority so frequently used by Debussy, a scale made up of major seconds and minor thirds. A frequently-cited pioneering study of pentatonicism in Debussy's music by eminent French ethnomusicologist Constantin Brailoiu notes:

Pentatony in his composition is not an unconscious or reflex-like reminiscence. He proves it himself by referring to it whenever he wants to evoke something "not from here": *Pagodes*, the exotic herdsman and the English soldier of *La boîte à joujoux*; the honourable S. Pickwick; *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (conveying a kind of mysteriousness). This admitted pentatony aiming at *couleur locale* serves in a way as a screen for all that emerges from his works, if not always dissimulated but, at least, very often intimately associated with other components which suddenly evoke or shroud it.<sup>82</sup>

The earliest of Brailoiu's 182 musical examples (still only the tip of the iceberg, for

many, many more uses of this sonority can be found in Debussy's *oeuvre*) dates from 1880, some nine years before he heard the *gamelan*.<sup>83</sup>

The existence of gamelan-like elements in Debussy's music *before* his first contact with this ensemble may well have enabled him to recognise these same elements in *gamelan* music, which in its turn provided a stimulus which encouraged him to use these same elements more extensively in his later compositions. With this thought I can find no special argument especially viewed in the perspective of the almost universal orientalisising elements prevalent in French culture during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century.

Certainly Debussy's contact with the *gamelan* in 1889 was inspirational and it is extensively documented, unlike the mysterious lack of documentation of the Exhibition of 1900 in which *gamelan* music was also featured, but the real sources for the evolutionary aspects within Debussy's musical style lie not in the *gamelan* tradition, which can only have made the most fleeting of impressions, but in sources much closer to home, overwhelmingly in the music of Wagner, and also in the music of the Russian nationalists (especially Mussorgsky), Chopin and Liszt, French composers such as Franck and Chabrier, the revival of ancient church music and Spanish folk-music.

At most, Debussy's contact with the *gamelan* provided a catalyst through which the techniques and materials used to suggest the orient, the mysterious, the far-off, the elemental, the sensuous, already present within the Western musical language could be more fully absorbed, focused, extended and transmitted in a body of works which are among the most dream-like evocations of an exquisitely refined sensuality ever created in the West.

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Godet, 'En Marge de la marge', *Revue musicale*, VII (May 1926), 56-67.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, rpt (London: 1962-5; Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press, 1978) I, 115.
- <sup>3</sup> Jaap Kunst, *Music in Java: Its history, its theory and its technique* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1949), I, 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) is more commonly known for the creation of Singapore and the establishment of the Royal Zoological Society.
- <sup>5</sup> The British presence in Java at this time was bought about through the Napoleonic Wars. France conquered the Netherlands in 1795; a few years later the Dutch East India Company was dissolved and the new Dutch government assumed control of its affairs. In 1810 Napoleon put his brother, Louis Bonaparte, on the throne of Holland and the Indies became French territory. The British, under the direction of Lord Minto, quick to seize advantage of French weakness in this far corner of Napoleon's empire, succeeded in gaining control of Java. Raffles, apart from his innovative land-rent system, is particularly noteworthy for his deep interest in the life and culture of the Javanese as reflected in his comprehensive *History of Java* (London, 1817). Java was restored to Dutch control in 1816 after the Congress of Vienna.
- <sup>6</sup> One of these *gamelans* is housed in the British Museum, the other at Claydon House, a National Trust property at Bletchley in Buckinghamshire. The British Museum has published a monograph, *The Raffles Gamelan: A Historical Note* (London: British Museum, 1970), edited by William Fagg, on their *gamelan*. This publication, besides providing a number of beautifully detailed illustrations of the instruments, reproduces the section on music from Raffles's *The History of Java*.
- <sup>7</sup> Fagg notes, somewhat mysteriously, that although Ráden Rána Dipúra was in England for several years (until Raffles's return to the East in 1820) and gave at least one performance, possibly using the instruments now housed in the British Museum, Raffles's biographers, including his widow, barely mention the visit, while the importation of the *gamelan* is completely overlooked.
- <sup>8</sup> Fagg, *Raffles Gamelan*, p.9.
- <sup>9</sup> Fagg., *Raffles Gamelan*, p.25.
- <sup>10</sup> Campbell, *Java Past and Present* (London: William Heinemann, 1915), II, 1015.
- <sup>11</sup> The term 'imaginative geography' is borrowed from Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979). The special interest shown by French scholars in modality dates from Beaulieu's *Mémoire sur quelques airs qui sont dans la tonalité grégorienne* of 1858.
- <sup>12</sup> Of course, as an 'imaginative geographer', Debussy's boundaries are even wider than suggested here and include also Spain (the songs 'Fantoches' and 'Mandoline', the piano pieces *Masques*, 'Les collines d'Anacapri', 'La Peurta del Vino', 'Sérénade interrompue', *Lindaraja*, 'La soirée dans Grenade' and the orchestral *Ibéria*), Portugal (*Danse profane* for harp and strings), ancient Egypt (the ballet, *Khamma*, and piano pieces, 'Canope' and 'Pour l'égyptienne'), India (possibly 'La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune') and China (the incompleting ballet *No-jali* and arguably the piano piece 'Pagodes' and the first movement of *La Mer*).
- <sup>13</sup> Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale* (Paris, 1950).
- <sup>14</sup> Schwab quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, p.51.
- <sup>15</sup> The gongs referred to are the large bronze gong *ageng*, approximately three feet in diameter of which one or two are found in each *gamelan*.
- <sup>16</sup> Sir Stamford Raffles, *History of Java*, I, 469-72.
- <sup>17</sup> Britten visited Bali during his Far Eastern tour of 1956. His works in which stylisation of *gamelan* elements is most easily detected are the ballet score for *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1956) and the ballet scenes associated with Tadjio in *Death in Venice* (1973).
- <sup>18</sup> Canadian-born Colin McPhee, who shared his enthusiasm for Balinese music with Britten, is better known as the author of the monumental and influential study *Music in Bali* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) than as a composer. His orchestral composition *Tabuh Tabuhan* (1935-6), which was written directly from the inspiration he received whilst living in Bali from 1931 to 1935, incorporates many Balinese musical elements. A particularly fascinating analysis of this and other works by McPhee is made by Richard Mueller in, 'Imitation and stylisation in the Balinese music of Colin McPhee' (Ph.D. University of Chicago 1983).
- <sup>19</sup> In the early 1960s, Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe, in the tradition of Percy Grainger (1882-1961) who advised young composers to look to the musical cultures of Australia's neighbours in Asia and the Pacific for their inspiration, and stimulated by the appearance of Colin McPhee's *Music in Bali*, composed three works which use directly borrowed as well as stylised Balinese musical materials: the orchestral *Sun Music III* (1966), *Tabuh Tabuhan* for wind quintet and percussion (1968) and String Quartet No. 8 (1969). Discussions of these works, as well as the Asian influence in Sculthorpe's music in general, can be found in Michael Hannan, *Peter Sculthorpe: his music and ideas 1929-1975* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1982), pp. 83-85, 86-88, 89-91 and 68-71, respectively. Interestingly, Sculthorpe's first visit to Bali was in 1973 and, somewhat ironically in the light of his earlier involvement, marks the end of his conscious use of Balinese musical materials as an element in his compositions.
- <sup>20</sup> Anik Les Musiques, 'Les Musiques d'Extreme-Orient à l'Exposition Universelle de 1889', *Cahiers Debussy Nouvelle Serie*, (1977), 24-37. Although many important details remain unestablished I am nevertheless indebted to Devries who, although not an ethnomusicologist, has uncovered information which goes some way towards dispersing the mists which surround what actually took place in the *Kampong javanais*.
- <sup>21</sup> Oscar Thompson, *Debussy: Man and Artist* (New York: Dover, 1967), pp.91-2.
- <sup>22</sup> Dukas (1865-1935) was a fellow-pupil of Ernest Guiraud, Debussy's composition teacher, and is best known for his descriptive orchestral work *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and the opera *Ariadne and Bluebeard*. Guiraud was known to be sympathetic to both Wagner and exotic musical influences.
- <sup>23</sup> Godet's (1866-1950) friendship with Debussy dates from their visits to Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889. A fervent Wagnerian, he was also one of the first French critics to recognise Mussorgsky's genius and undertook a study of

the historical background of the characters in *Boris Godounov*. He was also an orientalist and travelled in his youth to Java and other Far Eastern countries. Towards the end of his life he translated historical and aesthetic works on India and Mohammedan civilization by Alfons Vaeth and Westermarck.

<sup>24</sup> See Godet, 'En Marge de la marge'.

<sup>25</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 115.

<sup>27</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 114.

<sup>28</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 116 n.

<sup>29</sup> Roger Nichols, *Debussy* (London: OUP, 1972), p.21.

<sup>30</sup> Mueller, 'Javanese influence on Debussy's *Fantaisie and Beyond*', *19th Century Music*, vol.10 no 2 (Fall 1986), 157-186.

<sup>31</sup> Reiche, 'Die theoretischen Grundlagen javanischer Gamelan-Musik und ihre Bedeutung für Claude Debussy', *Zeitschrift für Musiktheorie*, 3 (1972), 5-15.

<sup>32</sup> Laurence David Berman, 'The Evolution of tonal thinking in the works of Claude Debussy' (Ph.D. Harvard University 1965).

<sup>33</sup> John Robert Ringgold, 'The Linearity of Debussy's music and its correspondences with the Symbolist esthetic: developments before 1908' (Ph.D. University of Southern California 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Berman, 'Evolution of tonal thinking', p.206.

<sup>35</sup> Berman, 'Evolution of tonal thinking', p.214.

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, *French Music: from the death of Berlioz to the death of Fauré* (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p.90.

<sup>37</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Thompson, *Debussy*, p.92.

<sup>39</sup> Tiersot's three articles, 'Promenades à l'exposition universelle', *Le Ménestrel* (Paris) 26 May, 30 June and 14 July 1889, are quoted in Thompson's bibliography.

<sup>40</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London: Eulenberg, 1979), p.19. For the special historical perspective of Debussy's encounter with *gamelan*, following so soon on the heels of his visits to Bayreuth, this whole section (pp.18-20) is important reading.

<sup>42</sup> Debussy's complicated life-long, love-hate relationship with the music of Wagner is also extensively and perceptively documented by Holloway.

<sup>43</sup> For further commentary upon Wagner's nature evocations as forerunners of the important impressionist-symbolist techniques with which Debussy's music is principally associated see Christopher Palmer, *Impressionism in Music* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), pp.91-108.

<sup>44</sup> Tiersot, *Musiques Pittoresques: Promenades musicales à l'Exposition de 1889* (Paris, 1889), p.35.

<sup>45</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 114. It should be noted that this passage cites Judith Gautier describing the *gamelan* heard at the 1900 Exhibition as being from Solo, Bali - a marvellous example of geographical confusion which Lockspeiser lets pass unremarked. Solo is Surakarta in Central Java, not Bali.

<sup>46</sup> Godet and Tiersot, as cited in Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 113-5.

<sup>47</sup> Each compared the Javanese dancers with some heroine of his choice. One imagines *Salambo*, another the Queen

Rarahu. One of my fellow music critics actually thought of the flower maidens in *Parsifal*. One of the dancers - Wackiem is her name - with her sweet serious face, her shoulders and bronze arms emerging from under a curiously draped gold-embroidered costume and wearing on her head either a gold helmet or white lotus flowers, is the living image of a little Indian divinity. Another is Gamina, almost Pamina of *The Magic Flute*; and indeed an association with Mozart's masterpiece with its mysterious ceremonies and its invocations to Osiris and Isis, is by no means out of place.' Tiersot, *Musiques pittoresques*, quoted in Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 114.

The four girls are identified by Devries, 'Les Musiques d'Extrem-Orient', p.33: Vakiem, Sariem, Soekia and Tanimah, aged respectively 12, 14, 13 and 16 years. Devries's article contains a photograph which shows the four girl dancers in the costumes supplied by 'Le Prince de Solo' and accompanied by the two attendant 'admonishers' mentioned by Maclaine Campbell.

<sup>48</sup> Devries, 'La musique d'Extreme-Orient', pp.24-37.

<sup>49</sup> Devries, 'La musique d'Extreme-Orient', p.33.

<sup>50</sup> See Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, I, 115.

<sup>51</sup> Mangko-Negoro is presumably Prince Mangkunegara of Surakarta.

<sup>52</sup> There are two different dance styles in Java emanating from the division of the ancient Mataram Kingdom (central Java) into two distinct kingdoms, Jogjakarta and Surakarta in 1755. The Dutch subdivided Surakarta into the Surakarta Kingdom and Mangkunegaran Princedom; and in 1812 the English divided Jogjakarta into the Jogjakarta kingdom and the Pakualam Princedom.

<sup>53</sup> Pougin, *Le Théâtre à l'Exposition universelle de 1889. Notes et descriptions, histoire et souvenirs* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1890), quoted by Devries, p.33.

<sup>54</sup> A third court dance, the *bekan lawung* (lance dance), dating from the seventeenth century, is performed by men.

<sup>55</sup> Koentjaraningrat, 'Javanese Court Dances', in *Preservation and Presentation of Traditional Music and Dance in Asia* (Tehran: Unesco, 1978), pp.71-72.

<sup>56</sup> Javanese musical scales are of two distinct types: the *slendro*, the five-note scale referred to here, characterised by intervals corresponding approximately with Western tempered minor 3rds and major 2nds and the *pelog*, a seven-note scale (in which two notes are often suppressed), containing larger and smaller intervals sometimes corresponding to the Western intervals of the major 3rd and minor 2nd.

<sup>57</sup> Maclaine Campbell, *Java past and present*, pp.1024-7.

<sup>58</sup> Maclaine Campbell, *Java past and present*, p.1027.

<sup>59</sup> Jaap Kunst, *Music in Java*, II, 546, lists 88 complete bronze *slendro* orchestras in Batavia.

<sup>60</sup> With the exception of Debussy's own statement (1913) which mentions 'old songs combined with dances' (see prefatory quotation). An example of a *serimpi* dance, *Gending Anglirmendung* is recorded by Doreen Powers on *Java: Music of Mystical Enchantment*, Lyrichord LLST 730. This is in the *pelog* mode which was apparently not heard in *gamelan* performances in 1889.

<sup>61</sup> Kunst, *Music in Java*, I, 128. He here cites the musical example mentioned in the note above as being typical of the music accompanying the *serimpi* dances.

<sup>62</sup> Tiersot, *Musiques pittoresques*, p.34.

<sup>63</sup> As reproduced in Reiche, 'Theoretischen Grundlagen'. These four bars Tiersot regarded as a kind of *stretta*.

<sup>64</sup> Kunst, *Music in Java*, I, 122, writes: 'The ideal which Javanese vocal music strives after is different from that of the Western manner of singing. As all Eastern singing, the Javanese variety, too, is more or less nasal . . . Europeans do not like Javanese singing especially by females; but whoever has taken the trouble to settle down to listen to it with an unprejudiced mind and without allowing himself to be discouraged by an initial lack of appreciation, will find that this vocal music will gradually reveal to him unsuspected beauties'.

<sup>65</sup> See Devries, 'Les Musiques d'Extreme-Orient', p.36.

<sup>66</sup> 'Although this well-known instrument was, and/or is, spread over the whole of Java, Madura and Bali, as well as part of Sumatra and Borneo, it is not, at present, found anywhere so generally as in the Sundanese mountain districts, for which reason it is often wrongly taken to be a typical Sundanese instrument.' Kunst, *Music in Java*, I, 361.

<sup>67</sup> Devries, 'Les Musiques d'Extreme-Orient', p.34.

<sup>68</sup> Devries, 'Les Musiques d'Extreme-Orient', p.34.

<sup>69</sup> Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, II, 256.

<sup>70</sup> Mueller, 'Javanese Influence', p.170.

<sup>71</sup> Mueller, 'Javanese Influence', pp.115-6.

<sup>72</sup> Mueller, 'Javanese Influence', p.180.

<sup>73</sup> David Cox, *Debussy Orchestral Music* (London: BBC, 1974), p.6.

<sup>74</sup> Palmer, *Impressionism*, p.21.

<sup>75</sup> See note 56.

<sup>76</sup> See Wasisto-Surjodiningrat, P.J. Sudarjana, and Adhi Susanto, *Tone Measurements of Outstanding Javanese Gamelans in Jogjakarta and Surakarta* (Indonesia, 1972).

<sup>77</sup> *Theory of Harmony*, transl. Adams (New York: Philosophical Lib., 1948), p.325.

<sup>78</sup> Berman, 'The evolution of tonal thinking', p.213.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Piston, *Harmony*, rev. ed. (London: Gollancz, 1978), p.482.

<sup>80</sup> Chopin, *Prelude Op.28 No 19*.

<sup>81</sup> Liszt, *Unstern*.

<sup>82</sup> Brailoiu, 'Pentatony in Debussy's music', in *Studia memoriae Belae Bartók sacra*, 3rd ed. (Budapest, 1956; London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1959), p.378.

<sup>83</sup> See Debussy's song 'Fleur de Blés', c. 1880, rev. 1891.