

Claude Debussy, among the circle of painters and friends in the plastic arts to which he belonged and frequented by preference, maintained a relationship with Camille Claudel (1864-1943) the student and model of August Rodin. Camille, as well as her brother Paul Claudel, passed on to Debussy their enthusiasm and fascination for the culture of the Far East, feelings which were intensified more by articles on China written by his friend Victor Segalen.

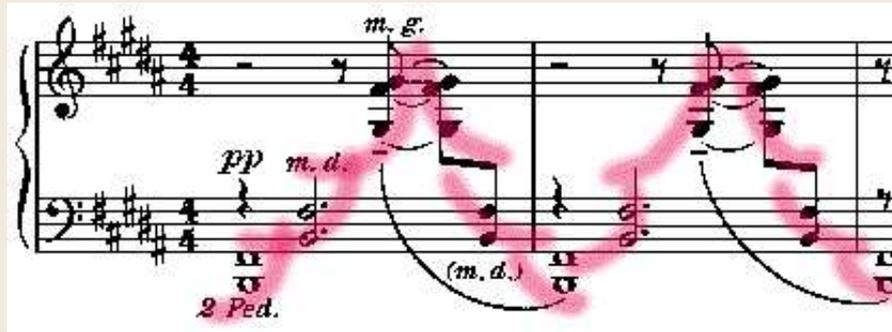
Debussy used musical elements from the Far East in “Pagodas” one of the three typical pieces by the composer who, without any thematic relation between them, composed “Estampes” considered the first complete, stylistically mature work for the piano and at the same time the first with poetic titles. We know that pagodas are temples in the form of a tower of various (several) superimposed floors narrowing vertical to the top.

In the “World Exhibition” in Paris 1889 and also in 1900 Debussy heard, for the first time, a “gamelan” group from Java and immediately felt enthusiastic and inspired by this music which was unrecognized in Europe and started to incorporate these new musical elements into his compositions.

The “gamelan” orchestra typically composed of an instrumental model, consisting of various types of gongs, metal cymbals and tambourines. Its tonal system, contrary to the European tonal system divides the octave into five intervals and not eight. Fundamentally they use two kinds of scales: Slendro and Pelog which to European ears are heard like pentatonics or whole tones.

Also typical is its musical structure: simplified, we could describe this style saying that the bass instruments play long tones, thus forming a foundation, the central instruments execute moderate notes while the high pitched instruments realize agile and rapid notes, and Debussy consequently used these elements in “Pagodas”.

In the first two beats one can recognize optically the form of a pagoda.



The higher voices in the course of the fragment develop in a linear movement of great extension over various octaves until the end of the piece is reached. Due to the almost exclusive use of the pentatonics the piece acquires a very static character, a character that intensifies exceedingly because of the use of repeated ostinatos that is to say on account of the numerous repetitions of the motives.

We also encounter oriental musical elements in the works of Puccini. His operas “Madame Butterfly” and “Turandot” stand out especially for this reason.

The composer, a native of Luca, had an enormous interest in Japanese musical techniques and wanted to delve deeply into understanding these. The wife of the Japanese ambassador, who in 1902 was in neighboring Viareggio, acquainted him with the Nipponese culture and also sang songs of her country to him.

In Milan he met with Sado Jacco a Japanese singer of tragedies whom he asked to recite different texts so that he could familiarize himself with the sound of the language and he also looked for books, scores and a large quantity of records. With great patience he dedicated himself to acquiring the technique of this difficult notation.

We could presume that the score of Butterfly overflows with Japanese melodies but it is not so. He only used six Japanese original melodies of which he selected some parts.

So, for example, the horns and violins are only heard in the second part of the Japanese national hymn at the entrance of the imperial commissary and the official of the civil registry at the wedding of Cho-Cho-Sans.

A passage of the popular song “My Prince” appears as the theme of Prince Yamadori, and Puccini briefly cites a reason on the Japanese song of spring in the orchestral postlude of the first act when Butterfly and Pinkerton enter the house.

For the oboe and violins he used the complete melody of the song “Cherry Blossom” and takes an original citation from the popular melody “Nihon Bashi” while friends congratulate Butterfly and she tells them that from this moment she is called Madame F.B. Pinkerton. To finish, at the beginning of the second act an ancient Japanese religious melody underlines the oration of Suzuki “Izagi, Izanami...”

It is really admirable how with such artistic ability Puccini used these oriental elements to create local colour. But why do so many passages of the scores sound typically Nipponese?

Because its form relies on the peculiarities of Japanese music. The contemporaries of Puccini used principally the entire tonal scale to produce the exotic colour sonore. He himself profited with this successfully in the theme of Scarpia in his opera “Tosca” although in “Butterfly” he however used this recourse very economically. For instance in the scene with uncle Bonzo in the first act. But almost always it is the pentatonic and the characteristic jumps in the third minors which achieve the oriental colour. Often he also used long pedal tones and parallel chords which accentuated even more this special atmosphere.

We cannot finish without mentioning what subtle instrumentation achieves in giving an exotic touch to this magnificent composition. Puccini did not use the “Japanese flute” or the typical “koto” of strings. Only bells, gong and metalophon were useful to achieve this effect accompanied by a delicate and clear instrumentation which, heeding especially to the sound of the winds, backs up this exotic atmosphere with success.