

CHINESE AND OTHER ASIAN INFLUENCES
IN DEBUSSY'S PIANO MUSIC

by

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates the relationship between Claude Debussy's piano music and various Asian influences, with a particular focus on Chinese influences. Debussy is one of the most prominent composers in the history of Western music, and his music draws on many features for inspiration, among which Asian elements and impressionism are the most representative. Debussy was inspired by Asian music, literature, and painting in many compositions, giving these works distinctive sound qualities as well as artistic appeal.

Based on a comprehensive study of scholarly literature as well as theoretical analysis, this project explores several Asian influences on Debussy and offers reasons for the formation of Asian style in Debussy's music. Particular elements of Asian style examined include Japanese prints and painting, Javanese gamelan music, and the Chinese pentatonic scale. Through the analysis of several of Debussy's piano pieces, including "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut", "La fille aux cheveux de lin", and *Le palais du silence*, this study discusses how Debussy's exotic colors reflect various Asian styles.

Additionally, through research on Chinese music history and theory, this project compares and summarizes several differences between Chinese music and Debussy's own music in various compositions. It also analyzes three Chinese piano pieces in order to make comparisons with Debussy's music.

This research supports the conclusion that Asian influences, including Chinese elements, endowed Debussy with indispensable inspiration and artistic expression in his musical compositions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Achille-Claude Debussy (1862–1918) was an influential French composer of the Impressionist style in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During his life, he composed many well-regarded orchestral pieces, works for theatre, and chamber music, but he also created piano music that became popular throughout the world. Due to the influence of different composers, aesthetics, and exotic cultures, as well as literature, painting, dance, and other artistic fields, he was able to break away from traditional composition techniques and create a unique creative style. Among these influences, Asian factors are among the most prominent for Debussy. Debussy's music is permeated with Asian cultural elements, such as the use of pentatonic scales, inspiration from Japanese prints and Chinese poetry, and gamelan musical elements, which give his music a distinctive flavor and often create a hazy and mysterious atmosphere. Asian influences, including Chinese elements, endowed Debussy with indispensable inspiration and expressive techniques in his music and deserve further study.

Many scholars have conducted multi-dimensional studies on Debussy's musical works from the perspective of cultural associations, but most studies of Debussy's orientalism have focused on the influence of Javanese gamelan music on Debussy, while few have examined Debussy's music from the perspective of Chinese and other Asian influences, such as Japanese art and Chinese elements. For instance, in Roy Howat's book *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, he mainly discusses the relationship between gamelan music, Indian music, and oriental art with Debussy's music. Although his

study explores some other Asian elements besides gamelan music, he does not explain why Debussy's music is closely related to these Asian elements, nor does he mention the influence of Chinese elements on Debussy's music.¹

Moreover, in chapter 3 of Angela Kang's dissertation, she explores how French views of Chinese exoticism emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century and analyzes the influence of the Chinese musical landscape on several French composers, especially Debussy. According to her research, numerous French poems, pieces of literature, art works, and music were inspired by Chinese landscapes during the beginning of the twentieth century, and she states that the influence of Chinese imagery goes far beyond the gamelan music and Japanese music.² Although her study introduces the Chinese influence from a historical aspect and analyzes two specific pieces, there are other piano pieces of Debussy's that are also inspired by Chinese music, and she does not analyze the differences between Debussy's music and Chinese music.

The methodological approach taken in this project is a mixed methodology based on historical musicological research and theoretical analysis. Several of Debussy's works and several Chinese keyboard works will be analyzed and compared, and the relationship between Debussy's compositional concept and Asian (including Chinese) influences will be examined.

Chapter 2 introduces Debussy's early musical learning and his fondness for Asian culture and analyzes the sources and reasons for the Asian and Chinese elements in Debussy's music. The artistic culture of France at that time, as well as Debussy's personal experience, made Debussy deeply fascinated with Japanese artworks. Then, at the World Exposition in 1889, Debussy heard gamelan music and Chinese theatre from the East, which

¹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

² Angela Kang, "Musical Chinoiserie" (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2012), 106–125.

further deepened his interest in Asian culture. Later, Debussy met and became close friends with the sinologist³ Louis Laloy (1874–1944), under whose influence he learned about Chinese culture, poetry, and music.⁴ Debussy incorporated these Asian elements in various musical compositions.

Chapter 3 explores the formation of Debussy’s pentatonic scale, analyzing how the pentatonic scale is used in selected piano pieces and how this music reflects the expression of Asian elements. The pentatonic scale, which is a typical characteristic of Asian music, is widely used in Debussy’s piano music, such as “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” from *Images II* (1907), “La fille aux cheveux de lin” (1909–1910), and *Le palais du silence* (*No-ja-li*) (1914). “Pagodes” (1903), the first piece in *Estampes* (1903), is one of Debussy’s most distinctly oriental piano pieces, in which the composer’s melodic progressions, harmonies, and textures are all suffused with the charm of Asian music. “Asian music” in this respect is characterized by an emphasis on the creation of atmosphere and musical color changes, which implies some hidden meaning behind the music, such as in gamelan music and some Chinese instrumental music. This characteristic is in line with Debussy’s emphasis on impressionism as well.

Chapter 4 investigates the origins and history of Chinese music, explaining the Chinese pentatonic scale and its use in selected piano pieces. The pentatonic scale is the most basic melodic structure in Chinese music and is widely characteristic of this country’s traditional repertory. Pentatonicism also has a very long history in China, beginning in ancient times. Adaptation based on ancient music is one of the most popular techniques used

³ Sinologist, a person who studies or is an expert in Chinese studies, like Chinese language, literature, history, and culture.

⁴ Deborah Priest, ed and trans., *Louis Laloy (1874–1944) on Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1999), 10.

in Chinese piano compositions, such as *Flute and Drum at Sunset* (1972) and *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake* (1975).

Chapter 5 compares Debussy's music with selected Chinese pieces, analyzing the use of pentatonicism in terms of scales, harmonies, and melodies to explore both the differences between Chinese and Debussy's music and the connection of musical aesthetics.

The overall purpose of this project is to explore the characteristics of Asian and specifically Chinese music on Debussy's piano music, as well as to analyze and compare the use of pentatonicism in both Chinese music and in Debussy's piano music. From the review of the current literature, it can be seen that Debussy's piano music and pentatonicism were inspired by various Asian elements. Through historical research and theoretical analysis, this project confirms previous findings and contributes additional evidence that the influence of Asian music and "hidden" or "underacknowledged" Chinese elements are fully reflected in Debussy's piano music, which contributes to his unique style.

Chapter 2

Debussy and Asia

Debussy's compositions are often seen as a reaction against the dominant German Romantic tradition of tonal music, especially Richard Wagner (1813–1883). In rejecting traditional Western conceptions of modes, scales, and harmonies, he drew on his exposure to culture and art from various countries, through the Paris World Exposition and other encounters with Javanese music, Japanese art, and Chinese literature and porcelain. This exposure deeply attracted him and allowed him to add elements of Asian style to his music, which he integrated in terms of both programmatic content and compositional techniques. Especially in his piano works, the harmonic layout, mode, melody, and musical expression have lots of resonances with traditional Chinese cultural elements in their expression of scenery and artistic conceptions. This use of Asian musical elements is therefore central to understanding Debussy's status as an innovative composer.

Brief Biography of Debussy and His First Exposure to Asian Culture

Achille-Claude Debussy was born on 22 August 1862 in the small town of Saint-Germain-en-Laye near Paris, France. He was not born into a musical family, instead, he was born into a middle-class family, and his parents earned their living by running a small china store business. Later, due to the poor business of the china store, his parents had to go to Paris to make a living, finding jobs as a broker and clerk in a printworks.⁵ Debussy's father

⁵ Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5–6.

enjoyed operetta and often took him to the theater. Perhaps due to his father's influence, he was very fond of music from an early age and showed a remarkable musical talent.

In 1870 and 1871, Debussy visited his aunt Clementine in Cannes, where he had his first musical experience and, later, he started to have piano lessons with a violinist, Jean Cerutti.⁶ In 1871, Debussy was fortunate to meet a musician who would become his mentor, Mme Maute de Fleurville (1853–1914). As one of Chopin's students, she recognized Debussy's great musical talent, taught him piano, and encouraged him to study at the Paris Conservatoire.

Although the education at the Conservatoire was very professional, Debussy displayed a growing reluctance to accept traditional musical techniques and rules. His unique understanding and interpretation of music created disagreements with his teachers, who were accustomed to the conventional rules and regulations, and he even had a tense relationship with his piano teacher Antoine François Marmontel (1816–1898).⁷ But in 1880, through the introduction of Marmontel, Debussy met Nadezhda von Meck (1831–1894), who was the patroness of Tchaikovsky (1840–1893), and Debussy became her children's piano teacher and played piano duets with her.⁸ During those days when he worked for von Meck, he had the opportunity to travel to many European countries, like Italy, Russia, and Austria, and was exposed to the music from different countries.⁹

In 1884, Debussy won the Prix de Rome composition competition with his cantata *L'enfant prodigue* (The Prodigal Son), which led him to graduate from the Paris Conservatoire the following year and begin his musical studies in Rome. During his time in

⁶ Louis Laloy, *Claude Debussy* (Paris: Les Bibliophiles Fantaisistes, 1909), 11.

⁷ Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 10–15.

⁸ Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 12–13.

⁹ Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 13.

Rome, Debussy made extensive contacts with some of the most active and influential musicians and composers in Europe at that time. Debussy had the opportunity to visit Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) and was greatly influenced by the piano playing and compositions of Franz Liszt (1811–1886). Debussy was a Wagnerian at this time, but his desire to develop his own style, his sense of purpose in French music, and his experience of the Franco-Prussian War in his childhood led him to abandon the majestic and heavy music of Germany and Austria in search of a new musical style.¹⁰

Debussy's curiosity was sparked by the exoticism prevalent in France in the late 19th century. At the 1889 World's Exposition in Paris, France, where arts and cultures from all over the world gathered, Debussy heard for the first time the sound of Javanese gamelan music.¹¹ The exhibition in 1889 showcased the Annamite Theater, which was from the central east area of Vietnam, as well as a team of four Javanese young woman dancers.¹² Regarding the Annamite Theatre, Roger Nichols observed that the most public reference to it was given by Debussy in a February 1913 newspaper article:

In the Annamite theatre they present a sort of operatic embryo, influenced by China, in which one can recognize the formula of the Ring, only there are more Gods and fewer pieces of scenery...A small, furious clarinet is in charge of emotion; a tam-tam is the organizer of terror...and that's all! No purpose-built theatre, no hidden orchestra. Nothing but an instinctive need for art which has found an ingenious way of satisfying itself; not a trace of bad taste!¹³

The charming timbre of Javanese gamelan music, so deeply different from traditional European music, greatly impressed Debussy. After 1889 he began to compose a great deal of

¹⁰ Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 26–44.

¹¹ Martin Cooper, *French Music: From the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Faure* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 90.

¹² Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 57–58.

¹³ Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*, 57–58.

music; most of his piano works were composed after he became familiar with Javanese gamelan, and many of these pieces were also influenced to varying degrees by other Asian music. Throughout his career, exotic sonorities played an important role in the formation of many prominent pieces, including such works as *La mer* (1903–1905), *Estampes* (1903), *Images* (1901–1907), and the first volume of *Preludes* (1909–1910).

Debussy's Interest in Asian Art

The prevalence of Eastern culture in France in the mid-19th century stimulated many French painters and musicians to take an interest in Asian culture, and Debussy was particularly fascinated by Asian art, such as Japanese prints, ukiyo-e painting (pictures of the floating world), and lacquer crafts. This Japanese and other Asian art provided him with great inspiration for his musical compositions.

In the 1860s, Japanese ukiyo-e was introduced to the European market, and a large number of Japanese artifacts, such as porcelain, lacquerware, folding fans, and clothing, were transported to various parts of Europe and the United States. In 1862, Madame de Soye opened a store called La Porte Chinoise, in the Rue de Rivoli in Paris, where people could view and buy Chinoiserie arts. This small store attracted many literary figures, poets, painters, and artists, such as the poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) and the painter Edouard Manet (1832–1883).¹⁴ Later, at the 1867 World Exposition held in Paris, Japanese handicrafts, costumes, and silks were displayed in large numbers, and the enthusiasm for Japanese culture and art grew in France.¹⁵

Within this boom of Japanese culture, ukiyo-e became a major focus of artists' attention. Ukiyo-e is Japanese folk art, popular after the middle of the Edo period (1603–

¹⁴ Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, Or.: Amadeus Press, 1996), 47–51.

¹⁵ Matthew Brown, *Debussy Redux: The Impact of His Music on Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 135–138.

1867) in Japan, near Edo (present-day Tokyo), where the Tokugawa shogunate was located. Ukiyo-e paintings are a straightforward representation of the tasks and scenes of Edo-period city life, such as beauties, bathing girls, haiku, kabuki, wandering girls, chivalrous warriors, flowery streets, traditional Japanese buildings and pavilions, and tourist scenery, and they are regarded as an “encyclopedia of Edo-period images”.¹⁶ Ukiyo-e not only absorbed Yamato-e and local art painting but also incorporated Chinese Ming and Qing dynasty (1368–1911) printmaking techniques and Western perspective painting. Its main form is woodcut prints, which were initially drawn by painters using brush and ink colors. From the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century, ukiyo-e painting reached a climax, representing the highest achievement of Japanese art.

At the end of the nineteenth century in Japan, ukiyo-e entered a late stage of development. In this period, landscape prints, represented by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), became popular, and the content of ukiyo-e changed from traditional figures to natural landscape scenes. This type of ukiyo-e is often recognized as the most creative ukiyo-e painting. These prints were highly sought after in Europe, influencing many Western masters of painting. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a printmaking boom in Paris, and prints were sold and traded wherever there was a market. Among the great variety of printed artworks, artists were especially drawn to the Japanese ukiyo-e. French nouveau painters, like Claude Monet (1840–1926), gained the artistic inspiration and theoretical basis they were searching for in the concept of Ukiyo-e painting.¹⁷

¹⁶ Xiaolu Liu, *History of Japanese Art* (Beijing: People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 1998), 125–127.

¹⁷ Michel Duchesneau, “Debussy and Japanese Prints,” in *Debussy’s Resonance*, ed. François de Médicis and Steven Huebner (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2018), 303–313.



Figure 2.1. Katsushika Hokusai, *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (Kanagawa oki nami ura), also known as *The Great Wave*, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*), c. 1830–32, polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 10 1/8 x 14 15/16 inches; 25.7 x 37.9 cm. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

“Under the Wave off Kanagawa” is an ukiyo-e landscape print (see Figure 2.1) created by Katsushika Hokusai in 1832. It is one of the most famous prints of ukiyo-e in Japan. Hokusai was already 72 years old when he created this print, at the peak of his painting attainments, and his techniques were sophisticated and skillful. Hokusai’s print mainly depicts the scene of the waves lapping against the ships on the sea of Kanagawa, with the scenery at the foot of Mount Fuji in the background. It combines motion and stillness, which displays the majestic and magnificent beauty of the Mount Fuji area.¹⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, impressionistic art emerged in France, represented by painters such as Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), and Debussy was greatly influenced by these painters as well. At the same time, the impact of

¹⁸ Man Shi, “The Influence of Woodblock Print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* on Photography,” *Han Zi Wen Hua*, no. 14 (2020): 152–153.

Japanese art on the West from the mid-nineteenth century onward was also prominent, and Debussy could not ignore the Japanese and Chinese art and artifacts in such an atmosphere. He was especially inspired by Japanese prints and Chinese drawings.¹⁹

According to Jacques Durand (1865–1928), a famous French music publisher, Debussy was fond of collecting Japanese and Chinese art and artifacts, such as Japanese lacquer paintings, Buddhist statues, and ukiyo-e. Durand, who published Debussy's *La mer*, recalled that he had visited Debussy when he was writing *La mer*:

His study was on the ground floor, with spacious bay windows which flooded it with light, and it opened out on to the garden which surrounded the house. The wide table on which he used to work was cluttered with high-class Japanese objects. His favorite was a porcelain toad [Arkel] which he called his fetish and which he took with him when he moved, claiming he could not work unless it was in sight. Many was the time he lamented to the difficulty of taking his worktable with him on holiday.²⁰

Durand further said: “I also remember, in his study, a certain coloured engraving by Hokusai, representing the curl of a giant wave. Debussy was particularly enamored of this wave. It inspired him while he was composing *La mer*, and he asked us to reproduce it on the cover of the printed score.”²¹

One piano piece that is influenced by Japanese artwork is “Poissons d’or” (Golden Fish) from *Images II* (1907). This piece is inspired by a wooden lacquer panel (see Figure 2.2), which is decorated with two golden carps, seaweed and willow trees in the lower and upper left corners respectively; the eyes of the golden carps are inlaid with rubies, and the willow trunk is inlaid with pearls.²² Although lacquerware was often associated with Japan,

¹⁹ Michel Duchesneau, “Debussy and Japanese Prints,” in *Debussy's Resonance*, ed. François de Médicis and Steven Huebner (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2018), 301–325.

²⁰ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), 194–195.

²¹ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 194–195.

²² Roberts, *Images*, 189–190.

lacquerware has ancient histories in several East Asian countries, including Korea and China. The earliest Chinese lacquerware, for example, unearthed by archaeologists at the Jingtoushan ruins in Yuyao, Zhejiang, China, dates back over 8,000 years.²³ During the 19th century and early 20th century, it was difficult for Europeans to identify the similarities and differences between Chinese and Japanese styles.²⁴ The museum dictionary in Kyoto National Museum of Japan states that “the lacquerware was often called ‘japan’ in the West, showing that lacquerware-making is an Asian art, but the Japanese actually learned the art of making lacquerware from China.”²⁵ During the Warring States period (475–221 BC), lacquerware technology entered into the first heyday of development in China, and later, it reached its peak and spread to Japan and other Asian countries during the Han and Tang dynasties (25–906).²⁶ During the Tang and Song dynasties (960–1279), Japanese artists absorbed a large number of Chinese lacquer techniques and developed them, making lacquerware an important cultural asset for the Yamato nation.²⁷

The lacquer panel owned by Debussy shows willow branches and leaves swaying in the wind, seaweed floating in the water, and golden carps swimming against the current with their fins stretched out due to the turbulence. According to Paul Roberts, a renowned British pianist specializing in Debussy’s music, the inspiration for “Poissons d’or” was not limited to this lacquer panel. It included other Japanese artworks with fish-related themes, such as *The Goddess Kwannon on a Giant Carp* created by Katsushika Hokusai (see Figure 2.3) and the

²³ Hao Wang, “Woodwork Found at Ruins Determined to be China’s Earliest Lacquerware,” *China Daily*, July 7, 2021, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202107/07/WS60e567e3a310efa1bd660593.html>.

²⁴ Pierre Boulez, *Orientalisms: Collected Writings*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Martin Cooper (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 424.

²⁵ Akio, Haino, *Chinese Carved Lacquerware*, Museum Dictionary, Kyoto National Museum, Kyoto, Japan, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/dictio/shikki/chou.html>.

²⁶ Shiguang Qiao, *The Lacquer Art* (Zhengzhou: Elephant Press, 2004), 17–19.

²⁷ Qiao, *The Lacquer Art*, 25–26.

decorative tableware designed by Felix Bracquemond (1833–1914) (emulating Japanese style, see Figure 2.4).²⁸



Figure 2.2. Japanese Lacquer Panel.



Figure 2.3. Katsushika Hokusai: *The Goddess Kwannon on a Giant Carp*.



Figure 2.4. Decorative Plate Designed by Felix Bracquemond.

²⁸ Roberts, *Images*, 190.

The Origin of Asian and Chinese Elements in Debussy's Music

With the rise of Asian culture in France during the middle of the nineteenth century, a significant amount of French poetry, literature, artwork, and music of the early twentieth century were inspired by Chinese landscapes.²⁹ In 1881, while working and living in the home of Nadezhda von Meck, Debussy composed “Rondel Chinois” for voice and piano, which is an unpublished work and was the earliest example of the influence of China (and indeed of Asia) in his music. He set the music to a French poem written by an unknown author. The poem depicts a dreamy scene full of Chinese cultural charm—a beautiful Chinese lady sleeping on a willow boat on a quiet lake, surrounded by azaleas, lilies, and bamboo forests:

Sur le lac bordé d'azalée (On the lake bordered by azalea)
De nénuphar et de bambou (Of water lilies and bamboo)
Passe une jonque d'acajou (Passes a mahogany junk)
À la pointe d'or effilée. (With a tapered golden point.)

Une Chinoise dort voilée (A Chinese lady sleeps in a veil)
D'un flot de crêpe jusqu'au cou. (From a stream of crepe to the neck.)
Sur le lac bordé d'azalée (On the lake bordered by azalea)
De nénuphar et de bambou. (Of water lilies and bamboo.)

Sous la véranda dentelée (Under the jagged veranda)
Un mandarin se tient debout (A mandarin stands)
Fixant de ses yeux de hibou (Staring with his owl-like eyes)
La dame qui passe isolée (The lonely lady passing by)
Sur le lac bordé d'azalée. (On the lake bordered by azalea.)³⁰

This poem gives an impression of Asian style as perceived in Europe in the nineteenth century, bringing audiences into a dreamy and nebulous scene.³¹

Debussy had not personally been to China when he composed this piece; the vast

²⁹ Kang, “Musical Chinoiserie,” 106.

³⁰ Margaret G. Cobb, *The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters*, trans. Richard Miller (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1982), 28–29.

³¹ Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5–20.

majority of influential representations of China came from porcelain ornaments and artworks, as well as books and magazines.³² In France the fondness for Asian culture, especially Chinese and Japanese art, had an upsurge; there were even three Chinese art stores on one street. By 1879, the Didot Bottin³³ had thirty-six boutiques listed under the heading “Chinoiserie et Japonerie,” and auctions of private collections of Chinese and Japanese porcelains had become commonplace.³⁴

Later, at the Paris World Exposition in 1889, Debussy became more directly fascinated by the traditional music of China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, especially gamelan music. The various percussion instruments of gamelan are dominated by distinctive metal instruments, which provide a unique representation of Javanese music and national culture. The core melody of this music is fixed and repetitive, and it is composed of multiple parts, including richly layered acoustics, independent melodies, and interlocking and orderly rhythms.³⁵ These elements are interwoven to make the music flow in a regular cycle. The music is performed mainly by the saron (metallophones), gambang (xylophone), kenong and kethuk (smaller gongs), and bonang (a two-octave range of smaller gongs and most noticeable in the introduction and off-beat interlocking).³⁶ Debussy, who was constantly experimenting with new harmonies and compositional techniques during this period, was fascinated by this mysterious and distinctive sound. He conducted a thorough technical study of gamelan music based on its characteristic melodic and rhythmic forms, and he began to apply these ideas to his own works.

³² Kang, “Musical Chinoiserie,” 109.

³³ Didot Bottin was a famous commercial directory in Paris in the 19th century.

³⁴ Ting Chang, “Collecting Asia: Théodore Duret’s ‘Voyage en Asie’ and Henri Cernuschi’s Museum,” *Oxford Art Journal* 25, no. 1 (2002): 21–22.

³⁵ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 111–113.

³⁶ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 111–113.

After the Paris exposition, Debussy's works with Asian elements began to increase significantly. From a melodic standpoint, Debussy often spreads short melodies through various layers, and the use of melodic materials focuses on repetition and sequential arrangement. The themes used in Debussy's works develop in a similar way to the fixed and recurring core melody in gamelan music and other Asian repertoires. For scales and modes, Debussy used a variety of creative techniques, attempting to break with the traditional European system of major and minor keys, and the most notable characteristic of scales is the use of the pentatonic and whole-tone scales. Moreover, there are several titles with Asian connotations used in Debussy's piano works ("Pagodes" from *Estampes* and "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut" (And the moon descends on the temple that was) in *Images II*), a further sign of the influence of Asian culture.

Reasons for Asian and Chinese Influences in Debussy's Piano Music

The Asian elements in Debussy's piano music reflect the cultural characteristics of diversification, which is caused by a variety of factors. Debussy was influenced by the cultural background of the time, artistic trends of thought, his own living environment, as well as his personal passion for Asian culture, art, and literature. There are three main reasons for the influences of Asian and Chinese culture on Debussy's music.

First, the general cultural context of France at that time embraced an appreciation of Asian culture, which provided Debussy with an exposure to Asia. In the mid-nineteenth century, some European countries began to expand their territories around the world and forced open the ports of Asian countries, and the popularity of exoticism on the European continent was closely related to imperialism.³⁷ With this territorial expansion, the art and culture from Asia, such as Japanese ukiyo-e painting, Chinese porcelain, and Javanese

³⁷ Roberts, *Images*, 45–47.

gamelan music, came to the attention of European artists. Many of them added these Asian elements to their own artistic creations, in such diverse fields as music, painting, and even clothing and furniture. Since the Asian style became a fashionable trend in France, composers were no longer limited to obtaining a superficial exoticism. Instead, traditional elements from these cultures were more readily available and could be integrated with the techniques of Western music.

Second, Debussy's desire for innovation affected his decision to incorporate his fascination with Asian culture into his compositions. Even while studying at the Paris Conservatoire Debussy began to compose with a more individual creative approach to forms and melodies than what was traditionally accepted. For example, he often used parallel fifths and did not conform to traditional harmonic progressions. The gamelan music he heard at the World Exposition in 1889 was a surprise, and this colorful sound greatly stimulated his pursuit of musical innovation. This was a significant influence on Debussy, and these musical ideas from Asia provided him with new creative sources and inspiration, such as the use of pentatonic scales and whole tone scales. Moreover, Debussy collected many Japanese prints and artifacts, which were not only very appealing visually but also directly inspired his works. To express his fondness for Japanese ukiyo-e, Debussy asked his publisher, Jacques Durand, to use *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai as the cover when *La mer* was published.³⁸ Additionally, Debussy's "Poissons d'or" in *Image II* was inspired by his other collection—Japanese lacquerware.

Third, Debussy's close friend Louis Laloy reinforced the influence of Chinese culture. In the first decades of the twentieth century Laloy, as a musicologist, sinologist, scholar, and music critic, was central to the musical scene in Paris. He was enthralled with Chinese culture and language, and he taught Chinese metaphysics and culture in fluent Mandarin at the

³⁸ Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, 194–195.

Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises. He also translated Chinese literature into French.³⁹ The earliest of Laloy's writings on Chinese music was *La musique chinoise*, published in 1903 in the series "Les musiciens célèbres."⁴⁰ Renkang Qian (1914–2013), a musicologist, theorist, and the first doctoral supervisor of musicology in China, had high regard for Laloy, praising him as "an accomplished musician of Chinese music, and the first French musicologist to study China according to the value system of Chinese music."⁴¹

Debussy met Laloy in 1902; although they did not know each other in the early stages of Debussy's musical development, they established a deep friendship, which is of great historical importance for the Asian focus of Debussy's compositions. Debussy was full of sincere admiration for Laloy, and he described their relationship as "of such a calibre that it seems to me to be almost invulnerable" in his letter to Laloy.⁴² There are 82 letters, notes, and telegrams written by Debussy to Laloy that have been preserved and published by Francois Lesure (1923–2001), which testify to their very close contact.⁴³ It is worth noting that, as the first French biographer of Debussy, the book *Claude Debussy* was published in Paris in 1909 by Laloy, which was the one that received Debussy's approval.⁴⁴ Debussy wrote in a letter to Laloy before the biography was published: "I congratulate [the publisher Dorbon] for the pleasure it is going to give me to read you. You are the only one who knows what Claude Debussy is – without bass drum, or embroidery."⁴⁵

³⁹ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 3.

⁴⁰ Michel Duchesneau, "Debussy and Japanese Prints," In *Debussy's Resonance*, ed. François de Médicis and Steven Huebner (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2018), 310.

⁴¹ Renkang Qian, *History and Current Situation of Musical and Cultural Exchange between France and China*, ed. Qian Yiping (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 1997), 415.

⁴² Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 7.

⁴³ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 7.

⁴⁴ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 15.

⁴⁵ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 15.

Guided by Laloy's extensive study of Chinese philosophy, Debussy's interest in Chinese culture deepened, and he also gained a greater understanding of Chinese music.⁴⁶ The first piece in his *Estampes* is entitled "Pagodes"; it was composed in 1903, shortly after the beginning of the friendship between Laloy and Debussy.⁴⁷ When composing this piece, Debussy was most likely influenced by Chinese music. In Laloy's biography of Debussy, this is how Laloy commented on the piece:

There are successions of whole tones, shyly indifferent; and, more frequently, incomplete scales, in which the whole tone alternates only with the minor third, according to the preference of Chinese taste: it is these incomplete scales which allow "Pagodes", from the *Estampes*, to achieve a perfect resemblance.⁴⁸

Moreover, Laloy's influence on Debussy was also reflected in Debussy's dedication to Laloy of his "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut" in *Images II*, and Laloy affirmed that the title of this piece was in Chinese style.⁴⁹ In an August 2, 1909 letter to Laloy, Debussy mentions that "he began the day well by reading some Chinese poems translated by Laloy. They are very fine and we must talk about them again."⁵⁰ Deborah Priest, who translated the book *Louis Laloy (1874–1944) on Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky* with an introduction and notes, mentioned in her introduction that the names of Confucius and other Chinese philosophers only appeared in Debussy's music criticism after 1903.⁵¹ Laloy not only diversified Debussy's interests, but also helped to inspire a wider range of styles in his music.

For Debussy, Asian elements could be used from different Eastern cultures, and his

⁴⁶ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 10.

⁴⁷ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 10.

⁴⁸ Louis Laloy, *Claude Debussy* (Paris: Les Bibliophiles Fantaisistes, 1909), 73–77; Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 81–82.

⁴⁹ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 10–11.

⁵⁰ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 10.

⁵¹ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 10–11.

unique compositional techniques made them closely associated with his music. He displayed both Chinese and other Asian elements within the context of Western art music, motivated by both his personal interest in Asian culture and larger trends of thought in Europe at that time.

Chapter 3

Asian Elements in Debussy's Piano Music

In the middle- to late- nineteenth century, Eastern and Western cultures communicated extensively. Many European composers sought inspiration from Eastern cultures, among whom Debussy made particularly outstanding achievements. Debussy was inspired by Asian culture, folk music, and art, and he expressed the mysterious Eastern world of his imagination in his music. In his piano works, Debussy used various compositional strategies to evoke and imitate East Asian aesthetic characteristics. In general, Debussy would give works titles evocate of Asian locales and cloak his melodies and harmonies with exoticist referential collections including the pentatonic and whole-tone collections. Debussy's experimentation with pentatonicism, a trait strongly associated with Asian musical traditions, led to the eventual integration of it with other aspects of his compositional style.

East Asian Musical Devices Used by Debussy to Evoke Asia

Pentatonic Collection

The pentatonic style is widely used in Debussy's music, and it is one of the most important elements of his musical style. The word "pentatonic" first appeared in *The Music of the Most Ancient Nations*, written by Carl Engel (1818–1882) in 1864, where the new word "pentatonic" was used to describe very ancient music, which did not necessarily refer to Asia.⁵² According to Jeremy Day-O'Connell's research, many scales were collectively

⁵² Jeremy Day-O'Connell, "Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition," *Music Theory Spectrum* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 225.

referred to as the “pentatonic scale” in 1864, which was the musicians’ perceptions of the pentatonic scale in its early formation:

What Du Haldé in 1735 had presumably heard in the music of Chinese monks who “never raise or lower their voice a semitone”; what Rameau in 1760 had described as a peculiar scale of “only five tones”, Roussier in 1770 as a scale “whose gaps always seem to await other tones”, and Laborde in 1780 as a scale “in which there is neither fa nor ut”; what Burney stumbled upon in his study of the “mutilated” scales of Greek music and elsewhere referred to simply as the “Scots scale”; what Crotch identified as “the same kind of scale as that produced by the black keys of the piano-forte,” and Fétis as “a tonal system in which the semitone frequently disappears”: in 1864 these became, once and for all, “the pentatonic scale.”⁵³

The pentatonic collection consists of only five tones. In general, the tones must be arranged in the order of a major second, major second, minor third, major second, and minor third; for example, the C major pentatonic scale includes C, D, E, G, and A as its five tones (see Figure 3.1). The pentatonic scale used in Debussy’s works is based on the diatonic collection, without the need to emphasize individual tones in the scale. And since there are dissonances in the pentatonic collection, but they aren’t particularly harsh, such as the major second, minor seventh, perfect fourth and fifth, but not the minor second and augmented fourth, this scale catered to the impressionistic style that Debussy pursued. At the same time, since the pentatonic scale does not contain semitones, the tendency from leading tone to the tonic is weakened. The use of the pentatonic scale also became a means for Debussy to obscure tonality.⁵⁴



Figure 3.1. C Major Pentatonic Scale.

⁵³ Day-O’Connell, “Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition,” 225–226.

⁵⁴ Jeremy Day-O’Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 167–171.

The use of the pentatonic scale in Debussy’s piano works is one of the keys to understanding its Asian flavor. Although this scale is also used in the music of non-Asian nations, Debussy is known to have been influenced by gamelan, even if his pentatonic scale was not entirely derived directly from gamelan music. One commonly identified source of Debussy’s pentatonicism is Javanese gamelan. Gamelan prominently uses a pentatonic-like scale, the slendro (see Figure 3.2), with five approximate pitches.⁵⁵ Although according to the musicologist Peter W. Schatt, the slendro scale is not strictly equivalent to the pentatonic scale, and Debussy’s use of the pentatonic scale in his works is probably an acoustic approximation that reflects the composer’s particular understanding of gamelan music.⁵⁶



Figure 3.2. Slendro Scale of Gamelan Music.

However, other scholars like Werner Danckert, suggest that Debussy’s pentatonic scale might be inspired by some of the music of European Romantics like Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849), Liszt, and Wagner, including Chopin’s *Etude in Gb Major, Op. 10 No. 5* (“Black Key”) (1830) and Liszt’s *Etude in Db Major, S. 144* (1845–1849).⁵⁷ Additionally, Chinese scholar Wenci Feng argues that the pentatonic scale used in Debussy’s works is related to the Chinese scale tuning and that Debussy learned about the Chinese pentatonic and hexatonic scales through the French music theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau’s introduction and commentary on the manuscript of the translation of *Mémoires concernant l’histoire, les*

⁵⁵ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 111–113.

⁵⁶ Peter W. Schatt, *Exotik in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts: Historisch-systematische Untersuchungen zur Metamorphose einer ästhetischen Fiktion* (Munich: Musikverlag E. Katzschler, 1986), 123–134.

⁵⁷ Werner Danckert, *Claude Debussy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1950), 85.

sciences et les arts des Chinois (Historical Treatise on Ancient and Current Chinese Music) written by J. J. M. Amiot (1718–1793), a French Jesuit missionary in China during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).⁵⁸ Day-O’Connell also believes that “Europeans’ first awareness of pentatonicism apparently originated with the missionaries’ increasingly detailed accounts of China in the eighteenth century.”⁵⁹ Amiot lived in China and studied Chinese music for twenty years, and he is regarded by Chinese musicologists as “the greatest contributor to the spread of Chinese music to the West among the Jesuit missionaries who visited China.”⁶⁰ He provided a detailed description of the Chinese music theory system in his treatise *Mémoires concernant l’histoire, les sciences et les arts des Chinois*, and he concluded that “Chinese system traveled to the ancient West, not vice versa.”⁶¹ Rameau (1683–1764) was interested in Chinese music, and he created “two competing schemes, a whole-tone scale and a pentatonic scale” based on Amiot’s treatise.⁶² According to Laloy’s notes, “Debussy loved Rameau as a spiritual father, and his admiration for Rameau was lasting.”⁶³ Thus, Debussy’s use of the pentatonic scale was also possibly inspired by Rameau’s interpretation of Chinese music.

Pentatonic Melodies and Harmonies

In Debussy’s piano works, the pentatonic scale is frequently used. While composing pentatonic melodies in his works, his selection of harmonic elements is also based on

⁵⁸ Wenci Feng, *History of Music Exchange between China and Foreign Countries* (Beijing: People’s Music Publishing House, 2013), 312–345.

⁵⁹ Day-O’Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy*, 49.

⁶⁰ Jiandun Cao, “The Music Cultural Exchange between China and Britain in Eighteenth Century and Its Historical Revelation,” *The Central Plains Culture Research*, no. 5 (2016): 41–47.

⁶¹ Day-O’Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy*, 52.

⁶² Day-O’Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy*, 51.

⁶³ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 115.

pentatonic structures. Therefore, both pentatonic melodies and harmonies serve to add Asian color to the musical material.

Debussy's piano suite *Estampes*, completed in 1903, is a work from his middle period and consists of three pieces. "Pagodes", the first piece of *Estampes*, is often considered by scholars, like Paul Roberts, to be a typical example of Debussy's piano music with Asian colors.⁶⁴ In terms of music, the extensive use of pentatonic scales and harmonies, as well as the integration of gamelan music elements, are a direct expression of the rich and strong Eastern taste contained in the piano music.

Most researchers believe that the major source of the Asian elements in Debussy's music is from the two World Expositions held in Paris in 1889 and 1890, which Debussy visited and saw live performances by musicians from Java, Japan, and China. Debussy's deep impressions of the Expositions were mentioned in letters, recollections, and conversations with friends throughout his life.

Scholars have different opinions on which Asian cultures these elements come from and what elements Debussy absorbed into his own creations. Andreas Liess, an Austrian musicologist, believes that the music of the East provides a rich source of inspiration for Debussy's music; the 1889 World's Exhibition, in particular, provided the best opportunity for inspiring his exotic creations.⁶⁵ Jürgen Arndt, a scholar from Germany, claims that there is a clear influence of Javanese gamelan music in "Pagodes", and these influences are not only in the acoustic surface but also in the deeper structural techniques.⁶⁶ According to Louis Laloy, the primary inspiration of "Pagodes" is the World Exposition of 1900, which was especially mentioned by the artist Jacques-Emile Blanche (1861–1942) since he was listening

⁶⁴ Roberts, *Images*, 156–157.

⁶⁵ Andreas Liess, *Claude Debussy: Das Werk im Zeitbild* (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1978), 275.

⁶⁶ Baisheng Dai, "The Interpretation of the Oriental Style in Debussy's Piano Work *Pagodes*," *Journal of the Central Conservatory of Music*, no. 1 (2007): 19.

to the gamelan with Debussy.⁶⁷ Gamelan music may be merely one of several possible factors in this work, since, according to Mervyn Cooke’s research, pagodas are quite rare in Indonesia.⁶⁸

The most distinctive feature of this piece is the use of different forms of pentatonic scales and modes, which gives an overall impression of Asian music and easily evokes the audience’s fantasy of the Eastern world. In addition, there are many imitations of gamelan percussion sound, such as gongs, chimes, and other metal-like sounds, and even percussive overtones can be heard. The sound is like the chiming of ancient pagodas, creating an ethereal and mysterious atmosphere in the Asian temples.

The structure of “Pagodes” is an ABA form with a long coda, and the use of pentatonic scales, multiple harmonic layers, and ostinato patterns in the melody provide a variety of musical layers. The pentatonic scales used throughout the piece are based on B and F-sharp (see Figure 3.3), and the melody recurs five times in different rhythms and between different registers.



Figure 3.3. Two Basic Pentatonic Scales in “Pagodes”.

⁶⁷ Laloy, *Claude Debussy*, 33.

⁶⁸ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 112; Roberts, *Images*, 159; Mervyn Cooke, *Britten and the Far East: Asian Influences in the Music of Benjamin Britten* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 7.

Figure 3.4. Debussy’s “Pagodes,” mm. 1–6.

At the beginning of the piece, there are chords of the major second and the octave in the right hand and the bass pedal point of a perfect fifth in the left hand (see Figure 3.4). In traditional harmony, the major second is a dissonant interval and is rarely used, but in the pentatonic scale and harmony, the major second is used extensively. The sound of such chords imitates the sound of chimes and paints a hazy image of Asia—a pagoda standing in a distant temple with the chiming coming from afar. In mm. 3–10, the B pentatonic scale is used in the melody of the right hand. This melody is the most important motif of the piece, which appears many times, both in its prototype and in its variant form, highlighting the pentatonic tonality of the piece and portraying the shape and contour of the pagoda stacked up layer by layer (see Figure 3.5). In mm. 11–14, there is a variation of the rhythm of this melody; in mm. 23–26, the upper voice is a variation of the rhythm, while the lower voice forms a reverse variation in the direction of progression with the right hand.

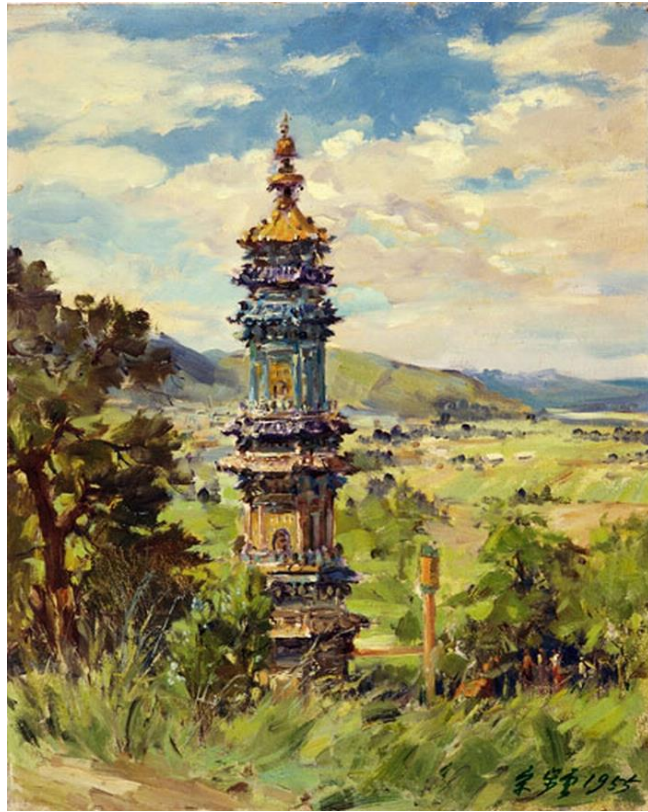


Figure 3.5. Painting of Pagoda with a Hazy Feeling.⁶⁹



Figure 3.6. Debussy's "Pagodes," mm. 16–18.

The second motif of a pentatonic melody built on F# first appears in mm. 15–18 (see Figure 3.6), and then recurs in the left-hand part in mm. 37–40. This phrase contrasts tonally with the pentatonic scale melody built on B, and the change in musical texture reinforces this contrast. At the end of the piece, the melody returns to the B pentatonic scale, and the whole piece ends with a special compound chord of all the notes from the B pentatonic scale (see

⁶⁹ Buyun Song, Pagoda, Flickr from Sina Blog, accessed June 3, 2021, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_ed7f9b0e0102v1s3.html.

Figure 3.7).

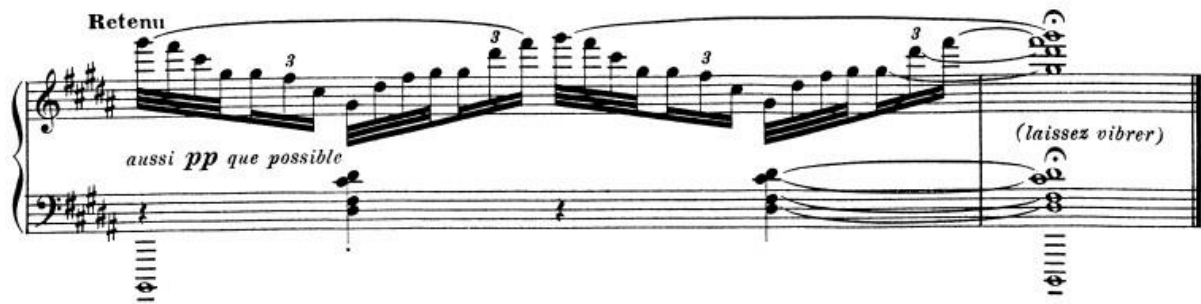


Figure 3.7. The Final Two Measures of Debussy's "Pagodes".

The use of these pentatonic techniques makes connections to Asian music, with short melodic fragments throughout each part by means of repetition and variations, and the vertical harmonic sound derived from horizontal melodies. The music of "Pagodes" has many similarities with Chinese music. The piece's pentatonic construction is quite similar to the aesthetic taste of Chinese music, which focuses on artistic conception. Chinese music also attaches great importance to the pursuit of musical image, using the most traditional Chinese pentatonic scale to depict some magnificent landscapes, just like the mood of Chinese ink and landscape paintings. As Laloy described this piece in his biography of Debussy, "these incomplete scales with whole tones and minor third allow 'Pagodes', from the *Estampes*, to achieve a perfect resemblance to the Chinese taste."⁷⁰

Furthermore, "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut" is the second piece in *Images II* (1907) and is one of Debussy's mature masterpieces. This movement's musical imagery is remarkable, with Debussy using pentatonic scales and pentatonic subsets to express a cold and desolate picture of a deserted temple under the moon.

The first pentatonic melodic fragment in the piece appears in mm. 13–15 (see Figure 3.8). The right hand in m. 13 ascends by the interval of a 4th from F-sharp, and the left hand

⁷⁰ Laloy, *Claude Debussy*, 73–77; Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 81–82.

includes five notes: A-B-C#-E-F#, which represents a complete pentatonic scale. At mm. 27–28, a new pentatonic scale appears (F#-G#-A#-C#-D#) with the melodic material in a descending progression and the left hand corresponding to an upward progression of broken perfect fifth intervals (see Figure 3.9). Immediately afterward, at measure 29, the left hand reappears with the first pentatonic scale melody.



Figure 3.8. Debussy’s “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut,” mm. 13–15.



Figure 3.9. Debussy’s “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut,” mm. 27–29.

The final section of the piece consists of two musical elements, which are based on a tonal fragment of A pentatonic scale and a lower broken descending pentatonic interval of the musical theme (see Figure 3.10). The left hand contains the pentatonic harmony of the fourth and fifth intervals and the long bass pedal points on C, after which the piece ends with the main pentatonic scale (A-B-C#-E-F#).

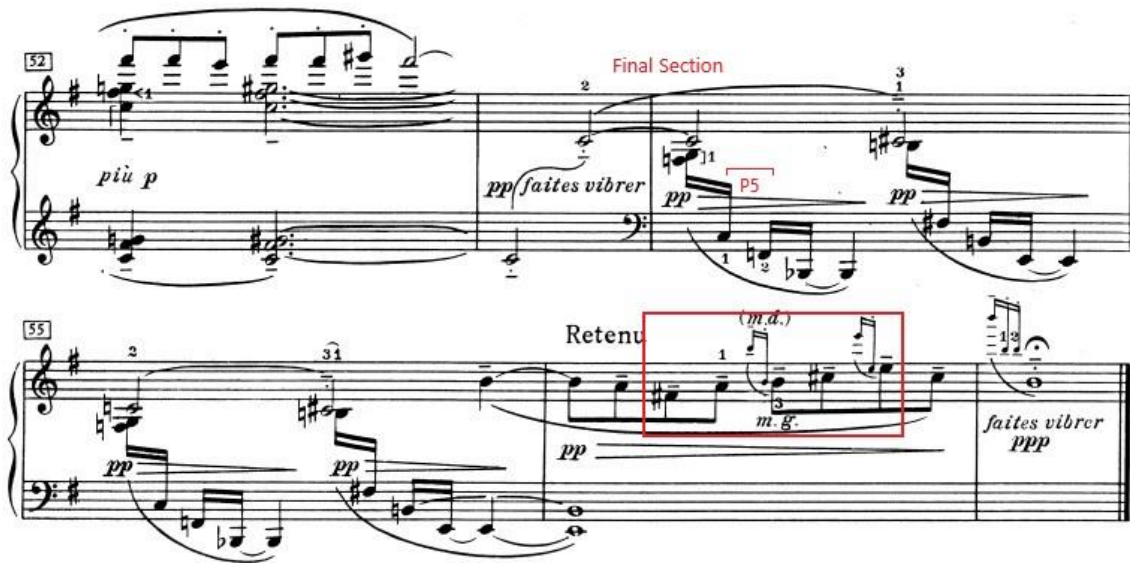


Figure 3.10. Debussy's "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut," mm. 52–57.

There is another piece of Debussy's, *Le palais du silence* (The Palace of Silence), in which the pentatonic nature of harmony is also reflected. At the end of 1913, Georges de Feure (1868–1943) invited Debussy to compose music for his Chinese-style ballet, *No-ja-li*.⁷¹ Feure was a prominent illustrator and set and costume designer for the theater, and he created a one-act ballet in 1913 called *Le palais du silence*, which has a prelude and eight consecutive scenes set in the island of Formosa (now Taiwan) in ancient China.⁷² *No-ja-li*, a young captive princess, is the most prominent character in the ballet, and the piece was subsequently referred to as *No-ja-li*. Feure heard of Debussy's fascination with Asian culture, and he visited Debussy with his scenario in early November 1913 to urge him to write music for ballet. Debussy then signed an agreement with the Alhambra Theater Society on 27 November 1913 to compose the music for *Le palais du silence*.⁷³ Due to exhaustion from performances in Moscow and St. Petersburg at the beginning of December 1913, Debussy

⁷¹ Robert Orledge, "Debussy's Second English Ballet: 'Le Palais du Silence' or 'No-Ja-Li,'" *Current Musicology* 22 (1976): 73–87.

⁷² Orledge, "Debussy's Second English Ballet": 74.

⁷³ Orledge, "Debussy's Second English Ballet": 76.

gave up on completing the music for the Chinese ballet in mid-January after writing a 14-double-page draft in early January 1914.⁷⁴



Figure 3.11. The Manuscript of Debussy’s *No-ja-li* in Sketchbook, p. 13.⁷⁵

The manuscript of Debussy’s *Le palais du silence* was preserved in Mme de Tinan’s sketchbook, and it was recently released to the public in a photocopy at the Centre de Documentation Claude Debussy in St. Germain-en-Laye.⁷⁶ In Figure 3.11, the bass line in the left hand is composed of a major second and two perfect fourths in one measure, which repeats for four more measures. There is a progression of offbeat eighth-note chords, which are formed by perfect fourths. Afterward, the entire melody returns to the beginning materials. These melodies and chords are all based on pentatonic harmonies. Robert Orledge, an English musicologist and expert in early twentieth-century French music, presumes that the use of pentatonicity in this piece is similar to Debussy’s “Pagodes”; however, since these two pieces were composed ten years apart, *Le palais du silence* was composed in Debussy’s

⁷⁴ Orledge, “Debussy’s Second English Ballet”: 76.

⁷⁵ Orledge, “Debussy’s Second English Ballet”: 84.

⁷⁶ Orledge, “Debussy’s Second English Ballet”: 81.

late period of creation and is “less repetitive and pentatonic, producing a barer, more genuinely oriental sound, such as the prominent use of major second, perfect fourth, and perfect fifth in both harmony and melody.”⁷⁷

Planing

The use of planing, a compositional technique of parallel progression, is one of the most common techniques in Debussy’s works, which is also an essential musical material and feature of his works. In the opening section of “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” (see Figure 3.12), Debussy’s use of planing creates an atmosphere of spaciousness and tranquility. Debussy breaks with conventional chord patterns by omitting the third and replacing it with a fourth to form a pentatonic subset (027) [A, B, E] with a vertical fourth and fifth above the root. There is a prominent major second in the chord and a weak sense of tonal center, which makes this sound pentatonic. This type of chord serves as the basis of the work, helping to shape its melodic themes and acoustic colors. The dissonant sound effects at the beginning vividly imitate the distant ringing of bells from the temple at midnight.

The image shows the first three measures of the piano introduction to Debussy's "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut". The tempo is marked "Lent" with a metronome marking of 66 (♩ = 66). The mood is "doux et sans rigueur". The music is written for piano in 4/4 time. The right hand features a melodic line with a prominent major second interval, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with a pentatonic subset (027) [A, B, E] structure. Dynamics range from piano (p) to pianissimo (pp). The score includes a grand staff with treble, alto, and bass clefs, and a piano (PIANO) marking.

Figure 3.12. Debussy’s “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut,” mm. 1–3.

Moreover, at the beginning of the prelude in *No-ja-li*, there is a planing of perfect fourth intervals in the right hand, and the chords in the left hand include perfect fourth and

⁷⁷ Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 200.

fifth intervals with long time values (see Figure 3.13), which highlights the harmonic sounds of perfect fourths and perfect fifths inherent in the diatonic collection. This is also one of the typical orientalist approaches of Debussy to composition.⁷⁸

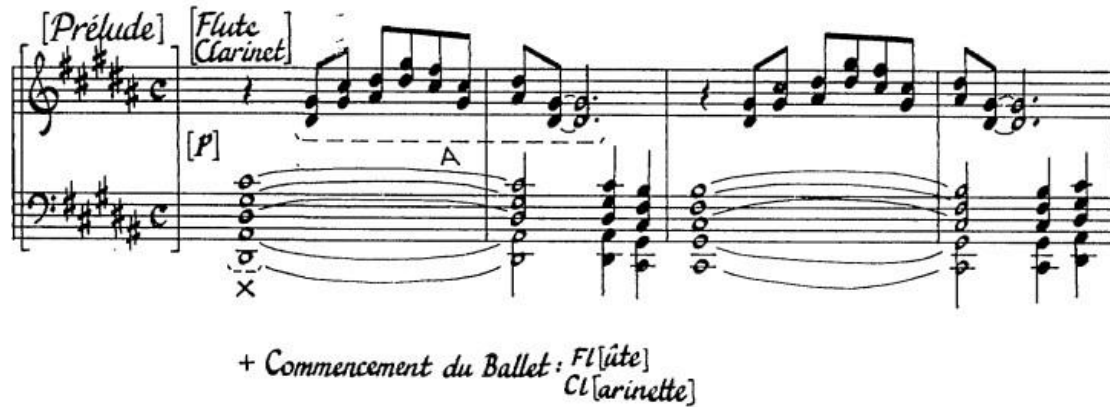


Figure 3.13. The Manuscript of Debussy's *No-ja-li* in Sketchbook, p. 10.⁷⁹

Titles and Expressive Markings

In Debussy's works, most of the piano pieces are given titles. Some of the titles are often seen as the embodiment of a unique Asian charm, with the most representative works being "Pagodes" and "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut". These titles are not only the combination of Debussy's personal experience and the imagery of the music but also a guide to the audience's imagination.

As a representative of Debussy's Eastern-inspired piano compositions, "Pagodes" contains numerous Asian and Chinese elements. Firstly, the title of the piece invokes Asian culture. The pagoda is an important symbol of Buddhist architecture and is a common construction in Asian countries. In general, the pagoda is a tall tower with many layers and a spire, and it consists of a square base, the round body, delicate carvings, and Buddhist

⁷⁸ Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre*, 200.

⁷⁹ Orledge, "Debussy's Second English Ballet": 83.

decorations. Debussy named the piece “Pagodes” to show the Eastern atmosphere of the work, which not only depicts the image of the pagodas, but also suggests a desire for the mysterious atmosphere of the East. The strong Asian flavor is reminiscent of ancient pagodas standing in the quiet and majestic mountains.

Additionally, the title of this entire piano suite, *Estampes*, also reflects Asian style. According to Roy Howat, “*Estampes* is the standard French term for Japanese prints.”⁸⁰ Printmaking was the most common form of painting in China and Japan at that time and became prevalent in France in the mid-nineteenth century. For the publication of *Estampes*, Debussy asked the publisher Jacques Durand to make the cover imitate the colors of Japanese prints.⁸¹ Debussy described the musical content of *Estampes* as a “spiritual journey”; in a letter to his close friend André Messager (1853–1929), he wrote: “I particularly like the titles of the pieces in *Estampes*, when someone does not have enough money to make a real trip, music can do it spiritually.”⁸² These titles *Estampes* and “Pagodes”, before bringing their new and unique sound effects, arouse the audience’s curiosity and imagination with their Asian-style titles.

Considering the title of “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut”, Debussy used pentatonicism to evoke images of ancient and mysterious temples under the hazy moonlight, giving audiences a sense of silence and the ethereal. This piece is dedicated to Laloy, who confirmed that the title was “de style chinois.”⁸³ In mm. 7–8 (see Figure 3.14), there is an expression marking *pp*, the sound slowly fades away, followed by a planed chord progression, and the higher part of the chords contours a melody. At this moment, these top

⁸⁰ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 112.

⁸¹ Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Fern die Klage des Fauns: Claude Debussy und seine Welt* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1993), 287.

⁸² Fischer-Dieskau, *Fern die Klage des Fauns*, 287.

⁸³ Priest, *Louis Laloy*, 10–11.

notes seem like cold but clear moonlight shining into the empty temple, making it more and more silent.



Figure 3.14. Debussy's "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut," mm. 7–9.

East Asian Musical Devices Used by Debussy in Non-Asian Contexts

Prelude: "La fille aux cheveux de lin"

Debussy's *Preludes*, composed in two collections of 24 pieces, were written during a period of musical maturation, and they have become some of the most representative works of his piano music. "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) is the eighth piece in the first collection of *Preludes*, written during 1909 and 1910, and it is a very delicate and elegant piece. This piece uses pentatonicism, but to depict a Scottish theme. The title of this piece is based on a poem of the same name by Leconte de Lisle (1818–1894), which depicts a young beautiful Scottish girl singing a simple and innocent song in the morning sun.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen* (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1997), 166–167.



Figure 3.15. Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" mm. 1–4.

The entire work is based on the pentatonic melodic theme at the beginning, which is widely used and presents a clear sense of the pentatonic mode. This smooth melody appears quietly in the right hand (see Figure 3.15), and the melody uses the pentatonic scale on Gb: Gb-Ab-Bb-Db-Eb. The whole theme, within one octave, begins with D-flat, then descends to E-flat, and ends on an octave lower D-flat. The second time the melody appears in mm. 8–11, and the main melodic register does not change. The same pentatonic scale appears for the third time in mm. 28–32 near the end of this piece (see Figure 3.16), in a similar harmonic layout to the first appearance of the theme but one octave higher, echoing the opening theme of the piece.

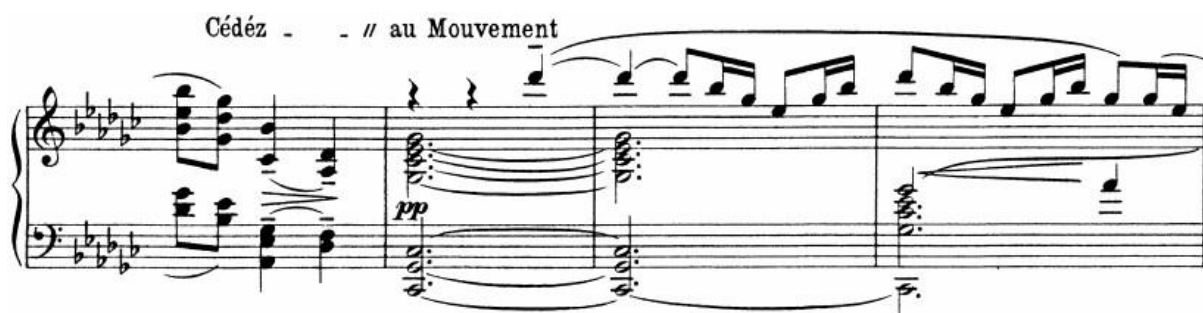


Figure 3.16. Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" mm. 26–29.

In this piece, Debussy uses several pentatonic scales in different keys. For instance, at measure 12, there is an ascending melody built from the pentatonic scale on Cb (Cb-Db-Eb-Gb-Ab) in the right hand; at mm. 19–20, there are pentatonic melodies on both hand on Eb

major, and the scale includes Eb-F-G-Bb-C five tones. The use of the pentatonic scale weakens the functionality of the traditional major and minor modes and makes the melodic line more expressive and distinct. Debussy focused on the color changes in the harmony, with unclear and blurred divisions of musical passages, accentuating the hazy sense of impressionism that seems to paint a picture decorated with notes, portraying a beautiful image of a young girl with flowing flaxen hair.

Comparison of “Pagodes” and Gamelan Music

Gamelan music mainly uses two mode systems: the slendro (the approximate pitches are similar to the pentatonic scale, see Figure 3.2) and the pelog (the approximate pitches are similar to the whole-tone scale).⁸⁵ In the ensemble, the various metal percussion instruments are generally improvised around the main theme, while the core melody is fixed and cyclic in the musical texture of the layers. The music is developed in a way that the theme is repeated in the form of variations. The ostinato patterns in gamelan music are usually syncopated or contain triplets in the middle voice, and the continuous basses have bass gongs to play, which have the function of dividing the passages.

In contrast, “Pagodes” is mainly based on the pentatonic scale, supplemented by some fragments of the whole-tone scale, such as mm. 33–36 and mm. 46–53. Debussy repeatedly uses long bass pedal points of pentatonic intervals to establish a solid foundation of harmony, as if simulating the strong bass sound of the gong, with the function of introducing the melody and structure division, for example at the beginning of the piece. The development of the music is based on the repetition of thematic material or rhythmic variations, and the syncopated major seconds and triplets run almost throughout the whole piece, serving as a linking material between different sections.

⁸⁵ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 111–113.

While the developmental techniques of the melodic themes and motifs used in Debussy's works show some similarities to gamelan music, "for a Javanese musician, nothing in "Pagodes" would be recognizable as gamelan music."⁸⁶ A distinctive feature of gamelan music is its texture, which is composed of soft and loud instruments and a variety of wooden-headed mallets and padded sticks that clarify gamelan music's complex counterpoint.⁸⁷ The elements used in "Pagodes", such as pentatonic scale, melodic repetition, rhythmic variations, and ornamentation of basic tunes, are also common in other Asian music. As mentioned earlier, the pentatonic scale can also be regarded as an important characteristic of Chinese music, and the development of variations on musical themes is also one of the main compositional techniques in Chinese music. Regarding the relationship between the music of "Pagodes" and gamelan, Howat points out in his study:

Taken more broadly, the piece is a picture, a westerner's perception of another continent, culture, climate and way of life. In short the newcomer, viewing the canvas from afar, is struck by the affinities while the specialist, close up with a glass, is all too aware of the differences. This was probably Debussy's aim, and confirms how well he succeeded in covering his tracks.⁸⁸

Gamelan music provided Debussy with inspiration and creative materials for his compositions, enabling him to combine his impressionistic style with exoticism elements. Through the use of pentatonic melodies, the structure of the themes, and in imitating gamelan musical texture. Debussy managed to create music with a strong Asian flavor that "newcomers" and "specialists" could appreciate on different levels.

⁸⁶ Roberts, *Images*, 158.

⁸⁷ Roberts, *Images*, 158.

⁸⁸ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 114.

Chapter 4

Chinese Culture and Traditional Music

China has a history of thousands of years, as well as a long history of music. In the five thousand years of ancient Chinese civilization, music played an important role in the process of historical development. The earliest evidence of music in China can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, and after experiencing various stages of slow development, gradual prosperity, multi-element integration, and re-development, Chinese music became more diversified in genres and connotations.

One stage in the development of Chinese traditional music was the emergence of multi-part music, such as the partial dependence of multi-voice music, produced by polyphony in the ensemble of national instrumental music and some simple multi-voice songs in the folk music of ethnic minorities. In this music the melody is the main means of expression, and each single melody line is enough to reveal a specific connotation and express a specific emotion. It is horizontally based on pentatonic melodic lines and vertically based on pentatonic chords. The ancient Chinese pentatonic scale is the source of Chinese national music, and it is also one of the characteristics of the mode and melody of modern Chinese national music.

The piano, as a western musical instrument, not only has an important influence on Chinese traditional music culture but also promotes the development of Chinese piano works. The creation and adaptation of Chinese piano music, on the one hand, inherits the outstanding characteristics of pentatonic melodic lines in traditional music; on the other hand, it enriches and develops these melody lines by giving full harmony, polyphony, texture, rhythm, and

other techniques of piano composition. Regardless of mode or rhythm, the melody of Chinese piano music often has distinctive characteristics that give a strong impression of national music. This study takes three representative Chinese piano pieces as examples to explore the musical sparks colliding in the blending of Chinese and Western music and the pentatonicism contained in Chinese piano works.

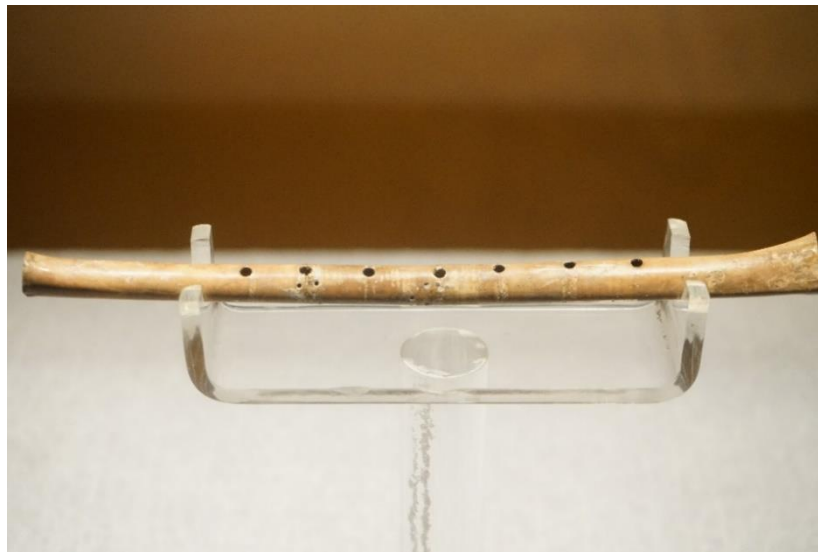


Figure 4.1. One of the Bone Flutes Discovered at Jiahu, on Display at the Henan Museum.

The Emergence of Chinese Music

The earliest history of Chinese music can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, and the Chinese pentatonic scale also emerged very early in ancient China.⁸⁹ The Jiahu bone flute with seven holes (see Figure 4.1), made of perforated crane bones, was unearthed at the Jiahu site in Wuyang, Henan Province, China and is arguably the oldest musical instrument ever discovered in the world, dating back 8,000 years.⁹⁰ Also, a large number of unearthed potteries Xun and bone whistles, which were contemporaneous with the Jiahu bone flute,

⁸⁹ Yuanyuan Lee and Sin-Yan Shen, *Chinese Musical Instruments* (Chicago: Chinese Music Society of North America, 1999), 63–66.

⁹⁰ Lee and Shen, *Chinese Musical Instruments*, 63–66.

indicate that people at that time already had basic musical needs. Archeologists have measured the sound of one of the bone flutes, which had been manually polished and had seven sound holes, and it produced at least a six-tone scale.⁹¹ The unearthed drums, bells, and chimes (see Figure 4.2) that prevailed afterward in the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties, indicate that China had extremely rich musical and cultural resources at that time.



Figure 4.2. Chinese Shang Dynasty Chimes.

The origin of Chinese music historiography is very complicated, experiencing the development from the stage of oral legends to the stage of written record. After entering the written era, a large number of written records appeared. *Lüshi Chunqiu* (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals) (around 239 BCE) and *Shi Ji* (Records of the Grand Historian) (around 94 BCE) are all representative works of early written records of Chinese music history (See Figure 4.3). From these historical records, it can be found that musical composing used the ancient plucked five-string Chinese instrument, which laid the foundation for the music

⁹¹ Jingyi Dong, "Questions on the Origin of Music in Chinese History," *Northern Music*, no. 13 (Summer 2019): 1–3.

culture of later generations.⁹² At that time, Chinese music was dominated by the pentatonic scale, after which the seven-tone instruments and works gradually emerged.

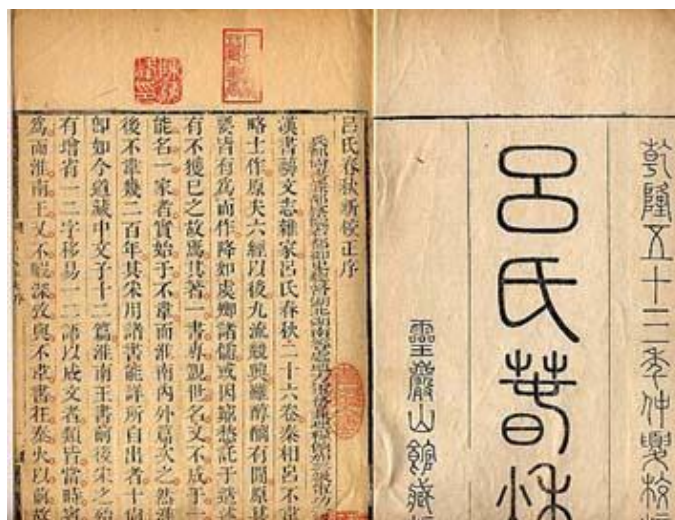


Figure 4.3. The Manuscripts of *Lüshi Chunqiu* (Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals).

In the Qing Dynasty (around the 17th–19th centuries), the popularity of Chinese traditional music was very high. Musical culture maintained a close relationship with the ordinary civilian class, showing the characteristics of secularity and sociality. During this period, elegant music and folk tunes were valued in society. The characteristics of regional music were colorful, and the types of folk music were rich and varied. Another representative musical art form was opera, which reached a peak of popularity.⁹³ The history of traditional Chinese music has passed through the two peaks of the Tang Dynasty and Qing Dynasty, and it has achieved high artistic achievements. Whether it is various types of music or the musical connotation, it can be regarded as a treasure in China’s history.

⁹² Yong Chen, *The Modern Transformation of Chinese Musical Historiography* (Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 2013), 15–29.

⁹³ Mingyue Liang, *Music of the Billion: An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture* (New York: C.F. Peters, 1985), 127–134.

History and Evolution of Chinese Musical Compositions

Guqin was one of the ancient plucked Chinese musical instruments with seven strings (see Figure 4.4). As early as the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE), Guqin was very popular. Literati and officialdom of the past dynasties liked to sing while playing Guqin in order to express their inner emotions. By the time of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, Guqin music had been recorded in written form, which became the earliest music scores in China.⁹⁴ For example, *Jieshi tone: orchid*, which has a history of 1,400 years, was composed in the Liang of the Southern Dynasty. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, many traditional Guqin tunes have been handed down, and there are more than one hundred well-preserved musical scores and more than three thousand Guqin tunes. For instance, *Yang Chun Bai Xue* (White Snow in Sunny Spring), *High Mountain and Flowing Water*, and *Plum Blossom Melody* are famous, representative pieces of Guqin. Whether they convey the feelings of happiness, anger, sadness, or the depiction of natural beauty, the music can be vividly played through the Guqin.⁹⁵ Guqin music is a key component of Chinese national culture, and this distinctive instrument is strongly associated with ancient musical culture.



Figure 4.4. A Picture of the Guqin *Lingfeng Shenyun*.

⁹⁴ Ting Su, “View Chinese Music from the Development History of Guqin,” *Song of the Yellow River*, no. 7 (Summer 2018): 20.

⁹⁵ Jianhua Guan and Yang Jing, “The Cultural Value System of Chinese Guqin Music,” *Explorations in Music*, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 23–29.

From the sixteenth century, Western music began to be introduced into China and existed in the court in an independent genre. At the end of the nineteenth century, as Chinese coastal ports were forced to open, many foreigners poured in, and Western music spread in China on a large scale. Folk music then began to absorb elements of Western music, forming a characteristic music style combining Chinese and Western elements.

Piano music gradually spread to China along with the spread of Western art and culture. A keyboard instrument first appeared in China in 1601, when the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) gave the Ming emperor a clavichord as a gift during his visit to Beijing.⁹⁶ In this period the keyboard instrument was a noble instrument, so the common people could not learn it and its popularity was restricted.⁹⁷ At the end of the Qing Dynasty, with the increase of activities between Western countries and China, the piano became more widely popular in China. Some schools even offered piano lessons so that ordinary students could have access to piano. From this period, the piano was officially written into music history in China.

With the increased popularity of the piano, compositions for this instrument have also been influenced by Chinese traditional culture, and the use of traditional elements has gradually become more technically mature. Chinese-style music is currently part of the mainstream development among Chinese piano students. From the early twentieth century onward, there are several stages in the development of compositional experience, technique, and style in Chinese piano works.

During the first stage of development in the early twentieth century, Chinese pianists began to compose piano music. Composers were greatly influenced by images of Western

⁹⁶ Joyce Lindorff, "Missionaries, Keyboards and Musical Exchange in the Ming and Qing Courts," *Early Music* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 403.

⁹⁷ Shucui Liu, "On Infiltrating Traditional Music Culture in Chinese Piano Works," *Journal of Heihe University*, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 160–162.

countries and less by traditional Chinese music culture. In January 1915, an appendix was published at the end of the first issue of the first volume of the journal *Science* in Shanghai, and the appendix is the piano composition *Heping March* (March of Peace) written by Yuen Ren Chao (1892–1982). This is the first piano piece composed and published by Chinese people, marking the emergence of Chinese original piano works. Therefore, this has become a work of historical significance in the history of Chinese piano. In his book *Life with Chaos*, Chao writes that the *March of Peace* was his first published piece of piano music and that it was completely in the Western style.⁹⁸

After this publication, Yuan-ren Zhao soon composed piano music in a Chinese style. In 1917, when he majored in philosophy at the Graduate School of Harvard University in Boston, he took courses in counterpoint and composition as electives in his spare time, and he composed another piano piece called *Ou Cheng* (Accidental), an untitled and improvised work. In the manuscript of *Ou Cheng* (see Figure 4.5), it was subtitled in French “Une Petite Idée Chinoise” (A small Chinese conception), indicating that the music has a very distinct Chinese tone and Chinese style.⁹⁹ The melodies are all pentatonic, and the use of embellishment notes imitates the tunes of traditional Chinese opera. In the beginning and end of this piece, the right-hand chords in the high register mimic Chinese folk percussion, and the left hand imitates the sound of percussion instruments throughout the piece. This is the first time that the piano has been used to represent the sound of Chinese folk gong, drum, and bamboo board.¹⁰⁰ *Ou Cheng* depicts a vivid performance of folk art during the festival, and this piano piece is a secular Chinese expression.

⁹⁸ Yuen Ren Chao, *Life with Chaos* (New York: Spoken Language Services, 1975), 75.

⁹⁹ Xinna Zhao and Peiyun Huang, *Zhao Yuanren Nian Pu* [Chronicle of Zhao Yuanren] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2001), 91.

¹⁰⁰ Zhao and Huang, *Zhao Yuanren Nian Pu*, 85–108.



Figure 4.5. A Photocopy of the Manuscript Score of the Piano Piece *Ou Cheng*.¹⁰¹

The second stage of Chinese piano evolution occurred in the 1930s. In the process of continuous exploration and application, many composers applied more folk elements into piano composition, thus creating more musical works with Chinese traditional culture. Among them, *A Shepherd's Flute* (1934) by Luting He (1903–1999) is the most outstanding. This work not only perfectly integrates the artistic conception of Chinese landscape painting with the expression techniques of Western music but also shows the distinctive artistic characteristics of Chinese folk music through piano music, and it has been highly praised. *A Shepherd's Flute* opened a new platform for the development of piano music in China. With significant progress in both the quality and quantity of musical works, this repertory began to enter a more mature stage of development.

¹⁰¹ Yuen Ren Chao, *Life with Chaos* (New York: Spoken Language Services, 1975), 91.



Figure 4.6. Huwei Huang's *Painting of Bashu*.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China during the 1950s and 1960s, China's political, economic, and cultural environments were significantly improved, which created favorable conditions for the development of piano music. However, Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) then caused a devastating impact on all areas of Chinese culture, art, and music, many outstanding musical works were destroyed at that period. In order to continue the development of Chinese piano music, a large number of composers tried to compose piano adaptations of folk instrumental pieces, folk songs, and Beijing operas, showing a strong Chinese traditional style. This period can be considered as an important turning point in the creation of Chinese piano music, and these piano adaptations gradually restored the suppressed piano music to its previous activity. At this stage, the developmental direction turned towards local folk music, and piano works were mainly adapted from traditional Chinese classical music. For example, Huwei Huang's *Painting of Bashu* (1958) (see Figure 4.6) was adapted from Sichuan folk songs, and the piece was written in a pentatonic scale, which renders a beautiful scene in the early morning of misty mountains in Sichuan. Moreover, the most important point in the adaptation of Chinese piano music is to imitate the timbre of traditional national instruments, such as Suona, Erhu, and Guzheng.

This is seen for instance in *Song of the Phoenix* (1973) by Jianzhong Wang (1933–2016), adapted from the folk Suona tune. The minor second intervals alternate from left hand to right hand (see Figure 4.7), describing the clear and cheerful chirping of birds, showing a light, lively, and humorous effect. Another example is Wanghua Chu’s piano piece, which was adapted from the traditional famous Erhu piece *Erquan Yingyue* (The Moon’s Reflection on the Second Spring) by Abing. By using a large number of appoggiaturas and tremolos, the work imitates the effect of erhu playing. In order to better show the performance of erhu in each handle position, the change of intensity is intentionally enhanced so that the music presents a full folk sense.



Figure 4.7. Jianzhong Wang’s *Song of the Phoenix*.

Most of the adapted Chinese piano music that is widely known is based on some original traditional ancient music in China. When the composers adapted the music, they preserved the melodies of the ancient music itself in large quantities and combined the more modern techniques with their own understanding of the ancient melodies. The adaptation of ancient pieces has promoted the continuous development of Chinese folk music and played a positive role in promoting it.

Chinese Pentatonicism

Pentatonic mode is widely used throughout the world, but different nations and regions use different pentatonic modes. The pentatonic mode has a very long history in China. The calculation method of the Chinese pentatonic mode is recorded in the *Guanzi*

Diyuan in the Spring and Autumn Period (around 771–476 BCE).¹⁰² Although the musical modes of various ethnic groups in China are relatively diverse, the pentatonic mode occupies a dominant position, and the use of the pentatonic scale is ubiquitous in traditional Chinese music.

The Chinese pentatonic mode refers to the mode composed of five tones arranged according to the ascending perfect fifth (see Figure 4.8), and the five tones are arranged in order of low and high to form the tonic pentatonic scale (see Figure 4.9). The names of each tone in Chinese pentatonic scale are Gong (宮), Shang (商), Jue (角), Zhi (徵), and Yu (羽), and the basic tone intervals are mainly composed of major seconds and minor thirds.



Figure 4.8. Chinese Pentatonic Mode.



Figure 4.9. Five Basic Tones of Chinese Pentatonic Scale.

In the Chinese pentatonic mode, each of the five tones in a pentatonic scale can be used as a tonic, and then a different mode can be formed. The modes are named after the name of the tonic tone. For example, when the tone Gong is the tonic, it is called Gong mode; when the tone Shang is the tonic, it is called Shang mode, and so on. The Chinese pentatonic

¹⁰² Junhong Dou, “A Study on the Logic of Chinese Pentatonic Style,” *Jiao Xiang-Journal of Xi’an Conservatory of Music* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 65–69.

mode can be rotated into five modes within the same Gong system, and the Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu can cycle into five pentatonic modes (See Figure 4.10). The rotation of Chinese pentatonic modes is equivalent to the conversion of the Western major and minor modes within the same key.



Figure 4.10. Basic Chinese Pentatonic Modes.

Moreover, when the Chinese pentatonic scale is extended according to the relationship of five degrees to form six-tone and seven-tone scales, it will add some “pian yin” (extra tones), such as Qingjue (F), Bianzhi (F#), and Run (Bb), thus forming six-tone and seven-tone modes, but they are all referred to as pentatonicism. The pentatonic scale is the main material of traditional Chinese music, and its music is mainly based on pentatonic

melodies. Although expanded to six-tone and seven-tone scales, it is always based on pentatonic scales, and the extra tones play a role of decoration, embellishment, and polish.

The Use of Pentatonicism in Chinese Music

The melody of Chinese piano music gives a very prominent impression of nationalization, due to the use of pentatonic scales and appropriate integration of local music elements to fully show the national color of the music. Although Chinese piano music has only experienced a few decades of development, Chinese composers have fully explored national composition techniques and characteristics and created many piano works with distinctive styles. The use of pentatonicism in traditional Chinese music is complex and diverse, and their distinctive modes are also reflected in specific musical works.

Luting He's *A Shepherd's Flute*

Luting He's piano solo piece *A Shepherd's Flute* is a masterpiece with strong ethnic roots in early Chinese piano music. He is one of the most outstanding contemporary composers, music theorists, and educators in China. In the spring of 1934, Alexander Tcherepnin (1899–1977), a pianist from the former Soviet Union, came to Shanghai and held a competition to select piano pieces with Chinese style. He, who studied at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, won the first prize for *A Shepherd's Flute*.¹⁰³ Unlike many other excellent Chinese piano adaptations, *A Shepherd's Flute* is a new piece independently created. There are neither direct folk songs nor typical folk-dance rhythms in the music. However, a Chinese style is still strongly and distinctly expressed in this work.

The composer paints a picture for the audience through the piece's title—A little

¹⁰³ Wei Chen and Lu Zheng, "Different Artistic Contexts of Chinese and Western Pastoral Musical Pictures Seen from *A Shepherd's Flute*," *Journal of Shanghai Normal University: Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 73–78.

shepherd boy riding on the back of a cow, playing the flute melodiously, leisurely roaming in the fields, clear and fluent flute sound echoed in the beautiful scenery of the wilderness.

There are two voices in *A Shepherd's Flute*, and they are created according to traditional Western counterpoint techniques. However, its melodies use the traditional Chinese pentatonic scales and modes. The whole piece is in the G Zhi (徵) mode with 4/4 meter, and the 76 bars are divided into three sections, which is a typical ABA structure with repetition. The A section of the music uses polyphonic writing based on the G Zhi mode (see Figure 4.11). The two pentatonic melodies that enter one after another use the same direction, the opposite direction, and the oblique direction; the rhythmic relationship is dense on the top and thin on the bottom; the length of the sentence is variable, and the sentences are intertwined. The melody uses traditional Chinese pentatonic scales, which are mainly composed of five tones: Zhi (G), Yu (A), Gong (C), Shang (D), and Jue (E). Therefore, this work has clear characteristics of the Chinese style.

Figure 4.11. *A Shepherd's Flute*, mm. 1–5.

The image shows a musical score for a section of 'A Shepherd's Flute' from mm. 25 to 36. The score is written for a single melodic line (likely flute) and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked 'Vivace'. The score is divided into three phrases, each indicated by a red bracket and label above the staff. The first phrase (mm. 25-28) is marked 'mp' and 'G Gong mode'. The second phrase (mm. 28-32) is marked 'cresc.'. The third phrase (mm. 32-36) is marked 'D' and 'f'. The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

Figure 4.12. *A Shepherd's Flute*, mm. 25–36.

The B section uses the G Gong mode with 2/4 time from mm. 25–52, and the music is in the dominant key (see Figure 4.12). At the beginning of this section there is a sudden acceleration, the tempo mark changes from *Commodo* to *Vivace*, which reflects the distinctive characteristics of folk-dance music. The main thematic material in this section is a phrase from mm. 25–28, and the same theme material is shifted and repeated at different pitches. This is a typical development technique, and it is still based on the pentatonic scale. In terms of mode, the thematic material of melody is still composed according to pentatonic mode. The first phrase (mm. 25–28) is in the G Gong mode; the second phrase (mm. 28–32) is on the D Gong mode, which is an imitation of the first phrase in the direction of the fifth degree; the first two measures of third phrase (mm. 32–36) are on the A Gong mode, which is an imitation of the second phrase in the five-degree direction, and the last two measures are back to the G Gong mode, which is preparation for repetition. Therefore, the entire segment

is based on the fifth-degree cycle of G-D-A-G Gong pentatonic modes. Moreover, the music in the left hand uses the harmony of the parallel third descending, which makes the music livelier, showing the lovely and vivid image of the little shepherd boy.

The A' section is basically a strict repetition of the A section with 4/4 time in the G Zhi mode from mm. 53–76 (see Figure 4.13). There is no significant change in compositional technique or structure, and the mode and speed are back to the same as the A section. The small difference is mainly in the use of embellishment, passing tones, and neighbor tones based on the basic framework of the A section. As one of the main means of variation in Chinese folk music, the addition of embellishment makes the theme melody sound more smooth, delicate, and pleasant.



Figure 4.13. *A Shepherd's Flute*, mm. 53–56.

He's *A Shepherd's Flute* not only integrates counterpoint techniques into the traditional Chinese pentatonic scales and modes but also absorbs and develops the form of Chinese folk multi-part music, enriching the music's expressiveness. This work depicts a sound and picture that is completely different from the artistic conception of Western music and has become one of the classics of Chinese modern music.

The piece uses Gb Gong as the main mode, coupled with the use of extra tones from the Chinese pentatonic scale, depicting a charming scenery of the spring river on a moonlit night. After the eight-measure introduction, the main theme uses the Chinese composition technique *Ding Zhen Ge*, which means the last note at the end of a phrase is used as the beginning note of the next.¹⁰⁴ The theme passage is also the basis for the following eight variations. The theme is composed of four musical phrases (see Figure 4.15); the first one starts on the Yu (Eb) in Gb Gong mode, and all the notes are on the black keys, which is the typical pentatonic scale, to imitate the arpeggios of the guzheng.



Figure 4.15. The Theme of *Flute and Drum at Sunset*.

In the following several variations, Li creates many arpeggio textures to integrate the timbre characteristics of the original pipa, which has the quality of Chinese folk musical instruments. These arpeggios are based on the Chinese pentatonic pattern, seen in Figure 4.16. While the right hand serves as the melody, the left hand plays an accompaniment and adopts pentatonic arpeggio textures. The continuous and compact descending arpeggio accompaniment texture is combined with the long melody of the upper part to make the melody more fluid.

¹⁰⁴ Dong Ye, *Genre and Form of National Instrumental Music* (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 1983), 185–189.



Figure 4.16. The Passage from *Flute and Drum at Sunset*.



Figure 4.17. The Passage from *Flute and Drum at Sunset*.

Moreover, the arpeggios are not entirely an accompaniment. Many arpeggios are used to compose melodies, and the melodic progression hidden in the arpeggios brings fluidity, which plays an important role in the piece. In Figure 4.17, the arpeggios in this passage become the main theme rather than an accompaniment, containing a clear melodic progression. It enriches the musical texture and makes it more layered. In the Gb pentatonic mode, the triad built on the Shang tone is Db, F, and Ab, and the triad built on the Zhi tone is Gb, Bb, and Db. To adapt to the pentatonic style in the melody, the thirds in the chords are often omitted. This kind of chord without the third note is a common chord structure in Chinese harmony. The fifth harmonic effect, combined with the rapid reverse contrast of the sound areas, depicts a picture of the rippling and splashing water. At the end, returning to the theme, the upper part uses ascending chords without thirds progression to imitate the bell tower chiming again (see Figure 4.18). The bass of the left hand imitates the Chinese flute, showing the scene of the fishing boat disappearing in the river and everything returning to

calm. The last two chords, like the pipa sound itself, make the listener feel peaceful and ethereal, and the whole piece ends in quiet.



Figure 4.18. The Coda in *Flute and Drum at Sunset*.

Flute and Drum at Sunset is a representative work of Chinese national piano music. Li uses Chinese pentatonic modes and scales, and he imitates several Chinese traditional instruments such as the pipa, guqin, guzheng, and xiao, which makes the work richer in national style. The work is like an ink painting, showing a beautiful scene of sunset, a river in spring, tower bells and drums, and the fishermen singing at night. It combines the verve of traditional music and artistic conception vividly to show the charm of traditional Chinese culture.

Peixun Chen's *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake*

Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake is one of the outstanding achievements of Chinese composers actively exploring national harmony. This piece originated from the Cantonese tune *Boudoir Dance*, also known as *Zui Tai Ping*, and its melody is catchy and melodious.¹⁰⁵ In 1975, Peixun Chen (1922–2006), who was a well-known composer in China and a professor in the Composition Department of the Central Conservatory of Music, was invited by famous pianists Guangren Zhou (1928–) and Chengzong Yin (1941–) to adapt a piano

¹⁰⁵ Xiaoyun Ni, "Some Explanation about the Artistry of Piano Piece: *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake*," *Journal of Quanzhou Normal University* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 39–42.

solo piece based on the Cantonese song of the same name. This piano piece contains strong local characteristics of traditional music. It combines Zhejiang folk music tunes with ornamentation and melodic characteristics of Guangdong music. The whole piece imitates the charm of Jiangnan string and wind instruments, like the erhu, pipa, and Chinese flute, as well as the style of Cantonese music, vividly depicting the beautiful scenery of the autumn moon over a calm lake.

The whole piece is small and exquisite, and the melody is rubato and relaxing. Chen adopted the melody of the original piece without any major changes, the music takes the pentatonic scale as the basic structure and has typical characteristics of a Chinese pentatonic mode. Although *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake* only has 26 measures, it includes four sections in the overall structure. All four sections are built on the Db Gong mode with two extra tones, alternating Gong and Yu modes in the same Gong system. Each section of music starts with the emphasis on the Gong or Zhi notes and ends on the Yu, Gong, or Zhi note, which brings a natural and soft effect.

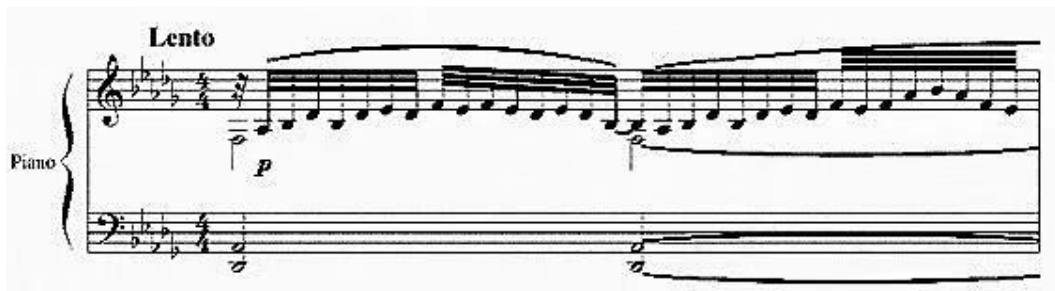


Figure 4.19. The Beginning of *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake*.

At the beginning there is a continuous pentatonic melodic pattern (see Figure 4.19), a common technique used by Chinese composers to write piano works with a strong Chinese flavor, and this tone pattern runs almost throughout the entire piece. The theme is on the Zhi mode in Db Gong system, and the additional notes are based on the third structural chord. The left hand uses the thirty-second-note broken chords (see Figure 4.20), and the extra tones

are also added to the broken chord pattern; they are all from the Db Gong pentatonic scales. The left-hand progression of bass chords increases the pentatonic acoustic characteristics of chords.



Figure 4.20. *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake* mm. 2–4.

In the final five measures of the piece, the melody is on the Zhi mode in the Db Gong system. The dominant chord of the last beat at measure 22 includes a major second in the chord, and the main chord of measure 23 also adopts this technique (see Figure 4.21). The chords with a major second include all the notes of Zhi pentatonic scale in Db Gong system, which makes the national characteristics of chord acoustics more obvious. Moreover, in terms of the arrangement of notes, the composer avoids traditional triad structures. In the left hand at measure 23, he establishes the fifth-degree structure of Db major chord with a perfect fifth interval from Db to Ab. The third note F of the main chord does not appear in the way of the conventional triad but appears in the Db pentatonic scale after the perfect fifth: Db-Eb-F-Ab-Bb. This method of composition is to avoid using the arrangement of chord notes Db, F, and Ab, which weakens the sense of major mode and strengthens the characteristics of the Chinese pentatonic mode.



Figure 4.21. *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake* mm. 22–26.

As a famous modern composer in China, Chen actively explored the nationalization of traditional Western music forms and modes in order to conform to Chinese aesthetic taste. *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake*, composed in his mature period, is a milestone on the road of exploring the nationalization of harmony and modes. While adopting the traditional Chinese pentatonic modes, this piece imitates the timbres of traditional instruments and integrates characteristics of traditional Chinese folk music. After Western harmony was introduced into China in the early twentieth century, Chinese composers used pentatonic modes and scales in their creations to imitate folk songs and overcome the stylistic inconsistencies caused by the combination of Western harmony with Chinese traditional modes.

Chapter 5

The Differences between Chinese Music and Debussy's Music

Pentatonicism is the primary feature of Chinese traditional music, while the main feature of Western music is the major and minor mode system. In modern times it has become more and more common to integrate a pentatonic musical language into the creative techniques of Western music. Debussy tried to break the traditional Western major and minor systems and harmonic standards by creatively using pentatonic scales, harmonies, and melodies. He created new tone colors, forming his own unique style, and his music had a profound influence on later Western music and piano music. However, due to the differences between Chinese and Western music cultures and social environments, the use of pentatonic music languages reflects their different characteristics. This chapter will analyze the use of three aspects of pentatonicism—scale, harmony, and melody—to explore the differences between Chinese music and Debussy's music.

The Comparison of Chinese and Debussy's Music from Pentatonic Scales and Modes

Pentatonic scales are the basic pattern of Chinese music, and pentatonic mode is mainly reflected in the specific works of Chinese traditional music in three situations. The first situation is the use of pentatonic scale in the whole piece. As described earlier, the basic Chinese pentatonic scale includes Gong, Shang, Jue, Zhi, and Yu tones. Since each of the tone degrees can be used as the tonic, there are five modes with each of the five tones as the tonic. For instance, the piano piece *A Shepherd's Flute* is mainly developed from the G Zhi pentatonic mode, and the whole piece only contains five tones: G, A, C, D, and E. The

second situation is the use of the pentatonic scale with one extra note. This scale is developed from the pentatonic mode by adding one extra tone Qingjue or Biangong. For example, the Shandong folk song *Yimeng Mountain Ditty* is a six-tone mode of E Zhi with Biangong, and its scale includes A (Gong), B, C-sharp, E, F-sharp, and G-sharp (Biangong). The third situation is the use of the pentatonic scale with two extra tones. Its scale is mainly based on the pentatonic mode, adding two different tones in the middle of the interval of the minor third. The piano piece *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake* uses the Db Gong mode with two extra tones throughout the whole piece.

By contrast, Debussy uses the pentatonic music language as only one tool to create his impressionist style, relying also on traditional Western techniques. In some of his works, only certain segments are based on pentatonic scales, such as the *En animant* section of *Voiles* (1909). The scale mainly consists of the five notes Eb, Gb, Ab, Bb, and Db, with Eb as the central tone of the mode. Other pieces are based entirely on pentatonic scales, such as “*La fille aux cheveux de lin*”, using the method of second and third intervals between adjacent tones.

Debussy’s pentatonic scale is mainly based on the seven-tone scales of the major and minor system. The composer can choose one of the seven notes to form the pentatonic scale, and each note of the pentatonic scale is of equal importance regardless of primary or secondary. This is different from Chinese pentatonic scales, which are based on the pentatonic Gong system. Gong is the most important tone in the scale and is sometimes supplemented by one or two extra tones.

The Comparison of Chinese and Debussy's Music from Harmonies

Chinese pentatonic harmony is mainly focused on the Gong tone, and the structure of its chords can be roughly divided into thirds superimposed and non-thirds structures.¹⁰⁶ Due to the emphasis on pentatonic tones, there are fewer triads with thirds, while there are relatively more chord types with non-thirds such as fourths, seconds, and fifths. These are used in various ways, often with an emphasis on second intervals in the chords. For instance, in order to highlight the unique acoustics of northern folk wind and percussion music, *Song of the Phoenix* uses a large number of second overlapping chords and minor second intervals, and the harmonic color and folk characteristics are extremely rich. Moreover, in Yinghai Li's character piece *Panda* (1986) (see Figure 5.1), the accompaniment pattern in the left hand under the pentatonic melodic line starts with broken chords of major second and lower fifth notes, vividly depicting the clumsy posture of pandas when they walk, and then the fifth intervals are added and alternated with the broken chords. In traditional Chinese music, the chords of superimposed thirds are less frequently used in pentatonic works because most of these chords contain the extra notes in pentatonic harmonies. Even if the extra tone is used, it is mainly put in the weak position of the middle part without emphasis, which well maintains the pentatonic characteristics of the work.



Figure 5.1. Segment of Yinghai Li's Character Piece *Panda*.

¹⁰⁶ Dou, "A Study on the Logic," 65–69.

In contrast, Debussy's use of pentatonic harmony is more flexible and diverse. The non-third superimposed structure chords no longer serve as a supplement to the third superimposed structure chords but have an independent meaning. The octave, the perfect fifth, the perfect fourth, the major second, and the minor seventh are widely used in Debussy's music, which greatly enriches its color. Parallelism is also a characteristic of Debussy's harmonic style. For instance, at the beginning of "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut" in *Images II*, Debussy broke the convention of banning parallel fifths in traditional harmony and boldly used continuous parallel fifths movement, and the characteristics of pentatonic harmony are prominent as well. The use of pentatonic harmony in Debussy's works is similar to that in Chinese music works, but there are obvious differences in the specific use of harmony. Debussy pays attention to the use of functional harmony, such as in the end of Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin", where the harmony used in the cadence is a typical functional harmonic progression. However, Chinese music works do not pay attention to functional harmony and tend to focus on the horizontal movement of each part, and the composers usually weaken the progression of functional harmony by adding extra tones.

The Comparison of Chinese and Debussy's Music from Melodies

The melodies in Chinese music works are diverse but mainly based on pentatonic scales. The melody lines play an important role in the form of Chinese music, which is characterized by neat structure, rich emotion, and clear sentences. In piano works, composers often used ornaments to imitate traditional Chinese instruments. Arpeggios and short appoggiaturas are used to simulate the glide of Gao Hu, the dense arpeggio is used to imitate the sound of Guzheng, the tremolo is used to simulate the rotation and rolling of the Chinese dulcimer, and the trill is used to imitate the flute. Composers use pentatonic melodies as the

basis to imitate the playing skills, timbre characteristics, and unique flavor of various national instruments.

In contrast, Debussy used pentatonic melodies more to create the hazy beauty of impressionism rather than imitating the timbre of an instrument. Pentatonic melodies also play an essential role in Debussy's music. For instance, at the beginning of *La mer*, an ascending pentatonic scale of F-sharp, G-sharp, B, C-sharp, and D-sharp is introduced with extremely weak intensity *ppp* in the low register, supported by a sustained B in the bass part. Thus, the sense of pentatonic mode is very clear. With the pure acoustics of the pentatonic mode, Debussy depicted the tranquility and serenity of the sea in the early morning. Moreover, harmony and melody often have the same status for Debussy, and melody can even be subordinate to the arrangement of harmonies. For example, at measure 14 of "Pagodes", there is a pentatonic melody line in the right hand, but the overall progression is parallel octaves with octaves in the left hand. As the overall pentatonic melody depends on the harmony, the melody appears only vaguely, which weakens the impression of the theme and creates a hazy effect with the characteristics of the impression style. However, in Chinese traditional music works, the melody often occupies a dominant position, and harmony is usually subordinate to the melody.

Debussy's use of pentatonic elements has many similarities, as well as obvious differences, with the pentatonic characteristics in Chinese music. Debussy frequently incorporates pentatonic elements, which are based on the traditional Western mode system of major and minor. Although his music has different style characteristics from the pentatonic music in China, his use of pentatonicism gives his music unique harmonic effects that evoke the sound worlds of Asia.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to examine the relationship between Claude Debussy's music and Asian influences, with a special concentration on the Chinese influence and comparison of Chinese music with Debussy's piano music. The research starts with a summary of Debussy's early experiences and his enthusiasm for Asian artworks, followed by an analysis of the reasons for the influence of Asian and Chinese culture, music, and art on Debussy's music. Then, in particular, the history of the evolution of Chinese music is illustrated, and some of Debussy's piano works and Chinese piano works are analyzed and compared.

Debussy was born in the mid-nineteenth century, and his unique musical style made him become a very representative French composer of that period. In Debussy's works, the Asian flavor represents the diversity of cultures resulting from several aspects. Debussy's friendship with many musicians, literary scholars, and artists, as well as his passion for exploring new things and being innovative, led to his exposure to music and art from many different cultures and countries during his lifetime. Debussy's compositional style has been influenced by a variety of sources, most notably Asian cultures, such as Japanese art, Javanese gamelan music, Annamite theatre, as well as Chinese poetry and pentatonic scales. The affection for Asian artwork inspired Debussy's music, and the use of short melodies and pentatonic scales fulfilled his desire to break with tradition and pursue exotic sounds. The Asian titles of several pieces, as a kind of contextual description, echoes the oriental sounds in the pieces themselves, which try to evoke the imagination of the listeners, as if taking them

on a trip to an Asian country. The wave of orientalism that swept Europe provided a favorable environment for the creation of the Asian aesthetic in his works.¹⁰⁷ The creation process of Asian flavors in Debussy's music is a process of cross-cultural understanding of different Asian music styles. Although Debussy's piano music incorporates a large number of pentatonic elements, they have distinctively different stylistic characteristics from Chinese pentatonic music. While under the influence of music and arts from different cultures, Debussy also devoted himself to exploring new musical styles. Debussy's music combines various musical elements to express his unique sound effects and personal style, and his musical language is not only an important source of inspiration for future generations, but also establishes his significant position in the history of music.

Overall, the evidence from this study suggests that these Chinese and other Asian elements allowed Debussy to find great inspiration in exotic sonorities. The analysis of Chinese piano music and the comparison with Debussy's music in this project provide a new understanding of Chinese music and the connection between Chinese music and Debussy's music, which brings attention to the influence of a wider range of Asian elements on Debussy. It is hoped that this project will be the starting point for further research on the connection between Western and Chinese music in the future, as perhaps the influence of Chinese music is present not only in Debussy's music, but also on some other Western composers.

¹⁰⁷ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 110–125.

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