

UNVEILING JAVANESE GAMELAN INFLUENCES IN DEBUSSY'S ESTAMPES L.100 I. PAGODES: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

Aisyah Nadiyah Mohd Zaki Al Hassan¹, Juwairiyah Zakaria², Ahmad Munir
Mahzair³, Sarah Alia Ahmad Jamal⁴, Amanina Alwani Badaruddin⁵
^{1,2, 3, 4, 5} Faculty of Music, University Teknologi MARA

Corresponding author: juwairiyah@uitm.edu.my²

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the significant influence of Javanese gamelan music on Claude Debussy's prominent piano work, "Pagodes," from the suite *Estampes* (L.100). The objectives of this study are; 1) to conduct an in-depth score analysis, and 2) to ascertain the influence of Javanese music on Debussy's *Estampes* L.100: I. *Pagodes*. This study employs a qualitative research design that emphasizes a comprehensive musical analysis of this piece. The comparative analysis was used to juxtapose the results of the score analysis with the established characteristics of Javanese gamelan music's structural components, harmonic framework, rhythmic complexities, and emotional dimensions of the composition. Finding reveals that elements like pentatonicism, rhythmic patterns, and timbral nuances from Javanese music are intricately integrated into 'Pagodas'. The analysis demonstrates that Debussy also integrates rhythmic principles from Javanese music, including complex polyrhythms, cyclical patterns, and ostinatos. The discovery also demonstrates that Debussy employs the piano's timbral capabilities to evoke the sounds of bonang, metallophones, and gongs. The music texture is a reflection of the structure of gamelan music, with the Gong serving as the structural layer, the *Balungan* as the core melody layer, and the *Panerusan* as the elaborating layer. Lastly, Debussy did not simply replicate gamelan music; instead, he abstracted its core principles, such as stratified polyphony, cyclical rhythmic structures, and unique sonorities, to develop an innovative and transformative pianistic language. This research provides musicians and scholars with a refined perspective on one of Debussy's most innovative compositions, while also significantly enhancing the comprehension of the musical exchanges that occurred across diverse cultures in the early 20th century.

Keywords: *Claude Debussy, Pagodes, Javanese Gamelan, Cross-Cultural Influence, Musical Analysis, Impressionism, Pentatonicism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) stands as one of the most influential composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, celebrated for his pioneering contributions to musical Impressionism. His work initiated a departure from the rigid structures and tonal conventions of the Romantic era, moving instead toward a musical language focused on conveying sensory impressions, mood, and atmosphere. A pivotal moment in the formation of his mature aesthetic occurred at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle, where Debussy first encountered the music of a Javanese gamelan ensemble. The mesmerizing allure of its sounds—characterized by unique pentatonic harmonies, complex polyrhythmic layers, and a distinctive percussive timbre—left an indelible mark on his musical imagination.

This encounter provided Debussy with a compelling alternative to the Western musical system, broadening his artistic horizons and solidifying his departure from traditional norms. The influence of the Javanese gamelan is perhaps most explicitly and profoundly realized in his 1903 piano composition, “Pagodes,” the first piece in the triptych *Estampes*. This work marks a significant turning point in Debussy's writing for the piano, serving as a laboratory for new sonorities and compositional techniques that would become foundational to his later works, such as *Images* (1905-1907) and the *Préludes* (1909-1913).

While the connection between “Pagodes” and Javanese music is widely acknowledged, the specific nature and extent of this influence often remain generalized. Many composers of Debussy's era incorporated exotic elements into their work, but few managed to integrate non-Western musical systems with such structural and aesthetic coherence. This raises a central problem: how did Debussy successfully synthesize two disparate musical traditions—European classical and Javanese gamelan—into a unified and innovative artistic statement?

This study aims to address this question by examining the compositional choices Debussy made in “Pagodes” as a direct result of his exposure to Javanese music. Its purpose is twofold: first, to provide an in-depth musical analysis of the piece, and second, to identify and elucidate the specific Javanese musical elements integrated within its structure. This research seeks to answer what specific techniques, scales, and rhythms Debussy employed, and how these components reflect the principles of Javanese gamelan music. By doing so, this article offers music performers, educators, and scholars a deeper understanding of Debussy's compositional style and the profound impact of cross-cultural encounters on the development of Western classical music.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Claude Debussy and his Significant Piano Works

Debussy was born at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918, during World War I. His life saw considerable cultural change. Lesure (2019), emphasizes that Debussy came from a poor, non-musical household. It is even more impressive since he entered the top Paris Conservatoire at eleven. His extensive research, which includes many letters and official records, shows how Debussy's education was different, how he fought against the Conservatoire's strict academic traditions, and how he won the Prix de Rome in 1884, which ironically led to creative frustration in Italy.

Debussy's piano works innovated a new keyboard technique and the modern piano repertoire. In 1966, Schmitz examines new strategies for playing Debussy's compositions, such as how to use the pedal to create washes of sound, layer dynamics subtly, and highlight certain timbres and textures. He believes the two volumes of *Préludes* (1909-1913) are elaborately structured compositions that change the composer's connection with the piano "impressions" In the same way, Roberts (2001), related *Estampes* (1903) and *Images* (1905, 1907) to Symbolist poetry and Asian art. All authors agree that Debussy's piano music was innovative. It abandoned Romantic virtuosity for a more provocative, vibrant, and atmospheric approach. He influenced later composers with this technique.

2.2 Musical Impressionism

Lockspeiser (1962) have thoroughly chronicled Debussy's departure from the inflexible frameworks of the Romantic period, emphasizing his groundbreaking application of harmony and orchestration to evoke compelling atmospheres. This shift toward a more sensory-based musical language is a common topic of study. Palmer (1973) builds on this by looking at how Debussy's tactics are similar to the aesthetic ideals of Impressionist artists. He focuses on how the composer was able to depict transitory moments and moods. In addition, Pasler (2001) points out, the term "Impressionist" to describe Debussy's music is a topic of academic debate. This is because the composer himself didn't like the title and Symbolist poetry had an effect on his work. Even yet, the phrase has stayed a helpful, if controversial, way to describe his style. Vallas (1933), one of Debussy's earliest biographers, wrote a story about the composer as a revolutionary who put color and timbre ahead of traditional melodic and harmonic progression. In 2001, Fulcher placed his new ideas in the larger cultural and intellectual background of Paris at the end of the 19th century, which helps us comprehend his distinctive musical language even better. In the end, most scholars agree that Debussy's work changed Western music in a big way. His emphasis on expressing sensory perceptions, emotions, and ambiance, as examined by these and other academics, signifies a clear departure from Romantic traditions. This new way of looking at music not only

defined Impressionism, but it also set the stage for numerous changes in music in the 20th century. His aesthetic has had a lasting effect on music, and experts are still looking into it. This makes him one of the most important composers of his period.

2.3 The 1889 Paris Exposition

The Paris Exposition of 1889 was a significant breakthrough event in Claude Debussy's musical career. This event introduced the composer to the Javanese gamelan, which changed his music outlook. According to Lockspeiser (1962), this incident was crucial for Debussy since it gave him a strong alternative to Wagnerian music, which he wanted to depart from. The gamelan assimilated new auditory potentials, not only imitated them. Roy Howat (1983) studied Debussy's use of non-Western pentatonic scales, rich textures, and a harmony based on resonance and timbre rather than functional progression. This new influence is most evident in "Pagodes," from his piano suite *Estampes*. It represents the gamelan's acoustic domain, say most. This influence changed his conceptions of rhythm, orchestration, and musical design (Trezise, 2003). Musicologists say his exposure to non-European music influenced his departure from Western tonality. It helped him build a unique style that shaped his output and 20th-century music. The history of contemporary music hinges on this interaction.

2.4 Debussy's *Estampes*, L.100 I. Pagodes

"Pagodes," the first piece of Claude Debussy's 1903 piano suite *Estampes*, is widely regarded by experts as an innovative piece that was written about after he heard non-Western music. This event offered him a significant contrast to the prevailing Wagnerian aesthetic. Howat (1983) gives a thorough musical analysis that shows how Debussy carefully converted the sounds of the gamelan into piano language. He did this by using pentatonic scales, making layered soundscapes with varying rhythms, and a resonant bass to mimic the way the gong punctuated the music.

The title "Pagodes" has been a major topic of scholarly debate, as Fauser (2005) points out, because pagodas are not native to Java. He claimed that this phenomenon stems from 19th-century Orientalism, during which Debussy presumably amalgamated diverse Asian aesthetics into a singular, generalized exotic vision. The title was not meant to be taken literally; instead, it was meant to be an evocative signifier for a dream-like, pan-Asian sound world. Scholars who wrote for books like *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Trezise, 2003) say that "Pagodes" is a very important turning point since it shows that the composer has completely moved away from functional tonality. The work is examined not merely as a transcription but as a complex act of creative integration. In the end, the literature shows that "Pagodes" is a groundbreaking piece of musical exoticism that changed the way Debussy wrote music in a big way.

Howat (1983) wrote a detailed musical analysis in 1983 that shows how Debussy carefully transferred the sounds of the gamelan to the piano by using pentatonic scales, creating layered textures with shifting rhythmic layers, and using a resonant bass to imitate the gong's punctuating function. According to the scholars who wrote *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Trezise, 2003), "Pagodes" is a turning point that marks the composer's clear break from functional harmony. They look at the piece not just as a copy but as a complex process of creative assimilation.

2.5 Javanese Gamelan Characteristics

The Javanese gamelan is a traditional musical ensemble of Indonesia, central to court and community life for centuries. Its music is built on a set of core principles that distinguish it from Western classical music.

Javanese gamelan tuning systems, especially the five-note *sléndro* and seven-note *pélog*, differ from Western equal temperament, making them important ethnomusicological topics. Significant analysis by Sumarsam (1995) showed that these systems are *laras*, or intervallic structure, unique to each gamelan set. This inherent variability means no two gamelans sound alike. Both systems are fundamentally different from the equal temperament of Western music, and their unique intervallic structures contribute to the characteristic sound of the gamelan. It was the five-note *sléndro* scale that most directly influenced Debussy.

Scholar, Sarcasm (1995) has examined the instruments and performing methods that make Javanese gamelan music unique. The group uses metallophones and tuned gongs. Usually heterophonic and layered, the music has one core idea. *Balungan*, or fundamental concept, drives music. Saron music is slow and steady. This simple tune helps other instruments produce complex sounds. Sumarsam (1995) describes how other musicians speed up and complicate the *balungan* while the gongs emphasize key places in the metric cycle. Layered melodies with varied instrument speeds and intensities create a rich and diverse sound. This tiered method helps explain Javanese gamelan music's aesthetic and structural basis.

The next characteristic of Javanese Gamelan to be discussed are the rhythmic and formal structure. Sumarsam's (1995) pioneering work shows how punctuating instruments mark nested time cycles. After the fundamental cycle, the *gongan*, the largest gong, the *ageng*, sounds. Becker (1980) has written about how this cyclical pattern reveals that Javanese regard time as cyclical rather than linear, making individuals feel like they are in an endless cycle and encouraging them to think about it. Unlike Western music's teleological, goal-oriented approaches. Sumarsam and Becker provide the structural and philosophical framework, whereas Brinner (1995) examines how artists use cognitive and interactive

processes to perform music in real time. His research illustrates how players' shared cycle awareness builds complex, interlocking rhythmic patterns called *imbal*. Perlman (2004) examines the theoretical concept of a "inner melody" (*lagu*) that helps performers follow the *gongan*'s formal framework. These scholars illustrate a complex musical system with a defined cyclical structure that underpins significant, interactive rhythmic development, blending musical form with cultural philosophy.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research design focused on an in-depth musical analysis of Claude Debussy's *Estampes* L.100: I. "Pagodes." The primary component that this study analyzes is the musical score of the piece. The data collecting procedure involves a thorough analysis of the score to identify and classify its fundamental compositional components, encompassing melodic motifs, harmonic frameworks, rhythmic patterns, texture, and performance directions. The comparative analysis was used to juxtapose the results of the score analysis with the established characteristics of Javanese gamelan music discussed in the literature reviews. The objective is to discover correlations between Debussy's compositional choices and the principles of gamelan music, thereby substantiating the claim of Javanese influence beyond mere anecdotal association.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Javanese Elements in "Pagodes"

The title "Pagodes" itself evokes imagery of East Asian tiered towers, setting a scene of exoticism. However, the musical content moves beyond superficial *chinoiserie* to engage deeply with the structural and sonic principles of Javanese gamelan. The analysis is organized around four key areas of influence: pentatonicism, texture and stratification, rhythmic patterns, and the evocation of gamelan instruments.

4.2 Pentatonicism and Harmonic Language

The most immediate and pervasive Javanese influence in "Pagodes" is its extensive use of the pentatonic scale. The piece is built almost entirely on a five-note scale corresponding to the black keys of the piano (G \flat , A \flat , B \flat , D \flat , E \flat), which closely approximates the Javanese *sléndro* scale. This pentatonic collection forms the basis of the piece's primary melodic motives and harmonic vocabulary.

The opening measures (mm. 1-2) establish this sound world immediately, with a low B natural (a pedal point functioning as a gong-like drone) underpinning a delicate, bell-like melody in the right hand built on the black-key pentatonic scale. Debussy avoids traditional Western harmony. Instead of functional chords (tonic, dominant, subdominant), he builds harmonies directly from the notes of the pentatonic scale, often creating resonant, open-fifth chords (e.g., mm. 3-4) that mimic the sonority of gamelan instruments.

The piece features three key melodic motives, all derived from this pentatonic source. The first is to appear at Measure 3, the second motive at Measure 11, and the third motive appears in Measure 33.

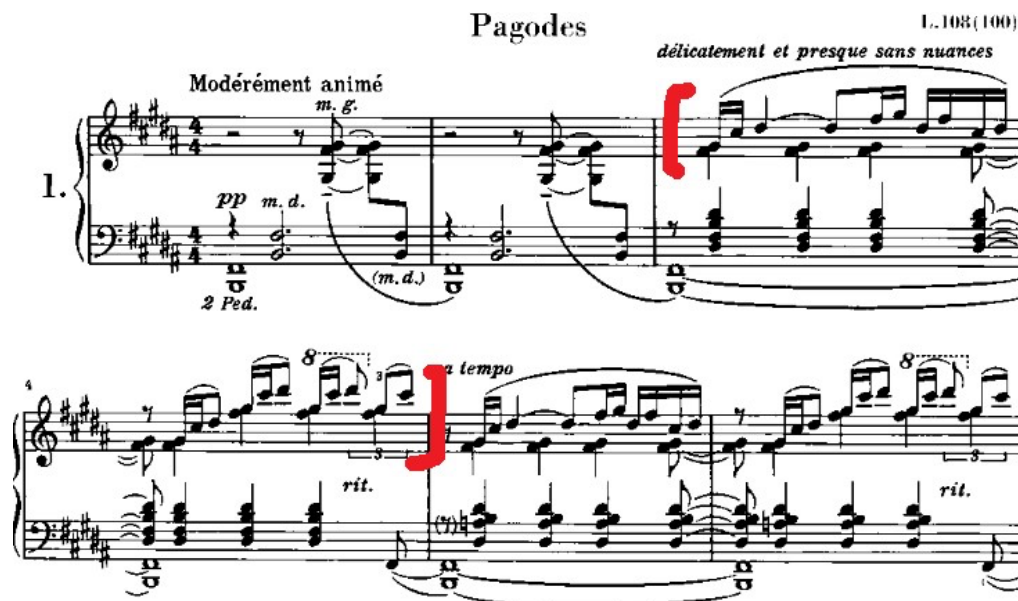


Figure 1: Motive 1 (measure 3-4)

Motive 1 in at Measure 3-4 as shown in Figure 6, consists of a tetratonic melodic motive in syncopated quarter-note rhythm pattern. It is accompanied by a sustained B perfect fifth in the bass, and an ostinato inverted B chord with a major second of F# and G# in the middle. This pattern repeats in the following two measures, with the chord changing to an inversion of B dominant.



Figure 2: Motive 2 (measure 11-14)

Motive 2 appears in Measure 11 as seen in Figure 2 features the pentatonic scale in G# minor in parallel octaves of varied Motive 1, which are arranged in triplets and duplets. The single prolonged bass note remains to resonate with the layers of the melodies. more animated, chordal motive that introduces a sense of rhythmic vitality.



Figure 3: Motive 3 (measure 33-36)

Motive 3 comes at the beginning of B section and features the B Lydian mode. The left-hand. The accompaniment stays within the alto range, in ostinato manner of F# major seconds, sustained throughout the phrase. The performance direction “*sans lenteur*”, meaning “without slowness”, indicates that this section should be played straightforwardly with a consistent tempo.

The analysis shows that Debussy’s treatment of pentatonicism is not merely melodic; it is deeply harmonic and textural. He layers different transpositions of the pentatonic scale and combines pentatonic melodies with static drones or ostinatos, creating a sense of harmonic stasis that is characteristic of gamelan music. The absence of leading tones and traditional cadential formulas allows the music to float and shimmer, free from the gravitational pull of Western tonality.

4.2. Texture and Stratification: A Gamelan on the Piano

Perhaps the most sophisticated aspect of Javanese influence in “Pagodes” is Debussy’s simulation of gamelan texture. He masterfully uses the piano to recreate the stratified polyphony of the ensemble, assigning different registers and rhythmic layers to represent the various instrumental groups. The texture can be deconstructed into three primary layers, mirroring the structure of gamelan music. The texture of ‘Pagodes’ features layered strata reminiscent of the tradition Javanese gamelan music. This is evident in the opening fourteen measures.

I. PAGODES
(Pagodas)

Edited by ISIDOR PHILIPP

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

Modérément animé
m.g.

PIANO

pp m.d.

délicatement et presque sans nuances

Balungan instruments

Gong

Punctuating instruments

Figure 4: Gamelan instruments layers in 'Pagodes' (measure 1-3)

4.2.1 The Gong/Structural Layer

This foundational layer is represented by deep, resonant notes in the piano's lowest register. The sustained B natural in the opening, the C# in measure 11, and the recurring low G#s function as the *gong ageng*, marking the beginning of musical cycles and providing a tonal anchor. These notes are often marked to be held, allowing their resonance to permeate the texture.

4.2.2 The Core Melody (*Balungan*) Layer

The main melodic motives, particularly Motive 1, function as the *balungan*. This melody is typically presented in the middle register, played at a moderate tempo with a clear, lyrical quality. It is the structural core around which the other layers are organized. For example, in measures 3-6, the left hand plays a simple, steady ostinato that can be interpreted as the *balungan*, while the right hand plays a more florid elaboration.

4.2.3 The Elaborating (*Panerusan*) Layer

The highest register of the piano is used to represent the elaborating instruments of the gamelan, such as the *bonang* or *gender*, which play rapid, decorative patterns. This is evident in the shimmering, bell-like figures in measures 1-2 and the rapid, interlocking two-note figures in measures 15-18. These high-register flourishes add a layer of brilliant ornamentation over the core melody, creating a rich, multi-layered sound that is remarkably evocative of a gamelan ensemble.

4.3. Rhythmic Organization: Cycles and Polyrhythms

Debussy also incorporates rhythmic principles from Javanese music. While the

piece is notated in common time (4/4), its internal rhythmic structure often defies a simple, metronomic pulse. Instead, it relies on ostinatos and cyclical patterns. The left-hand figure in measures 3-10, for instance, is a two-measure ostinato that repeats, creating a hypnotic, non-directional feeling.

Furthermore, Debussy creates complex polyrhythms by layering different rhythmic patterns simultaneously, a key feature of gamelan music. A clear example occurs in measures 11-14, where the left hand plays a steady two-note pattern in duple rhythm, while the right hand plays a melody in triplets. This superimposition of two against three creates a subtle rhythmic tension and complexity. More intricate polyrhythms appear later in the piece, such as in measures 37-40, where the right hand plays syncopated chords against a steady ostinato in the left hand, and in measures 78-81, where three distinct rhythmic layers are present: a low gong-like pedal, a mid-register ostinato, and a high-register melodic fragment. This rhythmic layering contributes significantly to the piece's non-Western feel and its successful evocation of the gamelan's intricate rhythmic web.

4.4. Evocation of Gamelan Instruments and Timbre

Beyond structural principles, Debussy uses the piano's timbral possibilities to suggest the sounds of specific gamelan instruments.

- **Gongs:** As mentioned, the deep, sustained bass notes directly evoke the sound of the large hanging gongs that punctuate the musical structure.
- **Metallophones:** The crisp, bell-like melodies in the upper register, often played with a light, non-legato touch, mimic the sound of instruments like the *gender* or *slenthem*. The use of the una corda pedal, as indicated by the direction *un peu en dehors* (a little to the fore), further enhances this delicate, ethereal quality.
- **Kettle Gongs (*Bonang*):** The rapid, interlocking figures in measures 15-18 and similar passages are highly suggestive of the *bonang*, which plays fast-moving elaborations on the core melody.

4.5 Performance direction restrictions within 'Pagodes'

The most important and counterintuitive directive is "delicately and almost without nuance" at the beginning. It quickly departs from Romanticism's expressive, emotionally intense rubato and explosive swells. The performer is told to be restrained and objective. Instead of personal, emotional intonation, "nuance" should come from the composition's evolving textures.

The piece is overwhelmingly quiet, dominated by dynamics of *p* (piano) and *pp* (pianissimo). Debussy uses hairpin crescendos and decrescendos (measures 15-18 and 33-36) not for dramatic effect, but to create subtle "shimmers" of sound, like the changing overtones of a struck gong. The performer is guided to maintain

a perfectly balanced texture, where the foundational "gong" motives, lyrical melodies, and shimmering arabesques coexist as equal partners without one dominating the others.

Debussy uses a sequence of tempo markings to control the rhythmic flow in a manner analogous to the structural rhythmic cycles (*irama*) of gamelan music. Markings like *Animez un peu* ("Animate a little"), *Toujours animé* ("Still animated"), and *Revenez au Tempo I* ("Return to the first tempo") are not invitations for virtuosic display but are structural shifts in textural density. The instruction *Sans lenteur* ("Without slowness") at measure 33 warns against a sentimental or dragging tempo, reinforcing the idea of a steady, hypnotic pulse.

5. CONCLUSION

Claude Debussy's "Pagodes" exemplifies profound artistic synthesis rather than mere surface exoticism. He innovatively reinterprets Javanese gamelan music for the piano, both structurally and musically. Robert (2001) contends that Debussy did not authentically replicate gamelan music; instead, he integrated its fundamental elements—such as stratified textures, pentatonic scales, and cyclical rhythms—and reinterpreted them within his own Impressionistic framework. The conclusion asserts that Debussy's paramount achievement was transforming the components of a complete gamelan ensemble into a novel solo piano composition. This emphasizes the significance of the 1889 Paris Exposition as a spur for modernism and provides a framework for performers and scholars to identify "Pagodes" as a crucial instance of cross-cultural interaction in 20th-century music.

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