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Ravel, Debussy, and Chinese Pentatonicism as Technique of Chinoiserie

ABSTRACT

Pentatonic characteristics of selected traditional Chinese melodies serve to illuminate the sound world of two Parisian art music bearing extra-musical associations with China: Ravel's 'Laideronette, impératrice des Pagodes' and Debussy's 'Rondel chinois: musique chinoise d'après les manuscrits du temps'. In the former, the theme of little pagodas can be likened to 'Air chinois', a specimen of Chinese tune circulated widely in the West since the eighteenth century. In the latter, decorative melodies evoke the head-motives of Chinese folksongs adapted in Charlotte Thomas Devéria's *Souvenirs de Chine*. A hearing of Chinese sounds in the Parisian pieces under investigation hinges not on a mere presence of the anhemitonic pentatonic scale, but on idiomatic configurations of the five notes *à la chinoise*. Chinese pentatonicism as technique of chinoiserie subtly interacts with Western harmonic procedures through what could be abstractly represented as the set-class (025) — a key element of Sino-French musical dynamics in the fin-de-siècle.

1. INTRODUCTION

A tent draped in Chinese style. Male and female pagoda attendants enter. Dance, Laideronette appears in the Chinese style of Boucher. A green serpent crawls amorously at her side. Pas de deux, then general dance.¹

The initial holograph of Ravel's 1912 ballet argument for 'Laideronette, Impératrice des Pagodes' (scene five of *Ma mère l'Oye*) tells of his oft-neglected artistic chinoiserie. Against the backdrop of a tent and surrounded by dancing pagodas, the empress Laideronette was intended to be featured visually *à la chinoise*. Chinese art was reportedly one of the shared predilections bonding Ravel with his *les apaches* fellows.² Instead of evoking contemporary art from China, however, Ravel opted for decors specifically 'in the Chinese style of Boucher'. Associated with the eighteenth-century vogue of French chinoiserie, François Boucher adapted Chinese figures to Rococo taste in a handful of prints. 'La danse chinoise' from 1742 portraying a divertissement for a prince was one possible reference in Ravel's creative mind. In this print, Boucher drew on existing western drawings of things Chinese, including a characteristic array of musical instruments. The music ensemble includes a rich percussion section with four parts. Tonal design indicates that among all dancers and musicians, the key figure is a poised lady performing with a plucked string instrument identifiable as *sanxian*. The highlight of Chinese musical instruments resonates with the 'Laideron-

ette' epigraph of the 1910 piano duet version.³ Taken from Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy's fairy-tale *Serpentin Vert* first published in 1698, the epigraph is centred on the pagodas' performance with their little theorbos and viols.

Evidences from the 1910 epigraph (attention to instrumental details), the 1912 ballet argument (quest for Chinese visual effect) and Boucher's 'La danse chinoise' (highlight of Chinese musical instruments) converge to suggest the idea that Ravel could have also aimed for a musical chinoiserie. Ravel's conception of what he probably intended to project as Chinese sounds is inferable from parallel instrumental markings on Ravel's and Robert Casadesus's annotated copies of the duet's first edition. At the start of three bars (bars 68, 72 and 77), Ravel's copy shows a cross marked for the *seconda* part, according to Roger Nichols.⁴ 'Tam-Tam' was indicated near the first cross. Casadesus's copy shows pitch indication 'fa sol' for the first cross, but offers no hints at instrumentation. In the 1912 ballet, tam-tam sonority was realised at the places Ravel and Casadesus marked and, more importantly, reserved until that point (rehearsal number 8) in order to underscore Laideronette's stage appearance 'in the Chinese style of Boucher'. Against a monophonic orchestral fabric featuring *sanxian*-like string pizzicato, tam-tam strokes mark three phrases with decreasing dynamics. The first solemn stroke in *forte* articulate a pentatonic three-note motif F#-C#-D#. A crucial precedence can be found in the Chinese episode in Ravel's 'Asie' (1903), where tam-tam is reserved for a highlight of the shift to an overt pentatonicism at the word 'Chine'. The coupling of tam-tam sonority with pentatonic sounds renders Ravel's musical chinoiserie and its sources all the more intriguing. The western tam-tam was popularised as a Chinese instrument in late eighteenth-century after the dissemination of *luo* — the Chinese tam-tam — to Paris.⁵ At the point of Laideronette's stage appearance, Ravel not only employed an instrument involved in early Sino-French musical dynamics, but also, I suggest, referred to the styled pentatonicism of a traditional tune representative of eighteenth-century Chinese music.

¹ 'Une tente drapée à la chinoise. Entrent pagodins et pagodines. Danse. Paraît Laideronette en chinoise de Boucher. Serpentin Vert rampe amoureusement à ses côtés. Pas de deux puis danse générale' (Marnat 1986, 323).

² Léon-Paul Fargue (1949, 57) reminisced that the group *les Apaches* shared predilections for 'l'art chinois, Mallarmé et Verlaine, Rimbaud ... Cézanne et Van Gogh, Rameau et Chopin, Whistler et Valéry, les Russes et Debussy'.

³ The epigraph is as follows: 'Elle se déshabilla et se mit dans le bain. Aussitôt pagodes et pagodines se mirent à chanter et à jouer des instruments: tels avaient des théorbes faits d'une coquille de noix; tels avaient des violes faites d'une coquille d'amande; car il fallait bien proportionner les instruments à leur taille' (Nichols 2008, 10–11).

⁴ See Roger Nichols's critical commentary on his editorial sources (2008, 32).

⁵ The dissemination agent was the Jesuit missionary Joseph Marie Amiot. According to François Picard (2006, 20), a *luo* with technical and practical descriptions was sent from China to Paris and, to certain extents, impacted the earliest introduction of tam-tam to Parisian art music in 1791 (François-Joseph Gossec's *Marche lugubre*).

2. RAVEL AND CHINESE PENTATONICISM

The tune in point bore the name ‘柳葉錦’ (transliterated as *Lieou yé kin*) in Joseph Marie Amiot’s musicological manuscripts. It was documented as the first of five melodic transcriptions collectively entitled ‘Airs chinois’ in Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine* (1735). Circulated widely as a specimen of Chinese melody since then, the tune was singled out as ‘Air chinois’ in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768) and his entry on music in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* (1772). The two authoritative French sources differ in that the former source carries a misprint in the third bar that obscures the otherwise full-fledged pentatonicism. Despite the existence of two slightly different versions, the tune was canonised as an iconic Chinese melody and adapted by twentieth-century western composers ranging from Ferruccio Busoni (1905) and Eugene Gossens (1911–1912) to Paul Hindermith (1943). The popularity of Rousseau’s ‘Air chinois’ in the West begs the question as to whether the tune, first received in Paris, has ever caught the attention of any French composers.



Fig. 1. ‘Air chinois’ as documented in Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine*.

Figure 1 shows ‘Air chinois’ as documented in du Halde’s monumental book on China. It should be noted that the transcription uses the then-fashionable French violin clef (G on the first instead of the second line). Reading with this clef, the thirteen-bar long ‘Air chinois’ sounds strictly pentatonic (G–A–B–D–E). Not a single note falls outside the pentatonic scale. A hearing of Chinese sounds rest, nonetheless, not on the mere presence of the pentatonic scale, but on the arrangement of notes into a non-western pentatonic organisation. The distinctive feature pertinent to the issue at hand is a descending three-note motif G–E–D coupled with repeated crochets. Statements of the motif drop to a repeated B (bar 1), bounces back to a repeated E (bar 2) and developed into unbroken successions of quavers ending again with a repeated B (bars 3–4). The motif is later highlighted in ascending form followed by a repeated D (bars 5–6 and its refrain, bar 11) and in descending form followed by a repeated B (bar 6–7 and its refrain, bar 12). The pentatonic organisation as such is not universal at all. One can rarely find it in, for example, Scottish pentatonic music. It is thus particularly captivating to discern close resemblance between ‘Air chinois’ and Ravel’s theme of little pagodas.

Ex. 1. Ravel’s ‘Laideronette, impératrices des pagodes’: theme of little pagodas (bars 9–10), theme of Laideronette (bars 65–68) and the superimposition of these two themes (bars 138–40).

If the first two bars of ‘Air chinois’ are rendered on the black keys of the piano, almost all the pitches of Ravel’s theme (1910 piano duet version) can be attributed in succession to the transposed Chinese tune (Example 1). In the theme of pagodas, the descending pentatonic three-note motif, F#–D#–C#, is presented as the head-motif, embellished before dropping to A# (bar 9) and, upon restatement, slightly altered before bouncing back to a repeated D# (10). Though veiled by a rough rhythmic diminution representing temporally the size of little pagodas and their instruments, the influence of pentatonicism from ‘Air chinois’ is striking. At Laideronette’s stage appearance ‘in the Chinese style of Boucher’ (bar 65), elaborated Chinese pentatonicism is distilled into its three-note essence. Each occupying one or two bars, the three notes of the Laideronette theme (in the order of F#–C#–D#) are projected with a kind of weightiness in stark contrast with the delicacy fostering the theme of pagodas. The two themes, one moving at the level of minims (Laideronette) and the other at the level of semiquavers (pagodas), superimpose with each other (from bar 138) to produce heterophonic effect. The physical proportion between Laideronette and the little pagodas exposed, their Chinese character remains shared through subtle pitch relationships based on Chinese pentatonicism presented in ‘Air chinois’.

A reference to Chinese pentatonicism demonstrated in such archetypal Chinese melody as ‘Air chinois’ is crucial to the intended chinoiserie of the piece. In fact, drawing on traditional Chinese melodies was not that unusual for Parisian composers at the time. Evidently, Ravel’s two *les apaches* fellows — Édouard Bénédictus and Manuel de Falla — made reference to selected pentatonic melodies from J. A. van Aalst’s *Chinese Music* (1884) and Judith Gautier’s *Les Musiques bizarres à l’Exposition de 1900: la musique chinoise* (1900) respectively.⁶ Chinese pentatonic bearings strengthened the *fin-de-siècle* wave of chinoiserie with musical substances and nurtured the styles of French modernists. Debussy was no exception.

⁶ See the chapter on Parisian adaptation of Chinese pentatonic melodies from my doctoral dissertation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

3. DEBUSSY AND CHINESE PENTATONICISM

The autograph of Debussy's 'Rondel chinois' (1881) shows a curious subtitle: 'Chinese music according to contemporary manuscripts'.⁷ To be sure, the French word 'chinois' at the time might not necessarily refer to things that are of the geographically remote land. It happened that the word also qualified things that are bizarre in perception. The song's dedication line does hint at Debussy's derogatory tone on what he referred to as 'Chinese' elements in the song, be it textual, musical, or both; it nevertheless does not discourage interpretations through the lens of China.⁸ For the rondel text unambiguously paints a pastoral scene in China. Traces of pentatonicism throughout the song's three parts (corresponding to the three stanzas of the rondel) serve to support this vantage point. Pentatonic gesture is first heard as vocal melisma at the ending of the line 'with water lily and with bamboo' (bars 13–14). All the five notes of the pentatonic scale (F–G–A–C–D) are outlined. This pentatonic scale, transformed briefly to become a closely related one (F–G–B♭–C–D), is mostly presented as scalic vocal lines for the rest of the first stanza (bars 15–18). The use of pentatonic scales as such hardly requires any insights gathered after manuscript studies. What then might Debussy have learned from the contemporary manuscripts he acquired? Did he not mean to infuse his music with something peculiar to Chinese music?

Jeu - ne fille an front de ja - de,
Dans le bois som - bre qui sou - pi - re,

Ex. 2. The openings of Devéria's 'Le lys d'eau' (top) and 'Chanson Pékinoise' (bottom).

It has been a formidable task to locate Chinese musical sources that were readily available to Debussy during his last years at the Paris conservatoire. One source published by *Magasin de musique du conservatoire* in 1881 — Charlotte Thomas Devéria's *Souvenirs de Chine: deux mélodies pour chant et piano* — could have been relevant and even impactful. The cover page of the set shows that quite similar to what Debussy's subtitle indicates, Devéria referred to the pair of songs as Chinese melodies (中國曲子). Much less elusively than 'Rondel chinois' though, they are modelled on Chinese folksongs ('imitées du Chinois') collected during Devéria's residence in China with her sinologist spouse. Quoted as the principal vocal theme (Example 2), the folksongs are characterised by these pentatonic head-motifs: A–C–D (the first song 'Le lys d'eau') and E–G–A (the second song 'Chanson Pékinoise'). The head-motifs are well preserved in important descendants of the two folksongs widely known as 恭喜

⁷ The full title reads: 'Rondel chinois: musique chinoise d'après les manuscrits du temps' (Lesure 2006, 475). My analysis of the song is based on the transcription presented as Appendix II in Mark deVoto (2004), which refers to the autograph currently conserved in the Library of Congress in Washington.

⁸ The dedication line reads: 'À Madame Vanier [sic], la seule qui peut chanter et faire oublier tout ce que cette musique a d'inchantable et de chinois' (Lesure 2006, 475).

你 (*Congratulations*) and 茉莉花 (*Jasmine Flower*) in nowadays China.⁹ If Debussy had indeed come across Devéria's songs when he worked on his own pastiche in 1881, an imprint must have been left at the last chord of the first stanza (bar 18). For the pentatonic correlation is too arresting to be missed. The Chinese pentatonic head-motif from 'Le lys d'eau', in the form of a minor-third turn followed by an upward perfect-fourth leap, can be identified as a melodic figure (E–G–A) at that point. The figure, unfolding in two layers, is posited away from the A-major chord, aiming for a choreography of hands that portrays how the mahogany junk passes toward the pointed tip of the lake at line 4 ('à la pointe d'or effilée').

La da-me qui pas se i-so-lée Sur le lac bor-dé d'a-za-lée.

Ex. 3. The ending of Debussy's 'Rondel chinois' (bars 39–46).

Even though the characteristic pentatonic head-motif assumes only decorative roles in Debussy's song, the projected interactions between Chinese pentatonicism and western diatonic harmonies are remarkable. Three restatements of the pentatonic figure (in the music for stanza three) interact with diatonic harmonies in interrelated ways (Example 3). At the first restatement (bar 40), the pentatonic figure, D–F–G, derives from a Neapolitan added-sixth chord (B♭–D–F–G). At the second (bar 42) and the third (bar 44) restatements, the figure, E–G–A, emerges respectively from the tonic major chord (A–C♯–E) and the tonic minor chord (A–C–E) by inserting a note (G) to the perfect fourth space available in the major and the minor chord. This view is strengthened by an earlier instance (bars 27–29) where the perfect fourths of chromatically descending sixth-three triads are linearised in opposite directions (voice) and filled-in (left hand of the piano) to form truncated pentatonic figures: E♭–G♭(–A♭), B–D(–E) and G–B♭(–C). Further support is offered by similar tonal mechanics at the start of *Ma mère l'Oye*'s prelude.¹⁰ Descending Chinese pentatonic figures (G–F–D and C–B♭–G), fashioned in a birdsong-like manner, can be read as emerging from G major (bar 3) and C major (bar 5) chords by injecting a note into the fourths in them. Note that the added notes imply dominant seventh sonorities.

⁹ I am indebted to Tse Chun Yan for his help with identification.

¹⁰ The prelude was composed for the 1911 symphonic suite and incorporated into the 1912 ballet.

4. CONCLUSION

Technically speaking, the pentatonic set-class (025) — an abstract representation of the aforementioned Chinese pentatonic sounds in ‘Laideronette’ (F \sharp -D \sharp -C \sharp) and ‘Rondel chinois’ (E-G-A and others) — is indeed embedded in diatonic harmonies ranging from the added sixth chord to the dominant seventh and the minor seventh chord. In other word, a key element of Chinese pentatonicism is inherent in these diatonic harmonies. The relationship is nothing but startling. Neither that Chinese pentatonicism — a melodic phenomenon *per se* — was incompatible with diatonic harmonies, nor that it only overlaps with them to a limited extent; rather, it is fully capable of being assimilated as part of the tonal languages of such prominent French composers as Debussy and Ravel. In a sense, the characteristic sound of Chinese pentatonicism could appear to ‘flow’ out of sonorities fundamental to major-minor tonality. Of critical importance is my view that the common ground between Chinese pentatonic melodies and Western diatonic harmonies is constituted not by a third, but as described above, by a perfect fourth. Without a ‘quartal’ structure *à la* Rousseau’s ‘Air chinois’ and Devéria’s ‘Le lys d’eau’ respectively, Ravel’s and Debussy’s Chinese-pentatonic motifs would not interact with diatonic harmonies in the same way. In this light, their reception and appropriation of fourth-based pentatonicism point to nuanced musical influences from China in fin-de-siècle Paris.

KEYWORDS

Ravel, Debussy, Chinese Pentatonicism, Chinoiserie.

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