

Claude Debussy: *Estampes* – Nos. 1 and 2 (‘Pagodes’ and ‘La soirée dans Grenade’) (for component 3: Appraising)

Background information

The composer

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) was the leading French composer of the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is usually described as a composer in the **impressionist** style, though he wasn't always happy for the term to be used for his works. Certainly, his music marks a break from the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition.

The French impressionist painters of the same era (such as Monet and Pissarro) created quickly produced ‘impressions’ of nature such as river scenes and pictures of flood, snow or flowers. Debussy too wrote music that described natural features, such as the wind in the plain (*La vent dans la plaine*), clouds (*Nuages*) or the sea (*La Mer*). Both of the last two pieces are for orchestra.

The painters and musicians of the time were also fascinated by the art coming in from the Far East. Van Gogh included Japanese prints in a number of pictures. Debussy, in his ‘Pagodes’, showed a similar interest. Northern European musicians were constantly in search of the exotic and new – different sound worlds, in fact anything to establish a style less closely related to German nineteenth-century Romanticism. That is why Spain became an inspiration for a number of composers.

Many of his compositions are miniatures – e.g., short piano pieces such as his *Préludes*. Most of these pieces have titles, though in the preludes he was careful to put the titles at the end of the music – he didn't want the musician (or listener) to be influenced too much by them.

Debussy was proud of his French heritage and another way he found to break away from the Germanic Romantic tradition was by using French directions in the music, such as *Modérément animé* (moderately animated) at the beginning of ‘Pagodes’.

Estampes

Estampes is a set of three pieces for piano, composed in 1903. It is in this music that Debussy first begins to explore some of the main elements of the new impressionist style.

- Brevity – Romantic composers tended towards extreme length in many of their pieces. Debussy and other early twentieth-century composers such as Webern often concentrated on much

smaller pieces. Melodies too were often short – e.g., the two-bar melody at the beginning of ‘Pagodes’.

- Descriptive music – all three pieces have descriptive titles: ‘Pagodes’ (‘Pagodas’), ‘La soirée dans Grenade’ (‘An Evening in Granada’) and ‘J’ardins sous la pluie’ (‘Gardens in the rain’). The music is never precisely descriptive. The titles are a starting point for the musical style.
- Pentatonic and modal melodies inspired by Eastern music and Western folk elements.
- Tonal schemes that avoid the sense of tonic and dominant chords and traditional modulation. The whole idea of traditional key is avoided. Nevertheless, the music tends to be more diatonic than other early twentieth-century music. The music is much less chromatic than for instance the music of Schoenberg.
- Parallel chords.
- Use of the sustaining pedal on the piano to produce misty effects.

‘Pagodes’

Debussy was profoundly influenced by the Javanese **gamelan** music he heard at the great international exhibition of 1899. He recreates some of the aspects of **oriental style** he absorbed on that and later occasions:

- The opening contains **gong-like open fifths**. Gongs are essential gamelan instruments.
- The chords also feature **added notes**, e.g. the G# added sixth, right hand bar 1, **avoiding straightforward triads** and recreating gamelan harmonies.
- Melodies are influenced by the **pentatonic** scale, such as the Javanese **slendro** scale. The **ostinato** theme in bars 3–4 only uses **four different notes**. The melody here is equivalent to what might be played on the metallophones of a gamelan ensemble.
- Speeds vary during a piece as they do in gamelan music.

Structure

The piece is in a loose **ternary form**, though the central section has elements from the first one, and each of the three sections has a number of subsections.

<p>Main section Bars 1–32</p>	<p>The music begins with a two-bar introduction which sets the oriental scene with gong-like sounds, produced by low-pitched open fifths and added note harmonies. The pianist needs to cross hands to play the notes, with the left hand rising above the right.</p> <p>The ‘gong’ sounds continue as a type of pedal for the first ten bars, when they are replaced by a single low G#.</p> <p>The key signature of five sharps suggests B major or G# minor but neither key is properly established. Debussy is using the black notes of the piano for their pentatonic possibilities. B is a tonal centre at the beginning rather than a key.</p>
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	<p>A two-bar pentatonic-style melody begins in bar 3 and is then used as an ostinato. This melody actually contains only four pitches – C#, D#, F# and G#. A three-note figure is played three times in the second of these bars, up an octave each time. The first two notes are then repeated as part of a triplet.</p> <p>When the melody is repeated at bar 5, the harmonies change subtly, with the addition of a flat seventh A [natural] above the bass B. Then at bar 7 there is an undulating scalic countermelody in the middle of the texture, repeated at bar 9.</p> <p>As the bass changes to G# in bar 11, there are two new ideas. A pentatonic idea using all five notes now is played in octaves in the left hand, while a separate idea closely related to the ostinato motif is played in octaves in the right hand.</p> <p>There is new music at bar 15. A new rumbling triplet ostinato figure starts in the left hand using just two pitches, like a slow trill. An oriental-style melody in simple rhythmic style produces cross-rhythms with the left-hand triplets – two against three (bar 16).</p> <p>At bar 19 the idea from the left hand of bar 11 returns in octaves at the top of the texture, with the triplet ostinato now in octaves as well. The music is a little faster (<i>animez un peu</i>). The bass gradually descends.</p> <p>At bar 23 the bass reaches low B again, while the two hands explore versions of the four-note idea from bar 11 in contrary motion.</p> <p>The sustaining pedal is held on throughout the next four bars, while the right hand plays triplets in two-part harmony, producing chords of fourths and fifths, always avoiding tonal thirds. The last two bars of the section reproduce the harmonies from the beginning.</p>
<p>B section Bars 33–52</p>	<p>The two-note syncopated chords in seconds from the end of the A section continue as a linking feature while a new melody explores a whole-tone scale. This middle section still contains many elements from the A section, including a new version of the melody from bar 11 (in the left hand of bar 37). The music gradually builds to a fortissimo climax in bar 41 with the theme from bar 11 in parallel harmonies, with left and right hands playing the same music two octaves apart.</p> <p>The whole-tone melody returns in bar 46, this time in the left hand. The melody is repeated while the accompaniment dissolves into trills (bar 50) and the tempo slows.</p>
<p>A section (varied) Bars 53 to the end</p>	<p>The opening music then returns, without the two-bar introduction. The music rises to another climax in bar 73, as in the central section, using the same melodic material.</p> <p>At bar 78 a new rippling ostinato figure starts in demisemiquavers at a high tessitura in the right hand. This is used as an accompaniment to the main</p>

	<p>tune in the left hand in the middle of the texture at bar 80. The countermelody from bar 7 reappears at bar 84.</p> <p>The dynamics become ever quieter (<i>encore plus pp</i>, bar 91) – ‘still more pianissimo’. The bass descends to a bottom octave B as the music is marked ‘as quiet as possible’. The instruction at the end is to allow the notes to continue vibrating, until the sound evaporates, by keeping the sustain pedal depressed.</p>
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‘La soirée dans Grenade’

Introduction

Debussy had only once made a very brief journey to Spain – just across the border to San Sebastian. Nevertheless, like other French composers before him, he was attracted to the exoticism of Spanish culture. The title of the piece means ‘Evening in Granada’. Granada is a town in southern Spain, in an area where centuries ago Moorish invaders from Morocco in north Africa had settled. Their influence remains to this day in architecture and music.

Habanera

The rhythm of the piece is based on the **habanera**, originally a Cuban dance – its name refers to the Cuban capital Havana. The habanera spread to southern Spain in the nineteenth century and it is still a popular dance there today. The nineteenth-century French composer Bizet uses it in a famous section of his opera *Carmen*.

Debussy refers to it in his instructions at the beginning (*Mouvement de Habañera*) – ‘habanera tempo’. The dance is in **simple duple time** and has a distinctive rhythm of dotted quaver, semiquaver and two quavers. **Staccato** is an essential characteristic of the style, and can be found continuously from bar 5 to 16. Often the first note of the rhythm will be **low pitched**, as in bar 1.

The habanera rhythm is present in all of the first 16 bars and makes frequent reappearances in other sections, often with repeated notes as in the bass from bar 23.

Guitar sounds

The guitar is the essential instrument of southern Spain and is required for the **flamenco dance** style of the area. Debussy refers to its sounds in the **spread chords** that are frequently heard in this piece. The first six bars of the *Très rythmé* section (from bar 38) all end with a spread chord. The dry sound of the rapid **staccato spread chord** of the flamenco guitar is found at the ends of phrases in the section beginning at bar 17.

Moorish song

The melody beginning at bar 7 is like a Moorish lament. It starts with extreme **dissonance** with the opening D clashing against the C# in the right hand. The distinctive **augmented second** of flamenco music can be heard in the third bar (B# to A). Otherwise the melody is distinctly **conjunct**. The rhythm is extremely fluid, rather like the **improvisation** that is so important in flamenco style. Note also the **acciaccatura ornament** in bar 12.

Other features of style

- **Parallel chords**, a favourite Debussy device, can be heard in various sections of the piece, e.g. from bar 17, where there are **parallel seventh chords**.
- **Added note chords and chords based on fourths and fifths**. The spread chords in the *très rythmé* section are an example.
- **Frequent changes of tempo**. There are four separate tempo markings on the second page of the score, including *rubato* (free rhythm), *retenu* (= rit.), *tempo giusto* (strict time, back to the earlier tempo), then *très rythmé* ('very rhythmic') – not necessarily a different tempo, but musicians often play this section a little faster.
- Debussy uses a **whole-tone scale** in bars 24–25 (A–B–C#–D#).
- Despite the use of dissonance and chords built on fourths and fifths, some of the music is distinctly **tonal** in character. The central melody in **octaves** beginning at the end of bar 41, as well as being **entirely conjunct**, is clearly in A major.
- Debussy requires **cross-hand** technique towards the end of the movement where the Moorish melody returns (bar 122).

Structure

The piece is distinctly **sectional** in style (many short sections). The many different ideas are all repeated at some stage in the piece. There is a sense of a very loose ternary structure with the lament melody from bar 7 returning near the end at bar 122, but it is more complicated than that, with many different ideas.

Bars 1–37	<p>The music begins with an introduction to the habanera rhythm. Debussy uses extreme ranges of the piano with low octaves in the left hand and high octaves in the right. The C# pedal continues for six bars before becoming an inverted pedal.</p> <p>The Moorish lament begins at bar 7 in what is made to sound like free time, including triplets (which often create cross-rhythms). Note the use of the melodic augmented second at bar 9 and elsewhere. There is a continuous inverted pedal C# – the tonal centre of this section, despite the key signature of three sharps.</p> <p>A new parallel seventh chord idea starts at bar 17. Each two bar phrase ends with a staccato spread chord. There is a C# pedal throughout.</p> <p>Two bars of habanera rhythm then lead to a new mainly stepwise idea at bar 23, featuring a whole-tone scale in bars 24–25. This all sounds over a repeated C# habanera rhythm in the left hand. Notice that the left hand is in the treble clef, so there is a distinct change in pitch range here.</p> <p>The parallel seventh chord idea returns at bar 29, now in a transposed version over an F# pedal. The idea has a new extension at bar 33 with syncopation and triplets.</p>
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Bars 38–60	<p>A new section marked ‘very rhythmic’ begins at bar 38 with a four-bar introduction. The spread chords at the end of each of the first six bars are built on fourths and fifths with added notes. The tonal centre is now A. A new tonal melody begins in octaves in the right hand on the upbeat to bar 42. The whole melody is built on steps. The habanera rhythm on A continues as an ostinato.</p>
Bars 61–91	<p>At bar 61 the rubato melody from bar 23 returns, again over a C# pedal, but this time without the whole-tone scale. There’s an augmented second instead.</p> <p>At bar 67 there is a new wide-ranging syncopated theme over an F# pedal and habanera rhythm. The key signature changes to F# major. There is a G double sharp, which acts as a chromatic appoggiatura to the third of the tonic chord. The occasional flat third A naturals have the effect of a blue note (e.g. bar 70). The music here is more disjunct (containing many leaps).</p> <p>At bar 78 a much smoother version of the theme from bar 23 and 61 now returns, without the whole-tone scale or augmented second. The dynamics show a sudden pianissimo (bar 78). There are continuous parallel triadic chords (built on thirds, without added notes).</p>
Bars 92–end	<p>The music from bar 17 then returns again, leading into the theme from bar 43, again in A major but with a new parallel chord accompaniment above it (from upbeat to 98), now pianissimo. The music moves into three staves, spread over a wide pitch range, with bottom E pedal notes in the bass.</p> <p>A new, very rhythmic idea starts at bar 109. It is marked as <i>lointain</i> (‘distant’), like a distant murmur of sound in the night air.</p> <p>At bar 113 the wide leaping, syncopated idea from bar 67 reappears but only for two bars, before the new ‘distant’ idea interrupts briefly, allowing the syncopated idea to continue for three more bars at bar 119.</p> <p>Finally the lament from just after the beginning makes its only other appearance. This time there are spread chords below, of A and of the subdominant D, while the habanera rhythm continues at the top of the texture. Notice the use of cross-hand technique here.</p> <p>The music gradually dies away at the end.</p>