

# MASKS MINSTRELS & MOSQUES

DEBUSSY's writing for piano was influenced by a fantasy world peopled by clowns and inspired by the larger Orient, that region so adored by European artists and colonialists.

By Catherine Kautsky

WITH RELIGION IN RETREAT, THE MONARCHY banished, and the bourgeoisie in ascendancy, Debussy and his fellow French artists in the late 19th century were hard-pressed to find the mysterious shadow world they so craved. They turned to a fantasy-world peopled by clowns, minstrels, and women with long, blonde hair, and they surrounded themselves with objects from the far-away Orient. Their choices reflected a predilection not only for distance from the quotidian, but also for embracing opposites. They lauded the artificial while yearning for nature, extolled primitive sexuality while desiring Buddhist serenity, and admired foreign cultures while supporting colonialism. They delved into the subconscious not so much through critical examination of their inner conflicts, but rather through an acceptance of contradiction and an interest in the multiple ways we see the outer world. Numerous poems and paintings emerged during this period, but it was Debussy who conveyed this world through music.

Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel, *A Rebours* (Against Nature), a masterpiece of the aestheticist/decadent movement, excoriates precisely the humdrum universe Debussy detested. Huysmans privileged art and beauty over nature, action, even morality, and his hero escaped from all relationships and obligations into a cornucopia of possessions. Debussy, who likewise sought material 'veils to clothe the naked truth', enjoyed this artificial world, with its 'tinted atmosphere' and 'Japanese camphor-wood under a sort of canopy of pink Indian satin'. Des Esseintes, the book's sole personage, was obsessed with the senses, and when

he quite literally 'listen[ed] to the taste of music', mixing liqueurs so as to coax a flute from crème de menthe, he must have been inspired by the same Baudelaire poem, *Harmonie du soir*, which inspired Debussy's prelude, *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*. Synesthesia captivated novelist, poet and composer; the senses intermingled, and by cohabiting all corners of the nervous system, they evaded capture and explanation.

Like Des Esseintes, Debussy sought objects that were 'lost in a mysterious ecstasy far off in the mists of time, beyond the reach of punctilious, pedestrian minds...' 'Desire is everything', Debussy declared. 'One has a mad but perfectly sincere craving for a work of art. It may be 'a Velasquez, a vase of Satsouma or a new kind of tie. What joy the moment one possesses it. This is really love.' Any visitor today to the Debussy Museum outside Paris will encounter Debussy's Japanese frog, his Chinese vase and wood screen, and the lacquered wood panel which inspired *Poissons d'or*, all testimony to this mild object-fetish and a fascination with the Orient.

Des-Esseintes too, traced 'inspiration to the [Oriental] lands of the sun' and, along with Hugo, Baudelaire, and others, would have admired Debussy's translation of distant objects into tones. *Canope*, an homage to two Egyptian burial vases which Debussy owned, is a striking example. It takes us thousands of miles and years from Debussy's Paris. The lonely C#s near the beginning seem like markers of a distant time and place, floating in and out of the C naturals preceding them as if two worlds, both veiled, could exist simultaneously. The foreign pitches appear so unobtrusively that they create no disruption, and yet they don't



its 'strangeness, ...beauty, [and] nobility' recalling André Gide's description of a North African mosque, similarly located in a far-off and impoverished land.

NO EVENTS PLAYED A GREATER ROLE IN extending French awareness of unfamiliar races and artifacts than the 1889 and 1899 Paris World's Fairs. Here Debussy reconnected with Japanese prints and encountered the gamelan; both were commemorated in *Estampes* (*Prints*). *Pagodes* is studded with the exotic scales, layering, gongs, and hypnotic repetition of the gamelan orchestra, and those same scales and gongs recur in countless other contexts, like *Voiles* and *Cloches à travers les feuilles*. At the same time, *Soirée dans Grenade* and *La puerta del Vino* illustrate

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powerfully the sensuality and abandon the French imagined in their neighbours of sunny Spain, considered likewise Oriental. One hears black notes freely clashing with white in the opening of *Puerta*, as if the confining rules of civilisation had been removed and the Fauvist obsession with wild, savage colour had set loose the dancers in Grenada. *Soirée* edges up more delicately, but its sinuous lines ally

belong to the preceding music at all. The music seems to take enormous comfort in this calm acceptance of contradiction, embracing an Oriental mindset fundamentally opposed to the rationality of those Western 'punctilious, pedestrian minds'.

WE FIND DEBUSSY PROBING THE BOUNDARIES of time and place equally gently in another tale of more literal explorations. *Danseuses de delphes* acquaints us not only with a sculpture of ancient Greek dancers which Debussy saw replicated in the Louvre, but also with the archeological digs in Delphi which so enthralled Paris in the 1890s. The digs allowed the French to simultaneously embrace another culture while reaping chauvinistic glory. Though the Greek king invited them to Delphi, his enthusiasm was apparently not shared by the people whose village lay atop the excavations. The whole enterprise reeked of colonisation, with the villagers subdued only at gunpoint. The stillness and serenity of Debussy's sculpture beckoned ambiguously,

us equally with the dancers' physical pleasure. The contrast between the restrained serenity of the monks who must have rung the bells in *Cloches à travers les feuilles* and the seductive women dancing their way through *Puerta* encapsulates the dual appeal of Orientalism – it allowed for a total denial of sexuality and a complete immersion in it. Passion and asceticism were simultaneously possible in imagined lands.

Small wonder that the French were famous for this preoccupation with the entire Orient, including Africa and India. As Edwards Said said: 'The Orient was almost a European invention... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences'. We see this preoccupation in the work of French painters like Gérôme and Matisse, and it parallels European colonialization. Vietnam, whose dancers Debussy admired at the World Exposition, was a French colony. India, under British colonial rule, appeared in Debussy's portrait of the coronation of George V in *Les terrasses des audiences du clair de lune*. Java, birthplace of the gamelan,

was a Dutch colony. Egypt, which spawned such beautiful funeral urns, lived under both French and English rule.

And to top it off, Debussy's black minstrels had come from Africa as slaves. Minstrel shows had originated in the US with slaves parodying plantation owners' formal dances; whites in cork-painted blackface then stepped in to parody their own imitators. These black-face performances were eventually imported to Paris, thus further complicating the colourful arrangements: one now had whites imitating the blacks, who had themselves initially imitated whites, and these latest whites were travelling to a country which had no experience whatsoever with the initial experience of either the blacks or whites. Not surprisingly, however, the rag-time rhythms, which required no sociological expertise, were a big hit; when blacks themselves arrived early in the century, they in turn shared the cake-walk with a population eager for distraction and probably quite eager to ogle an unfamiliar race as well. Debussy's cake-walk/minstrel music is cheerily filled with syncopations, crunchy seconds, and happy parodies of both more and less serious musical undertakings: Wagner in the case of *Golliwogg*, tambourine jamborees and the rat-a-tat-tat of snare drums in *Minstrels*. While the original Golliwogg story posits a friendly encounter between whites and blacks, the Golliwogg doll himself hardly presents an attractive visage, and the image of blacks in general was something less than flattering. As numerous published cartoons can attest, 'les nègres' were viewed as a species far closer to the animal kingdom than the oh-so-elevated French.

Darwin's *Origin of the Species* had appeared only 50 years earlier, and the French were eager to place some unfamiliar foreigners between themselves and their newly acquired jungle ancestry. Perhaps because of purported proximity to the primitive African wilderness, blacks were seen as virile and carefree. Their Otherness proved enormously alluring – civilisation clearly had its discontents and was craving a bit of diversion. The enticement of primitivism provides an interesting antidote to the aestheticists' turn away from nature, and Debussy too must have enjoyed a release from all that artificial beauty. Small wonder that *Minstrels* is punctuated with mildly barbaric, liberating outbursts, while both *Golliwogg* and *Le petit nègre* cavort in the happy-go-lucky fashion of untroubled children who occasionally utter inappropriate expletives.

**M**YSTERIOUS WOMEN, SLAVES, COLONIAL subjects – the engagement with exotic foreign cultures which so attracted Debussy and his fellow compatriots entailed an unmistakable safety net: Gallic power. The French undoubtedly found it safer to comingle with erotic Vietnamese dancers and brash black men when they knew those cultures were safely subdued. Primitivism was an adventure to be enjoyed from home. *Le Ménestre* reported in 1889 that 'Rome is no longer in Rome; Cairo no longer in Egypt and Java no longer in the East Indies. All of that has come to the Champ de Mars...' It seems no accident that 'Champ de Mars' translates as 'field of war', for the 1889 Exposition was planned for the centenary of the French

Revolution and contained a significant nationalist component. The Eiffel tower, 'before which colonial peoples would stand in awe', was constructed expressly for the celebration. There was a clear sense of racial superiority embedded in the entire affair, and curiously, one of its signifiers was the colour of hair. In *Ode triomphale*, a musical tribute to France, the stars were to be 'very white, and very blond, pale blond', thus illustrating a contemporary tendency to present the French race as entirely bleached of any threatening pigments. The French are not as a rule the least bit blonde, but, interestingly enough, Debussy's female heroines, from *Mélanie* to *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, all sport long flaxen locks. With their ephemeral, virginal sex appeal, they are beautiful, but unavailable, a fitting response to the 'extreme violence et passionnée douceur' of *Puerta* and other licentious offerings.

Hair has long been a symbol of sexuality, both offered and revoked, and veils are used to cover its serpent-like allure, its 'naked truth'. In Islam, as in Judaism and Christianity, women cover their hair to signal abnegation. These veils and, likewise masks, fascinate Debussy and other artists; witness *Voiles*, *Masques Suite Bergamasque*, and the circus evocations. The clowns and acrobats immortalised in the prelude, *General Lavine – excentric* – are, like the veiled women, impossible to know. They live in tents. They do not speak. They consort with wild animals and communicate through bodily gesticulation. They are situated in a sexual no-man's land. Apollinaire identifies harlequins as 'neither male nor female' and Des Esseintes recalls a circus acrobat who undergoes 'an artificial change of sex'. These hermaphrodites, with their wigs, masks, and make-up are reminiscent of people far away on whom we pin our desires and from whom we stay aloof. They are mirrors of our irrational selves, and we distance ourselves from them through awe, laughter, and disdain.

**R**OYHOWAT TELLS US THAT SUFISM, A RELIGION of the Orient, may have been the origin of both harlequins and cork-paint, so minstrels, clowns, and Orientalism may indeed be historically linked. In any case, they resemble one another unmistakably through their exoticism and their forbidden promise. When *La Marseillaise* resounded at the 1889 World Exposition, proclaimed by Javanese angklung as well as French military bands, onlookers were reassured that they could simultaneously embrace enticement and its abnegation, for their national anthem retained command over every paradox. Likewise, in the last of Debussy's preludes, *Feux d'artifice*, *La Marseillaise* makes a cameo appearance, offering Debussy the safety of his citizenship in the midst of forbidden adventures. But here the *Marseillaise* is a mere fragment, immersed in a foreign tonality: the clarity of that simple European vantage point could not be sustained. Debussy believed deeply in a world where certainty was not a virtue; his pianistic masks, women, and Orientalism offer irrefutable testimony." ♪

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