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Oriental Colour in Exoticist Portrayals in Art and Music at the Climax of the Long Nineteenth Century¹

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A Growing Passion for Exotic Colour

Of the many starting points for artistic inspiration to emerge throughout the long nineteenth century – whether driven by the natural world, classical civilisations, mythology and paganism, the gothic (and the “gloomy” North, also embracing Nordic and Scandinavian mythology and sagas), the Orient, folklore and fairy tales, dreams and personifications, and so forth – it was those works focussed on the Orient that, generally, lent themselves most obviously not only to a forcible brightening of colour (sometimes seen in non-Oriental works, too, of course) but, more importantly, to the often thrilling *clashing, juxtaposing and blending of contrasting colours* which – especially in “absolute” music – would tend otherwise

¹ This article is part of my broader research and an extract from a book on which I am currently working, provisionally titled *Orientalism and the Enhancement of Colour in Musical Composition and the Related Arts during the Long Nineteenth Century*.

to be largely avoided, except for very special effect (lest such clashes be perceived as too unsophisticated or “barbaric” for refined and cultured tastes). Certainly, by the 1840s, avant-garde exoticism was the *ne plus ultra* of fashion and had become the consuming passion of the French intelligentsia, “superseding the classical and medieval revivals as well as other aspects of romanticism”.² This fact helps to explain the once-extraordinary fame and trendsetting popularity of the French composer Félicien David (1810–1876) – who today, by comparison, seems all but forgotten – because he helped pioneer the mid-century interest in Middle Eastern Orientalism, especially as a musical explorer himself, who returned from his Near and Middle Eastern travels in 1835 to “sing in France of the Orient” and introduce the most remarkably perfumed exotic novelty to the Paris concert hall and stage. Although artistically stylised and affiliated with French symphonic suavity, the opening repeated appeals to “Allah!” and especially *Le Chant du Muezzin* (including the words “Allah hou akbar”, “Ou Mohammed rasoul’ Allah” and “La allah ill’ Allah”) in Part III of his symphonic ode *Le Désert*, of 1844, were likely the first time that an artistic representation of the worship of Allah had ever occupied a central place on the Paris stage.³

In her prize-winning essay for *The Art-Journal* on “The Harmony of Colours as exemplified in the [Great] Exhibition” of 1851, the author, a Mrs Merrifield, felt it necessary to draw attention to “the harmony of colour” which prevailed “in the productions of Turkey, Tunis, and the Asiatic nations”. She maintained that “the harmony of colours – of the more simple and positive colours, at least – was formerly well understood” by the ancient Egyptians and other “Oriental” races. But in most latter-day Western creations inspired by the “East”, she was not convinced that this harmony of colours had been properly appreciated. She found that “the glitter of metallic colours” was – even at this date – “too frequently mistaken for richness, and violent contrasts for harmony”. To her way of thinking, the decorative artist seemed often “to run riot in the riches of his palette, and to endeavour to dazzle” if he failed to please.⁴ This is a charge that could also

² See Dorothy Veinus Hagan, *Félicien David 1810–1876: A Composer and a Cause* (Syracuse, 1985), 85.

³ The name of “Mahomet”, by contrast, either within or as subject matter for vocal, choral and operatic works, was certainly not uncommon in Europe in the early nineteenth century – being included, for example, in Beethoven’s music for *Die Ruinen von Athen* (composed in 1811 and staged in 1812 in Pest, Hungary).

⁴ Mrs Merrifield, “The Harmony of Colours as exemplified in the [Great] Exhibition”, in *The Art-Journal Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of All Nations* (a facsimile of the 1851 edition published by George Virtue), repr. London 1970, I‡ and VII‡.

be levelled at some Orientalist composers, for as splendid new orchestral effects became available, there was always the danger of composers over-indulging in “local colour” and splashing wildly about in their tonal paintboxes. Nevertheless, while the effects produced may not always have been thought in the best of possible tastes, they often served – like much of Berlioz’s more ambitious music – as testing grounds for timbral innovation.

Forty years later, in the 1891 draft Preface to his *Principles of Orchestration* (and bear in mind it was conceived two decades prior to this), Rimsky-Korsakov was arguing that orchestral scoring had, by this stage of the century, become absolutely integral to any composition worthy of the name. And between these dates, in *The Grammar of Painting and Engraving*, a work which first appeared in Paris in 1867, the influential art critic Charles Blanc (1813–1882) – a disseminator and populariser of the colour theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul – had already noted the tendency of contemporary fine artists to place considerations of colour before all else, to the extent of trying to convey ideas solely in terms of colouration. Discussing such works as Delacroix’s *Jewish Wedding in Morocco* (1841) in a section entitled “Colour of the Light” (and almost as an echo of Victor Hugo’s prophetic Preface to *Les Orientales* of a generation earlier – Delacroix and Hugo often being compared in their day as “poetic colourists” in their respective mediums),⁵ Blanc wrote:

Only in our own time, in fact, has the eloquence and aesthetic value of colour been revealed. [...] The ardent colourist invests colour itself with form, all elements being subordinated to the brilliancy of his tints. [...]

In zealously pursuing the triumph of colour [...] Our colourists journey to the Orient: to Egypt, Morocco or Spain, and gather a huge repository of brilliant objects – cushions, slippers, narghiles, turbans, burnous, caftans, carpets and parasols. They create heroes of lions and tigers, accentuate a landscape’s importance, redouble interest in a costume – even in inert matter – and so painting turns descriptive [...]. Above all else, let the colourist select those harmonies of colour that *conform to his thought*. The pre-eminence of colouration over drawing demonstrates the usurpation of the relative over the absolute, of fleeting appearance over fixed form, of the sensual impression over the realm of the soul. Just as literature ultimately becomes decadent when images are elevated above ideas, so fine art grows material and must

⁵ Baudelaire records how “Victor Hugo has become a painter in poetry; Delacroix [...] a poet in painting.” See Joshua C. Taylor, *Nineteenth-Century Theories of Art* (Berkeley, 1989), 230.

decline wherever the mind that draws is overrun by the impulse that colours; when, in short, the orchestra, rather than accompanying the song, becomes the entire poem.⁶

Crucially, the Orient itself is the supreme source of colour, for Blanc argues:

From time immemorial, the Chinese have known and fixed the laws of colour, and the tradition of these laws, handed down from generation to generation down to the present day, and spread throughout Asia, has been perpetuated so well that all Oriental artists are colourists, and infallible colourists, since a false note is never to be found in the pattern of their colours.⁷

And in a further sub-section on “The Vibration of Colours”, Blanc also points out that it is the “Orientals” who understand the secret of how to intensify even seemingly ordinary colours:

The Orientals, who are excellent colourists, when they have a surface that appears to be plain, do not fail to make the colour vibrate by applying tone upon tone in its pure state [...] and it is by this method that they obtain true harmony. [...] The more intense the colour [...] the more the Orientals make it shimmer [...] [in order] to prevent dryness and monotony, in order to produce, in a word, that vibration without which a colour is as unbearable to our eyes as a sound would be to our ears under the same conditions.⁸

Whether through his travels and studies in the East or by intuition, Blanc goes on to relate that Delacroix was the first Western painter who learnt how “to make his surface quiver” in like manner to the Orientals – by layering tone over tone, although with each of his tones being very slightly and subtly different from one another. Such approaches were making the moderns true “colourists”.⁹

⁶ Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (Paris, 1867), 609–10. (All translations from Blanc are mine.) “Couleur de la lumière” is a short sub-section of Chapter XIII on “Painting”. While Blanc’s writings had an impact on many artists, perhaps the most remarkable was on Seurat and Signac (with their pointillist or neo-impressionist / divisionist style), and also on Gauguin and Van Gogh. In *Chevreul’s Colour Theory and its Consequences for Artists* (London, 2010), 14–15, Georges Roque notes that by the 1880s, all the more daring artists “were actually looking for a recipe in order to give more intensity to their colours, and found it in the juxtaposition of complementary colours. [...] As so many painters were trying at the time to enhance their colours, this law [Chevreul’s law of complementary colours] provided them with an extraordinary technique.”

⁷ Blanc, *Grammaire*, 595.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 606–607.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Likewise Renoir (1841–1919) later reported that when he wanted his reds to be as “sonorous” as a bell, he would add more and more red hues to his canvasses (or do the same with other colours of the same type) until they seemed almost to ring out.¹⁰ By 1867, Blanc acknowledged that it was Delacroix (who died in 1863) who was responsible for immensely widening the future scope for painting, and he applauds him for being:

one of the greatest colourists of the modern era, perhaps even the greatest, for he surpassed all others, not only in the aesthetic language of his colouring, but in the phenomenal variety of his themes, and the orchestration of his colours.¹¹

Blanc’s various comments on colour in works of visual art may be compared with Rimsky-Korsakov’s statements regarding orchestration as having become “part of the very soul of the work”. Rimsky-Korsakov maintained that a musical work should be

thought out in terms of the orchestra, certain tone-colours being inseparable from it in the mind of the composer and native to it from the hour of its birth.¹²

In other words, the traditional approach to scoring whereby a short score / piano sketch is later fleshed out or “elaborated” in full orchestral garb (likened to an artist’s sketches and tracings giving rise to an initial “cartoon”, before being translated from this skeletal vision into a full-blown oil painting) – a process still familiar even to a radical mid-century “colourist” like Berlioz – had become too imagination-limiting by later in the century.¹³ And indeed, vice versa, many orchestral as well as operatic works necessarily existed in piano “reductions” (whether for performance at home or for rehearsal purposes), perpetuating the primacy of keyboard-centred renditions or equivalents. Richard Strauss, in his 1905 revision of Berlioz’s *Grand Traité*, claimed that even the symphonic works of Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms all still belonged to the “spirit of the piano”, and so praised Wagner for breaking free of any constraining keyboard

¹⁰ See Anthony Bertram, *The History of Western Art* (Cheltenham, 1988), 21–22.

¹¹ Blanc, *Grammaire*, 601.

¹² Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration*, ed. Maximilian Steinberg, tr. Edward Agate (New York, 1964), 2.

¹³ See Strauss’s Foreword to Hector Berlioz, *Treatise on Instrumentation*, exp. and rev. Richard Strauss, tr. Theodore Front (New York, 1948), I–II.

ancestry in pursuit of pure colouristic effects. And Liszt, using his imagination in reverse, as it were, and “with his instinct for tone colours”, “succeeded in filling this spirit of the piano in the orchestra with new poetic life” – in other words, treating the piano as a colouristic “orchestral” instrument.

Certainly, by the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire, as art critic, had already begun to doubt whether it was possible to be “at once a great colourist and a great draughtsman”.¹⁴ He explains that “the colourist who undertakes to express nature through colour would often lose more by suppressing his happy touches than by attempting a greater austerity of drawing”. One could almost make an equivalence here between the nineteenth-century dualism of the composer of Absolute versus Programmatic music, when comparing the Draftsman to the Colourist: “Pure draftsmen are philosophers and abstractors of quintessences”, Baudelaire asserts, while “Colourists are epic poets”. In Delacroix’s work, for instance, lines cease to exist, Baudelaire claims, because “for colourists, who seek to imitate the eternal palpitations of nature, lines are never other than the intimate blending of two colours, as in the rainbow”.¹⁵ Colour as *the* principal element of a work was now ideally to be applied directly to the “canvas” (i.e. the score), without any preliminary sifting, dissection or delay (and note here the parallel with impressionist philosophy and its spontaneous approach to the application of colour *en plein air*). By such means, colour was to be freed to capture the very essence of nature, or the “scene” in question, and not toned down for the sake of any academic conventions regarding balance or traditionally-established notions of good taste.

Very much in accord with Rimsky-Korsakov’s aesthetic revelations, Louis Laloy, in his survey of “Debussysme”, reminded his readers that the impressionist painters believed “everything in the universe is connected: colours are perpetually reacting upon one another”; and he cited Jules Laforgue’s belief that “Impressionism leads to the apotheosis of sensation”.¹⁶ By 1891, Rimsky-Korsakov was insisting that a preoccupation with orchestral “colour” had emerged thanks to the contemporary fascination with exotic subjects. This was also the period of Rimsky-Korsakov’s greatest “Oriental” inspiration, during which he produced his famed trio of colourful works of the late 1880’s – the *Capriccio espagnol* (1887: of Spanish [Moorish] inspiration), *Easter Festival Overture*

¹⁴ Cited in Taylor, *Nineteenth-Century Theories*, 226.

¹⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, 232.

¹⁶ See Louis Laloy, “Claude Debussy et le debussysme”, *Le Mercure Musical (La Revue Musicale Mensuelle S.I.M.)*, 6 (1910), 510–511 (my translation).

(1887–1888: of Asiatic-Russian inspiration) and *Scheherazade* (1888: of Middle Eastern / “Arabian” inspiration). It also closed a period in his work, at the end of which his orchestration (as he himself related) “reached a considerable degree of virtuosity and bright sonority without Wagner’s influence”.¹⁷ Adalyat Issiyeva draws attention to the fact that Rimsky-Korsakov – even though the most “Eastern” in influence and geographic location, and the most widely-travelled of all the composers here under discussion – privately thought that the version of the “Orient” he had generated through his own music was imaginative to the point of bordering on the “somewhat far-fetched and speculative”, and also largely reliant on “all-purpose oriental idioms”. He revealed at the end of his life that with more study and understanding, he might have created something far more “authentic”. (In saying this, Rimsky-Korsakov was distinguishing between his own speciality, “Russo-Slavic” music, and other more Eastern “Oriental” musics – with which he claimed to have no true natural affinity.) In arguing that, for the most part, “Russian Orientalism emerged from European stimuli” – and especially “French Orientalist culture” – Issiyeva also points to the irony of the fact that (being an interpretation of an interpretation) “a great number of [Russian] musical pieces recycled some French musical devices depicting the Orient”.¹⁸

Indeed, the fascination with all aspects of Eastern culture peaked during the years 1890–1920, as also did the interest in colour. As part of the outlook of many leading Russian composers who were aiming to create a colour-imbued national style in music (with Rimsky-Korsakov as their champion), they tended to regard Berlioz’s orchestral innovations with awe, even if they did not always fully embrace the music of other later French composers, while at the same time feeling that some flavour of “Orientalism” should undoubtedly permeate their national style as “an essential component of musical Russianness”.¹⁹ The popularity of *Scheherazade* today should not blind us to the fact that its premiere was nearly cancelled by the Imperial Russian Musical Society because of its seeming “lightness” (for which read the “gaudy superficiality” of such a thoroughly illustrative

¹⁷ Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, tr. Judah A. Joffe, ed. Carl Van Vechten (London, 1974), 296.

¹⁸ See Adalyat Issiyeva, “Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov and His Orient”, in Marina Frolova-Walker (ed.), *Rimsky-Korsakov and his World* (Princeton, 2018), 1–2; Adalyat Issiyeva, “Dialogues of Cultures: French Musical Orientalism in Russia, ‘Artistic Truth,’ and Russian Musical Identity”, *Revue musicale OICRM*, 3/1 (2016), 77 and 84–85.

¹⁹ Issiyeva quoting Marina Frolova-Walker as to Mily Balakirev’s thoughts on the Russian musical identity, as Balakirev came to take up the nationalist mantle of Mikhail Glinka (as explained in Frolova-Walker’s *Russian Music and Nationalism*). See Issiyeva, ‘Dialogues’, 87.

work): for it was claimed this type of composition “might corrupt the taste of our musical youth”.²⁰

The Apotheosis of Orchestral Colour

Rimsky-Korsakov, who spoke of “the secret of colour” in the creative faculty, understood that he was living at a time when a certain attitude towards colour had reached an apex. He singled out Brahms (1833–1897), only 11 years his senior (and champion of the “Absolute” school), as an example of a composer to whom timbral qualities were not a priority. Acknowledging that Brahms was in no way ignorant of orchestration, he argued that, even so, “nowhere in his works do we find evidence of brilliant tone or picturesque fancy”. “The truth is,” Rimsky-Korsakov concluded, “his thoughts did not turn towards colour; his mind did not exact it”.²¹ Rimsky-Korsakov realised that the form of a work could coalesce around, or even be generated by, individual and combined instrumental “colours” and textures – rather than colour being added later to works that had been pre-conceived around more abstract ideas of form, where melody, harmony and rhythm had previously tended to hold primacy in the often unstated hierarchy of musical parameters.

Earlier in the 1880’s, Emmanuel Chabrier (1841–1894) had a comparable colour awakening to Rimsky-Korsakov and experienced an equally fruitful turning-point in his music, which thereafter began to attract to it descriptive epithets such as “sparkling” and “glowing” (not unlike art critics’ comments on the “shimmering” and “luminescent” impressionist paintings Chabrier had begun to collect).²² His friend and fellow composer Henri Duparc reflected in a letter of 1908 that Chabrier “had some kind of sudden revelation of orchestral colour” – which Duparc ascribed wholly to Chabrier’s 1882 visit to, and inspiration stemming from, his nearest “Oriental” region (“Iberia”). Prior to Chabrier’s extended, ear-opening sojourn in Spain, Duparc recalled that Chabrier’s orchestration was that

²⁰ Issiyeva, ‘Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov’, 11.

²¹ Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles*, 2.

²² Chabrier was the original owner of *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882), for instance – the late masterpiece of his friend, Édouard Manet – and he could view it while he was composing, as well as contemplating pictures by Cézanne, Monet, Renoir and Sisley. (Ernest Chausson had a similarly wide circle of painter friends, though he preferred to collect Delacroix.) See further Roger Delage, ‘Chabrier et ses amis Impressionistes’, *L’œil*, 108/17 (1963), 16–23.

“of a pianist (conceived at the piano), heavy, clumsy and colourless”. Duparc despaired of Chabrier’s potential, until:

He came back with the dazzling *España*, a masterpiece of orchestration. Since then, his orchestration has never left that level. Perhaps it has become perfected in that it more adequately conveys the spirit of his music. *España* creates the impression of a work marvellously orchestrated. The later works seem to have been *thought out orchestrally*. I am not even aware of the orchestration, which is united to the underlying idea of the music, and not superimposed on it.²³

For such reasons, Gustav Mahler reportedly went so far as to claim that this glittering opus represented nothing less than “the foundation of all modern music”.²⁴ Paul Dukas (1865–1935), a fellow student with Debussy, also celebrated *España* as conveying a “joyously debauched sonority”²⁵ – certainly in comparison to what seemed to be expected of composition students in accordance with the traditional teaching that Dukas was, at that time, receiving at the Paris Conservatoire. Dukas’s magnum opus was the lavish (Persian-themed) Oriental ballet *La Péri* (1912) – a “poème dansé en un tableau” (“dance poem in one scene”), which Diaghilev had hoped to produce for his Ballets Russes with designs by Léon Bakst. It was, instead, memorably premiered alongside two other sumptuous “Oriental” ballets also based around the theme of an exotic *femme fatale*: Vincent d’Indy’s sensuous Assyrian goddess *Istar* and Florent Schmitt’s *La Tragédie de Salomé* (infused with the spirit of the composer’s own Middle Eastern travels – featuring, at one point, a haunting, wordless, sinuous and Eastern-inflected women’s chorus, heard from behind the scenes: all told, a score so ravishing that Schmitt was also dubbed by the press “the new Berlioz”). Chabrier was, perhaps, the composer most thoroughly aware of, and

²³ This letter was later published in Paris in 1914 (on the twentieth anniversary of his death) in a Chabrier exhibition catalogue – and it is cited, in part, in Edward Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting: A Study in Comparative Ideas from Turner to Schoenberg* (London, 1973), 185n.

²⁴ Mahler is reported to have uttered these words during a rehearsal of the work with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. See Henri-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler – Chronique d’une vie: Le génie foudroyé 1907–1911*, iii (Paris, 1985), 867; also Roger Delage, *Emmanuel Chabrier* (Paris, 1999), 290. It is also interesting to consider that, in his lifetime and shortly afterwards – at least in the eyes of several critics and biographers – Mahler was seen as the new “Berlioz” in terms of having inherited his grandiose orchestral imagination (see Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, 143).

²⁵ See Delage, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, 293 (my translation).

also influenced by, his consideration of emerging trends in the fine art of this period. And Delage even argues that, through his creation of *España*, Chabrier was effectively demonstrating that he maintained the same aesthetic credo as the Impressionists: “to dedicate art to the exact observation of nature, taking care to capture scrupulously the reality of movement alongside the fleeting qualities of light.”²⁶

Like his impressionist painter friends, Chabrier had been seeking new inspiration *en plein air*, as it were, by travelling to his nearest exotic location, in order to capture the authentic colours and absorb the essential spirit of the region he was portraying. And so, reviewing the premiere of *España* in 1883, the contemporary music historian, composer and enthusiastic Orientalist Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray (1840–1910) wrote of how Chabrier

hails from a group of pioneering explorer-musicians who aim to paint from Nature, in pursuit of truth.

One cannot hear *España* without realising how Spanish popular songs and dances have thoroughly permeated the work. [...] M. Chabrier has been able to weave in themes of rude origin, derived from Spanish songs, to create various moods – some vivacious and impetuous, others rousing and boisterous, and still more that are sensual and languorous. While retaining all their primitive colour and rhythm, the composer has injected his work with the full, lush paraphernalia of today’s instrumentation.

His orchestration is quite brilliant, and sparkles with colour [...]. Surely M. Chabrier wisely and deliberately stored up a hoard of sunlight while in Spain, so that on his return he could mix it into his compositional palette.²⁷

²⁶ Letter-manifesto signed by Monet, Renoir, Degas, Pissarro, Sisley, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Boudin and John Lewis Brown, dated after 1877. Cited by Delage, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, 290 (my translation).

²⁷ Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, ‘Concerts’, *Le Ménestrel. Musique et théâtre*, 18 November 1883, 407 (my translation). It would not be fair to omit the observation that, for all its originality, Chabrier’s *España* owes a stylistic debt to the particular precedents set by Édouard Lalo in his *Symphonie espagnole* (1875) and the (then) very recent premiere of his ballet *Namouna* (6 March 1882, at the Paris Opéra). Chabrier visited Spain in the second half of 1882 (from July to December). He also wrote to Lalo to try to obtain scores of the piano reduction and of the orchestral suites drawn from *Namouna*, because the publisher (J. Hamelle) was being slow in supplying them. (What today effectively corresponds with the first of three suites compiled by Lalo from *Namouna* was given in concert on 14 January 1883, under the baton of Charles Lamoureux.)

Of *España*'s importance in terms of the composer's exemplary use of instruments to create "local colour", Myers not only observes how, in 1883, it sounded genuinely novel, but points out that this work – like Ravel's *Bolero* – constitutes an orchestrational tour de force of Western art music of the period. Indeed, this single and relatively short orchestral composition made Chabrier an instant celebrity. *España* was soon being performed all over Europe and was recognised as the most "painterly" work to appear in the "Spanish" genre since Glinka.²⁸

Again, it was in the 1880s that, while Debussy's early approach to composition (after recently winning the Prix de Rome in 1884) was acknowledged as in no way "banal", it was still disparaged for its "decadent" quality, and he was attacked for his "dangerous" inclination towards "vague Impressionism". It was considered that Debussy had:

a too highly pronounced tendency to seek out what is strange. One can sense that he has a feeling for musical colour, but exaggeration of this easily leads him to forget the importance of precision of outline and clarity of form.²⁹

Debussy later spoke (in the guise of Monsieur Croche, and in exaggerated style) of how Beethoven's music consisted for him of an interesting, if restricted range of hues, ranging from black to white, though with an "exquisite scale of greys" between; while Wagner's orchestra, by comparison, represented "a sort of multi-coloured paste, spread almost uniformly", but wherein it was no longer possible to "distinguish the sound of a viola from that of a trombone".³⁰ In fact, Debussy came to admire Richard Strauss's dazzlingly extrovert orchestration and exhilarating approach far more than that of Wagner's suave blending and sublimation of tones. He considered that Wagner's music, although beautifully

²⁸ See Rollo Myers, *Emmanuel Chabrier and His Circle* (London, 1969), 46.

²⁹ Excerpt from the official report of the Académie des Beaux-Arts concerning Debussy's 1887 "envoi" from Rome, *Printemps* – an attempt to capture something of the spirit of the natural world and the "gradual blossoming" of "beings and things" within (as cited in Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* [Cambridge, 1998], 41–42). The original score of this first version of *Printemps*, for orchestra and wordless chorus, now sadly appears lost.

³⁰ Debussy's thoughts in this respect were first published as an "interview", or "L'entretien avec M. Croche", in *La Revue blanche* (1 July 1901), and later reprinted in Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croches et autres écrits*, ed. François Lesure (Paris, 1971), 48: "gamme exquise des gris [...] une espèce de mastic multicolore étendu presque uniformément". (I have preferred to translate "mastic" as "paste", not "putty", as in some sources.)

seductive, had already become “out-dated” when weighed against the colouristic innovations and soaring iridescence of the modern school.³¹

The Preface to Rimsky-Korsakov’s posthumously published (1912) treatise on the art of writing for the orchestra contains a neat summary of what he felt to be the most important achievements of nineteenth-century composers, when placed in their historical context. He described the epoch in which he was living as the “post-Wagnerian age” – an age, moreover, “of brilliance and imaginative quality in orchestral tone painting”. The composers who had eclipsed their predecessors as colourists are listed by Rimsky-Korsakov as Berlioz, Glinka, Liszt and Wagner; modern French composers such as Bizet and Delibes; and those of the new Russian school – Borodin, Balakirev, Glazunov and Tchaikovsky.³² All of the composers mentioned by Rimsky-Korsakov wrote illustrative music, many being pioneers in the field of programmatic orchestration. These musicians showed the way forward for subsequent generations of French and Russian composers, especially through their “Oriental” compositions.³³ Strange as it may seem today, contemporary critics could even discern “Eastern” characteristics in Tchaikovsky’s absolute music. In 1897, the *Berliner Tageblatt* carried a report on Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony which attacked the “semi-Asiatic taste” of his orchestration – meaning his use of “the shrillest and gaudiest colors”.³⁴

³¹ And especially as Wagner was dead by February 1883, when Chabrier was writing *España* (from January to August of that year) – with both Debussy (b. 1862) and Richard Strauss (b. 1864) becoming great admirers of Chabrier, as later, too, did Ravel (b. 1875).

³² Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration*, 1.

³³ Laloy writes of composers wanting to emulate *plein-air* artists and of the link between the Russian and French schools: “As early as 1880 it could be foreseen. Already, at the other end of Europe, musicians had escaped from the fortress to roam the countryside: they were Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and Mussorgsky; the first two picturesque, enamoured of sonority to the point of intoxication, inventors of an orchestra where every note is a colour; the other two endowed with a lively, tender and generous sensibility, which they desire to convey entirely through their music, without any concern for rules; and [...] Mussorgsky, in his *Romances* and in *Boris Godunov*, is Debussy’s closest precursor”, in *Claude Debussy et le debussysme*, 512–513 (my translation).

³⁴ As translated and reprinted in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Lexicon of Musical Invective: Critical Assaults on Composers Since Beethoven’s Time*, 2nd edn (Seattle, [1953]; 1990), 211.

Exotic Colour, Decadence and Decline: from the Orient to the Universe

“Garishness” and “musical sensationalism” (i.e. striving after effect) became one of the markers of so-called “decadence” in music for an increasing number of commentators, and the underlying argument and main concern of Constant Lambert’s *Music Ho!* (published in 1934) was that sensationalism can only be bettered by further sensationalism – so that art *ultimately becomes corrupted* by such endless seeking after effect.³⁵ Likewise, Nietzsche (who died in 1900) had warned that indulgence in purely descriptive art would signal aesthetic “degeneracy”, by which stage art could serve only to excite “jaded nerves”.³⁶ As a corollary of Lambert’s argument, it can perhaps ironically be seen that if Oriental inspiration helped increase the technical range and possibilities of musical art throughout the nineteenth century, it also assisted in its gradual “corruption” and inevitable tendency towards extremism by the early twentieth century (the *reductio ad absurdum* of entirely abandoning oneself to programmatic intent in music and of ignoring the “absolute” – as Eduard Hanslick had seemed to forewarn exactly 80 years before).

The poet and aesthetic critic Jules Laforgue (1860–1887) had similar forebodings some 50 years previously, even though he was a fierce advocate of the immediacy and sensuality induced by heightening colour – almost as if he knew its dangers, but had become addicted to colouration as an artistic drug. Laforgue (writing mainly in the 1880s) went so far as to propose that, in order to transcend the ordinary (avoiding dullness at all costs – a cardinal sin in art), the ideal aim of painting should be, by this time, to initiate a “visual orgasm” – while music, likewise, should also be emulating such climactic “coloured vibrations”. In such artistic ecstasy lay meaning and the fundamental vitality of life (however transitorily experienced). At the same time, however, Laforgue began to fear that within these tendencies, solely concentrated on producing brilliant effects, art and life might eventually become reduced to holding “only the interest of a kal-

³⁵ The technically extraordinarily accomplished composer Richard Strauss (1864–1949) was, at times, accused of just such sensationalism in his “Oriental” opera *Salome* (1905), it being then viewed as sometimes discordant, certainly shocking, and indeed both decadent and immoral – to the extent that it was banned by the Vienna censor until 1918, although always popular wherever it was performed elsewhere.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), 107.

eidoscope”.³⁷ It is also worth noting that impressionist technique had a powerful influence on Laforgue’s approach to creating imagery within his own verse – the posthumous impact of which belied his brief life.³⁸

And so – as both an experienced composer and a critic – Constant Lambert likened Claude Debussy’s orchestral nocturnes to “an exquisitely wrought Mohammedan decoration”, expressing both wonder at the detail of his craftsmanship and horror at what he described as Debussy’s “cold and detached pictorialism”, which seemed to him to exclude the human presence and human emotion (aesthetically now very far removed from Beethoven’s quintessential Romantic philosophy of “heart speaks to heart”, as articulated at the beginning of the nineteenth century).³⁹ Also bear in mind the term “impressionist”, as applied to Debussy’s music – and certainly as a *direct influence* on it – was largely anathema to the composer himself, except for occasional ironic use,⁴⁰ though Lambert’s, and other *pictorial* and *colour* analogies, were still often drawn during this period – which is the essential point for our argument. Where Debussy does align with the Impressionists – philosophically at least – is through his dislike of formal compositional conventions and analysis of his works, as well as his insistence on being given sufficient “freedom” in musical art to discover “the mysterious correlations between nature and the imagination”.⁴¹

By this late stage in the progress of musical Orientalism over the course of the long nineteenth century, Lambert maintained he could discern a spiritual emptiness underlying this garish “Orientalized” Western art. “Colour and atmosphere have taken the place of design and eloquence”, he felt able to assert

³⁷ See Lockspeiser, *Music and Painting*, 103–104.

³⁸ T. S. Eliot acknowledged, for instance, that it was Laforgue who first taught him the rich poetic possibilities of his “own idiom of speech”. See “Talk on Dante”, *Adelphi*, 27/2 (1951), 107.

³⁹ Or “From the heart, may it again go to the heart” (“Von Herzen – möge es wieder zu Herzen gehen!”) – as inscribed in Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* (1824) and also adopted as a motto by Cardinal Newman (1801–1890): “*Cor ad cor loquitur*”.

⁴⁰ As convincingly argued in Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: impressionisme et symbolisme* (see *passim*). Pointillism was sometimes invoked to explain the multihued flecks and timbral flashes in Debussy’s music, an early such reference occurring in 1894, where the eminent Belgian critic Maurice Kufferath acknowledges Debussy’s skill, but decries his “musical pointillism” and “universal amorphousness”. See Maurice Kufferath, “Chronique de la semaine – Bruxelles”, *Le Guide musical* (4 March 1894), 227.

⁴¹ Claude Debussy, “Pourquoi j’ai écrit *Pelléas*”, *La Revue blanche* (April 1902); reproduced in *Monsieur Croches et autre écrits*, 61. (The translation is mine; “correspondences” is often used instead of “correlations”, but the latter term is here preferred, as the former seems now too loaded with ambiguous philosophical connotations.)

by 1933.⁴² And the composer Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) concurred. “Like all luxury,” he argued – commenting on what Stanford saw as the contemporary tendency to overindulge in orchestral colour – it quite simply “ends by palling”.⁴³ And yet, as Sergei Rachmaninoff also perfectly well understood, “Without colour, it [music] is dead.”⁴⁴

Further evidence of increasing extremism with regard to artistic colouration in the new century, but in the field of fine art (to the point of “colour saturation”), is provided by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), who noted how, in the pre-war period, colour now seemed an all-consuming aesthetic preoccupation. This is what he said of the early Ballets Russes productions of Serge Diaghilev:

At first the ballets, Bakst’s *Scheherazade* in particular, were overladen with colour. A quite immoderate generosity! The paints seemed to be overflowing in bucketfuls. The generally pleasing effect was due to the material rather than to any merit in the design itself.⁴⁵

It could be said that the world became “over-exposed” by the early to mid-twentieth century, that we knew too much to have to use so much imagination in exploring our planet ever again. One of the last exceptions was to emerge in 1933, when the Polish-born globetrotting musician Alexandre Tansman (1897–1986), who settled in Paris just after the Great War in 1919, produced his extensive, multi-part *Le Tour du monde en miniature. Quinze feuillets de voyage* for piano solo – concentrating on providing musical impressions, or aural “postcards”, of a host of Oriental regions, although first embracing the US (he had toured there and was influenced by jazz), before moving on to Japan, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Ceylon, India, Egypt, Spain and finally Italy.⁴⁶ The wonder was gone; the modern world had obviated its mystique

⁴² 1933 is the date of Constant Lambert’s Preface to *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London, [1934]; 1948) (see pp. 19–20 and 34 for quotations), and the mid 1930s is effectively the end of the period under discussion. Lambert states in his Preface: “The theme of the book is modern music in relation to the other arts and in relation to the social and mechanical background of modern life.”

⁴³ Charles Villiers Stanford, *Musical Composition: A Short Treatise for Students* (London, 1911), 171–172.

⁴⁴ See Basil Maine, “A Conversation with Rachmaninoff”, in the archives of *Musical Opinion* (October 1936), reprinted in *Musical Opinion Quarterly* (April–June 2016), 17.

⁴⁵ In Prince P. Lieven, *The Birth of the Ballets-Russes* [London, 1936], (New York, 1973), 22.

⁴⁶ See further ‘Alexandre Tansman: Diary of a 20th-Century Composer’, tr. and ed. Sylvain Frémaux and Jill Timmons, Polish Music Center, <https://polishmusic.usc.edu/research/publications/polish-music-journal/vol1no1/alexandre-tansman-diary/> (a translation of excerpts from

through the omnipresent gaze and glare of the camera lens with its ultra-realistic and commonplace pictures – unfiltered, as it were, through the many distorting but brilliantly creative hues of our complex human apperceptive processes. We almost need to discover extra-terrestrial life forms and the “habitats” of deepest space to rekindle that sort of imaginative power today. In his astute and provocative writings, Constant Lambert very clearly drew out this link between the extension of musical technique and the inspirational capacity of “geographic exploration”:

There is an obvious end to the amount of purely physical experiment in music, just as there is an obvious end to geographic exploration. Wyndham Lewis has pointed out that when speed and familiarity have reduced travelling in space to the level of the humdrum, those in search of the exotic will have to travel in time, and this is what has already happened in music. The impressionist composers vastly speeded up the facilities for space travel in music, exploring the remotest jungles and treating uncharted seas as though they were the Serpentine. Stravinsky, at one time the globe trotter par excellence, can no longer thrill us with his traveller’s tales of the primitive steppe and has, quite logically, taken to time travelling instead.⁴⁷

Lambert saw the vogue for “pastiche” (beginning in the 1920s) as an extreme manifestation of the artist’s desire to travel in time *ad libitum*. The arrival of “pastiche” also signals the death-knell of earthly or “geographic” exoticism in music. The “Orient” had, by this time, all but exhausted its once-bewitching, colour-intoxicating power. Replacing the earlier wonder, and an often genuine nineteenth-century effort to understand and appreciate the “Orient”, the Orientalist genre was turning into a kind of parody of itself. In the realm of light music, this tendency is hugely amplified: here, there was not even the slightest pretence of seriousness of intent. It was as if everyone was turning inward – music inspired by the Orient seemed often to be mocking itself and, in doing so, mocking “otherness”. While Albert Ketèlbey (1875–1959) was a gifted light concert music composer, few would claim any lofty aesthetic ideals for his cloying “Oriental” miniatures (of largely derivative, standardised colouration). Yet even these works retain brief moments of sweeping grandiosity, as if savouring one final

the book Alexandre Tansman, *Regards en arrière. Itinéraire d’un musicien cosmopolite au XXe siècle*, ed. Cédric Segond-Genovesi with Mireille Tansman Zanuttini and Marianne Tansman Martinozzi (Château-Gontier: Aedam Musicae, 2013).

⁴⁷ Lambert, Preface, 47.

reminiscence of each Eastern region portrayed, at a time when Western empires were entering their period of decline and Western hegemony over parts of the East was threatening to wane – to be heard in works such as *In a Persian Market* (an Arabian / Middle Eastern “intermezzo scene” with optional chorus, 1921), *In a Chinese Temple Garden* (an “oriental phantasy” with optional chorus, 1923), and *In the Mystic Land of Egypt* (with optional solo vocal and choral parts, 1931). Ketèlbey seems to have taken the cue for some of his “Orientalisms” from the style of Johann Strauss II’s *Ägyptischer Marsch* (also featuring an optional chorus) – and similar works of over half a century earlier – so adding a further layer of nostalgia for a lost world to the reception of Ketèlbey’s early twentieth-century “Eastern” light music (though with a weaker tutti sound than Strauss’s orchestration could generate). In fact, there is a century-long continuity of a choral/orchestral “soundworld” stemming from Beethoven’s Janissary-inspired Turkic “Chorus of the Dervishes” written for *Die Ruinen von Athen* (1812), through the Middle Eastern “L’entrée au désert: II. Marche de la caravane” and “Nuit: II. Fantaisie arabe – Danse des almé” in Félicien David’s *Le Désert* (1844), to Strauss’s *Ägyptischer Marsch* of 1869, and on to Ketèlbey’s early twentieth-century “Egyptian” and “Persian” novelties.

By the first part of the twentieth century, the British composer John Foulds (1880–1939) – fed up with light music parodies of the “East” (though himself often reliant on income from this very genre’s popularity) – sought in his final years, while resident in India, to find a more “real” style for the future creation and development of symphonic musical Orientalism – as elucidated in the Prefatory Note he wrote to the score of his *Indian Suite*, completed in 1935:

This Indian Suite is not to be confused with those numerous pieces which attempt to conjure up an “oriental” atmosphere by use of a drone-bass, tam-tam, so-called “oriental” scales, and other “tricks-of-the-trade”. Successful as many of these imitations have been with the general public, the present writers have no desire to add to their number.⁴⁸

Foulds dreamed of establishing a permanent “Indo-European Orchestra”, comprised of instruments from both the West and from India (where he had been

⁴⁸ John Foulds, *Indian Suite: Based on authentic Indian Melodies from the collection of Maud MacCarthy* (Munich, 2011), ix. The composer’s second wife was ethnomusicologist Maud MacCarthy (1882–1967), an authority on Indian music who yearned for “cosmic consciousness”, made it her task to absorb the wisdom of Central Asia and India, and became a master of Karnatic classical vocal music.

working prolifically from 1935 and was to die in 1939). On 28 March 1938, he presented a high-profile, experimental public concert of such East-West musical fusion in the presence of Victor Hope, then Viceroy of India. At the time of his death, Foulds had also been planning a great Symphony of East and West, Op. 100 (mainly sketched in 1937–1938, now believed lost, as with several of his later works). Foulds's work, generally, is further notable not only for its thorough-going attempt to found a new "authentic" genre of musical Orientalism (which was doomed by his sudden death on the verge of the Second World War), but also for the fact that (irrespective of any opus numbers) he sought to classify certain of his works as comprising "groups" of "Music Pictures", as he termed them – with each such work aiming to capture something of the atmosphere of other times, and of far-away places.

But the most famous early twentieth-century attempt to break earthly bonds and begin musical space exploration was the result of a successful experiment by an English composer of Swedish ancestry, who turned his attention from the earth to the heavens. Even so, a new generation of artists may yet demand of their creative dreams a stellar penetration far in excess of that achieved by Gustav Holst in his descriptive musical vision of *The Planets* (written 1914–1917; premiered 1918–1919), where each planet is interpreted solely in the context of its traditional astrological associations. Holst proves a fine example of a composer whose imagination was powerfully captivated by both archaic "magical" (i.e. national/folkloric) as well as "Oriental" (Indian) philosophies.⁴⁹ John Foulds more obviously tried to unite Orientalism with the celestial in his substantial and adventurous, Indian-inspired *Three Mantras* for orchestra (written 1919–1930, premiered in the latter year) – specifically designed to turn the listener's consciousness towards the stated objects of each of the three movements, which were entitled: Mantra I – Of Action [...] and Vision of Terrestrial Avatars [i.e. manifestations of the divine]; Mantra II – Of Bliss [...] and Vision of Celestial Avatars; and Mantra III – Of Will [...] and Vision of Cosmic Avatars.⁵⁰ Mantra II

⁴⁹ Ralph Vaughan Williams, in his summary assessment of Holst's music published in 1920, noted: "Holst uses a very large orchestra in the Planets not to make his score look impressive, but because he needs the extra tone colour and knows how to use it". See Ralph Vaughan Williams, "Gustav Holst", *Music & Letters*, 1/4 (1920), 314.

⁵⁰ The most notable (existing) late orchestral works of John Herbert Foulds, inspired by various Oriental regions (and often stimulated by the work and interests of his wife), also include his *Chinese Suite* "on Original Melodies written in the Chinese Idiom" in 4 movts, Op. 95 (1935); *The Song of Ram Dass* "after a melody of Maud MacCarthy" (1935); *Kashmiri Wedding Procession* for small orchestra "after a melody of Maud MacCarthy" (1936); *An Arabian Night: Orien-*

includes a wordless female SSA chorus, as pioneered so evocatively – offstage, unearthly-sounding and fading away – in Holst’s *Neptune, the Mystic*, the final movement of his suite *The Planets*.

Similarly eclectic and heterogeneous, *Télescope II* (1930), for large orchestra, by the Russian modernist composer Leonid Polovinkin (1894–1949), hovers between far-off visions, screaming upper registers and plodding futurist mechanist sounds (at times veering towards militarism), while also integrating occasional South American dance rhythms. This was one of a set of four orchestral *Télescopes* (I–IV, 1926–35) written by Polovinkin, who also wrote incidental music for *Princess Turandot*, a play first staged in 1922 by Russian-Armenian actor/director Yevgeny Vakhtangov, and it proved so successful that it has been performed annually every year since; and, like Puccini’s opera of four years later, it was based on the play written by Carlo Gozzi back in the mid-eighteenth century (1762), when both *Chinoiserie* and *Arabian Nights*-derived tales, were all the rage – precursors to the much more multifaceted Orientalism that emerged during the course of the great interrogative and expeditionary nineteenth century. Orientalism proved to be just one – though an important – component of the nineteenth-century “battle of the [artistic] styles” (which, out of all the arts, seemed to rage most diversely and furiously in the field of architecture).

As the contemporary political geographer Tim Marshall writes in the opening of *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World* (2023), “We explored the world and discovered it is finite.”⁵¹ And so it became in the twentieth century. As so poetically expressed by John Gillespie Magee, it seems the “high untrespassed sanctity of space” – just as Marshall contends – is likely the next frontier, not only politically and geographically, but, and in consequence, *imaginatively*, too. Thus, the later twentieth century and the twenty-first century might well prove astronomically and astrally dominant, as a starting point for much artistic inspiration – taking their cue from Holst’s trail-blazing early twentieth-century “cosmic” suite as forerunner.⁵² A contemporary work, the “prismatic” *Polaris* (“Voyage for Orchestra”), Op. 29 (2010), by

tal Nocturne for small orchestra (although this, too, incorporated Indian melodies) (1936–37).

⁵¹ Tim Marshall, *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World* (London, 2023), xi.

⁵² Well before this, that long-lived and intrepid composer-traveller, polymath and Orientalist Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) had himself dreamt of becoming an astronomer while growing up in mid nineteenth-century France and indeed would later see published his various amateur observations of the heavens.

Thomas Adès (b. 1971), is a possible current model for this genre, owing as it does a good deal to celestial inspiration.

When the seemingly endless, and once-unknowable, variety of the world started to vanish, so much of the unique exotic colour of each region, and its power to inspire, withered too. As the real Orient became known, and as the world as a whole seemed to shrink, artists' "geographic" imaginations were, likewise, gradually neglected and abandoned – in the same way that some once-cherished album of slowly-fading colour travel photographs might, at long last, be filed away for good. The rich artistic legacy of the long nineteenth century, however, is not only to be found in the countless works of all types inspired by the "Orient", but, most particularly, in their *technical advances*, so often linked to a fervour for amplifying colour, precipitated by the unfettered and unbounded geographic inspiration of all kinds of Romantic artists and their direct successors.⁵³

⁵³ In technical treatises, equating orchestration with colouration, great imagination, even as analogous to exploration (ever since Berlioz especially linked instrumentation and colour in 1843), is not something that has diminished in any way to this day, and indeed it continues to permeate European and English-speaking manuals on the subject. In mid twentieth-century America, for example, Bernhard Rogers at the Eastman School of Music – taking his cue from Rimsky-Korsakov – published *The Art of Orchestration: Principles of Tone Color in Modern Scoring* (New York, 1951), choosing to open its Preface thus: "To orchestrate is to paint. Both arts enlist color and line as expressive means. In both, the sensuous ingredient sharpens and deepens the artist's thought. Orchestration requires imagination, taste, and skill. It combines adventure and discipline."

ABSTRACT

This article explores how the correlation of Orientalism with “colour” helped stimulate the increasing brilliance of orchestral music as the nineteenth century approached its zenith, explaining particular analogies that were drawn between fine art and music, while emphasising the importance of colour as traced in the evolution of treatises on instrumentation and orchestration and the ever-growing focus on colour in music generally (tone / tone colour / colouration / tone painting). It also draws parallels with developments in other art forms during the period – in literature, but especially in relation to those theories revolutionising fine art – aiming to illustrate that they were all driven and underpinned by similar “Eastern”-derived aesthetic philosophies, approaches and ideals – by tending to prioritise the enrichment of colour over all other constructional parameters. Even before the turn of the twentieth century, some critics feared that such unrestrained striving after colouristic effects, or “sensationalism”, was inducing every art form to turn “decadent”.

KEYWORDS: Orientalism, exoticism, romanticism, colour, Impressionism, aestheticism, instrumentation, orchestration, programme music

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