

Indian perspectives in the works of Albert Roussel and Maurice Delage

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Abstract: *French composers Albert Roussel and Maurice Delage were strongly influenced by Classical Indian music, the evocation of this exotic world offering them the opportunity to devise innovative musical languages. The present paper strives to reveal the manner in which both Roussel and Delage employ in their works modal constructions, inspired by Indian ragas, vocal and instrumental timbres that can be associated by the Western listener with the sound of Indian music, at the same time incorporating in their works rhythmic patterns and sound effects specific for Indian music. The orientalism and exoticism in the works of these two composers reflect their desire to obtain a certain purity of the artistic expression, while the direct contact with the music of India and that of other regions in Asia, visited by Roussel and Delage, contributed in a great deal to their transcending of the philosophical, social, and even musical barriers and limitations, offering them the freedom to turn to new means of musical expression in their works.*

Key-words: *orientalism, exoticism, Albert Roussel, Maurice Delage, influences*

1. Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, musical exoticism proved to be an important stylistic orientation, that could offer a valuable solution for French composers in search of novel means and modalities of expression. The musical compositions devised during this period were influenced by various sources, such as the contact with the music of the Orient, Spanish music, or African art. Musicians strived to discover and reveal the mystical character of these forms of art, an aspect that is emphasised by their fascination with such concepts as *ritual, magic, or primitivism*. Their perspective could also be linked to the evolution of certain sciences, such as Anthropology.

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Exoticism and orientalism offered artists and musicians the possibility to present new modalities and means of expression through their art, often leading to the *invention* of a new musical language through the use of certain elements pertaining to the culture evoked in the work: vocal or instrumental timbres, rhythmic patterns, musical modes. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, French musical orientalism was dominated by the influence and sound of Northern African and Middle Eastern music. Nonetheless, towards the end of this era, specific features of Indian music could gradually become discernible. In works such as the operas *Le Roi du Lahore* (1877) by Jules Massenet, or *Lakmé* (1883) by Léo Delibes, the use of certain modal structures can be observed, concerning which French musicologist Julien Tiersot remarked that are of Indian origin (Tiersot 1905, 73–74). However, these structures are carefully integrated by the composers within a musical discourse devised according to the rules of Western music composition.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the direct contact of certain French composers with Indian culture and music significantly altered the manner in which India would hereafter be represented in French music compositions. Albert Roussel and Maurice Delage are among those composers who were profoundly influenced by Indian music, discovering that the evocation of this exotic world could offer them the opportunity to devise innovative musical languages. Both Roussel and Delage resorted to the use of sound constructions inspired by the Indian ragas, to the use of vocal and instrumental timbres that can be related by the Western listener to Indian music, as well as to the incorporation of rhythmic patterns and particular sound effects (for example, the musical discourse is supported through the use of *drones* — *bourdon* — with the purpose of recreating the effect produced by the auxiliary chords of the sitar or surbahar, instruments specific to Indian music).

Within the French musical landscape of the early twentieth century, the two composers represent different attitudes and perspectives regarding India, as well as concerning the evocation of *the Other* (a concept that is closely related to orientalism and exoticism). Both Roussel and Delage had traveled to India, voyages that proved to be endless sources of inspiration for the two composers. Their representation of India is marked by the direct contact with this world, however, the manner of expression through sound is different in the works of the two composers, strongly influenced by their personal Indian experience, as well as by their previous musical education and cultural background. The aim of this research is to reveal the distinctive features of the works of Roussel and Delage, disclosing two different pictures of India, two different manners of representation through sound, accomplished through the use of musical elements of Indian inspiration.

2. Albert Roussel and the evocation of India in Orchestral Works

An important figure of early twentieth century French music, Albert Roussel continues the tradition of French musical orientalism, his works embracing Impressionist, Neo-Classical, and Post-Romantic influences, as well as elements borrowed from the Indian music he had the chance to listen to during his Indian sojourn.

In 1909 Roussel travels to India, his voyage encompassing well-known cities, such as Bombay or Calcutta. In his correspondence dating to this period, Roussel mentions that he was greatly impressed by his contact with the Indian world, however as far as music is concerned, he was not impressed by what he had heard. He describes the music he had listened to as lacking harmonic support and thoroughly different from the music of the Far East (Java, Japan). Roussel compares Indian music to those *chansons populaires* that fascinated the composers of the Schola Cantorum, pointing out the resemblance between the constitution of certain European folk songs and that of the sound structures he had the chance to hear in India (Labelle 1987, 35).

Educated and formed in the spirit proposed by the Schola Cantorum de Paris, the manner in which Roussel integrates in his works certain elements of oriental inspiration is different from the aspirations of his predecessors. Up until that point, the main desire of French composers was to emphasize the exoticism of cultures that are different from the Western world. This was accomplished through the use of particular musical elements, that conveyed the musical discourse a marked oriental expression. The works of Roussel, however, evoke *the impact* of the Oriental world, the effect this meeting has on the Western man. His works are deeply influenced by Impressionism: the Orient evoked by Roussel *suggests*, rather than clearly describing, the composer *reveals* the world *perceived* by him, as the Western spectator of oriental scenes. Ever in the search for novel sound effects, resembling his contemporary, Maurice Delage, Roussel strived to incorporate in his works (conceived according to the rules of tonal music) modal fragments and scales borrowed from Indian music. Through the obtained sounds and colors Roussel does not strive to be truthful, rather he aims to achieve an expressive musical discourse, remarkable through the timbral combinations, the often harsh and violent harmonic constructions, and the powerful rhythmic constructions employed.

Although inspired by the composer's contact with Indian culture, the work *Evocations*, for orchestra, choir, and soloists, is not rich in foreign elements: the composer rather *suggests* the Indian world, he does not strive to obtain an authentic evocation, as far as the obtained sound is concerned. The transparent and bright texture of the music, as well as the instrumental writing, evoke the

Hindu temples visited by Roussel, at the same time expressing the emotional impact this meeting between East and West had on the composer.

In each of the work's three parts, the composer employs scales that resemble the construction of certain Indian ragas. However, these modal constructions are carefully incorporated within the construction of the work, their discovery proving a difficult task. During the entire work, Roussel strives to suggest a distinct atmosphere, obtained due to the use of the chosen timbres and devised sound structures.

The essence of Indian music and spirituality is captured in the third part of *Evocations*. The choral parts reveal the specific features of Indian vocal music: the music is rich in ornaments, resembling the performance of a conjuration, while the frequent use of the semitones echoes the microintervals (microtones) in Indian music. Roussel strived to create a complex evocation of India, which may be observed in the timbral combinations he used, in the rhythmic and melodic ornaments, or in effects such as the *glissando* — through which he evokes the *mida* ornament in Hindustani music (Daniélou 1954, 11).

Similar to his contemporaries, Roussel desired to devise a novel musical language, inspired in his case by sources of Indian origin. Through the use of particular harmonic structures or the juxtaposition of certain timbres, he aims to obtain surprising color effects, intended to convey the distinct sound of Indian music. In his opéra-ballet *Padmâvatî* the composer's strong bond to the French music tradition of the previous centuries may be observed (Giroud 2010, 249). Here as well, Roussel resort to the use of interesting harmonic constructions and includes Indian melodies, as Lacombe remarks (Lacombe 2001, 205). The construction of several scenes in the opera echoes the Indian ragas: for example, the intervention of Gora in the first act of the opera, or Padmâvatî's discourse in the third scene of the first act. Moreover, the composer employs a vocal discourse that is rich in ornaments, thus evoking the distinct features of Hindustani vocal music: for example, the vocal intervention of Nakanti in the first act of the opera, Padmâvatî's vocal discourse, or the choral parts in the second act of the opera.

Despite the fact that the sound and atmosphere of the second act lies closer to the particularities of early twentieth century Western music, nonetheless one may observe the composer's concern regarding the use of certain elements that could convey his musical discourse a distinct sound (Fig. 1). These elements, employed for the representation of the oriental and exotic, can be remarked in the manner in which the vocal discourse is conceived, as well as within the instrumental writing: descending chromatic patterns, the frequent use of the semitone (which may reflect the composer's desire to convey the distinct atmosphere of the

microintervals in Indian music), rhythmic and melodic patterns, scales with a pronounced modal character/modal scale.

The image shows a musical score for Albert Roussel's "Padmâvatî", Act II, Cérémonie funèbre (excerpt). The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line features lyrics such as "- mah", "A", "na mah", "na", "Indra - ya", and "namah, namah, namah, na.mah, namah, namah, namah, na.mah, namah, namah, namah, na.". The piano accompaniment includes a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand. Dynamics like "ff" are indicated.

Fig. 1. Albert Roussel: "Padmâvatî,"
Act II, Cérémonie funèbre (excerpt)

3. Maurice Delage and the evocation of India in Chamber Works

Delage was born in Paris, son of the owner of a shoe polish factory, the Lion Noir. The family business owned factories in India and Japan, thus the composer had the opportunity to travel to these regions. During his oriental voyages, Delage had a close encounter with Classical Indian music, which would become one of the main sources of inspiration for the future works of a composer eager to discover and employ new means of musical expression.

Unlike his compatriot, Albert Roussel, in the works inspired by his contact with India Maurice Delage advances an idealized musical representation of this world. Searching for new means of expression, in his compositions Delage assimilates elements belonging to Indian music, often requiring the performers of his works to adapt their vocal or instrumental technique in order to obtain the sound and color desired by the composer.

The ideal sound imagined by Delage was greatly influenced by the microtonal subtleties of the Indian ragas, the tuning system of the instruments employed by Indian musicians, the complex rhythmic and melodic improvisations, as well as by the timbral richness of Indian music. The dominion of color over musical syntax is an idea that characterizes French musical works of the early twentieth century, an aspect discernible in the works of Delage, inspired by Indian music to devise numerous timbral combinations (Born-Hesmondhalgh 2000, 14). The elements borrowed by the French composer and incorporated within his musical discourse aimed to create novel sounds, while at the same time re-creating the distinct atmosphere conveyed by the Indian music Delage had heard.

Quatre poèmes hindous, a cycle of four songs, composed between 1912–1913, and *Ragamalika* (1915) are among Delage's most famous works of Indian inspiration. Both works reflect the composer's desire of adjusting his own means of expression, with the purpose of devising an authentic representation of India and obtaining novel sounds.

The cycle of Hindu songs, *Quatre poèmes hindous* was dedicated to the soprano voice and a chamber ensemble consisting of two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, harp, and string quartet. The work may be performed in its reduction for voice and piano. The songs are mainly composed according to the rules and distinct features of Western musical discourse, however, the entire cycle seems to be *saturated* by the character and distinct attributes of Indian music. This type of musical writing suggests a manner of musical representation described by Jean-Pierre Bartoli as "*la re-création pseudo-authentique*": the composer devises melodies, rhythms, and timbres that are associated in the conscience of the Western listener with the distinct sound of oriental music, due to their similarity to the original musical material, which had inspired the composer (Bartoli 1997, 143). This type of representation of the Orient (in this case, of India) operates with distinct elements, a specific musical expression saturated with ingredients pertaining to the oriental music that inspired the evocation.

In order to obtain the desired sound, in the score of his Hindu songs Delage offers precise indications regarding the performance of certain vocal or instrumental passages. Thus, in the opening phrases of the song *Un sapin isolé...*, through the indications marked in the score, the composer seeks to obtain a precise evocation of the sitar or surbahar sound. Delage writes the following, regarding the technical execution of the cello line: in order to obtain an authentic sound, the performer will use *glissandi* and will adapt his or her technical approach — finger placement (Delage 1914, 9). The composer specifies that the same finger of the left

hand should be used to slide between the notes, while the right hand will attack the chords firmly — which produces a sound that closely resembles that of Indian stringed instruments. The use of ornaments, along with the gentle sliding from one note to the other, creates a continuous sound, the obtained effect being similar to the resonating sound produced by the drone strings of the sitar (auxiliary strings which are strummed). The *drone* represents harmonic or monophonic accompaniment or effect, where a sound or chord is sounded without interruption throughout ample portions of the musical discourse. The ostinato drone accompaniment is employed in Classical Indian music, while the distinct sound of this harmonic or monophonic support influenced Western composers at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The vocal discourse devised by Delage in his Hindu songs suggests the influence of Hindustani vocal music. Unlike the *Quatre poèmes hindous*, in his *Ragamalika* (1914) the composer places the vocal discourse in the low and middle registers of the voice, his indications regarding vocal emission aiming to recreate the slightly nasal sound of Carnatic music (the musical tradition of Southern India): the composer clearly marks the passages that must be sung with closed or open mouth. The term *Ragamalika* designates a *garland of ragas*, and is a typical form of Carnatic music. The segments which constitute this garland of modes are devised using different ragas.

Ragamalika, chant tamoul composed by Maurice Delage suggests the strong influence of Carnatic music, regarding both the vocal and instrumental discourse. The song is written in the Tamil language, the Dravidian language spoken in the southern parts of India by the Tamil population. The text is an adaptation of the phonetic transcription of a sacred chant praising Shiva Nataraja (the god Shiva in his form of cosmic dancer). The song is written in E flat Major, but the basis of the melodic lines is inspired by the structure of a raga. The piano accompaniment consists of an ostinato (the left hand), comprising rhythmic and melodic patterns, and a complex melody (the right hand) played against this ostinato.

Delage suggests that the work should be performed on a “*prepared piano*”, one of the first experiments of this kind in European music (Pasler 2000, 107). The composer asks the B-flat sound, on the second line of the bass clef, to be dampened by placing a cardboard inside the piano, just where the hammer and string make contact. By doing so, Delage aims to obtain the distinct sound of the Tabla drum and the effect produced by the drone strings in the accompaniment of stringed Indian instruments (Figure 2).

CHANT

♩ = 66

pp Fermez la bouche

Yain

Bouche ouverte

p Yénn Pá - dit - tá - -

PIANO⁽¹⁾

pp

ppp

(1) On peut amortir le son du  en plaçant un carton léger sous les cordes, à l'endroit où frappe le marteau.

Fig. 2. Maurice Delage: "Ragamalika, chant tamoul" (excerpt)

-dou.vé

nâ Râ - na

Oun - den - va - ré

Vid - dou - vé

Na.da.radjà

Bouche ouverte

Bouche fermée

Bouche ouverte

Bouche fermée

Bouche ouverte

Comme

A - am - bâ M

ma à vou

Yénn

Comme

cresc. poco

p

pp

ppp

à bassa :

Fig. 3. Maurice Delage: « Ragamalika, chant tamoul » (excerpt)

4. Conclusions

In the works of nineteenth century French composers, the musical representations of the Orient were often accomplished through specific compositional techniques, such as the use of motifs, rhythmic and melodic patterns, or the incorporation of borrowed musical fragments, more or less precisely reproduced using the Western notation. Bartoli refers to this manner of composition as “*la technique de l’emprunt adapté*” (Bartoli 1997, 142). According to this approach, borrowed musical fragments would be incorporated in the works of Western composers, however, these fragments would lack precision. This can be explained through the fact that Western music permits the reproduction of oriental microintervals only to a certain degree. When resorting to this method, composers would adapt the borrowed musical material, so that this could fit within the sound constructions devised according to the rules of Western music composition. This type of representation is used in works from the early twentieth century as well, similar fragments being observed in the compositions of Albert Roussel and Maurice Delage.

Both composers employ melodic and rhythmic patterns borrowed from Indian music, however, the musical vision of the two artists differs. Delage employs fragments taken over from Indian music and desires to obtain an authentic discourse, where elements of Western music are subordinated to the distinct features and requirements of the incorporated Indian music. On the other hand, despite his use of scalar constructions which allude to the Indian raga, Albert Roussel does not employ fragments borrowed from the performances he had witnessed.

However difficult is to fully grasp the concept of raga and no matter how imprecise the transcriptions made by the two composers (imprecision owing to the limitations of Western musical notation), modal constructions may be identified in the works of Roussel and Delage, evoking the sound and distinct atmosphere of certain Indian ragas. Indian music offers both composers the possibility of exploring new modalities of sound constructions (even new forms), of using novel timbral combinations and adapting the vocal and instrumental technique of Western performers in order to obtain the desired sound effects.

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