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Music in the 18th and 19th Century

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Cultural Representation and Distortion Through Music in the 18th and 19th Century

The purpose of this research is to identify the ways in which European Imperialism in the 18th and 19th century has effected the culture and therefore the music of this time period. The ethnocentric nature of colonialism has sought to override the culture of the Other, while at the same time exoticizing it within it's fine arts. For example, operas and works by various European composers have reflected a romanticized idea of different cultural identities. I will explore how, what Edward Said called Orientalism, and what is more modernly referred to as representation, have been expressed within Western music.

In order to better understand my arguments and to lay a foundation for this paper, I will begin by defining some key terms. Exoticism, as defined by various scholars, is the taste for and the representation of distant and rare things. Orientalism defined by Edward Said, is making statements about the Other, authorizing views of, and describing the orient, by teaching it, settling it, and ruling over it. Overall, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.¹ French, Italian, Russian and Austro-German composers all share traits of exoticism and inauthentic representation of the Other through their music. I will focus on a few specific examples and demonstrate the detrimental inaccuracy of Western musical representation.

¹ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print, page 3.

My first example of representation will be Verdi's *Aida*. The figure head of 19th century viceregal Egypt, Khdiva Ismail, commissioned a European style opera for his court and country. He approached Verdi, one of the most well known and successful Western writers of the time, and with flattery and 150,000 francs. In the end, Ismail convinced him to write an Egyptian opera. Verdi agreed and soon wrote *Aida*, whose basic plot includes, an Egyptian army defeating an Ethiopian force. A young Egyptian hero of the campaign is impugned as a traitor, sentenced to death, and dies of asphyxiation.² Verdi inquired about the religious habits of the Egyptians to an early Egyptologist named Ricordi. What he learned, he would soon change and adapt in order to exoticize his opera. Verdi added a heavy female presence in the religious depiction of Egyptian culture that did not exist in reality. Said states that Verdi dramatizes the presence of Egyptian women, by making them priestesses, dancing girls, slaves, concubines, and "bathing harem beauties", in order to eroticize and express superiority over the Other.³ The music that he wrote for *Aida*, also aimed to embody an imagined rareness. Verdi had never been to Egypt or heard Egyptian music played by Egyptians. He built the sounds of Egypt from within his mind by voicing his music with trumpets, harps, and flutes, including utilizing the flattened hypertonic. Verdi's music and libretto work indicate his Western dominance over another culture and its music in the late years of the 19th century.

Meanwhile in France, Debussy was using similar tactics in his compositions. The current political and social situation in France was incredibly nationalistic at this point in history. Debussy aimed to write music that was French and all his own. By turning to the far off

² Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Print, page 125.

³ Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*, page 103, 121.

destinations of his imagination for inspiration, his music embodied an exotic trend that was going on in France in the late 19th century and early 20th century. For Debussy, extensive travel was not possible, and so he would utilize stereotypes and exotic markers to fill the void of first hand experience. These exotic markers such as, pentatonic scales, rhythmic stasis (“rhythm cannot be contained within bar lines,”⁴), and modality in his music served to label it as unique and rare.⁵ Additionally, characteristic of Debussy’s works are a series of chord succession rather than chord progressions. His music didn’t resolve the way the majority of works did at the time. I believe this is a result of Debussy’s own entrepreneurship as well as his desire to exoticize and represent the Other through his music. An example of Debussy’s exoticism and representation is his piece titled, *Une Soirée dans Grenade*. In 1903, he wrote in a letter, “I’ve also written a piano piece which bears the title *Une Soirée dans Grenade*. And I tell you, if this isn’t exactly the music they play in Granada, so much the worse for Granada. No more need be said!”⁶ This comment shows Debussy’s preference of his music over the actual music of Spain, a country he had never visited. Nevertheless, in a Western style he used duple and triple rhythmic combinations and modal harmonies to evoke an exotic Spanish feel.

Along side Debussy, French composer Camille Saint-Saëns, similarly represented culture through music. In 1872 he wrote *La Princesse Jaune*, which falsely represented the Orient and Asian cultures as weak and frail through pentatonicism. The single act, comic opera is set in the Netherlands, where a Dutch man falls in love with a painting of a Japanese woman. He dreams

⁴Frisch, Walter. *Music in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013. Print, page 232.

⁵ Babyak, Tekla. *Nietzsche, Debussy, And The Shadow Of Wagner*. Diss. Cornell U, 2014. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Web.

⁶ Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, ed. and trans. François Lesure and Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 23

one night that he is in Japan, and finally can be with the woman in the portrait. The libretto alone demonstrates the exoticism and fantasy of Oriental women. The non-goal oriented nature of pentatonicism used in *La Princesse Jaune* creates a drone like sound that signifies the main character's dream state, and the erotic nature of his Japanese love.⁷ This kind of scale lacks a strong and obvious harmonic direction, which I believe reflects the weak appearance of the Orient in this libretto. The Japanese woman is easily dominated and her relationship (although imaginary) with the Dutch man is male oriented, meaning her roll is to pleasure him.⁸ The floating nature of pentatonic themes in Camille Saint-Saëns', *La Princesse Jaune* reflects the assumed fragile nature and the Otherness of Asian cultures in the 19th century.

African music was also poorly represented by Western composers, and true African music was pushed further away from Western awareness. Representation scholar, Kofi Agawu, discusses the ways in which Western composers and early ethnomusicologists have done injustices to African music. He discusses how authentic African music was given a Western functional tonality in order to make it easier for Europeans to listen too. This change in African music caused the native polyrhythmic, non-teleological, hemitonic and pentatonic scales to take a back seat.⁹ Western composers wrote the kind of African music that they wanted to hear, rather than honoring or studying authentic indigenous styles. Here is a link to a group of female yodelers in Africa. This serves as an example of pre-colonial African music (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cATZe_jlc9g). This is the kind of music that Western composers found different, and therefore unpleasant to listen to, from their function Western tonality.

⁷ Babyak, Tekla. *Nietzsche, Debussy, And The Shadow Of Wagner*, pages 40-48.

⁸ Babyak, Tekla. *Nietzsche, Debussy, And The Shadow Of Wagner*, pages 45-48.

⁹ Agawu, K. Representing African Music. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(2), 245-266 (1992).

A contemporary example of post colonial African music is the group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo singers. They sing songs arranged by Paul Simon, a Western musician. Regardless of how talented the group is, their music is far removed from what is authentically African.

According to Agawu, African music is continuously represented by the West because “the imperial urge dies hard”. Western scholars, composers, and leaders have shown their desires to colonize and rule over the Other for centuries. In the 18th and 19th century composers and scholars sought to “discover” the music of the Other and reveal it to mainstream society, rather than studying and discussing previously existing and developed forms of African music.¹⁰

Agawu also argues that the representer and the represented should be from the same socioeconomic background and share similar hands on experiences. This is to ensure a more accurate representation of culture and music. Hegel, an influential 19th philosopher validates Agawu’s arguments and concerns. Hegel stated that Africa “is an unhistorical continent, with no movement or development of its own...The condition in which they [Africans] live is incapable of any development or culture, and their present existence is the same as it has always been.”¹¹ This sickening mindset was common in the 19th century and as a result African music was changed and elevated to meet Western European standards.

Overall, the West has been representing and exoticizing the Other for centuries. First I looked at Verdi’s *Aida* and discussed his version of Egyptian music and culture in his opera for Egypt’s viceregal leader. Verdi added an erotic female presence that did not actually exist in

¹⁰ Kofi Agawu. CIRMMT Distinguished Lectures in the Science and Technology of Music, Princeton University, USA Published on May 29, 2014.

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 190.

Egypt at the time. In France, Debussy and Saint-Saëns wrote pieces that utilized pentatonic scales, modes, and non-western meters to exoticize their music and to fantasize the Other. Their representations of the Other were not genuine and reflect Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Lastly, composers were drastically changing the sound of Africa. They borrowed elements of African rhythm but rejected the original, true African sound. A Westernized version of Africa would soon be familiar to Western society. This kind of representation through music has contributed to the stereotyping of the Other and the various cultures that are non-Western cultures. Composers and ethnomusicologists must strive for a more accurate and hands-on approach while studying music. It is unfair and damaging to falsely represent and exoticize a group of people and their culture. In conclusion, music is a universal human experience that carries immense value regardless of where it comes from. There is no better or worse form of music. These thoughts are imagined and are a result of centuries of exoticism and false representations.

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