

Unrecognized Exoticism in Debussy: The Incidental Music for the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (1911)

Some recent studies of musical exoticism attempt to define consistent exotic practices across many genres; others focus on a particular repertory, or even on a single work. In both types of study, though, the works most often discussed are of two near-opposite types:

- short instrumental pieces (such as Debussy's *Pagodes*, from *Estampes* for piano, 1903), in which exoticism resides primarily in the score's pitches and rhythms; and
- grand operas (such as Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, 1904), in which exoticism can arise from musical but also nonmusical elements (including some that may vary from one production to another).

Debussy's extensive incidental music for the quasi-medieval religious pageant *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien* (1911, text by Gabriele d'Annunzio) gives occasion to explore the ways in which exoticism can function in a genre that combines features of both categories: the short, independent piece and the larger theatrical work.

The exoticism in *Martyre* has been surprisingly overlooked. Astute commentators (Stoianova, Sheppard, Herlin) have focused more heavily on the work's place in d'Annunzio's career and that of Ida Rubinstein (the dancer who declaimed and mimed the title role *en travesti*); its complex sexual and religious/sacrilegious overtones; and recurring attempts at reviving it in performance and recordings. A recent study (Lamothe) helpfully places the work in the tradition of contemporaneous operas and spoken dramas dealing with ancient Rome and early Christianity. However, a close reading of the spoken and sung words and of Debussy's music suggests that *Martyre* is, in addition, an exotically drenched rendition of a central Christian legend, and also one of Debussy's most striking and multifaceted experiments in exotic portrayal.

D'Annunzio ignored the long tradition that gave Sebastian's birthplace as Narbonne (France) and instead made him an archer from Lebanon. Half of the singing characters are Middle Easterners, and Jesus is described as "ce jeune homme asiatique," a characterization that affects how we perceive Sebastian's subsequent mimed reenactment of Christ's Passion and Debussy's orchestral music for it.

Debussy's incidental music is acutely responsive to the mixed-genre attributes of d'Annunzio's verse-play/pageant/dance-work. Exoticism, accordingly, manifests itself differently at different moments: in purely instrumental numbers (such as the prelude to Act 2, depicting the lair of the Babylonian sorcerers); in separable songs and choruses (one turns out to be a straightforward example of Javanese gamelan style, closely analogous to *Pagodes*, a fact that seems not to have been noticed, much less explored); and in action numbers—including two keening laments—for the Women of Byblos (Lebanon) and the People of Syria. One number forms a possible missing link between standard "Orientalisms" (e.g., in Massenet's *Hérodiade*) and the white-note

pandiatonicism of neoclassic Stravinsky. Another is, I argue, echoed quite closely in a passage in Messiaen's (India-inspired) *Turangalila* Symphony (1949).

Martyre, a sophisticated semiotic network in itself, is thus a work more intriguing and influential than has been recognized. It also opens up a broader understanding of how exoticism functions in musical works generally.