

ISSN 2598-2192 (online)

LEKESON

Interdisciplinary Journal of Asia Pacific Arts

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1, APRIL 2018

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Oralléluiants [1975]

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INDONESIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS DENPASAR
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**LEKESAN: INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF ASIA
PASIFIC ARTS**

Jurnal.isi-dps.ac.id
ISSN: 2598-2192 (print)

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**LEKESAN: INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF ASIA
PASIFIC ARTS**

Is a peer-reviewed journal

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Lekesan: interdisciplinary journal of asia pasific arts is published 2 (two) times a year, i.e. april and october. To find out more about the submission process, please visit <http://jurnal.isi-dps.ac.id/index.php/lekesan>

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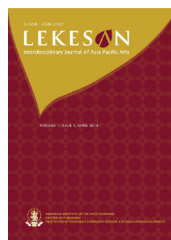
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All published article are embedded with DOI number affiliated with Crossref DOI prefix 10.31091



Lekesan: Interdisciplinary Journal of Asia Pasific Arts

Journal homepage <http://jurnal.isi-dps.ac.id/index.php/lekesan>

Interculturalism through a cognitive filter: Gilles Tremblay recomposes gamelan in *Oralléluiants* [1975]

Jonathan Goldman¹

In an article on the impact of gamelan music on Claude Debussy's musical language, Nicholas Cook shows Debussy's musical interpretations that navigate between viewpoints that claim that the gamelan presents "confirmation" of the principles that have been acquired by French composers and others who judge inspired techniques from the gamelan to imitate foreign musical culture. This article applies Cook's thought to the Javanese gamelan inspiration case in *Oralléluiants* (1975) by Gilles Tremblay (1932-2017), by trying to go beyond the opposition between pastiche orientalist style and deeper style assimilation by giving credit to the composer Québécois. This paper proposes the idea of "cognitive filters" as a way to understand how gamelan affects Tremblay without the same effect on other composers who are exposed to the same musical culture. The phrase "cognitive filter" shows every musical schematic that listeners have not mastered in terms of their training, ability, acculturation and psychological specificity, and that represents an order perceptual data to enable in the capture of previously unknown music.

Keywords: cognitive filter, gamelan, tremblay

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Article history:
Received 19-3-2018
Received in revise form 16-4-2018
Accepted 17-4-2018
doi: dx.doi.org/10.31091/lekesan.v1i1.344

Introduction

Gilles Tremblay (1932-2017) is one of the composers in Quebec who, after visiting Bali and Java in the 1970s, composed works inspired by their experience and in particular with their encounter with gamelan traditions. *Oralléluiants* (1975) for soprano, bass clarinet, horn, two percussionists, and three double-basses bears trace of this intercultural musical encounter even though the influence of gamelan is far from obvious and, in fact, barely audible. Like Debussy's third Nocturne, *Sirènes*, *Oralléluiants* cannot be considered a mere 'pastiche' that maladroitly imitates gamelan. It is closer to what John Corbett describes as 'conceptual orientalism,' since it is 'obliquely, conceptually indebted to a non-Western inspiration. According to the English music critic, this category includes among others, certain works by John Cage and Steve Reich and stands in contradistinction to 'decorative orientalism,' a category in which Corbett includes for example Henry Cowell's *Persian Set*, which he likens to a 'contemporary chinoiserie,' that approaches 'world music kitsch.'

But conceptual orientalism relies on concepts, or more precisely, cognitive categories that are particular to each composer who undertakes an intercultural musical project. This article tries to understand Gilles Tremblay's creative activity in *Oralléluiants* through traces of this creativity found in the Tremblay fonds at the Université de Montréal archives, and more generally, works by French-Canadian composers who were inspired by gamelan, through the concept of 'conceptual schemas' proposed by Nicholas Cook in a recent article that examines the way Javanese gamelan inspired Debussy's music. These conceptual schema lead me to introduce a related concept, that of 'cognitive filter,' in which the perception of an exogenous music, in order to be apprehended, must pass through the sieve of perceptual—in this case musical—categories. These categories explain the singularity of the approaches of any given composer faced with similar sources of inspiration (in this case, various traditions of gamelan), and allows us to think about the ways the gamelan inspiration operates in *Oralléluiants*. This article thereby tries to understand what a compositional approach that at once avoids pastiche but also does not shun external influences, might look like.

On the notion of cognitive filter

The Québec-Indonesia connection

Tremblay is not the only musician of his generation from the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec to be inspired by gamelan in the 1970s. Other composers include José Evangelista, Claude Vivier and John Rea, all of whom visited Bali and Java at different points in their lives, and studied local music while there. Each of these composers wrote one or more works borrowing structures or sonorities from gamelan, some of which are also inspired by social or religious mores of a specific region. *Orallélui-*

iant, however, is unique among these 'Indonesia-Québec' works in that it is inspired by *Javanese* gamelan, while the majority of the other pieces refer to Balinese gamelan. Indeed, while *Oralléluiant* is glittering and meditative, pieces like *Clos de vie* by José Evangelista or *Pulau dewata* by Claude Vivier are rhythmically dynamic with a strong metrical pulse; where Tremblay inserts episodes that use the Javanese instruments in an aleatoric context, creating unpredictable counterpoint with other sound layers, Evangelista weaves together heterophonic textures by employing micro-variations around a single melodic line. The differences between these gamelan-inspired works can be better explained by the fundamentally different *processes* of apprehension on the part of each composer than by the regional variations in gamelan tradition.

The contrasts between these approaches illuminate the impact that transculturalism can have on a composer whose musical language has already reached a certain degree of stability and maturity, and underlines the ways that intercultural encounters must pass through what I call 'cognitive filters.' I define cognitive filters as any schematization of musical processes artists owe to their training, craft, acculturation, the singularity of their inner lives, etc., which represents and orders perceptual sense data and enables previously unknown music to be understood. A 'harmonic' filter, for example, tends to lead a listener to hear any superposition of sounds with different fundamentals as 'chords,' or even 'functional' chords. A cognitive filter resembles a form of perception (in a Kantian sense) to the extent that it is a precondition for all musical perception, but it is closer to a listening 'habit' in that it can probably be unlearned through a concerted mental effort. In any case, this filter acts as an interface that mediates between the perception of a newly encountered repertoire, and the assimilation of this repertoire within a work inspired by it to varying degrees.

Debussy and the gamelan, again... and again

In a recent article on the perennial question of precisely what Debussy owes to his encounters with Javanese gamelan ('Anatomy of an encounter: Debussy and the gamelan, again'), Nicholas Cook seeks to address more generally 'how influence operates in the cross-cultural domain.' Cook identifies a common *topoi* among many writers on the influence of Asian music in Debussy: they set up a contrast between a somewhat orientalist stylistic pastiche and a deeper approach of 'stylistic assimilation,' claiming that in his most successful works Debussy achieves an ideal of stylistic assimilation while knowingly avoiding the artifices of pastiche. Cook notes 'the key claim is that Debussy responded to gamelan as he did because he was musically and conceptually prepared for it.' Hence the claim by many commentators on Debussy's music (Roy Howat, Mervyn Cooke, Neil Sorrell, etc.) that rather than speak of the 'influence' of non-European music, one should rather speak of 'confirmation' since, according to

them, the aspects of Debussy's language that we associate today with the influence of gamelan are already present in works that precede his initiation to Javanese music. The alleged encounter with musical otherness should therefore be seen, in this view, more as a 'non-discovery' or rather the reiteration of a discovery already made:

In effect, an impermeable distinction is drawn between an ideologically valorised idea of influence and an idea of imitation seen as both aesthetically and ideologically suspect, and the result is to rob the idea of influence of its usefulness.

Cook imagines a compromise between these two drastic positions, the first claiming that the influence can be summed up as imitation pure and simple, and that stylistic innovations can only result from appropriation, and the second asserting that the encounter did not have any significant impact on the composer's style and only served to reinforce a previously selected aesthetic approach. Cook then tries 'to sketch an approach to influence that creates room for transformation' by focusing on a particular stylistic trait of Debussy, namely his preference for 'superimposed rhythmic strata, with a tendency for the higher notes to move faster than the lower ones.' He observes that the rhythmic relationships between superimposed lines in such passages, in *Images* for orchestra for example, resemble not only textures specific to the gamelan, but also valid relationships between voices in the rigorous Fuxian counterpoint that Debussy would have learned during his studies at the Paris Conservatory from the Cherubini textbook on the subject. Debussy's prior experience with species counterpoint was a mental preparation for his encounter with gamelan, leading Cook to propose that 'it is the possibility of mapping the rhythmic layering of gamelan music onto the already deeply internalised schema of species counterpoint that explains Debussy's ability to respond to the gamelan as he did.' Cook therefore endorses some of the ideas put forward by those who characterize the meeting as a 'confirmation' rather than an 'influence,' to the extent that these critics 'correctly locate the core of the process in Debussy's act of reception'; nevertheless, Cook also agrees with those who claim that the 'influence' of the gamelan was decisive for Debussy to the extent that this encounter could have caused a profound stylistic change. The encounter may have allowed Debussy to enrich and transform what Cook calls pre-existing 'conceptual schemata,' which are the result of training, previous encounters and personal innovations prior to the encounter. Before applying this reasoning to Tremblay, let us return to the opposition between imitation and confirmation, which evokes the discussions about the impact of West African music on the American composer Steve Reich.

Steve Reich and African music

'The question often arises as to what influence my visit to Africa in the summer of 1970 had on *Drumming*? The

answer is *confirmation*.' These remarks by Steve Reich are drawn from an enlightening article by musicologist Martin Scherzinger, who offers a particularly audacious reading of Reich's iconic work *It's gonna rain* (1965). Scherzinger shows how influential these comments have been on the discourse around Reich's music, leading commentators to invariably qualify the encounter with West African music as a confirmation of an aesthetic path already embarked upon rather than a significant shift or reversal. Thus Robert Schwarz claims that 'Reich discovered that the structure of West African music was not that different from his own,' while D. J. Hoek argues that Reich's stay in Africa 'reinforced his predilection with repetition, polyrhythms, and slowly changing processes.' Scherzinger claims that these different narratives 'overlook [...] the overt African elements in Reich's output before his trip to Accra in 1970.' He then retraces the most significant moments of Reich's encounters with African music. He probably owes this encounter to his music history teacher, musicologist William Austin, while a student at Cornell University in the mid-1950s, and especially to his reading of A.M. Jones' now-classic *Studies in African Music*. This familiarity with African music would therefore anticipate Reich's trip to Africa by more than a decade. 'For Jones, setting a pattern against itself at a staggered time interval so that its downbeats do not coincide is a staple of African music. Indeed, Jones's transcription of the Icila dance in the second volume of *Studies in African Music* reveals phased rhythmic relationships between various sets of drums.'

Therefore, in contrast to the dominant discourse about the American composer, Reich's compositional language, according to Scherzinger, was closer to an imitation of an idea rather than a confirmation of a previously made choice. The tape piece *It's gonna rain*, which precedes Reich's trip to Africa, already owes much to the principles of West African music, particularly the 'resultant patterns' abundantly described by Jones. Scherzinger argues that Reich's comments on his own music 'can thus conspire to deflect attention from the African models to which his earliest works were deeply beholden. For it is the structural properties of African music laid out in Jones's book that were at issue in the creation of *It's Gonna Rain*.' Scherzinger's text thus acts as a corrective to the narrative put forward by historians of American experimental music, but a different reading, touching on the cognitive issues outlined by Cook, is also possible. According to this reading, the out-of-phase tape tracks behind *It's gonna rain* provided Reich with the necessary background to enable his encounter with traditional West African music, particularly the percussion music of the Ewe. This meeting triggered a new compositional phase that brought his minimalist language to maturity. The out-of-phase loops and Ewe percussion would have played the same role in Reich as that of the Fuxian counterpoint and Javanese gamelan in Debussy. Therefore, without claiming that Reich's music, from *Drumming* (1970-1971) forward, can be reduced to

mere pastiche, one cannot deny the importance of his encounters with a non-European music tradition on the evolution of his own musical language.

On *Oralléluiants*

Tremblay's first encounters with gamelan

As a young adult, Tremblay was introduced to Balinese music at the inaugural year of the Marlboro Music School and Festival in the United States where, in 1951 and at the age of 19, he went to study with French flautist Marcel Moyse (1889-1984), who had him listen to gamelan recordings. Later, he acquired a recording of gamelan on the Folkways label. Then, in 1971, having joined the faculty of the Montreal Conservatory (now the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal), he applied for a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. This scholarship would allow him to 'experience the music of Bali and Java firsthand.' His application was successful, and this allowed him – after having negotiated a sabbatical from the Conservatory for the 1972 autumn semester – to travel for several months in Asia, visiting Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and finally arriving in Indonesia in the summer of 1972, where he visited Java and Bali.

During his trip, Tremblay studied the music of these countries by making field recordings complemented by photos. Upon his return, he presented this material during a lecture given at the University of Montréal on 14 December 1972 entitled 'Listening to the Orient' (see Figure 1). He also produced two radio programmes and took part in a television show in which he described the music he had heard during his trip, focusing on Korea, Bali and Java. The music of Java seems to have particularly affected him, since the piece he composed upon his return, *Oralléluiants*, explicitly evokes the Javanese gamelan. This turn towards non-European music may seem surprising for a composer who said that 'making musical exoticism has never interested me...' Nevertheless, in the program notes for *Oralléluiants*, Tremblay unequivocally emphasizes the influence of his encounters with non-Western musical cultures when composing the piece: '...the work was written after my return from the Far East, and the influence this had was, I believe, by no means superficial, such as that acquired as a tourist or from a postcard or storybook.'

Gilles Tremblay's music draws inspiration from a wide variety of sources including Edgard Varèse's sound masses, the mobile forms of some of Pierre Boulez's works, the controlled aleatorics of Witold Lutosławski, the harmonic-rhythmic spirituality of his teacher at the Paris Conservatory, Olivier Messiaen, the stochastic music of Iannis Xenakis, proto-spectral explorations, etc. Certain elements of his musical language remain constant: structured in semi-aleatoric modules, he often leaves the choice of the final arrangement of figures, dynamics or durations to the performer. But could it be that his preference for con-



Figure 1. Gilles Tremblay at his lecture 'Listening to the Orient,' given at the Université de Montréal, 14 December 1972.

Photo: Donald Crousset

trolled aleatorics had a significant effect on his encounters with Asian musical traditions?

Javanese references in *Oralléluiants*

Oralléluiants ('The title is drawn from two words: 'orants' (a person praying), inside of which is inserted alleluia is written for soprano and an unusual ensemble made up of bass clarinet, horn, three double basses and a collection of percussion instruments played by two musicians. The percussion setup includes aluminium foil amplified by two microphones. The pitch space is organized around the harmonic series of the open strings of the double bass (E, A, D, G). The text sung by the soprano is taken from the first Hallelujah of the Pentecost mass, consistent with Tremblay's Catholic faith; the theme titled 'Psalmodie,' that first appears at rehearsal 14 in the score is directly inspired by plainchant. While it may seem incongruous to juxtapose plainsong with evocations of gamelan music, Tremblay, along with other Western admirers of gamelan, finds an affinity between the sacred polyphonies of the *Ars nova* period and the gamelan. Tremblay sees links between the way a sacred motet is structured around a Gregorian *cantus firmus* and the way a piece (*gendang*) for gamelan is constructed out of the 'pokok' tones of a melodic skeleton (*balungan*). On a more conceptual – and speculative – level, Tremblay sees other affinities between the two traditions, as he explains in one of his radio interviews made upon his return to Montreal:

The purpose of my trip was to understand the sacred music of these countries, because I sensed there was a common element between all sacred music, between Buddhist chant and Gregorian chant and the sacred music of India or Bali. In *Oralléluiants*, the percussion section includes several instruments found in the gamelan such as *cengceng* and the *kendang*. In the aforementioned interview, Tremblay refers to a passage particularly imbued with the influence of gamelan:

yet even though I was still steeped above all in Javanese music at the time I wrote the work, the whole of the last

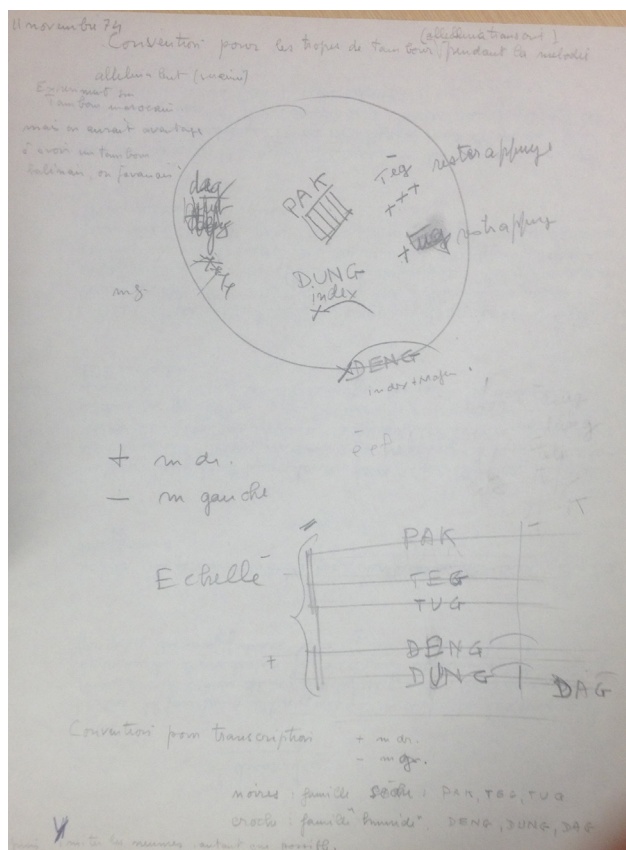


Figure 2. Sketch by Tremblay for *Oralléluiants*, 11 November 1974.

Figure 3. Description and use of the *kendang* from the score of *Oralléluiants*, rehearsal 60

sequence – notwithstanding the fact that my temperament has occasionally led me to write some rather violent works, ablaze with rapid, virtuosic passages – this whole last sequence is on the contrary one of serenity and gentleness.

As he explains in a conversation with Wilfred Lemoyne, Tremblay associates the Javanese gamelan to slowness, depth and serenity, in contrast with what he perceived as the essence of Balinese gamelan:

everything [in Javanese gamelan] is much slower and extremely refined. The result is very impressionistic and what is striking is the strength of conviction possible within soft dynamics. The approach to temporality and rhythmic cycles is very long; cycles can last up to four and a half minutes each, it's an incredible labyrinth.

The approach to temporality that Tremblay perceives in Javanese gamelan – however reductive his impressions may appear – is already apparent at the very start of *Oralléluiants*. A single rhythmic cycle lasting three minutes appears on the first page of the score in which the three contrabassists freely explore the natural harmonics of their respective E strings, and ends, in an obvious nod to the colotomic gamelan tradition with an austere gong signalling the end of the cycle. The serene passage that Tremblay refers to above, however, begins at rehearsal 60 and finishes before the final sequence at the end of rehearsal 72. The passage seems to relate to the description of the Javanese gamelan that Tremblay outlines in his lecture ‘Listening to the East’:

it possesses a totally different character, made of more rhythmic sounds in which the tempo is constantly fluctuating and in which the rhythmic cycles are punctuated by the deepest of all gongs that sometimes ring for a very long time (more than five minutes).[...] The long durational cycles and the impression of the infinite that arise from them corresponds very well with the Buddha and the architecture of the Borobudur Temple [...] and the landscape that surrounds it.

The passage in question, like the gamelan in *Surakarta* described by Tremblay, is characterized by a constantly fluctuating tempo with small rallentandos and accelerandos, and short phrases punctuated by gongs (played on tubular bells and metal plates struck with a mallet). The instrumentation consists of the soprano, one double bass and two percussionists, the second playing exclusively on the *kendang*. In one of the sketches (Figure 2) as in the score (Figure 3), Tremblay writes the names of the notes he assigns to the *kendang* (*pak*, *teg*, *dung*, *deng*, *dag*), stating ‘it would be ideal to have a Balinese or Javanese drum.’

The *kendang* figures in this passage are reminiscent of the transcriptions (or composition exercises?) Tremblay made during his journey (Figure 4). The title ‘Javanese Stanzas’ of this sketch dated 5 July [1972] suggests that the composer intended to explore certain aspects of gamelan music

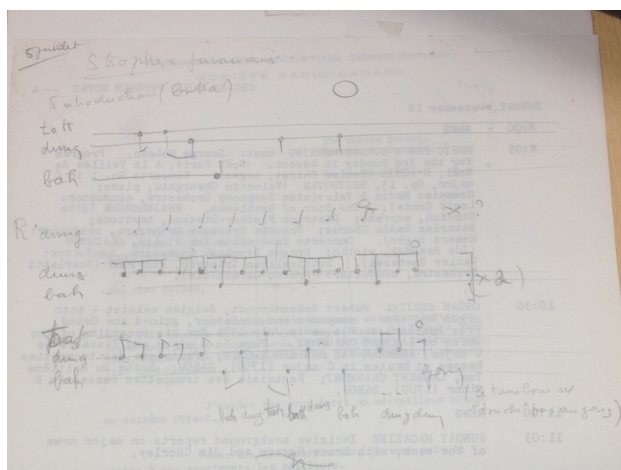


Figure 4. Sketch entitled ‘Javanese stanzas’ made by Tremblay on 5 July 1972 during his trip to Java.

in one of his works.

Aleatoric cognitive filters in *Oralléluiants*

If the ‘serene’ passage illustrates how Tremblay’s encounter with Javanese music (particularly the fluctuating rhythm, the phrase periodicity punctuated by gongs and a general atmosphere of serenity) enriched his musical language, the two passages surrounding it are likely linked to a specific experience Tremblay had during his stay in Java, rather than to a particular characteristic of Javanese music itself. In Tremblay’s final report to the Canada Council, the composer recounts a remarkable moment of interculturalism that he experienced during his trip:

In Central Java, after Bali, I sojourned successively in Surakarta and in Jogjakarta where I took classes with teachers. One day, when I was playing a very simple melody that I had learned to play very quickly on the *saron* [...], in order to help me grasp the fluctuation of tempi (which is typical of Java), my master started to play on some drums, behind my back. To my great amazement, I followed him very naturally. I played and ‘was played’ at the same time. At that moment, a group of musicians came in, out of curiosity, to see who was there, and then they sat down beside various gamelan instruments, playing a constellation of rhythmic counterpoints. This was one of the most intense musical experiences that I have ever had. I almost lost my sense of gravity; I was literally lifted up by so much beauty and also by non-verbal human communication. A communication owing to the fact that I was a musician among other musicians!

One could easily imagine how this experience of being a ‘musician among other musicians,’ with superimposed layers of ‘constellations of rhythmic counterpoints,’ could have been the inspiration for the two sections framing the ‘Javanese’ passage described above, both employing an aleatoric structure dependant on a high degree of impro-

visation by the performers. The section preceding the Javanese passage (rehearsal 56, pages 23 to 32 in the score) is entitled ‘Cymbal Dance Sequence.’ Tremblay explains that in this section, the music ‘unfolds on several simultaneous planes’ and that rather than being presented in the form of a score with superimposed staves for each instrument, the score ‘here splits into many parts.’ The section consists of five types of musical material labelled A, B, C, D and E. These layers gradually overlap, beginning with the A section and ending with E. The A music consists of steady beats played on ‘Chinese crash cymbals.’ The other layers are then gradually added over top: phrases played by the bass clarinet and neumes sung by the soprano (music B), long sustained notes played by the horn (music C), music D played by the second percussionist and music E, consisting of indistinct effects in the double basses. These superimposed and asynchronous ‘constellations’ end with a ‘signal marking the end of the sequence: a long rolling cry.’ The percussion sonorities are sustained by being picked up by a microphone and diffused through the room; the other instruments react to these resonances much like Tremblay’s experience of ‘playing and being played.’

The aleatoric passage that concludes the work is particularly audacious in the amount of freedom Tremblay affords the performers: although the passage resembles a *tutti* section made up of various ascending scales, Tremblay explains that it consists of several reservoirs of pitches (‘mobiles’ to use his Calderian terminology) from which each instrument improvises at will, playing long held notes drawn from the spectra of the four open strings of the double bass. Tremblay states ‘the section must be long enough to become immersed in a state of timelessness and the unknown.’ The order of the notes is left to the performer, sometimes with broad indications. For example, Tremblay indicates that ‘the singer must slowly move toward the high register, but not systematically. The performer may backtrack (even substantially so) but the general tendency should be upward.’ The overall effect that Tremblay wishes to achieve is clear from the uppercase, underlined word ‘ECSTATIC’ at the top of the page. By filtering Javanese ceremonial music through an aleatoric prism and spectral pitch material, Tremblay strives to create a musical expression of ecstasy.

Conclusion

In this brief overview of *Oralléluiants*, I have attempted to shed light on the way Tremblay projects gamelan music onto a cognitive screen shaped by controlled aleatorics, similar to Nicholas Cook’s approaches Debussy through the latter’s formative studies in counterpoint. This analysis could be extended to other Quebec composers such as José Evangelista and Claude Vivier, who were equally inspired by gamelan in their work. For each of these composers, their encounters with gamelan passed through a distinctive cognitive filter, and therefore, each case should be studied

separately in order to properly identify the unique qualities of each.

As we have seen, for Tremblay, the Javanese gamelan is for better or for worse synonymous with serenity and transcendence. In addition to the external features (fluctuating tempi, the ends of cycles signalled by gongs in a ‘colotomic’ manner), Tremblay’s encounter with gamelan music coincides with a spiritual shift in his own music and an increasing presence of explicitly religious or spiritual themes. Strikingly, with the exception of the *Matines pour la Vierge (antienne)* (1954) composed at the age of 22 and *Cantique des durées* (1960), no work before *Oralléluiants* contains any explicit allusion to religion or spirituality. It is possible that his travels in Asia are partly responsible for this personal shift and a decisive one at that, if one considers his later explicitly sacred work, *Vêpres de la Vierge* (1986). Even if such an assumption is too bold, it is undeniable that allusions to gamelan lend Tremblay’s aleatoric language a certain gravity, a transcendent dimension that enriches it. ‘For me, if the music of Bali did not exist, the world would collapse,’ he once confided. Even if Tremblay’s vast musical output does not depend on the gamelan for its existence, it provides it with a structural and spiritual beacon that was necessary at some point in his journey, even when it is not immediately audible.

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