

Modes of Listening to Chinese Pentatonicism in Parisian Musical Modernity

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ABSTRACT

How can we listen to modernist manipulations of the anhemitonic pentatonic scale, which was referred to as ‘gamme chinoise’ (Chinese scale) in early twentieth-century Paris? This study proposes multiple listening pathways by revealing creative approaches to the scale at different levels of a musical structure. Drawing on music-theoretical underpinnings and cross-cultural capacities of the scale, this paper scrutinises three representative Parisian pieces bearing extra-musical associations with China and devises modes of listening based on analytical readings. It is found that creative approaches range from alteration of dominant ninth chord as pentatonic harmony (Ravel) and exploitation of pentatonicised octatonic space (Schmitt) to formulation of pentatonic network (Stravinsky). Historically-informed analyses and listening pathways based on the two pentatonic scale-steps – minor third and whole tone – impact on our aural perception of culturally encoded techniques, shed light on cross-cultural dynamics between China and France, and contribute toward a theory of Chinese pentatonicism in Parisian musical modernity.

Keywords: Music theory and analysis; pentatonicism; China; Paris; modernity

I. INTRODUCTION

In view of an expanding scholarship on music-theoretical underpinnings and cross-cultural capacities of the anhemitonic pentatonic scale, this paper integrates perspectives from both directions in the quest of advancing our understanding of what early twentieth-century Parisian musicians characterised as ‘gamme chinoise’ (Chinese scale). Not only does my investigation share the spirit of important Anglophone and French studies (Kopp 1996; Picard 2001; Day O’Connell 2009) by proposing modes of listening to pentatonic practices, but it also advances the efforts of existing Sino-French cultural studies (Tchen 1974; Tao 2001) by placing a special focus on Parisian musical modernity.

Taking a cue from what Marcel Proust (1913) referred to as ‘emploi exclusive de la gamme chinoise’ (exclusive employment of the Chinese scale), this paper probes into the little-understood reception of Chinese pentatonic scale in early twentieth-century Paris and places at its focal point novel manipulations of the scale. The key questions are: what analytical evidences can be drawn from different levels of a musical structure? How can these findings guide our understanding of and listening to Chinese sounds?

II. METHOD

Taking into consideration sketch materials housed at the Bibliothèque national de France and Paul Sacher Stiftung, I scrutinised pentatonicism in selected passages from three representative pieces bearing extra-musical associations with China and devised listening models based on analytical readings. Set-theoretical approaches were adopted where appropriate.

The selected passages were as follows:

- A. Maurice Ravel: ‘Asie’ from *Shéhérazade* (1903), bars 83–87;
- B. Florent Schmitt: ‘Le parapluie chinois’ from *Une semaine du petit elfe Ferme-l’œil* (1912), bars 27–34;
- C. Igor Stravinsky: Introduction to Act I of *Le rossignol* (1908–14), bars 36–43.

III. RESULTS

A range of creative approaches to the Chinese scale were unravelled as follows:

- A. Alteration of dominant ninth chord as pentatonic harmony (Ravel)
- B. Exploitation of pentatonicised octatonic space (Schmitt)
- C. Formulation of pentatonic network (Stravinsky)

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Alteration of dominant ninth chord as pentatonic harmony (Ravel)

The key to understanding the pentatonicism of the passage under scrutiny (Figure 1) lies in a chord mediating the transition from triadic to pentatonic harmonies. The chord in point is placed at the word ‘Chine’ and stands out in a bar framed by double bar-lines (bar 85). The mediating role of the ‘Chine’ chord is, I suggest, attributed by its double identity – triadic and pentatonic – which stems from the preceding ninth chord and the ensuing pentatonic harmonies.

In the two bars before the ‘Chine’ chord, the three-note figure, C#-D#-F#, is featured in the vocal melody (‘Je voudrais voir la Perse, et l’Inde’) and the harmony (right hand of the piano). In the two bars after the ‘Chine’ chord, another three-note figure, D-F-G, is featured in the vocal melody (‘sous les ombrelles’) and the top line of the accompaniment.

Figure 1. ‘Asie’, bars 84–87.

The two figures – C#-D#-F# and D-F-G – are both (025) sets, but they are contextualised differently: the former set is heard in a ninth chord (B-D#-F#-(A)-C#) while the latter set in harmonies derivable from the pentatonic scale (Bb-C-D-F-G). In this light, the ‘Chine’ chord can be viewed as a chromatically heightened ninth chord (C-E-G-Bb-D) which is slightly altered (C-F-G-Bb-D) in order to accommodate all the five notes of the Bb pentatonic scale. The set-class (025), highlighted in the ‘Chine’ chord (right hand of the piano), forms the basis of the chord’s triadic-pentatonic nature and contributes to its mediating role.

B. Exploitation of pentatonicised octatonic space (Schmitt)

A cultivation of an octatonic sound world with pentatonic sets is at work in the passage under scrutiny (Figure 2). The passage is mainly built around two pentatonic set-classes – (0358) and its subset (025) – retrievable from the Chinese-inspired theme, yet not a single note involved falls outside the octatonic scale starting with F# and G, or what Pieter van den Toorn (1983) designated as ‘octatonic collection III’.

At the start of this passage (bars 27–28), the theme based on the tetrachord, A#-C#-D#-F#, is heard with two other layers of the same tetrachord. It is restated literally at a minor third above as C#-E-F#-A (bars 29–30), and accompanied by (025) in the form of ornamented percussive chords. The theme is then transposed yet a minor third higher as E-G-A-C (bars 31–33) and fragmented to produce (025). Up to this point, the music has been organised at three of the four minor-third related octatonic nodes – F#, A and C – which are inferable from the changes of key signature. Further T_3 operations in quick succession (bar 34) bring (025) to the last node Eb and finally back to the starting node F#. The circulation of (0358)

and (025) through the four octatonic nodes facilitates an extensive exploitation of the octatonic-III space. In a sense, the octatonic space is pentatonicised.

Figure 2. ‘Le parapluie chinois’, bars 26–34.

C. Formulation of pentatonic network (Stravinsky)

Embedded in the orchestral fabric of the passage under scrutiny (Figure 3) are two ascending lines of strings marked *flautando*. Stravinsky’s sketch for these eight bars shows that the string lines were conceived as a cascade of thirds (Taruskin 1996), which, I propose, can be viewed as an intricate pentatonic network.

In the sketch, eight thirds are drafted at a perfect fourth higher and with halved values. Beamed four by four, the thirds present a two-by-two harmonic pattern of minor third and major third. If the upper and lower notes of each harmonic thirds are considered separately, it can be observed that each of the two layers is made up of a linear pattern of minor third and major second, or (025) in set-theoretical terms. A reading of the first two consecutive sets of the upper layer – Bb-C#-Eb-F#-Ab – reveals the orthographically veiled presence of the black-key pentatonic scale. If the characteristic intervallic pattern is extended until the first harmonic third is reached again, a series of twelve pentatonic scales would be formed along the circle of fifths. The orderly yet out-of-phase transitions of pentatonic spaces in the two layers interact with each other and transform their respective pentatonic sonorities. In this light, an underlying pentatonic network lurks behind the cascade of thirds.

Figure 3. Introduction to Act I of *Le rossignol*, bars 36–43.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary research shows that creative approaches to the Chinese scale under discussion drew on the pentatonic set-class (025). The two pentatonic scale-steps integral to this set-class – minor third and whole tone – are fundamental to our understanding of and listening to Chinese pentatonicism in Parisian musical modernity.

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