MUSIC IN THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

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Impressionists such as Claude Monet (1840–1926) and related artists such as the American-born James MacNeil Whistler (1834–1903). Like the Symbolist poets, the Impressionist painters aspired to musical effects; Whistler, for example, evoked music in the titles of paintings such as *Symphony in Gray* and *Nocturne in Blue and Green*. Though Debussy rejected the label of Impressionism, which art critics coined to deride the "unfinished" quality of Monet's paintings, he often described his music in visual terms that recall the techniques of the Impressionists. Thus he characterized his *Nocturnes* as designating "all the various impressions and the special effects of the light that the word suggests."

Impressionist painters were concerned less with the specific object depicted than with the temporal and spatial dimensions of the act of viewing, and the play of light, shadow, and color. Monet examined these phenomena by painting similar scenes at different times of day, such as his remarkable series of over twenty paintings of haystacks from around 1890 (Fig. 2.3). The point is not that these were particularly interesting or attractive haystacks; on the contrary, the goal was to reveal the depth of experience accessible through close attention to the most mundane objects. In a similar way, Debussy's approach to melody and harmony allows us to hear familiar intervals and chords as if for the very first time.

In a kind of musical analogy to Monet's representations of the same haystack in changing atmospheric conditions, Debussy presents his melodies in various harmonic, textural, and timbral settings. The *Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun,"* for example, starts with three statements of a flute melody in different harmonic contexts, so that we hear the same sequence of pitches in new ways each time. The idea of building up a piece not by harmonic or melodic development but rather through contrasts in rhythm, texture, dynamics, and register becomes even more fundamental in *Pagodas*. While echoing the static pitch content of gamelan music, Debussy sheds new light on the same simple repeating pentatonic melodies by presenting them in an astonishing range of figurations (see Anthology 2). Whereas Monet's art form required a separate painting for each moment of the day, Debussy's music can make us experience the changes in real time. As he wrote: "collect impressions . . . that's something music can do better than painting: it can centralize variations of colour and light within a single picture."

EXOTIC BORROWINGS

The evocations of Asia in Debussy's *Pagodas* mirrored the Parisian vogue for Oriental art in the late 1800s. Debussy was an avid collector of the Japanese prints and engravings that gave *Estampes* its title; his 1905 orchestral work *La mer* (The Sea) was inspired by a woodblock print by the great Japanese artist Hokusai (1760–1849). When he published *Estampes*, he took great care with the colors and fonts for the title page to make it a luxury object comparable to the Japanese-inspired clothing, chic cuisine, and artworks by Édouard Manet, Whistler, and others sought after by fashionable Parisians.

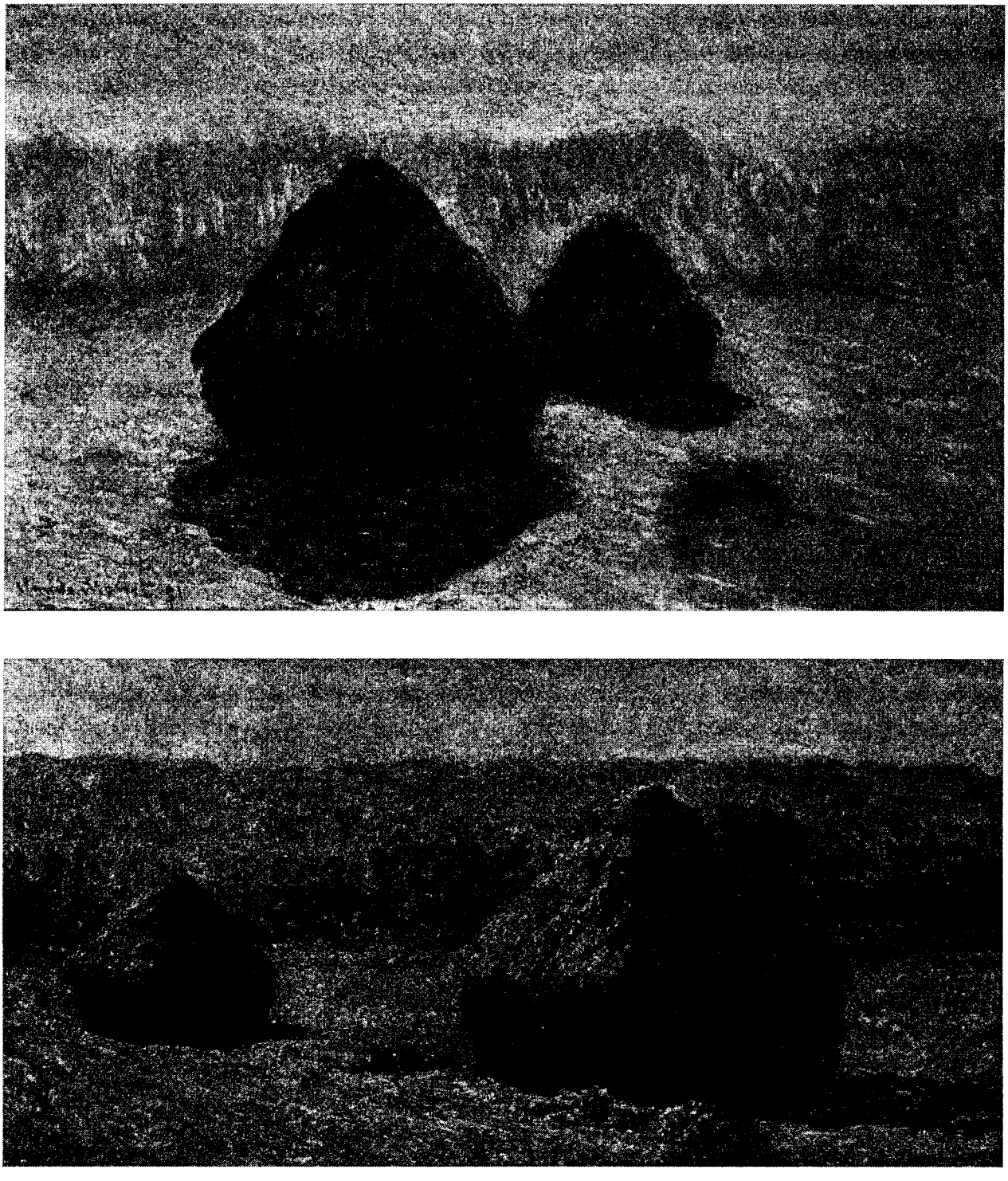

Figure 2.3: *Claude Monet,* Haystacks *(1890–1891)*

The widespread interest in exotic cultures exemplifies Musil's systems of happiness and balance, in this case as a way of coming to terms with and rationalizing the implications of imperialist expansion at the turn of the century. Between 1880 and 1914, technological and scientific advances allowed the European powers, the United States, and Japan to colonize vast areas of Africa,

Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent in order to gain access to raw materials and open new markets. These cultural and material riches were showcased in world's fairs such as the 1889 Universal Exposition, which featured replicas of villages from Vietnam, Tunisia, Algeria, and other French colonies. Such ethnographic exhibits helped propagate the racist theories of cultural evolution that underpinned and justified the processes of colonization. The inhabitants of less technologically developed nations were regarded as representing earlier stages in the development of the human species from savagery to barbarism to civilization. Thus while modernity was experienced most directly by people in the urban environments of the developed world, through colonialization it had a direct or indirect impact on virtually everyone.

The history of Western music is full of encounters with exotic styles, but a new attitude toward these musics is a defining characteristic of Modernism and modernity at the turn of the twentieth century. For many of Debussy's contemporaries, music of non-Western cultures was primarily of anthropological interest, better suited to a museum of natural history than the concert hall. But Debussy treated other traditions as art forms in their own right, as well as resources for his own musical thinking. He observed of the Javanese music he heard at the 1889 Universal Exposition that it "obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child's play. And if one listens to it without being prejudiced by one's European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise more fit for a traveling circus" (SR 197:1435; 7/28:165).

In some ways *Pagodas* is comparable to other Exoticist works from the turn of the century, such as Maurice Ravel's orchestral song cycle *Shéhérazade,* also composed in 1903. The text of Ravel's first movement, *Asia,* based on a poem by Tristan Klingsor, brings together fantasies of a vaguely defined "Orient" with references to Persia, China, and India. Ravel simulates exotic musical travels by incorporating clichéd "Asian" pentatonic melodies and "Middle-Eastern" augmented seconds like unusual spices added to a familiar tonal harmonic language.

Yet in *Pagodas* we hear Debussy's willingness to engage more substantively with other traditions in order to expand and transform his own musical language in profound ways. Inspired by the percussive sounds and stratified layers of Javanese gamelan music, he explores techniques for using textural contrasts to create form and movement in a context with limited melodic and harmonic development. And while he does not abandon tonality entirely, most of his melodies and the elaborate accompanimental figurations are based on the characteristic five- and seven-note Javanese scales. Debussy's productive encounter with gamelan music, here and in works such as the piano piece *Cloches à travers les feuilles* (Bells through the Leaves) from *Images* (1907), set the stage for many other composers we will be considering throughout the century, including Ravel, Colin McPhee, Benjamin Britten, György Ligeti, and Steve Reich.