

The Key Debates of Musical Exoticism and Orientalism in Historical Musicology

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Abstract

This paper delves into the enduring interplay of musical exoticism and Orientalism in historical musicology, inspired by Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*. It scrutinizes how Western perspectives of Oriental regions have been shaped by Eurocentric and colonial lenses. Building on Said's theory, it examines contributions from scholars like Sindhumathi Revuluri, Ralph P. Locke, and Ping-hui Liao, Dorinne K. Kondo, and Mari Yoshihara. The study emphasizes the ongoing relevance of Orientalism in academia, particularly in musical studies. Through Giacomo Puccini's opera, *Madame Butterfly*, the paper highlights debates on character identities, gendered geography, and audience perceptions, shedding light on the complex interplay of national pride and Orientalist fantasies.

Keywords: Orientalism, Musical Exoticism, Transculturalism

Recommended Music to accompany this article

Giacomo Puccini Madame Butterfly

Giacomo Puccini Turandot

Verdi Aida

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Edward W. Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, examines how the Western world has historically studied, interacted and represented oriental regions through a Eurocentric and colonial lens. Oriental regions generally encompass the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. The concept of Orientalism is not only about geographical boundaries, but centres on stereotypes and biases about the Orient constructed by Western scholars and institutions through the past centuries. The word 'Oriental' refers specifically to the East and its purported geographical, political, and cultural inferiority in comparison to the West. Significantly, Said's critiques have emboldened introspection in almost every academic discipline. Many exotic stereotypes in classic works and methodological falsities from past eras have been reconsidered based on his theory.

Derived from Said's theory of Orientalism, this paper reviews the key academic debates of musical exoticism and Orientalism within the last thirty years. Sindhumathi Revuluri's musical reflection on Orientalism, Ralph P. Locke's analytical methodology, and a case study of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* by Ping-hui Liao, Dorinne K. Kondo, and Mari Yoshihara from each of their respective and diverse focuses, all extend the theory of Orientalism into the domain of historical musicology.

Said thoroughly investigates the history of Orientalism; he examines its 'self-metamorphosis' process from a pure 'enthusiasm of everything Asiatic [referring to Raymond Schwab]' to

European invasions, occupations, and colonialism: ‘...Orientalism has accomplished its selfmetamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution.’^[1] Because the mystery of the East stimulated the imagination and daydreams of Europeans, Said defines the invented portrayals of the Orient as ‘imaginative geography’: ‘...[this] universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary.’^[2] The latent and manifest Orientalism interplay within the general concept and the political scope of Orientalism is pivotal in Said’s study. He juxtaposes ‘two great themes’ embedded in the idea of Western supremacy and Oriental inferiority: ‘knowledge and power.’^[3] Said then illustrates and exemplifies these themes through the lectures of Arthur James Balfour and the writings of Evelyn Baring, first Earl of Cromer, specifically with respect to the British’s apparent indoctrination regarding issues in Egypt. Balfour’s political viewpoint was that the West (Great Britain) had authority over Egypt, not because of military and economic power, but because of ‘British knowledge of Egypt.’^[4] The Westerner stands in a superior position (a higher dimension) and is able to analyze and determine the development or retrogression of Egypt (or the Orientals); therefore, Westerners are more knowledgeable about the people of the Orient than they do themselves. The knowledge and the power synergize and correspondingly build a mutual relationship: the power supports foreign governors in order to gain more regional information (knowledge), and the knowledge helps them to grasp even more power. There are two major distinctions between the West and the East that Balfour and Baring suggest: 1) Oriental countries laboured under ‘absolute government’ during their great centuries, but Western countries enjoyed ‘self-government’;^[5] and 2) Orientals think ‘accuracy is abhorrent’ whereas Westerners are ‘devoid of ambiguity.’^[6] Said then elaborates on many more stereotypes of Middle Eastern and Eastern peoples, such as the following: “devoid of energy and initiative”, much given to “fulsome flattery”, intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals; Orientals cannot walk on either a road or a pavement... Orientals are inveterate liars, they are “lethargic and suspicious”, and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the

[1] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 95.

[2] *Ibid.*, 54.

[3] *Ibid.*, 32.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, 38.

[6] *Ibid.*

Anglo-Saxon race'.^[7] Building upon this skewed knowledge of the Orient, the West is then able to self-righteously govern these other countries and lead them to civilization. Thanks to the civilized identity given to the East by the Western world, countries in the Eastern sphere consequently became dependencies. This is a political strategy of entrenching colonialism and legitimizing foreign occupations. Said argues that 'the Orientalist reality is both antihuman and persistent.'^[8] Orientalism has resulted in ethnic degradation, political scheming, and other consequences. Said urges scholars to acknowledge and, more importantly, to eradicate the process of 'self-metamorphosis' in Orientalism in future studies. By doing so, it is the only way to prevent the perpetuation of false history.

The musicologist Sindhumathi Revuluri observes that Edward Said consistently uses active verbs when exploring and tracing Orientalism. This underscores that Orientalism within academia is not a relic of the past; but rather an ongoing phenomenon. She points out that an objective, unbiased review of Orientalism in music is unattainable if avoiding the subjectivity of primary or secondary sources from the past (perhaps incorrectly recorded), still less so considering that imaginative ethnography has become inextricable from European culture. Particularly in music studies, Orientalism almost equates with exoticism in the sense of otherness. Although 'exoticism' and 'otherness' are not interchangeable words, they both commonly refer to a 'fascination with denigration' beyond the boundaries of the West, that which is 'ours.'^[9] Revuluri highlights the fact that academic recognition of musical ethnography existed before the concept of self-reflection in anthropology, and before the discipline of ethnomusicology in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century. She gives as an example what Julien Tiersot wrote in his *Notes on Musical Ethnography*: '[that] these arts [non-European music] are inferior to our own must be admitted, or rather affirmed... Europe, having always been the cradle of human civilization, will naturally be home to a musical practice far superior to what people of other parts of the world could ever attain'.^[10] We should find 'inferior' and 'superior' to be familiar terms from Said's *Orientalism*, and these two words clearly expose the hierarchical status of non-European music

[7] *Ibid.*, 38

[8] *Ibid.*, 44.

[9] Sindhumathi Revuluri, "Orientalism' and Musical Knowledge: Lessons from Edward Said," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 141, no. 1 (2016): 208.

[10] *Ibid.*, 207.

and European music. A century has passed since Julien Tiersot penned the above passage. However, the present question pertains to how musicologists today approach the study and interpretation of Orientalism and exoticism within European musical compositions. Revuluri focuses her attention on the authenticity of the Eastern elements in music, and her verdict is similar to Said's, that 'Europe invented the Orient.'^[11] Numerous examples, including but not limited to *Turandot* and *Madame Butterfly* (as elaborated in subsequent paragraphs), illustrate the prevalent exotic symbolism in different Western musical contexts. These exotic elements are inspired by the Westerner's imagination of unfamiliar or false records of otherness, but not by tracing the actual cultures of such places. Revuluri acutely asks, '...who has the right to imagine? ...these so-called objective records do not provide a corrective to imagined exoticism.'^[12] The Asiatic world exists as an 'antithesis' to that of the Europeans;^[13] correspondingly, the notion of musical exoticism is applied to reflect the supremacy of European classical music. To consider the theory in reverse, Orientalism has now been deeply integrated into European culture, and has 'helped to shape Europe.'^[14] In the same sense, musicology would not be the same without exoticism and Orientalism. Moving back to the question of the many difficulties that musicologists today are facing—building objectivity and rationality upon subjectivity—illuminates Orientalism as an ongoing condition rather than something that can easily be put aside. The past influences the present; therefore it is not exclusively past. Said's advice is not easy to achieve, and not only in the discipline of musicology. However, if scholars have the awareness to exercise frequent self-reflection, the latent Orientalism in musicology can at least be recognized in academic studies. Revuluri concludes her journal article with the following question: 'Is it possible that there are traces of Orientalism, however latent, left in our work today? And if so, how might we confront this aspect of the history and present of musicology?'^[15]

[11] Ibid., 208.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 209.

[14] Ibid., 208.

[15] Ibid., 209.

Let us put aside Revuluri's question for now, and look into musical exoticism and Orientalism in more detail. Ralph P. Locke defines musical exoticism as '...an ideology, a diverse collection of attitudes and prejudices, an intellectual tenden-

cy'.^[16] He discusses the variations in how scholars conceptualize and define musical exoticism. For example, Bellman's perspective on musical exoticism focuses on direct borrowing from other cultures. In contrast, Betzwieser's perspective considers any musical material perceived as exotic, whether or not it has been directly borrowed.^[17] Locke then defines musical exoticism into two paradigms: 'All Music in Full Context' and 'Exotic Style Only.' The 'Exotic-Style Only' paradigm means the music itself is borrowed from an unfamiliar (non-Western) territory and naturally manifests its exoticism. Transculturation can be overlapped within this paradigm, because it traces the musical materials from non-Western ethnography. For example, in Puccini's *Turandot*, the composer adopts the Chinese melody of 'Mo-Li-Hua', a folk song from the Jiangnan region, to further underscore the exotic characterization of the opera. However, Locke argues, not all musical works apply authentic materials from non-Western cultures like Puccini did in *Turandot*. Many are composed with unconventional musical features, such as "primitive" harmonies, unusual modes (various Hungarian-Gypsy scales, distinctive pentatonic options, and so on), and accepted-as-characteristic tunes, rhythms, and instrumental sonorities...' to create the sense of otherness.^[18] Said's theory of imaginative geography can be perfectly applied here: the unfamiliar land beyond 'our' (the Western) border is the so-called 'land of barbarians.'^[19] Likewise, regardless of authenticity, as long as something appears as unusual in classical European music, it intuitively comes to be thought of as exotic. The idea of barbarism in musical exoticism is eloquently expressed by Mary Hunter, who, in Locke's view, 'pointed out that the violent and irrational aspects of [Mozart's] alla turca style... symbolize the violent and unpredictable behavior of the region's inhabitants.'^[20] The "All the Music in Full Context' paradigm does not focus on the exotic in Western music, but rather covers everything else within this context. It is more commonly seen in Musicodramatic (operatic) works, because the plot, the characters, the libretto, the choreography, and other theatrical elements can consistently display the exotic effects. Locke lists multiple operatic works that contain paradigmatic plots referencing Orientalism: Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Verdi's *Aida*, Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, Delibes's *Lakmé*, and Puccini's *Turandot* and *Madame Butterfly*.

[16] Ralph P. Locke, "A Broader View of Musical Exoticism," *The Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (2007): 479.

[17] *Ibid.*, 481.

[18] *Ibid.*, 182.

[19] Said, *Orientalism*, 54.

[20] Locke, "A Broader View of Musical Exoticism," 491.

From this list, Locke concentrates his analysis on the Orientalist features and the two types of paradigms in *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot*. Puccini undoubtedly uses pentatonic modes and Japanese tunes in various excerpts; however, the 'Exotic-Style only' paradigm is insufficient to explain the proper musical depiction of Cio-Cio-San when the composer is not using any exotic elements. The non-musical effects are the key indicators that show audiences Cio-Cio-San's stereotypical Asian female's 'delicacy, credulity, and submissiveness';^[21] meanwhile, the music remains within the Western harmonic system. In *Turandot*, as Peter Schatt has analyzed in his own study, Liù is 'trapped in her pentatonicism' within the aria 'Signore, ascot';^[22] however in Act III, her 'growing independence and courage' are expressed with diatonic harmony.^[23] In this case, the negative circumstance is shown with Chinese pentatonicism, whereas the positive side of the character obviously is not expressed with similar exoticism. There is certainly much that may be argued with respect to musical superiority and inferiority regarding Orientalism in operatic works. *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot* are operatic examples that encompass both paradigms, and in a 1993 article in *Revista de Musicología*, Locke specifically analyzes the Orientalist traits in these paradigmatic plots.

It is absolutely interesting and enlightening that Locke summarizes the plots of Orientalist operas under one paradigmatic model and its variant. In his summary, there is always '[a] young, tolerant, brave, possibly naïve, white European tenor-hero' who is an incontrovertible and righteous European figure; there are 'alluring dancing girls, and a deeply affectionate, sensitive lyric soprano' who stands for the mystery of the Orient; and there is '[an] intransigent tribal chieftain (bass or bass-baritone) and [his] blindly obedient chorus of male savages' who are meant to represent the rigidity and uncivilized culture of the East. Each figure respectively reflects Said's theories of Orientalism. The innocent 'European tenor-hero' symbolizes the Westerner's superior position in human civilization, and the 'European tenor-hero' entering an unfamiliar territory stands for the European countries conquering the barbarian lands and bringing a civilized identity (colonization). The attractive and exotic female figures (who can also be *femmes fatales*) always

[21] *Ibid.*, 488.

[22] Ralph P. Locke, "Reflections on Orientalism in Opera (and Musical Theatre)," *Revista de Musicología* 16, no. 6 (1993): 3126.

[23] *Ibid.*

trigger the fantasy of seductive mystery, and illustrate the imaginative geography in Said's theory. Lastly, recall Balfour's speech about the Oriental countries: '...all their great centuries—and they have been very great—have been passed under despotisms, under absolute government'.^[24] The 'chieftain' and his 'blindly obedient savages' are stereotypes of rigidity and collectivism in a dictatorship. Locke identifies two essential themes in these Orientalist operatic works: 1) 'its irrelevance to the East, and the East's to it' and 2) 'its power to reflect and even shape... the attitude and behavior of Westerners toward the non-Western world'.^[25] Judging from his analysis of Orientalism in music, irrespective of musical or non-musical elements, Said's theory utterly fits into these compositional practices.

To extend and deepen the study of Orientalism in music, I will focus on one specific opera—in this case, Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*—and review the key debates regarding the character Cio-Cio-San's identity, gendered geography, and audience perceptions. Because of Puccini's enthusiasm for musical exoticism, he put effort into seeking authentic Japanese materials and to employ them in the story of *Madame Butterfly*. Puccini consulted the Japanese actress Sada Jacco for local linguistic features, he listened to Japanese music on a gramophone, and he read books about Japanese traditions and practices unrelated to music. Puccini not only attempted to accomplish in *Madame Butterfly* what is described by Locke's paradigms 'Exotic-Style Only' and 'All the Music in Full Context', but also endeavored to advance toward a 'harmonic science' of incorporation and inclusion through which the Orient would be 'constituted and then introduced into Europe.'^[26] In this sense, the character portrayal of Cio-Cio-San is a tremendous success. Cio-Cio-San stimulates and satisfies the fantasy white males entertain about Oriental females; and beyond an exotic fantasy, she also symbolizes European interest in and acquisition of the colonized lands. According to the analogue mentioned by Liao, '*Butterfly* reflects an uncurious "other-phobia" ...a female body to be possessed and then deserted,'^[27] and '...as Said has told us, the 'Orient's colonial accumulation and acquisition by Europe'.^[28] Indeed, Cio-Cio-San is the victim of an irresponsible American white male's impulsive desire, and she must sacrifice, must suf-

[24] Said, *Orientalism*, 33.

[25] Locke, "Reflections on Orientalism in Opera (and Musical Theatre)," 3134.

[26] Ping-hui Liao, "'Of Writing Words for Music Which Is Already Made': 'Madama Butterfly, Turandot', and Orientalism," *Cultural Critique*, no. 16 (1990): 38.

[27] *Ibid.*, 39.

[28] *Ibid.*, 28.

fer, and must die in her own ritualistic way. Her demise again represents the hegemony and power of the West. The Western perception of Asian females weighs down Cio-Cio-San with certain attributes; her 'self', in anthropological terms, is defined as the Western preconceived image of Japanese womanhood: 'A "self" is closed, fixed, an essence defined by attributes.'^[29] Therefore, Cio-Cio-San's efforts to change her identity are meant to be rejected by the Americans. Although she gives up her own people and religion and depends solely on her 'husband', the plot, the Western audiences, and the 'self-metamorphosed' Orientalism together will thwart her effort to change the Japanese female identity. In the discourse of a defined 'self' and expected 'identity', Madame Butterfly conveys gendered Orientalism, and as Kondo points out: 'gender is projected onto geography'.^[30] Kondo summarizes Puccini's opera as 'West wins over East, Man over Woman, White Man over Asian Woman.'^[31] Explicit gendered Orientalism played a significant role in gaining acclaim from American and European audiences. This is evident in the extreme gender inequality and West-East divide portrayed in Madame Butterfly's plot. In *American Quarterly*, Mari Yoshihara explores theatre-goers' performance experiences and their perceptions of Madame Butterfly in early 20th Century America and in Japan.

Yoshihara firstly introduces the historical and political context of Madame Butterfly's premiere in both America and Japan. In the early 20th Century, America—the newest developed Western power—saw an increase in its interest and influence the East. In the meantime, Japan's expansion and military victories in Asia readied it to ally with Western imperial power. In the trendy years of Madame Butterfly, Japan had just opened the door to the Western world. The whole nation was undergoing a conflict with respect to patriarchy, nationalism, and eagerness for Western recognition. Before Japanese vocalists had access to the international stage, Cio-Cio-San was played by white divas in America. These divas in real life were rather modern, independent, and quite dissimilar to the submissive Japanese character they portrayed on stage. The modern American woman and the Japanese feminine stereotype, both on and off stage, created a sharp contrast. It wasn't until Miura Tamaki, a renowned Japa-

[29] Dorinne K. Kondo, "M. Butterfly": Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," *Cultural Critique*, no. 16 (1990): 11.

[30] *Ibid.*, 7.

[31] *Ibid.*, 10.

nese vocalist, achieved international acclaim for her portrayal of Cio-Cio-San that Western audiences were exposed to an Asian diva. This marked a departure from the tradition of predominantly white divas in this role. However, despite her success and fame, Orientalist biases still persisted among Western audiences, shaping their perceptions of her. According to Yoshihara's study, Americans blithely assessed Miura's performance: '... she pattered about on those funny little feet of hers and gave some pretty imitations of an Occidental prima donna; but she remained invincibly Nipponese [Japanese].'^[32] Yoshihara further comments that '...America's Orientalist fantasies about Japanese femininity that gave birth to the character of Cio-Cio-San were thus projected onto the body of Miura.'^[33] Miura had a clear understanding of what the American audience wanted to see, yet at the same time she also had an awareness of the Orientalist fantasy in the opera. Miura described the first act as '...almost thoroughly absurd to the Japanese, and one can see this as an unfiltered expression of the fantasies of the foreigners who have no understanding of Japan.'^[34] The Japanese nation had various and contradictory attitudes toward Miura; on the one hand, they acknowledged Miura as a representative of national pride; on the other hand, they were skeptical about her presentation as a vocalist. In the multipartite controversy engendered by Miura, the problem of Western superiority and Oriental inferiority had finally exposed its essential complexity. In this case, the Japanese nation flattered Western hegemony and perceived the Orientalist opera as a national image on the international stage. As Yoshihara concludes in her article, 'in the cross-Pacific context of growing U.S. hegemony in Asia-Pacific and Japan's quest for modernity and assertion of parity with the Western powers, the two nations' projects converged in the performance of *Butterfly*'.^[35] Orientalism is bidirectional, in that Asian peoples, in order to attain their own purposes, allowed, or even encouraged, Westerners to imagine and embrace this supposed inferiority of the East.

After reviewing the discussions and examples of musical exoticism and Orientalism. I would like to return to Sindhumathi Revuluri's question: 'is it possible that there are traces of Orientalism, however latent, left in our work today? And if so,

[32] Mari Yoshihara, "The Flight of the Japanese Butterfly: Orientalism, Nationalism, and Performances of Japanese Womanhood," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2004): 981.

[33] *Ibid.*, 982.

[34] *Ibid.*, 983.

[35] *Ibid.*, 998.

how might we confront this aspect of the history and present of musicology?^[36] My answer is that latent Orientalism may still persist in contemporary musicology, affecting how we study and represent non-Western music. However, to confront this issue, we should engage in critical self-reflection to identify and address potential biases, reevaluate terminology with Orientalist connotations, and promote interdisciplinary collaboration with scholars from diverse fields including but not limiting postcolonial studies, ethnographic studies, and anthropology, which can provide valuable insights into the Orientalist underpinnings within musicology. By taking these approaches, musicology can progress towards a more culturally sensitive and equitable discipline that embraces diversity and encourages respectful and accurate representations of music from different cultures. Lastly, we should always remember Said's advice: '...we must virtually see the humanistic values that Orientalism, by its scope, experiences, and structures, has all but eliminated'.^[37]

[36] Revuluri, "Orientalism' and Musical Knowledge," 209.

[37] Said, *Orientalism*, 110.

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