



Leopold Godowsky

Java Suite

Tobias Borsboom

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Tobias Borsboom *piano*

1	Gamelan	4:41
2	Wayang-Purwa, Puppet Shadow Plays	4:24
3	Hari Besaar, The Great Day	5:43
4	Chattering Monkeys at the Sacred Lake of Wendit	2:17
5	Boro Budur in Moonlight	5:19
6	The Bromo Volcano and the Sand Sea at Daybreak	4:28
7-9	Three Dances	7:26
	I. Moderato	
	II. L'istesso tempo	
	III. Doppio movimento	
10	The Gardens of Buitenzorg	5:17
11	In the Streets of Old Batavia	4:40
12	In the Kraton	8:50
13	The Ruined Water Castle at Djokja	7:38
14	A Court Pageant in Solo	4:33

total playing time 1:05:21

The musical journey as mental purification

From: The Gardens of Buitenzorg by Jan Brokken

Leopold Godowsky visited Java on a journey through the Far East that began in Japan on October 13, 1922, and ended in Honolulu on May 25, 1923. A trip that took the pianist-composer to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Singapore, Java and the Philippines.

Japan and China only half pleased him; too crowded, too many people. Only in Java, which with forty million inhabitants he also found a tad too crowded, did he truly fall under the spell of Asia. Everything about the island charmed him: the princely cities of Solo (Surakarta) and Djokja (Yogyakarta), the cratons, the markets, sawas, volcanoes, the sunrise from the rim of the crater of the Bromo, the five hundred Buddha statues on the Borobudur, the wajang puppetry, the oldest district of Batavia, Kota Tua, the gardens of Buitenzorg. But what really overwhelmed him was that he found a highly refined culture that derived its eloquence from an instrument that, like the piano, is a percussion instrument: the gamelan.

In Java, Leopold Godowsky did not compose a note, but the gamelan music lingered in his ears for weeks, months, years, eventually resulting in his finest work, the Java Suite, fifty minutes of music that can be listened to like a travelogue.

Gamelan is an umbrella term for all kinds of percussion instruments, from metallophones and xylophones to gongs and drums — “gamelan” is derived from the Javanese gamel: to beat. Godowsky was not the first composer to come up with the special sound of a gamelan orchestra, a simultaneously soft and penetrating bronze sound with the gong as its deepest and darkest tone. Claude Debussy had already fallen under the spell of Javanese sounds at the 1889 World's Fair in Paris. Several times he visited the Dutch East Indian pavilion, where a complete Javanese village had been recreated and a gamelan orchestra continuously provided mysterious sounds. Motifs from the gamelan kept playing through his mind and he used them in “Pagodes,” the first of his 1903 Estampes. Debussy made school, Maurice Ravel in 1905 showed echoes of the gamelan in *Jeux d'eau* — one of his finest compositions and, despite the Javanese influence, all Ravel — and in the last of his *Miroirs*: “La vallée des cloches.”

Béla Bartók directly referred to the gamelan in *Mikrokosmos* Vol. IV No. 109 by giving the piece the title "From the Island of Bali" and composed that piece for two pianos around 1930. Another fine example is the first movement from Francis Poulenc's 1932 Concert for Two Pianos, an overwhelming piece of music in which the inimitable Poulenc combines gamelan influences with Mozart.

Godowsky, too, in his *Java Suite*, attempted to blend Eastern sounds with a Western arrangement of scales and octaves. The fourteen pieces for piano open with "Gamelan" to get right into the mood, an atmosphere that is both mysterious and precise. Incidentally, John George Hinderer, who had been Godowsky's personal secretary for many years, wrote in a reflection in *The Musician* that Godowsky had become fascinated with the gamelan as early as the World's Fair, as had Debussy. In 1889 and 1890 the young Leopold Godowsky was indeed in Paris, possibly visiting the Indian pavilion with Saint-Saëns, for Saint-Saëns, too, found the gamelan "an oriental sensation" and could not be turned away from the East Indian pavilion.

In Solo, Godowsky listened intently to the percussion instruments for hours at a time. Nothing conveyed so strongly the mysterious and strange character of the island and its inhabitants, he wrote as an introduction to the score of the *Java Suite*. "The sonority of the Gamelan is so weird, spectral, fantastic and bewitching, the native music so elusive, vague, shimmering and singular, that on listening to this new world of sound I lost my sense of reality, imagining myself in a realm of enchantment."

How he made that sound world sound on the piano was nothing short of stunning. He naturally combined the piano technique of Chopin and Liszt with the percussion technique of the Javanese masters on the gamelan. Not only did he manage to shape the symbiotic encounter between two continents, but also that between different times. The gamelan is much older than the piano, the fortepiano or the harpsichord. Between the 8th and 11th centuries, it already enlivened the court life of the Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms and kingdoms of Java, Bali and Sumatra. With the *Java Suite*, Godowsky also makes a fantastic journey through time.

This is all the more remarkable because he spent only six weeks in Java, from mid-February to the end of March 1923. He also gave twenty more recitals there. Evening

programs of mainly works by Chopin and Liszt. On this tour, too, a piano tuner accompanied him, and it was necessary, because in addition to the two grand pianos he took with him on each trip, he had four more concert pianos brought in to perform the concerts to his own high standards. Cost: 25,000 American dollars. Godowsky was on the road, or preparing for another performance, and yet he still managed to find time to visit all the cultural attractions and get in touch with Javanese musicians and composers. And, that above all, to immerse himself in the essences of the gamelan.

[...]

Born in 1870 in Vilnius, Lithuania, Godowsky wrote *Gamelan* in Berlin, *Borobudur* in *Moonlight* in New York, *In the Streets of Old Batavia* in Evanston, Illinois, and *The Gardens of Buitenzorg* in Chicago. Not one of the fourteen pieces in the *Java Suite* he composed in Java. He provided the score with an introduction, gave precise directions for pedal use to make the piano sound as much like a gamelan as possible, and published the complete work in May 1925 with music publisher Carl Fischer in New York.

To put the performer in the right mood, he gave each piece a brief characterization. For "*The Gardens of Buitenzorg*" he wrote: "The heavily perfumed air awakens an inexpressibly deep and painful yearning for unknown worlds, for inaccessible ideals, for past happenings irrevocably gone- these memories which the ocean of time gradually submerges and finally buries in oblivion...Why do certain scents produce unutterable regrets, insatiable longings, indefinable desires?"

I recognize what Godowsky touches on — "past happenings irrevocably gone," "memories which the ocean of time gradually submerges" — though I wonder if a pianist has much use for it. Perhaps the heavily perfumed air made Godowsky's head spin a bit.

He emphasizes in his accompanying text that he wrote "pp" remarkably often in the score, pianissimo, "very softly," to avoid bringing the *Java Suite* as a bravura piece. Like all of Godowsky's works, it is virtuosic yet he wants it to sound primarily like a musical travel impression, like a particular mood that carries and intoxicates the listener.

Prior to "The Gardens of Buitenzorg," Godowsky recorded three dances in the Java Suite. The first was supposed to express "the languor and wistfulness of the Far East," the second "the grace and gracefulness of Oriental dancers," the third "their poetry and tenderness. A bit obvious, those explanatory texts, but fortunately you don't hear it in the music.

In the first piece, "Gamelan," he looks for the extremes you can achieve with a percussion instrument and lets the music come in waves, just as a gamelan orchestra does. It really is a tour de force as he achieves it on the piano; in three minutes the boundaries fall away and you are in the heart of Java. In the second, "Wayang Purwa," he manages to reproduce precisely the lumbering movements of the wayang puppets. In the third and fourth pieces, "Hari Besaar" and "Chattering Monkeys at the Sacred Lake of Wendit", both busy and lively, he elaborates on the gamelan rhythms. Things get really mysterious in the fifth piece, "Borobudur by moonlight".

The Borobudur was much more of a ruin during Godowsky's visit than when Olga (my mother) clambered up the terraces of the temple complex twelve years later, but the composer saw the stupas, the bell-shaped shrines that hold the relics of Buddhist saints, under the moonlight, and that inspired him to create mysterious sounds, as if the inside of the bells were being tapped very softly and they reverberated darkly.

Godowsky considered the Java Suite the beginning of a series of musical pieces he would write inspired by his travels. He had coined a Latin term for it, "Phonoramas," say panoramas for the ear. So the full title of the Java Suite is 'Phonoramas' — Tonal Journeys for the Pianoforte — Java Suite. Java would be followed by a Russian suite, a Spanish, a Moroccan, a Turkish and a Jewish suite, "sort of like Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies," he wrote to a friend. Liszt's influence is unmistakable, but more from his *Années de Pèlerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage).

The journey as musical inspiration was one of the ideals of European High Romanticism and began with Franz Schubert's *Winterreise*. For romantics, the journey was a form of mental purification with a strong cleansing effect on body and mind. If it was good, you came back reborn from a trip. A trip to the Far East enhanced these effects and was considered a plunge into a mystical and spiritual world. You could call Godowsky

the forerunner of George Harrison, the most adventurous of the Beatles, who sought refuge in India and found his example in sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar.

I also hear echoes of Saint-Saëns in the Java Suite, particularly of his Fifth Piano Concerto, nicknamed "The Egyptian". A curious concerto from 1896, full of oriental and sensual longings, the middle movement of which was inspired by a Nubian song Saint-Saëns had heard the boatmen singing on the Nile. The other movements of that Fifth Piano Concerto are a mishmash of impressions gained by the voraciously traveling composer during his wanderings — Algerian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Indochinese, Japanese. The young Godowsky clearly learned more from Saint-Saëns than he was willing to admit as an adult, or perhaps it is better to say that Saint-Saëns made him receptive to alien musical influences. Saint-Saëns also saw travel as a mental cleansing and a way to process grief.

After completing his Java Suite, Godowsky considered doing something more with his impressions gained in Japan and China, but it never materialized. In 1930, while Godowsky was recording Chopin's Nocturnes, he suffered a stroke that almost completely paralyzed him on the right side, eliminated most of his memory and ended his career as a pianist and composer. He could no longer perform or make records. Only once did he make an exception and had a recording of "The Gardens of Buitenzorg" made at his home.

Eight years later, on November 21, 1938, Godowsky died in New York at the age of sixty-eight. By then he had become a distant memory. In the obituaries, journalists were left only to ask whether he could have pocketed the million dollars for which he had insured his hands in the 1920s. An exorbitant sum, they thought at the time.

Jan Brokken

The Gardens of Buitenzorg

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Brendon Heintz'.

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Equipment

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Microphone preamplifiers Grace Design m802mk2
AD/DA conversion Merging Technologies Hapi MkII
Headphones Audeze LCD-X
Loudspeakers Grimm Audio LS1be
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A close-up photograph of a palm frond, showing the central rachis and several long, narrow, green leaflets. The lighting is soft, creating a natural, slightly blurred background. The text 'trptk' is centered in the middle of the image in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font.

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