

DEBUSSY'S OLD HINDU CHANT (*LA BOÎTE À JOUJOUX*) EXOTIC HUMOROUS FAKERY AND REJUVENATION OF MUSIC

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Izvleček: Debussyjev balet za otroke *La Boîte à joujoux* (1913) vsebuje potegavščino oziroma šaljivo posnemanje »klasičnega hindujskega petja«, ki predstavlja ključ do globljega razumevanja baleta, v katerem si je Debussy prizadeval pomladiti in revitalizirati zahodno glasbo s sklici na spontanost, po eni strani otroško in po drugi tisto, še prisotno v tujih tradicijah, ki naj bi bile bližje prvotni avtentičnosti.

Ključne besede: Claude Debussy, eksotika, raga, glasbeni humor, potegavščine

Abstract: Debussy's ballet for children *La Boîte à joujoux* (1913) contains a fake "Old Hindu chant". But the comic fakery seems to provide the key to understanding the deep meaning of the ballet, in which Debussy strives to rejuvenate and revitalize Western music by referring to the so-called spontaneity of both childhood and foreign traditions, for the sake of recovered authenticity.

Keywords: Claude Debussy, exoticism, rāga, musical humour, fakery

Comic Fakery in Debussy's Output

Claude Debussy is certainly not a composer whose music is commonly linked to humour in people's minds: this is more the case for Haydn,¹ Mahler,² Offenbach,³ Shostakovich⁴ or Satie.⁵ Yet Debussy wrote a fairly generous body of humorous works. In fact, this composer who has mostly been defined as an impressionist or symbolist – two aesthetic fields from which humour is almost entirely absent –, wrote more than seventy-five completed musical works with a comic dimension.⁶ These include, for instance, *Children's Corner*, *The Toy Box*, *Puck's Dance*, *Minstrels*, *Fantoches*, *Homage to S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*, *The Interrupted Serenade*, *Fairies are Exquisite Dancers*, *Pantomime* and

¹ See, for instance, Burnham, "Haydn and Humor"; Bonds, "Haydn, Laurence Sterne"; Paul, "Comedy, Wit, and Humor in Haydn's Instrumental Music"; Wheelock, *Haydn's Ingenious Jesting with Art*.

² Schadendorf, *Humor als Formkonzept*.

³ Dufresne, *Jacques Offenbach*.

⁴ Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody*.

⁵ See, for instance, Volta, *Érik Satie*; Orledge, *Satie the Composer*; Borio and Casadei Turrioni Monti, *Erik Satie*; Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*.

⁶ Lassauzet, *L'Humour de Claude Debussy*.

Pierrot. All these examples reflect the importance of humour for Debussy not only as an artist but also as a person. One need only look at the descriptions of the composer made by those who knew him to discover frequent references to his humour. Thus René Peter mentions “the proud, slightly faunistic mask, on which a pure, mocking smile of a conquering god is incised and radiates”,⁷ while Colette states that “his faun’s laughter was not in response to our laughter, but to an inner prompting”.⁸ Paul Landormy evokes “the smiling irony of M. Debussy”,⁹ Suarès “those beautiful, caressing and mocking eyes”,¹⁰ and G. Jean-Aubry, after the composer’s death, regrets no longer seeing “those piercing eyes that stared at each other with such irony and, at the same time, as if under the spell of an indefinite reverie”.¹¹

With regard to humour, Debussy was accustomed to practise deception and fakery. The best-known example of this comes from outside his activities as a composer, under the mask of Monsieur Croche.¹² On 1 April 1901 Debussy initiated his activities as a music critic for one of the best journals in the Parisian literary and artistic world, *La Revue blanche*, whose tone did not exclude irony and humour. Three months later he gave life to his *alter ego* Monsieur Croche – a character who is inspired by Paul Valéry’s Monsieur Teste.¹³ In so doing, he followed the example of Willy (Henry Gauthier-Villars’ pseudonym), who had taken up the profession of music critic ten years earlier and similarly expressed himself under the mask of an invented character: L’Ouvreuse du Cirque d’Été.¹⁴ Debussy’s invention allowed him not only to conveniently criticize his contemporaries without suffering the consequences but also to transform the journalistic article into a real short story entitled “Monsieur Croche Antidilettante” (that is to say, “dilettante hater”), where he describes himself spending the night discussing music with M. Croche. However, the “Antidilettante” was a short-lived character, since he appeared only three times: Debussy preferred in general to write under his own name.

But this tendency towards fakery can be found in many places in his musical production. One such instance – *Chansons de Bilitis* – occurred independently of his own initiative. This song cycle is based on a collection of poems supposedly discovered and published in 1894 by the German archaeologist Professor G. Heim, and authored by a young Greek woman who lived during the sixth century BC on the island of Lesbos (where she was a rival of Sappho) and subsequently in Cyprus. In reality, both Bilitis and the expert are invented: *Geheim* means ‘secret’ in German. The author of this invention was none other than a close friend of Debussy: the young poet Pierre Louÿs, who later revealed

⁷ Quoted in Gauthier, *Debussy*, 11. “[...] le masque fier, un peu faunesque, sur lequel s’incise et rayonne un sourire narquois et pur de dieu vainqueur”.

⁸ Quoted in Lefebvre, *Colette*, 118. “[...] son rire de faune ne répondait pas à nos rires, mais à une sollicitation intérieure”.

⁹ Quoted in Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, 278. “[...] la souriante ironie de M. Debussy”.

¹⁰ Suarès, “Debussy”, 125. “[...] ces beaux yeux caressants et moqueurs”.

¹¹ Jean-Aubry, “Some Recollections of Debussy”, 203.

¹² Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*.

¹³ Valéry, *La Soirée avec Monsieur Teste*.

¹⁴ On the influence of Willy on Debussy, see Langham Smith, “*Pelléas and Gil Blas*”; Landerouin, “‘Critique créative’ et ‘critique de créateurs’”.

the hoax. Thus when Debussy composed his song cycle on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* three years later, he did not need to collude in the deception and indeed openly identified Pierre Louÿs as the author of the poems.

On two other occasions Debussy himself is the perpetrator of fakery, and both instances arise for humorous purposes. One of them is the String Quartet composed in 1893. Its full title, *String Quartet in G minor*, Op. 10, immediately reveals its humorous intent: the work is alone in Debussy's entire catalogue in being given a key and opus number – an absurd number, since this is by no means his tenth published work. With this joke Debussy explicitly references classicism, a situation reflected in a four-movement structure that respects the classical model: sonata-form allegro, scherzo, slow movement, fast finale. Thus rather than indicating the position of this quartet in his output, the opus number is meant to reflect a tradition, and more particularly Mozart's Op. 10 string quartets, themselves dedicated to Haydn. And this is a tribute rather than a parody, since in his letters and criticisms Debussy never had a word of disdain or reservation for Mozart, of whom he said: “[...] he is the purest of musicians, he *is* music!”¹⁵

The Oriental Melody in *La Boîte à joujoux* and the Seven Objections against Its Validity

Another, more promising instance of falsification, which has not attracted much attention in scholarly literature, can be found in his ballet for children called *La Boîte à joujoux* (*The Toy Box*, 1913).¹⁶ Debussy summarized the story as follows:

It would be a work to entertain children, but nothing more. [...] The plot? Oh! very simple: a cardboard soldier loves a doll; he tries to show her; but the beautiful girl cheats on him with a Pulcinella. The soldier finds out about it and terrible things happen: a fight between wooden soldiers and Pulcinellas. In short, the lover of the pretty doll is seriously wounded during the battle. The doll looks after him and... everything ends for the best... You can see that it is a child's play!¹⁷

The passage involved in the falsification is located in the first of four tableaux. A stuffed elephant enters the stage, whereupon there appears a smooth melody whose alleged origin is described by the composer in the score as follows in a footnote: “Old Hindu chant

¹⁵ Debussy, *Correspondance*, 322. “[...] c'est le plus pur des musiciens, c'est *la musique!*”

¹⁶ See for instance Herlin, “André Hellé”; Martins, “‘La boîte à joujoux’”; Orledge, “Another Look inside Debussy's ‘Toybox’”.

¹⁷ Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, 329–330. “Ce serait une œuvre pour amuser les enfants, sans plus. [...] L'intrigue? Oh! très simple: un militaire de carton aime une poupée; il tâche de le lui démontrer; mais la belle le trompe avec un polichinelle. Le militaire vient à l'apprendre et il se passe des choses terribles: combat entre soldats de bois et polichinelles. Bref! l'amoureux de la jolie poupée est grièvement blessé au cours de la bataille. La poupée le soigne et... tout finit pour le mieux... Vous voyez que c'est d'une simplicité... enfantine!”

that is still used today in the taming of elephants. It is built on the scale of ‘5 o’ clock in the morning’ and necessarily in five-beat measures”.

Music example 1

Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux*, first tableau, bb. 85–91.

Plus lent *Mélancolique et trainant* (*)

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system begins with a treble clef and a 5/4 time signature. The melody is characterized by triplets and a melancholic, dragging quality. The piano accompaniment is marked *pp*. The second system continues the melodic line with more triplets and a five-note run. The piano accompaniment remains *pp*. The third system starts with a *mf* dynamic, followed by a *p* dynamic and a *morendo* section. The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* and features a crescendo and decrescendo. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat sign.

(*) *Vieux chant hindou qui sert, de nos jours encore, à apprivoiser les éléphants. Il est construit sur la gamme de "5h du matin" et, obligatoirement, en 5/4.*

It seems that Debussy was well informed when he mentioned the time system of the playing of *rāgas* prevalent in North India. To inform himself, he may have taken advantage of a meeting with the Sufi musician-philosopher Hazrat Inayat Khan in early May 1913 (at

the very moment when he undertook the composition of this ballet).¹⁸ The latter recalled it in his memoirs: “I came to know Monsieur Debussy, the great composer of France, who became very much interested in our ragas. The evening when the ragas were played to him, he always remembered and called it ‘the evening of emotions’”.¹⁹

According to Simon Morrison, Inayat Khan is in the lineage of Mian Tansen – an unrivalled musician considered to be one of the nine jewels in the Court of the sixteenth-century Emperor Akbar.²⁰ This musician has become so legendary that all sorts of stories are told about him. One of them is about a wild elephant that was captured: as it was impossible to tame this ferocious beast, Tansen was called upon to sing a melody to the elephant, so that it gradually calmed down until it agreed to let Emperor Akbar climb on its back. It seems that this story reached Debussy's ears – whether or not through Inayat Khan – and that the composer sought to communicate in his ballet a variation on the Tansen legend.

However, Debussy's footnote, as well as the melody to which it refers, seem to be more a joke than a musical reality. Indeed, seven objections tend to undermine its validity:

1. The association of a *rāga* with an hour of the day does indeed refer to a practice of Hindustani (or North Indian) music, but this practice refers, rather, to three-hour slots (*prahar*) than to fixed times. Moreover, these *prahar* are subject to great variation according to season and latitude. For example, the first *prahar* of night-time (normally between 6 pm and 9 pm) may not use the same time slot, depending on whether one is at an equatorial latitude or at the seventieth parallel north or south during the solstice times. So it is highly unlikely that a melody would be based on the purported scale of “5 o'clock in the morning”.
2. A *rāga* is not systematically associated with a *tāla* (or rhythmic cycle), contrary to what Debussy suggests here by specifying a time signature (“necessarily in five-beat measures”).
3. Hindustani music has only three five-beat *tāla*, which are particularly rare and employed mainly by percussionists. These five-beat *tāla* always consist of two sub-units (*vibhag*) composed of two beats or three beats (*matra*). Two of these *tāla* are based exclusively on 2 + 3 (*Ardha Jhaptaal* and *Soolfakhta*), while the third is based exclusively on 3 + 2 (*Jhampak*). However, the melody written by Debussy oscillates between division as 3 + 2 (bb. 85–90) and division as 2 + 3 (bb. 84, 91).
4. The scale used does not correspond to an existing *rāga*.²¹ It is quite possible to avoid the fifth in order to emphasize a perfect fourth (as with the *rāga Marwa*), but not a tritone as used by Debussy (G^b–C); the very notion of a diminished

¹⁸ According to Elisabeth de Jong-Kessing, Inayat Khan identified an authentic Indian melody in *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*. See de Jong-Kessing, *Inayat Khan*, 121.

¹⁹ Inayat Khan, *Complete Works*, 129.

²⁰ Morrison, “Debussy's Toy Stories”, 427.

²¹ Moutal, *Hindustani Rāga-s Index*.

fifth does not exist in the *rāga* system (the first and fifth scale-degrees are the only immutable ones).

5. The tonic C, clearly suggested by the bass, is altered in the melody (C#), a procedure inconceivable in Hindustani music.
6. The chromatically ascending triplet arpeggios (bb. 88–89) are likewise impossible in the *rāga* system: rarely can more than one scale-degree be found in two different positions within a single *raga*.
7. Most important, elephant training is not one of the many magical properties attributed to some Indian *rāgas*.²²

Crafting a Hoax and Ripping Open Puppets

It is therefore clear that the episode of the so-called old Hindu chant is first and foremost a hoax on the part of Debussy, who, having yielded with delight to the orientalist temptation in *Pagodes* and *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*, this time approached it with an ironic distance. The pseudo-erudite footnote accordingly directs its mockery not so much at the audience (which is unaware of it, because it is not reading the score) as at musicologists and critics, who, through their pompous speeches and abstruse verbiage, contrive to destroy the mystery of music. This is indeed what Debussy deplores in the opening lines of his first review in *La Revue blanche*:

People forget that, as children, they were forbidden to pull their jumping-jacks to pieces – even then such behaviour was treason against the mysteries – and they continue to want to poke their aesthetic noses where they have no business to be. Although they no longer rip open puppets, yet they explain, pull to pieces and cold-bloodedly slay the mysteries; it makes things easier, and then one can converse.²³

Thus striking a seemingly serious note, Debussy misleads his reader by pretending to be a true connoisseur; but behind this mystification he is actually pointing to the odious tendency to “rip open puppets”. More interestingly, this false quotation is probably the key to understanding the underlying meaning of the humour in *La Boîte à joujoux*.

Rejuvenating Western Music

In this same ballet one can find many references to other works (that this time really exist). Significantly, when Debussy quotes another composer, he systematically distorts the

²² I would like to thank Julien Jugand for his valuable information about Hindustani music.

²³ Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, 23. “Les hommes se souviennent mal qu’on leur a défendu, étant enfants, d’ouvrir le ventre des pantins... (c’est déjà un crime de lèse-mystère): ils continuent à vouloir fourrer leur esthétique nez là où il n’a que faire. S’ils ne crèvent plus de pantins, ils expliquent, démontent et, froidement, tuent le mystère: c’est plus commode et alors on peut causer.”

original model. For instance, Mendelssohn's famous "Wedding March" from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is played over a G–A ostinato that does not belong to the original work and has the effect of suspending the tonality.

Music example 2

Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux*, third tableau, bb. 154–157.

The musical score for Music example 2 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and the instruction *un peu en dehors*. The melody features a series of chords and intervals, including a prominent G–A interval. The lower staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, playing a continuous ostinato of eighth notes. It starts with a *sempre pp* dynamic and a *simile* instruction. The piece concludes with a *p* dynamic.

Similarly, the harmony of "Gloire immortelle de nos aïeux", from Gounod's *Faust* is immobilized by a seventh-chord on the tonic – the first two lines being subsequently interrupted by dissonant gestures.

Music example 3

Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux*, second tableau, bb. 82–83.

The musical score for Music example 3 is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It is titled "Entrée des soldats." The upper staff features a piano (*pp*) dynamic and the instruction *la mélodie doucement en dehors*. The melody consists of eighth-note chords. The lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment, including a triplet of eighth notes. Below the staves, the lyrics are written: (Gloire im - mor - tel - le de nos aïeux).

Finally, the melody of the *Sultan's Polka* by Charles d'Albert is minorized and the chromatic progression of its accompaniment shows "an obvious disrespect for the author's thought", as Debussy himself acknowledges in the score.

Music example 4a

Charles d'Albert, *Polka du Sultan*, bb. 7–10.

The musical score for Music example 4a is in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. It begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The melody is characterized by a chromatic progression of eighth notes. The lower staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords.

Music example 4b

Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux*, fourth tableau, bb. 19–22.

Les enfants enthousiasmés dansent une polka célèbre avec un évident irrespect pour la pensée de l'auteur.

Tempo di Polka (♩ = 96)

All these works have one thing in common, which is to belong to a musical world that Debussy considered to be sclerotic. He was critical of Gounod,²⁴ described Mendelssohn as an “elegant and easygoing notary”²⁵ and – although he did not mention Charles d’Albert anywhere – we can suppose that he did not feel much affinity with this salon composer, whose output abounds in waltzes, galops, polkas and quadrilles.

Although Debussy distorted these works, he did not apply the same method to the many nursery rhymes that appear with great purity throughout *La Boîte à joujoux*. Some of them are inserted as monodies without accompaniment (for example, “Dodo l’enfant do” and “Polichinelle” in the first tableau and “Il était une bergère” in the third), while others have a straightforward harmonization (for instance, “Fanfan la Tulipe” in the fourth tableau). Moreover, the general language of the ballet is simpler and more elementary than what Debussy normally employs for his “serious” works.

Certainly, the deformation of classical music is guided, at least in part, by the need to devalue, which is largely unavoidable in humour.²⁶ If nursery rhymes do not need to be

²⁴ Gounod’s *Faust* clearly did not hold a special place in Debussy’s heart. Henry Malherbe recalled that he talked about it with insatiable irony. When Debussy admitted that if he were to rewrite *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he would do something quite different, Edouard Colonne replied that Gounod said exactly the same thing about his *Faust*, to which Debussy retorted that in his case that was not very surprising (Malherbe, “Deux maîtres que j’ai connus”, *Candide*, 9 December 1937, 19). Elsewhere, he expressed his opinion about this work more clearly: “This deplorable habit of taking a thing, good in itself, and disguising the spirit of it in easy and amiable sentimentalities is always the story of Faust, his throat cut by Gounod; or Hamlet, disturbed quite unhappily by Mr Am. Thomas. Truly, one condemns certain people who forge banknotes to the best of their ability without thinking of those others who forge similarly, and with the same goal of profit”. (“Cette déplorable habitude qui consiste à prendre une chose, bien en soi, et à en travestir l’esprit en de faciles et aimables sensibleries, c’est toujours l’histoire de, Faust égoragée par Gounod; ou Hamlet, dérangé bien malencontreusement par Mr Am. Thomas. Vraiment on condamne des gens qui font de leur mieux de faux billets de banque, sans penser à ceux-là qui contrefont également, et pour le même but de lucre”) Debussy, *Correspondance*, 115.

²⁵ Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, 24, 132. “[...] un notaire élégant et facile”.

²⁶ Alexander Bain considers, for instance, that laughter is the expression of the degradation of a person or a thing that one usually invests with an authority and a dignity that inspire respect: “Laughter is related to the manifestation of power or superiority, and also to a sudden relief after

treated in this way, it is because their mere inclusion in a work of art is enough to generate such a devaluation, on account of the hierarchical relationship that appears when they rub shoulders with a more “elaborate” musical language. However, this is not the case with the works of Mendelssohn, Gounod and Albert. They occupy a more honourable position, which Debussy must therefore deflate if he is seeking to create a comic effect from their quotation.

In doing so, however, he delivers the following message: he has found in the world of childhood an original naïvety that can serve as a basis for the renewal of musical language. In this respect Debussy resuscitates Baudelaire’s concept of the toy in “Morale du joujou” (“The Philosophy of Toys”): “The facility for gratifying one’s imagination is evidence of the spirituality of childhood in its artistic conceptions. The toy is the child’s earliest initiation into art, or rather it is the first concrete example of art; and when maturity intervenes, the most rarefied example will not satisfy his mind with the same enthusiasm, not the same fervent conviction”.²⁷

Note that in Debussy’s criticism of the “treason against the mysteries”, he introduces the metaphor of the child and his puppet – a theme central to *La Boîte à joujoux*, as it is to *Children’s Corner*, written a few years earlier in 1908, where, as in the ballet, several puppets come to life, thanks to the child’s fertile imagination. And among these puppets is an elephant in the orientalizing second movement, “Jimbo’s Lullaby”. In a way, it was already on Debussy’s agenda – here, with the assistance of pentatonism and later with this fake “old Hindu chant” – to summon musical languages from distant cultures in order to make them participate in the rejuvenation of the Western musical language. As a matter of fact, Debussy was fascinated by the musical traditions of other cultures, was amazed by his discovery of the Javanese gamelan during the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris and praised the music of distant peoples in his music criticism:

There have been, and still are, despite the disorders brought about by civilization, charming little peoples who learned music as simply as one learns to breathe. Their conservatory is: the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind in the leaves, and a thousand little noises that they listened to with care, without ever consulting arbitrary treatises.²⁸

a constraint. [...] Let us consider [...] risible degradation as a release from constraint. From this point of view, comedy is the reaction of seriousness. The dignified, solemn, stable attributes of things require from us a certain rigidity, a certain constraint; if we are suddenly released from this constraint, reaction and hilarity ensue”. (“Le rire est lié à la manifestation de la puissance ou supériorité, et aussi à un soudain soulagement après la contrainte. [...] Considérons [...] la dégradation risible comme une délivrance de contrainte. Sous ce point de vue, le comique est la réaction du sérieux. Les attributs dignes, solennels, stables des choses exigent de nous une certaine rigidité, une certaine contrainte; si nous sommes brusquement délivrés de cette contrainte, la réaction, l’hilarité s’ensuit”). Bain, *Les Emotions et la volonté*, 251–252.

²⁷ Baudelaire, “Philosophy of Toys”, 15.

²⁸ Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, 229. “Il y a eu, il y a même encore, malgré les désordres qu’apporte la civilisation, de charmants petits peuples qui apprirent la musique aussi simplement qu’on apprend à respirer. Leur conservatoire c’est: le rythme éternel de la mer, le vent dans les feuilles, et mille petits bruits qu’ils écoutèrent avec soin, sans jamais regarder dans d’arbitraires traités”.

In a way, the will to rejuvenate the ageing Western musical language applies to all the artistic parodies that have been mentioned above, since they all refer to something remote: either in time or space, or in both. The “Op. 10” in Debussy’s quartet refers to the Golden Age of classical music. The *Chansons de Bilitis* take place in Ancient Greece, where and when the roots of Western civilization lie. While Pierre Louÿs was writing them, he had in mind the connections that can be drawn between two eras, as is already evident in the dedication: “This little book of ancient love is respectfully dedicated to the young girls of the future society”.²⁹ Likewise, the fictitious *rāga* in *La Boîte à joujoux* refers to a practice remote in both space and time, since the *rāga* appeared many centuries ago in distant India.

When Debussy integrated a fake “old Hindu chant” in *La Boîte à joujoux*, he humorously misled the reader into thinking that an authentic ethnomusicological approach was involved. But leaving aside the underlying malice of this quotation, we may rightly consider that the “old Hindu chant” fake contributes towards our understanding of the deep meaning of *La Boîte à joujoux*, where Debussy strove to revitalize Western music by referencing the so-called spontaneity of both childhood and foreign traditions for the sake of a recovered authenticity.

²⁹ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, 5. “Ce petit livre d’amour antique est dédié respectueusement aux jeunes filles de la société future”.

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DEBUSSYJEV STAR HINDUJSKI NAPEV (*LA BOÎTE À JOUJOUX*): ŠALJIVA EKSOTIČNA PREVARA IN OŽIVLJANJE PRVOBITNE GLASBE

Povzetek

Claude Debussy je bil znan po prevzemanju lažnih identitet in drugih prevarah, ki se jih je posluževal kot šaljevih potegavščin. Med drugim se je v vlogi glasbenega kritika skrival za »gospodom Osminko« (Monsieur Croche), kar je bilo prav priročno za nekoga, ki želi kritizirati, ne da bi bil deležen posledic svojih kritik. Pošalil se je tudi s tem, da je svojemu Kvartetu dopisal »opus 10«, pri čemer nobeno od njegovih drugih del ne nosi nobene številke (in kvartet niti ni bilo njegovo deseto objavljeno delo).

Primer take šaljive prevare v Debussyjevem glasbenem opusu najdemo tudi v skladateljevem baletu za otroke *La Boîte à joujoux* (*Zaboj z igračkami*, 1913), ki se mu muzikološka literatura še ni kaj dosti posvečala. Prevara nastopi, ko na prizorišče vstopi slon, ki ga spremlja prijetna melodija, katere domnevni izvor skladatelj opiše takole: »Star hindujski napev, ki se še vedno uporablja pri urjenju slonov in je sestavljen po lestvici 5 zjutraj in obvezno 5 na takt«. Ker se je Debussy med skladanjem baleta srečal s slavnim indijskim sufijskim glasbenikom Inayatom Khanom, se zdi, da je bil dobro seznanjen z glasbeno tradicijo tega dela sveta. A tako Debussyjev opis kot tudi sama uporabljena melodija sta prevari: na njuno nelegitimnost opozarja vrsta muzikoloških ugovorov.

Debussyjeva psevdoznanstvena opomba o stari hindujski melodiji ni toliko v posmeh javnosti (ki se potegavščine sploh ne zaveda), temveč bolj raziskovalcem glasbe, ki po skladateljevem kritičnem mnenju s svojimi izumetničenimi besedami in abstraktnim govoričenjem le prispevajo k uničevanju skrivnosti glasbe same. Poleg tega se zdi, da ta opomba predstavlja ključ za razumevanje globokega pomena njegovega baleta. V njem si Debussy prizadeva pomladiti in oživiti zahodno glasbo s sklicevanjem na tako imenovano spontanost tako otroških kot tujih tradicij, ki naj bi bile bližje prvobitni avtentičnosti.