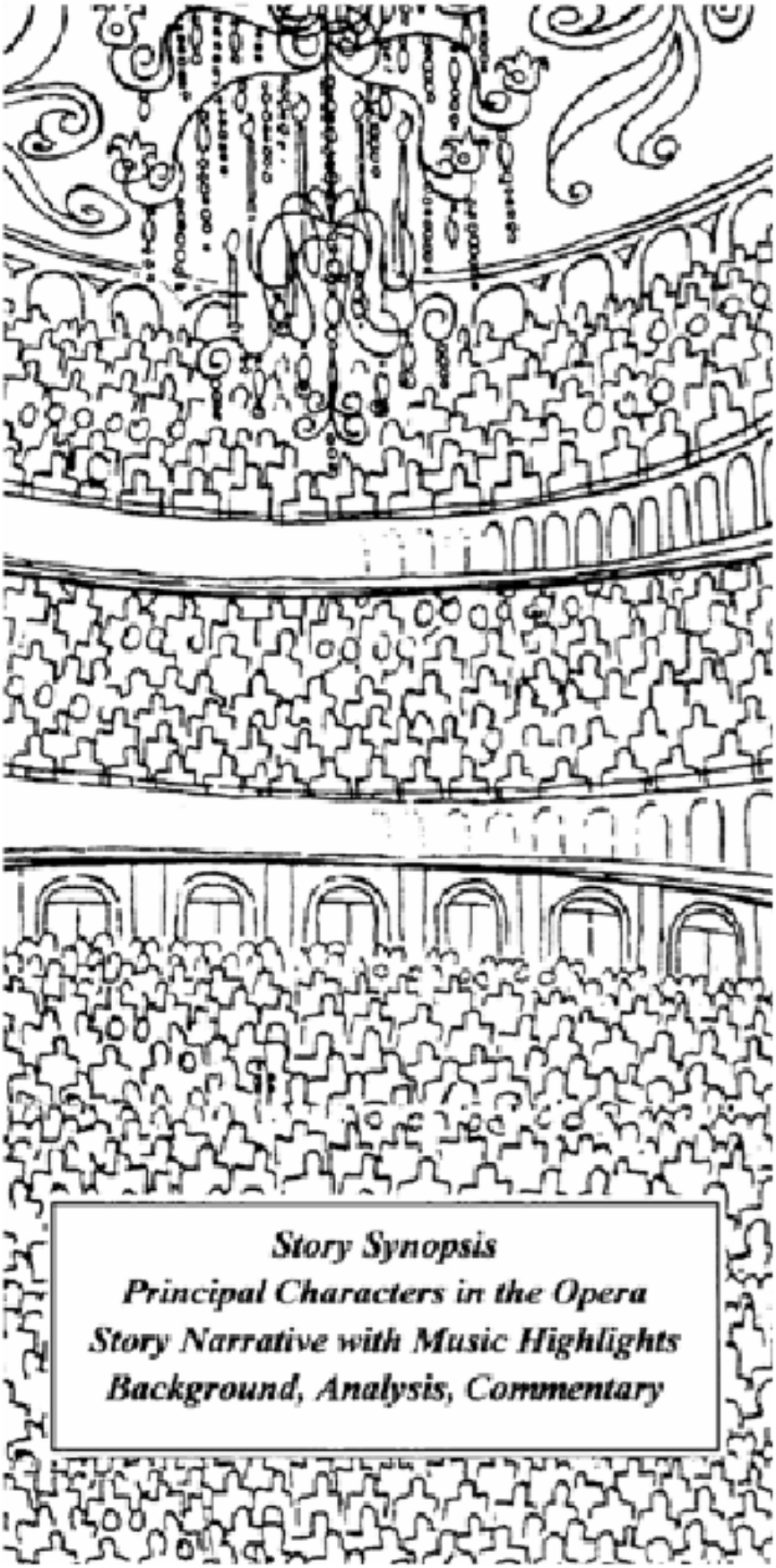
Pelléas et Mélisande

Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series



Story Synopsis
Principal Characters in the Opera
Story Narrative with Music Highlights
Background, Analysis, Commentary

Pelléas et Mélisande

Lyric Drama in French in five acts

Music

by

Claude Debussy

Libretto: adapted from the play

by Maurice Maeterlinck

Premiere: Opéra-Comique, Paris, 1902

Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher

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Principal Characters in Pelléas et Mélisande

Golaud, Arkel's grandson	Baritone
Mélisande	Soprano
Pelléas, Arkel's grandson, Golaud's half-brother	Baritone or Tenor
Arkel, King of Allemonde	Bass
Geneviève, mother of Golaud and Pelléas	Mezzo-soprano
Yniold, Golaud's son by a former marriage	Soprano
The shepherd	Bass
The doctor	Bass

Servant women, silent beggars,
unseen chorus of sailors

TIME: Legendary
PLACE: The kingdom of Allemonde

Brief Story Synopsis

In the deep forest, Golaud encounters the beautiful Mélisande, sobbing nervously by a well. When he questions her background, she can only provide a confused account of her origins. Golaud leaves with her and later marries her.

Pelléas, Golaud's much younger half-brother, plays with Mélisande in the castle gardens. Mélisande plays with her wedding ring, which falls into the spring. When Golaud learns of the loss, he insists that she search for the ring, and he orders Pelléas to accompany her in her fruitless task.

Mélisande combs her long hair at the window of the castle tower as Pelléas passes by. Mélisande leans far out of the window, her hair cascading down and engulfing Pelléas. Golaud sees them and warns Pelléas to keep away from the fragile Mélisande, who is pregnant with child.

Pelléas tells Mélisande that his sick father wishes him to go away on a journey. The news saddens Mélisande, but they decide to meet once more in secret. As they say farewell, they realize their mutual love. Golaud finds them and kills Pelléas.

At Mélisande's bedside, Golaud expresses his remorse. Mélisande has just given birth to a daughter. She dies quietly, without suffering.

Story Narrative with Music Examples

Prelude:

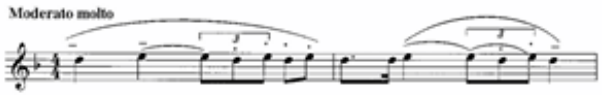
A brief orchestral prelude presents three principal themes, motives that will later undergo rhythmic and harmonic transformations commensurate with the action and symbolic development of the drama.

The first theme conveys the gloom of the forest in which the first scene is set.

Gloomy forest:

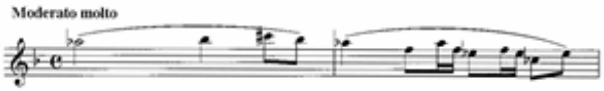
The second theme is associated with Golaud, a sullen middle-aged widower; it is a wavering theme that conveys his lack of inner purpose, yet also possesses a distinctive rhythmic quality.

Golaud:



A third theme, essentially pentatonic, is associated with Mélisande.

Mélisande:



The second and third motives combine, symbolically suggesting that the destinies of Golaud and Mélisande are interwoven.

Act I - Scene 1: A stream in a forest

Golaud has lost his way while pursuing a boar he has wounded. He finds the fragile young Mélisande sobbing nervously by a well.

Sobbing:

He draws nearer to her and touches her on the shoulder. She is startled: "Ne me touchez pas!" ("Do not touch me!"), and threatens to throw herself into the water. Golaud questions her, and her responses about her past are vague: she has been hurt, but does not recall by whom; she ran from somewhere long ago, but does not recall from where. She is lost, frightened, and wants to leave.

While she was weeping, a golden crown fell from her head; it now gleams at the bottom of the well.

The crown:

Golaud is unable to learn who gave her the crown. He offers to recover the crown for her, but she threatens to throw herself into the well if he does.

Golaud identifies himself as the grandson of Arkel, the old King of Allemonde; he learns only that her name is Mélisande.

Royalty, or Destiny:

There is an extreme disparity between Mélisande's youth and Golaud's age. She stares at him with child-like curiosity, and he becomes fascinated yet troubled by her eyes, which never seem to close. She frankly admits that she is repelled by his giant size, graying hair, and beard.

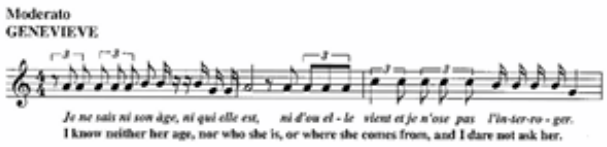
Finally, Golaud persuades her that he will accompany her to safety, to a place he cannot reveal at this moment. Mélisande agrees reluctantly. The scene concludes with a sense that powerful forces of darkness will control their destinies; Mélisande and Golaud leave the forest together, the lost leading the lost.

Act I – Scene 2: A hall in the castle.

King Arkel is old and half blind, the wisdom of age evoking his compassion for human sorrows. Geneviève, his daughter, bore two sons: Golaud, whose father is dead, and Pelléas, a much younger son from a different marriage. Her husband, Pelléas' father, is deathly ill and resides in the castle.

Geneviève reads Arkel a long letter from Golaud to his half-brother, Pelléas, which announces that six months ago, he married a young girl who he found lost and terrified while he was hunting in the forest. He still does not know who the mysterious creature is, and where she came from.

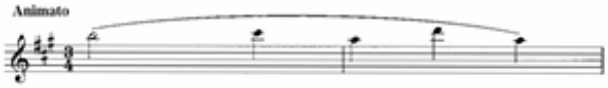
Geneviève's reading of the letter:



Golaud's letter expresses his concern about Arkel's acceptance of his homecoming with Mélisande; if he is amenable, Pelléas should light a lamp in the tower overlooking the sea. If the lamp is not lit on the third night, he will sail away and never return.

Arkel gravely consents to Golaud's return with his bride, the wisdom of his age evoking his tolerance, and his acknowledgement that no one has the right to judge another's deeds and determine destiny. Geneviève expresses her concern that since the death of Golaud's first wife he has become introverted and withdrawn, almost a stranger to them.

Pelléas theme:



Pelléas enters, weeping because he has learned that his friend Marcellus is extremely ill and has expressed his longing to see him before he dies. Arkel persuades Pelléas to delay his journey by reminding him that his own father remains in the castle, deathly ill.

As Arkel and Geneviève leave, Geneviève reminds Pelléas to light the lamp in the tower, "Aie soin d'allumer la lampe dès ce soir" ("Take care to light the lamp before this evening"), an acknowledgement of Arkel's acceptance of Golaud's new wife, but more significantly, an unwitting pronouncement of doom for Pelléas and Mélisande.

Act I – Scene 3: Outside the castle

Pelléas enters as Geneviève and Mélisande discuss the dismal and depressing old castle and its surroundings. As evening falls, the three watch a large ship leave the harbor, barely visible in the mist. Mélisande realizes that it is the ship that brought her to the castle, and inquires why it is leaving, fearing for its safety in the approaching storm.

Geneviève enters the castle, leaving Pelléas and Mélisande alone for the first time. They are forced to leave because of the increasing winds. They descend a steep path, Pelléas supporting Mélisande by the arm. Pelléas announces that he is leaving tomorrow, prompting Mélisande's flirtatious inquiry as to why he is leaving.

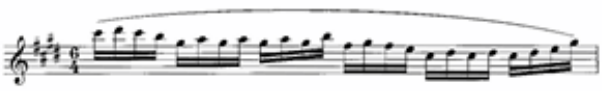
Mélisande's question remains unanswered, but a growing relationship between them has surfaced, the first act ending on a question and an unresolved dissonance.

End of Act I:

Act II – Scene 1: A spring in the castle park

Pelléas and Mélisande sit by the spring, their outing having no conscious purpose other than the enjoyment of pleasure by innocent youths.

The spring:



According to ancient legend, the spring possessed magic powers that can cure the blind, but no one resorts to them now since the King himself is blind; the symbolic significance of the well is the opening of Pelléas and Mélisande's eyes to the destiny towards which they are being inexorably driven.

Mélisande's long hair has begun to arouse desire in Pélleas. He inquires about her first meeting with Golaud in the forest, Mélisande responding that her memory of it is vague, although she does recall that he wanted to kiss her, and does not recall why she refused.

Mélisande plays thoughtlessly with her wedding ring, throwing it skywards and catching it as it falls, until it accidentally falls into the water.

The Ring:

Mélisande fears that the ring is lost, prompting Pelléas to reassure her that they can get another one. Mélisande asks what they should tell Golaud; Pelléas advises her to tell him the truth.

An intimacy has been established between Pelléas and Mélisande despite their outward appearances of childlike innocence.

Act II – Scene 2: A room in the castle

Golaud's horse was suddenly frightened; it bolted and threw him, at the exact midday moment when Mélisande lost the wedding ring.

He lies in bed, gently tended to by Mélisande. Mélisande bursts into tears, but she is unable to explain why. Golaud questions her affectionately and compassionately: Is it the King? Is it Geneviève? Is it Pelléas, who is always strange, and is now sad because he cannot visit his dying friend Marcellus? Is it the dismal castle? Is it the old people who live in the castle?

Mélisande cannot explain the cause of her melancholy, but it is indeed the gloomy old castle that has depressed her. Golaud takes her hand to comfort her and notices that her ring is absent. Stammering in confusion, she lies about its loss, telling him that it slipped from her finger that morning in the cave by the sea while she was gathering shells for little Yniold.

Golaud becomes agitated, asserting that he would rather lose everything he possesses than that ring; he orders Mélisande to immediately go and find the ring before the tide rises and carries it to sea. If she fears the cave, she should have Pelléas accompany her. But she must go at once, because he will not sleep until the ring is recovered. Mélisande leaves weeping.

Act II – Scene 3: Outside the cave

At Golaud's urging, Pelléas has accompanied Mélisande to the cave, although both know that they will not find the ring there. Pelléas terrifies Mélisande with his description of the darkness inside the cave: so vast and dangerous that it has never been fully explored, and that ships that have entered were wrecked. But the roof is beautiful, its incrustations of salt and crystal gleaming when struck by light.

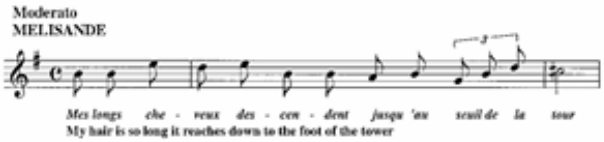
Three white-haired old beggars are seen sitting against a ledge of rock in the sudden moonlight. Pelléas explains that they beg because of the famine in the land, and that they sleep inside the cave.

Mélisande becomes terrified by the sinister ambience and urges Pelléas that they leave, perhaps returning another day.

Act III – Scene 1: One of the towers of the castle

Mélisande sits by an open window, combing her hair and singing a simple song as the night air enters her room.

Mélisande's long hair:



Pelléas appears on the path that runs below her tower window. He tells her that he finds her beautiful, and asks her to lean out of the window and let him kiss her hand because he intends to leave tomorrow. She implores him to delay his departure, and as she bends lower and lower to grab his hand, her long hair suddenly cascades over him, inundating him.

The pair reveal the love that has overloaded their hearts, a fortissimo explosion of passions; Pelléas has become totally intoxicated by Mélisande's beautiful hair, which has totally engulfed him, and he ties her hair to the branches of the willow tree.

At the height of their rapture, they are startled by doves that have suddenly fluttered about them; like Mélisande, the symbols of peace and love. Mélisande hears approaching footsteps and believes they are those of Golaud. She tries in vain to raise her head, but her hair has become entangled in the branches of a tree.

Fatal Jealousy:

Golaud asks Pelléas what he is doing there, but Pelléas is too confused to answer. Golaud cautions Mélisande that she will fall if she leans so far out of the window, and then remarks that it is midnight and children should not be playing in the dark: "You are children…What children! What children!" Golaud leaves with Pelléas.

Act III – Scene 2: The castle vaults

Golaud has brought his half-brother Pelléas to the gloomy castle vaults, where a stench of death arises from the stagnant water. Is Golaud trying to frighten Pelléas? Or does he have something more sinister in mind?

Pelléas walks in front, Golaud behind carrying a lantern and holding Pelléas by the arm, ostensibly to keep him from slipping over the abyss. Golaud's hand trembles, causing the lantern light to flicker. Neither man mentions the incident outside the tower, but there is the sense that each is preoccupied with thoughts about it.

Golaud cautions Pelléas to avoid Mélisande because she is frail; and, she is pregnant and must be handled delicately to avoid misfortune.

Act III – Scene 3: Outside the castle

Golaud is tortured by his suspicions of Pelléas and Mélisande. He places extreme pressure on his little son Yniold, both physically and emotionally, to learn what the boy knows of the activities of his uncle Pelléas and his stepmother Mélisande.

Yniold:

Yniold tells Golaud that they don't want the door open when they are together. But his answers are uninformative, increasingly frustrating Golaud. Golaud asks him if he has seen them together often, what they speak about, and if he has seen them kissing. Yniold replies that he has seen them kissing, demonstrating it by trying to give his father a peck on the mouth, but recoils because of the prickliness of his beard, just as Mélisande did when she first met Golaud.

A light goes on in Mélisande's window that they are sitting under. Golaud lifts the boy up to the window and asks him what he sees. Yniold reports that they both say nothing, but only look fixedly at the light, as if expecting something to happen.

Finally, Golaud enlists young Yniold to spy into the room where Pelléas and Mélisande are gazing silently at the light.

Act IV – Scene 1: A room in the castle

Pelléas tells Mélisande that he has a foreboding of catastrophe. He just visited with his father, who is recovering from his illness, but after his father held his hand, he turned grave and commented that Pelléas had the appearance of someone who does not have long to live; he urged him to travel and get away from the castle.

Pelléas is resolved to obey him, but he must see Mélisande before he departs, and they agree to meet by the blind man's well in the park.

Arkel enters and tells Mélisande that since Pelléas's father is out of danger; it is a signal, he hopes, that will now bring joy to the tomb-like castle. He has had great sympathy for Mélisande's melancholy; her bewildered look is seemingly an expectation of some great misfortune. Poignantly, he proudly tells her that her youth and beauty have consoled him as he draws nearer to death. Mélisande remains silent, her eyes fixed to the ground.

Arkel's sympathy:

Golaud enters; visibly upset because there is blood on his forehead, which he claims resulted from going through a hedge of thorns. He asks Mélisande to wipe his brow, but she refuses, repulsed by his roughness. Golaud becomes infuriated and orders Mélisande to bring him his sword, which she also refuses to do. Golaud seizes the sword himself and nervously inspects the blade, a revelation of his sinister inner thoughts.

Golaud alternates between feigned calm and outbursts of violence. He reproaches Mélisande for staring at him, and describes her gaping eyes to Arkel. Golaud's anger mounts as he swears that he will learn her secrets despite Arkel's pronouncement of her innocence.

Golaud's temper erupts out of control. He seizes Mélisande's hand, and then lets it go in an expression of agonized repulsion. He then seizes her by the hair

and forces her to her knees, moving her from side to side while laughing hysterically. He suddenly gains his composure and becomes calm, feigning indifference as he tells Mélisande to do as she pleases because he attaches no importance to it; he will not play the spy.

As Golaud departs, Mélisande bursts into tears, claiming that she is unhappy because he no longer loves her. Arkel had done nothing to stop Golaud's violent behavior, but moralizes on the misery of the human condition, commenting that if he were God, he would have pity on the hearts of men.

Act IV – Scene 2: By a well in the park

In what is symbolically a hopeless struggle against destiny, Yniold's ball gets stuck under a stone, and the boy tries vainly to raise it. He watches a flock of sheep pass by, the boy pathetically inquiring where they will sleep the night. The shepherd remarks that they are not en route to the stable, but to the slaughterhouse, prefiguring the shedding of blood. As night falls, Yniold leaves.

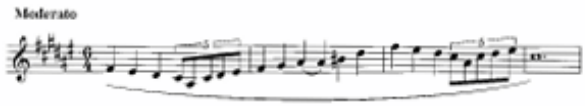
Act IV – Scene 3: The same well in the park

Pelléas muses that soon he will leave the castle, leaving behind everything that binds him to life; but he must see Mélisande and look into the depths of her heart and reveal his inner feelings for her.

Mélisande arrives, and Pelléas takes her from the moonlight to the shade of a lime tree, where she will be unseen from the tower window. He bids her farewell and kisses her, each acknowledging love for the other, the words spoken and without orchestral accompaniment: Pelléas, "Je 'taime"; Mélisande, "Je t'aime aussi."

The young lovers lose themselves in tender images.

Love Duet:



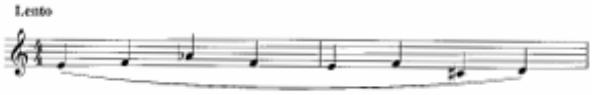
They hear sounds from the castle that indicate that the drawbridge is closing. It is too late for them to re-enter the castle. They embrace passionately. Mélisande becomes fearful, telling Pelléas that she hears footsteps and the crackling of leaves; Pelléas is heedless to her warning, caring only to hear their hearts beat.

Mélisande's eyes catch sight of Golaud crouched behind a tree, his sword drawn. Golaud lunges toward Pelléas while brandishing his sword. He strikes Pelléas, who falls dead. Mélisande flees in terror, pursued by Golaud.

Act V: A bedroom in the castle

Golaud and Mélisande were found lying in front of the castle. Golaud was wounded by his sword but fully recovered; Mélisande lies on her deathbed, fatally wounded. She has given birth to a daughter.

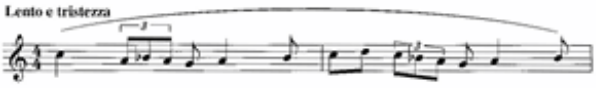
Birth:



The Doctor concludes that Mélisande is not dying from the wound she received at the hands of Golaud; she was born for no reason but to die, and now she dies for no reason. Golaud reproaches himself for his brutal revenge of their simple act of kissing like children.

Mélisande awakens. She indicates that she feels better, and asks Arkel to open the large window so that she can see the sun descending into the sea.

The sun descends:



Golaud is remorseful and begs Mélisande's forgiveness, but she asks him what there is to forgive. He moans that he has done her a great wrong; that

everything that has happened was his fault, because he loved her so much.

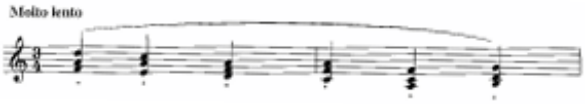
Golaud asks Mélisande if she indeed loved Pelléas: Mélisande murmurs that she loved him, but she denies any guilt. The self-tortured man wants to hear the response he fears most, but grieves because he will die in ignorance: "I shall die blind!"

Mélisande asks King Arkel if winter is coming, expressing her fear of the cold. She was unaware that she bore a little girl; the infant child is placed beside her, but she is too weak to take it in her arms.

Servants silently arrange themselves along the walls of the room. Golaud rages at them, but they remain silent.

Mélisande speaks no more, but her eyes are full of tears.

Mélisande's pardon:



Arkel prevents Golaud from speaking to her, commenting that the human soul needs to leave in peace and quiet.

The serving women fall to their knees, and the Doctor confirms Mélisande's death.

Golaud sobs as Arkel prophetically remarks that it is now the little child's turn to experience the tragic circle of life: love and destiny.

Commentary and Analysis

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) had become a brilliant virtuoso pianist by the age of ten. He was admitted to the Conservatoire, where his additional studies included counterpoint, theory, harmony, and composition; he was reputed to have exasperated his teachers by making up outlandish chords that he refused to resolve.

Debussy had a lifelong love-hate attitude toward Richard Wagner. Wagner had become a towering figure in European culture, a colossal visionary whose new tonal architecture and new musical language established the basis for a metamorphosis to modernism in music: rich chromatic harmonies barely tethered to tonality.

During Debussy's early development he had joined most of musical Europe in its worship of Wagner. But Debussy's fling was brief, and for the rest of his life he led the revolt against Wagnerism. He believed that the Wagnerian formula only suited Wagner, and that his operas were more stifling than liberating; they were too long, too self-absorbed in the composer's philosophy, too lavishly orchestrated, and, too German.

Debussy described himself as a *musicien francais*, the label not so much his identification with French music, but an affirmation of his anti-Wagnerism, and his later anti-German animosity following the First World War. He concluded that it was necessary to transcend Wagner rather than follow his path; he was seeking a purer style of music — what Erik Satie called a French style without sauerkraut. Debussy believed that music was the essence of everything French: a genre that required clarity and elegance compared to German music's traditional length and heaviness; in French music, finesse and nuance were considered the daughters of intelligence.

There was very little music that Debussy liked. He found inspiration in Mussorgsky, particularly the emotive power of the music of *Boris Godunov*, and he admired the complicated counterpoint of Javanese music, but he was uninspired by Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and even the symphonies of Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn, which he considered "period" pieces.

Debussy was the last composer of the Romantic movement, and was recognized as the greatest French composer of his time; today, those accolades remain. Debussy described the "Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune" ("Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun") (1894) as "successive scenes in which the longings and the desire of the faun pass in the heat of the afternoon." It was an epochal work with unprecedented harmonic innovations that became the underlying inspiration for twentieth-century music.

In the "Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune" Debussy had indeed innovated a new music style, discarding elements of the past and overthrowing notions that had remained static up to that time: his music was a synthesis of rich colors and rhythms, in which tonality began to disappear as a result of unresolved chords and suspensions, and an orchestra that reinstated sound for sound's sake.

Debussy's only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), one of the last operas of the great French romantic opera tradition, was composed in Debussy's new, modern music style.

Debussy disliked the term Impressionist that was used to characterize his new music style. The term was originally used to describe the works of late nineteenth-century French painters, their "impressionism" sacrificing clarity of subject matter to mood; they exploited the suffusing effects of light, color, and atmospheric conditions to sharply undermine contours, resulting in softly focused blurred images, which were intended to convey the general "impression" of a scene rather than its precise visual qualities. In painting, Impressionism was the antithesis of naturalism; in music, Impressionism was a reaction against the powerful pathos of Wagner. In Impressionism, ideas became more tangible than characters, and atmosphere became the decisive factor in shaping the music.

Like the Impressionist painters, Debussy had developed new theories of light and color for his musical inventions. He was not interested in Classical forms, but in sensibility: capturing a fleeting impression or mood, and seizing its exact essence as economically as possible. In Debussy's

Impressionism, tonality was not completely abandoned, but it certainly appeared to be on the verge of extinction. The music became more concerned with subtle nuances and effects than with substance and structure; instrumental colors were finely graded; static, non-climactic melodies would often circle about a single pitch; and complex harmonic textures provided colorful sounds.

The new musical language evaded hard diatonic cadences, and strove for subtlety rather than assertiveness in its melodic expression, harmony, color, and design. Debussy intended to eliminate melodic patterns in which phrases of two, four, or eight bars were balanced symmetrically by corresponding phrases of similar length; he resolved dissonances by holding or prolonging them in order to provide a sense of infinite harmonic fluidity.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the new "lyrique" of Gounod and Thomas had finally redeemed French opera from its earlier Meyerbeerian grand opera excesses, those Cecil B. de Mille spectaculars that were huge and exotic: what Wagner would bombastically condemn as effects without causes. The new French "lyrique" — or lyric operas — were no longer pompous, swollen, or gigantic spectaculars, but rather, musico-dramatic portrayals of strongly etched personalities, in intensely sensitive personal relationships that expressed intimate human values: French opera had become lyric, not epic; not thematic but melodic; not heroic, but purely and genuinely personal.

Debussy and the young Belgian playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck, shared many affinities: they spoke the same language; they were nourished by the same culture; and each sought the same refinements of expression, preferring subtlety to bombast.

Maeterlinck was a leading exponent of the Symbolist movement, which arose in the 1880's, and espoused veiled emotions and mystery over realism. The play, *Pelléas et Mélisande,* was produced in Paris in 1892, and the next year Debussy seized on it as an ideal subject for an opera: a drama that had no place or time in its portrayal of vague and moody

characters submitting to fate; and a play that was comprised of short scenes that would not condemn him to long acts. Debussy's new musical language of Impressionism would provide the dramatic realization of Maeterlinck's inherently lyrical prose, "an evocative language whose sensitivity can be extended into music and into the orchestra decor," according to Debussy himself.

In general, Maeterlinck's plots were intended to be no more than outlines of archetypal situations; the settings were vague and timeless; the prose language was more prominent for what it suggested than for what it stated; the imagery strove to evoke the evanescent and the intangible; and the elusive characters were shrouded in mystery, pared down to but a few fundamental impulses. Maeterlinck's prose style was extensively alliterative, integrated with obscure fantastic words, ornate syntax, and suggestive poetic ideas, the words no longer referring to mere objects and actions, but to meanings concealed behind the literal meaning.

Maeterlinck's orderly lyrical dramaturgy was exceptionally well suited to the demands and limitations of opera because it essentially depicted basic situations that required a minimum of exposition and explanation; one emotional state merged into another through its own natural development, with few interruptions from external events. At times, a Maeterlinck drama seemed like the theater of the unspoken, the silent moments of the drama always pregnant with emotions.

Debussy set Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* by virtually adapting it word for word, but of necessity he excised four complete scenes. Basically, he did not tamper with the play's symbolism, leaving the greater part of Maeterlinck's motives as he found them. Ultimately, he created an unprecedented musical mood to realize the text, every scene exuding a sense of beauty that was derived from the interplay of musical color, light, and atmosphere, the music expressing feeling and suffering in human terms, despite the dream-like aura that suggests that the characters lived in a mysterious dream.

There are no arias or ensemble numbers in the traditional sense, and the characters communicate

in a declamation style, a speech-song, or semi-parlando, that challenged Debussy to create a wealth of music to underscore dialogue, as well as to invent music for the motives and scene transitions. Nevertheless, the vocal style is not the flowery genre of Gounod, Bizet, or Massenet, but rather, an arioso style in which the characters communicate in a declamatory style of speech-song: voices move in pure speech cadences, their expression resembling speech, and rising to climaxes in soft, restrained tones; the words are impulsive and remain faithful to the inflections of the French language, shaped by the rise and fall of syllables, not by the music. Therefore, words flow naturally, like the ebb and flow of conversation, the lines delivered with very little singing implied, because the emphasis is on stress and phrase patterns, clarity, and diction.

The text and music are fully integrated. The orchestra is a subtle commentator rather than a dominant element that never overpowers words, its restraint creating the "impressionistic" effect of mood and atmosphere. Whole-tone chords convey a sense of being lost or confused, and chiming discords convey pain, the latter describing Golaud's stifling pain after falling from a horse in Act II – Scene 2.

Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* score owes some of its provenance to Wagner, not in terms of the vocal power demanded by Wagner, but primarily in the use of leitmotifs: motives are presented, developed, and interwoven, but the orchestral writing possesses far less density than a typical Wagner orchestration, and the leitmotifs are not interwoven to the Wagnerian extreme; the orchestra's prominence occurs mainly in the interludes that facilitate scene transitions, rather than in the scenes themselves.

Wagner's operas were essentially based on legends that intrinsically provided potent symbols for development as musical motives: swords, spears, ravens, swans, rainbows, and potions. Maeterlinck filled *Pelléas et Mélisande* with symbols that represented a gift to Debussy, and the leitmotif technique provided the perfect means to exploit the drama in pure musical terms: animals of many kinds, gates, the tower, the ring, Mélisande's hair, water, and the clock.

Debussy avoided the methodical application of these motives and effectively understated them in

sound and concept, an escape from Wagnerian hyperbole; however, even in their subtlety and restraint, their pianissimo sounds and diaphanous colors portray a dream-like world that seems to suggest a mysterious affinity between nature and the imagination.

The recurrent themes and images undergo very delicate transformations that in many instances are hardly noticeable. Nevertheless, Debussy was extremely straightforward in his scheme of leitmotifs, which primarily embraces the principal characters and a few abstractions. The leitmotifs sound like a Greek chorus, continually commenting on both plot and personal relationships. At times, Debussy was extremely selective in not scoring a motive at all; Arkel has no motive, and there is no motive for his blindness. Nevertheless, Arkel's music is more vigorous than the other characters, perhaps because of his wisdom, or his illusory sight.

It took Debussy ten years to compose his only opera, and its first production experienced a host of complications: a comedy of errors, ruffled pride, bitterness, heroics, and sheer silliness.

Maeterlinck wanted his common-law wife, Georgette LeBlanc, an actress and singer, to be the first Mélisande, but Albert Carré, director of the Opéra-Comique, was determined to have Mary Garden premiere the role, the star of *Louise*, two years earlier. Maeterlinck suspected that Debussy was responsible for what he considered a betrayal. He condemned Carré and Debussy as his avowed enemies, and did everything he could conceive to discredit and even ridicule the work: there was a court action in which Debussy prevailed; and Maeterlinck threatened Debussy and even challenged him to a duel. But despite Maeterlinck's harassment, bad rehearsals, problems with designers, and even the government's censoring of small portions of the opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* survived and premiered on schedule.

The public and critical reaction to this revolutionary work was divided; it shared a combination of hisses, applause, and cheers. Richard Strauss attended the premiere and claimed: "But I

am a musician and I hear nothing." Nevertheless, there were those who did not hesitate to call the opera a unique masterwork.

Pelléas et Mélisande has never enjoyed the popularity of operas by Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner. It is too refined and lacks hot-blooded passion, yet there is a minority thatconsiders it the most subtle and most atmospheric opera ever written.

Very little "happens" in *Pelléas et Mélisande.* Some find it dramatically static and exasperating, a series of inconsequential events stretched into entire scenes. Debussy's music, although sensuous and radiant, can seem as murky and evasive as Mélisande. Nevertheless, it is a story of characters that are powerless against the forces of fate, their drama mounting to its tragic denouement with consummate art. Acts I and II essentially represent the preparation for the tender lyricism of the third act, in which the ill-fated lovers finally find each other. In the fourth act, tragedy swiftly follows their ecstasy, and in the fifth act, destiny overcomes these pitiful creatures, none of which possessed evil in their souls.

Nevertheless, *Pelléas et Mélisande* indeed was — and still is — a new kind of opera; it is seemingly as amorphous as the play, set in a dreamy world filled with symbolic suggestions, few emotional climaxes, no big scenes, and peopled with characters who are like shadows, static in their action. But the entire effect of the opera arises from its subtle impressions, textually and musically.

Pelléas et Mélisande is seemingly a French alternative to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, both operas having more shared moments than differences: both are symbol-laden romantic triangles that hinge on violent resolutions. *Pelléas et Mélisande* has a paucity of action: a chamber-play format within which the story unfolds in small increments, leading to a symbolically heightened conclusion. Debussy achieved what had traditionally been conveyed with towering emotions and passions with an intimate dialogue that was charged with significance, but only rarely resorting to expressing strong emotions. In *Pelléas et Mélisande*, every hand gesture and every body movement holds an essential

significance, and there are dramatic confrontations with abrupt shifts of mood on a variety of levels; the entire idea was to subject the listener to a spell by holding him under the power of its melodic sung-speech.

Pelléas et Mélisande satisfies the deep-seated French conviction that literary values override musical values, and that in opera, the mind should be concentrated on the text. It is certainly not a shallow work, and it is replete with meaning that is both bewildering and disturbing; and critics and listeners alike have had difficulty unraveling its underlying meaning.

Debussy was a musical painter par excellence, a musical dramatist who made the art of musical Impressionism the new grammar of the music of the twentieth century: new and adventurous harmonies with parallel chord movements, unresolved dissonances, and the elimination of rules for modulation or progression became the path-breaking elements in which twentieth-century modernism emerged. But Debussy's deceptively calm music also taps the subliminal emotions of the characters more deeply than Maeterlinck's words.

In the end, Debussy's opera provided music of insinuation rather than rhetoric.

Post-Debussy tonalism influenced modern music during the first half of the twentieth century, a tonalism that became strongly rooted in the melody and the rhythmic vocal inflections of the languages of specific cultures. Among the operas of the new modernist tonal school were: Béla Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1918); Igor Stravinsky's *The Nightingale* (1914), *Mavra* (1922), *Oedipus Rex* (1926), *The Rake's Progress* (1951); Zoltán Kodály's *Háry János* (1926); Sergey Prokofief's *L'Amour des trois oranges* ("The Love of Three Oranges") (1921), *The Fiery Angel* (1954), *War and Peace* (1941-1952); Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), *Billy Budd* (1951), *Turn of the Screw* (1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960); and Dmitry Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* (1934).

In the nineteenth century, Czechoslovakia began its national school with Bedrich Smetana, a composer of both comic and tragic operas; he is best known for his vigorous, highly colorful folk comedy, *The Bartered Bride* (1866). Following Smetana, Antonin Dvorák wrote nine operas, but could not supersede his extremely popular instrumental works; his melancholy fairy tale, *Rusalka* (1901), has been rediscovered, and proved to be an opera possessing powerful melodic and harmonic qualities.

Leos Janácek was a Moravian whose music possessed a highly individual signature, typified by short-phrased melodies that captured the speech-rhythms and specific inflections of his native language. Many of his operas were rediscovered after World War II: *Jenufa* (1916), *Kát'a Kabanová* (1921), *The Cunning Little Vixen* (1924) and *The Makropoulos Affair (*1926); each opera possesses its own unique musical character, but always preserves the unique inflections of the Czech language.