

DEBUSSY – PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE – OPERA MAGAZINE ARTICLE

by Jon Tolansky

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"That's the point where things begin to move towards the catastrophe, and where Mélisande begins to tell Golaud lies and to realize her own motives, assisted in this by the said Golaud, a solid fellow for all that; it also shows you shouldn't be completely frank, even with young girls."

Roger Nichols' and Richard Langham Smith's splendid guide to Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, published in 1989, quotes those words from the letter the composer wrote to Henri Lerolle in 1895 as he was composing the music for Act 2 Scene 2. He was referring to the place where Golaud notices that Mélisande's wedding ring is missing, and she instinctually fabricates a story about losing it when she was looking for seashells with Yniold. Of course the reality was that she had been playing with it when she was with Pelléas in the park and it had accidentally fallen to the bottom of the well by the fountain.

About half way through Debussy's brief description to Lerolle, his language becomes somewhat abstruse, maybe unconsciously suggesting that all is not straightforward and clear in this story. And from the moment that the opera premiered on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1902 right up to today, its psychological question-marks as much as its revolutionary musical style have engendered strongly divisive reactions. Some, like the writer of this article, have been mesmerized by its evocative and human power, and others have dismissed it as ineffectual. Even some of its advocates have differed considerably in their views of the characters and the way they are musically depicted by Debussy. Mélisande is the one who is most hotly debated. Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, who had discussed the opera in detail with the composer, said in an essay "How not to perform *Faust*, *Carmen*, *Pelléas*," published by Éditions Heugel in Paris in 1933, that Mélisande is "...a woman with ruses, a woman who knows how to lie – And how!"

In a not dissimilar vein, Pierre Boulez told me "Mélisande is a very complex character. One so often hears that she is pure and virginal, but on the contrary she is very ambiguous. She pushes Pelléas to love her. In contrast to Golaud's directness with his fits of temper, Mélisande is, shall we say, a more snake-like character: sometimes she is like a nice girl, and at other times she is determined to have her own way."

Contrast that with Frederica von Stade, who with Colette Alliot-Lugaz, François Le Roux, and José van Dam are the very distinguished *Pelléas et Mélisande* artists who have spoken about the work specially for this edition of *Opera*:

"I have always felt that Mélisande is possibly a very simple creature in many regards. She is not that complex. She is just someone who, because of what might have happened to her in her early life, is a reactive person through instinct rather than a character who responds through wisdom or experience. She reacts in a very youthful way – maybe she is young for her years – and much of the personality that is imposed on her is really a man's view of her rather than who she is – more especially Golaud's of course. Her few words are, I think, naturally ingenuous and honest – honest in the way very young people are, especially young people who have had a trauma in their life, and as we understand it she has had an enormous trauma. Someone who has come from great danger and trauma is frightened,

and is deeply and severely altered by their fear. It can distort their feelings for life, and I think that's why so often her speech is so terse. Even her lies – they are the lies of someone who is protecting themselves, someone who says what they hope will keep them safe. That is very different from lying out of malice or calculating deception.”

Colette Alliot-Lugaz, the Mélisande in the controversial Pierre Strosser production in Lyon in 1985 as well as many other productions, has a similar view.

“She is basically simple and has almost childlike qualities, which is why people are attracted to her, because they find this mysterious. But in herself she is straightforward and not mysterious at all. She genuinely wants to express love to Golaud, but she finds him and his dark castle oppressive, and so she escapes into herself which is why she doesn't answer his questions. And then she can't face him when she has lost her wedding ring. She only discovers her real self with Pelléas, and here Debussy shows us how this unfolds. For my debut in the role, I studied Mélisande with Irene Aitoff, a celebrated authority on this opera since the 1930s, and she meticulously taught me how and why the part must sound as though it is being spoken, even though it is still sung, but in differing ways when she is with Golaud and Pelléas. Her responses are very instinctive and Debussy indicates this very clearly. She increasingly feels alienated from Golaud and when he frightens her she speaks in a hesitant, secretive manner. Then, in contrast, with Pelléas her feelings are spontaneously open and the words must be conveyed very directly, as they are felt freely as an intimacy between her and Pelléas develops. It is innocent but it is like a mutual secret code, a very deep inner feeling of love that is difficult to interpret, because to really make it work in performance you have to allow yourself to be carried along by the impulse of the moment. Debussy has written the part in a way that necessitates this spontaneous, freely spoken kind of response from the singer.”

Frederica von Stade also looks to the music as well as the text for the key to Mélisande's personality.

“The way that both Maeterlinck and Debussy have portrayed Mélisande is extremely clear in intention for every moment that she appears. For instance, when she plays with the ring and loses it. Why wouldn't you throw away the ring of someone who treats you like a servant? But, it's still an accident, and that is so very clearly depicted in the music at that moment. Deep down inside she's dying to get rid of that ring, and throwing it up in the air playfully on the spur of the moment is a very youthful way of expressing that – throwing away the symbol of it, so to speak. She doesn't intentionally lose it, but in the presence of Pelléas, her inner unconscious impulses make it happen, accidentally. Debussy tells us that so wonderfully in the music there. Throughout that scene the natural flow and weightless texture of the music show us how Mélisande is beginning to feel close to being on a plain with the one person who can bring her joy: Pelléas – and that she can play with him like a young person. The music so beautifully evokes here and then also later on in the opera how the real foundation of Pelléas and Mélisande's attraction and subsequent attachment to each other is youth, not passion. A passionate relationship does develop between them in due course, but the love they share is their youth.”

In marked contrast to the open and spontaneously flowing music when Pelléas and Mélisande are together, the music of Golaud often has a heavy, troubled tread and an ambiguous, unstable tonality, as it does right from the start when his motif, sounded by the woodwind after the opening “forest motif,” suggests in its whole-tone scale unease that he

is a lost soul. For José van Dam the symbolic overtones in Debussy's music for Golaud mirror many metaphorical inferences in the text.

"Golaud's very first words: 'I am never going to find my way out of this forest' – he is really saying 'I am never going to find my way out of my life.' For me this first phrase tells us about the entire opera that is to come. Golaud is completely trapped in himself and he remains that way right through to the end. In fact there are often insinuating double meanings in the text for Golaud, which can only be ideally understood if one is very familiar with the French language. For instance, when he takes Pelléas down into the vaults of the castle and he says to him 'be careful' and then a little later 'give me your arm, not your hand – it could slip,' he is really saying 'be careful, don't go any further with Mélisande, you could come to harm.' And in the scene with Golaud and Yniold, when Yniold says 'Mummy has lit her lamp, it's getting light,' and Golaud then says 'yes, it's beginning to get light,' he means 'yes, it's beginning to become clear in my head – I am beginning to understand.' These doubles entendres are a symptom of Golaud's isolation, talking to himself in his own solitary world, and his inability to communicate."

In his music, Debussy has ingeniously evoked all the intricate subtleties of these situations – on the one hand, in the case of Golaud, what lies underneath in the imagination, what he cannot be certain he sees, and what, at the cost of his sanity, cannot be rationalized; and on the other, in the case of Pelléas and Mélisande, what naturally develops in open reality, but what so often can only be suggested because of the impossibility of the situation. In the latter respect, François Le Roux – after many years as Pelléas, now singing Golaud – disagrees with the clear-cut view that Maestri Inghelbrecht and Boulez have expressed about Mélisande's relationship to Golaud and indeed to Pelléas.

"I think this is the problem of a lot of men who only want to understand what they see right in front of them in a woman – maybe like Golaud! We all know it is very difficult to understand anyone who is not oneself – it's already difficult to understand oneself! – and I think this is what is great about Maeterlinck's theatre and Debussy's music. Instead of trying to create ideas about people and making them black and white, everything is grey. There are no primary colours – and I think Mélisande is a mystery to herself. For instance, take the place in Act 2 Scene 2 when she tells Golaud she feels 'ill in this place,' he then tries to find out what it is that is making her so unhappy – Arkel, Geneviève or Pelléas maybe – and she says 'it isn't anybody – you couldn't understand – it is something that is stronger than I am.' I think she is absolutely truthful here – she doesn't know what is going on. When she then says to Golaud that she would like to go away from the castle with him, I don't think it's because she thinks she is in love with Pelléas. She feels something wrong between her and that place. Partly I think through his own relationships, Maeterlinck really comprehends a lot of the non-questionable ambiguity of what a man and a woman are saying to one another with all that you can't understand, and of course Golaud is the one who does not understand anything. And in the very subtle ways Debussy writes for the three characters, his reflection of the text is wonderfully faithful."

José van Dam adds his response to Boulez's comments about Mélisande:

"No, I don't think she is snake-like at all. She doesn't understand Golaud any more than he understands her. She becomes frightened of him, and then Pelléas is like a joyful release for her, but she doesn't plan anything with him. Their relationship just develops naturally of its own accord, unlike how it is with her and Golaud."

François Le Roux relates how Pierre Strosser dealt with that development in his production at Lyon.

“I remember him saying to Colette and me ‘I would like you to think that you are two kids saying to one another “I’ll be the princess,” “I’ll be the prince,” and we’ll play that.’ So, instead of thinking in a factual everyday language, these are like two children playing together and they are just having fun inventing stories. When I did the Fountain Scene in Act 2 Scene 1 with Colette, we felt that everything that Pelléas says was like this – so when he tells her that this is the place where he likes to come when it’s hot, and this old well is called the Fountain of the Blind because legend has it that it used to cure blind people, maybe he was inventing all this like a child’s fantasy. Why not? That’s what Mélisande loves in him – it’s this sense of fantasy telling a story, and striking chords that she has never experienced before. She then realizes that in Golaud’s world her life is going to be more factual whereas with Pelléas it is going to be more dreamy. For me, Maeterlinck is expressing how either you create art and you live through art, or you stay in so-called normal life and you are stuck with a prosaic factual existence. It is a choice in life. Can you live in both these worlds? No. So, for me, Mélisande is not summed up as a liar or a snake. She is trying to find her way through two plateaus of life, but she doesn’t really know what’s going to fit her properly.”

And, in Golaud’s mind, the delicate, almost non-existent dividing line between the plateau of Pelléas’ and Mélisande’s child-like fantasy and the threat of a passionate love affair is scarily and ingeniously highlighted in the music when he dismisses them after discovering their “game” by the tower in Act 3 Scene 1. “Quels enfants” – “What children” – he mutters, (as José van Dam says “he tries to convince himself they are just children”) and we then hear an orchestral interlude by turn sinister and tragic in which the musical motifs for Golaud and Mélisande are contorted into a tangle that expresses a world that could not be further away from innocent child’s play. Deep in Golaud’s soul, it is a hopeless torture, and we now know that this story has to end in terrible tragedy. So, before long, do Pelléas and Mélisande.

“The only way they can escape their situation is death,” comments Frederica von Stade. “Taking a risk of death, and that’s a decision that, although it is not formalized in the piece, is a very logical one for them, and it does not carry the weight that it would if they were ten years older.”

“In the end, Mélisande wants to die,” adds François Le Roux, “and so does Pelléas – and also so do Golaud and Arkel! Tragically for Golaud, he has to carry on – his burden is to be alive. It is all so very human. And in Debussy’s music, we feel the destiny of fate driving you somewhere you don’t know where you are going.”

Indeed, as Debussy had famously said to his former teacher Guiraud before he discovered Maeterlinck’s play, he would only write an opera if he found a subject in which the “characters do not argue but submit to life and fate”. And so much of the musical power in this towering masterpiece is Debussy’s expression of the symbolic forces and consequences of fate that cannot be simply quantified – elements that leave lasting prints on the inner mind and recessed emotions that breathe without rationale, including on the persona of the character that always seeks a rational explanation and will never find one: Golaud, who suddenly reacts so intensely when he sees that Mélisande is not wearing her wedding ring, as François Le Roux comments.

“We don’t know what that ring means to him. He says to Mélisande ‘I would rather have lost everything I own than have lost that ring. You don’t know what it is. You don’t know where it comes from.’ But he doesn’t explain that. So, not only Mélisande carries wounds we don’t know about, but also somewhere in Golaud there is a trauma from his earlier life, maybe his childhood. We mustn’t forget that in the first scene of the play the servants say that he has already tried to commit suicide. I think the drama for Golaud is that he knows he is not fit for the world he is in: he knows that he is bound to become the new king, but both Arkel and he realise that he is not really suitable to be the king, so Arkel is delaying dying as much as he can, and Golaud is already growing old and not finding the way of becoming the king. When he then chances upon this beautiful lost young woman in the forest, he feels he has found a new hope – so much so that this Prince says to a complete stranger he has only just met ‘I am also lost,’ which is maybe the only completely touching phrase he sings in the entire opera. He is so confident about a new future that when he is finally disappointed he becomes enraged and kills. I don’t want to excuse what he does, it is terrible, but I think it is understandable.”

François Le Roux, Colette Alliot-Lugaz and José van Dam all sang in Pierre Strosser’s production of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Lyon, in which he set the entire action indoors with Golaud looking back introspectively on the tragedy of his life with Mélisande. At no time are any scenes taking place in their original surroundings specified by Maeterlinck. Some people – and this writer is one of them – have felt that the staged absence of the emotive natural and environmental symbols in the text has deprived the opera of its essential expression, but, for François Le Roux, Strosser’s approach was revelatory.

“Strosser wanted Colette and I to work together with him for three weeks before the start of the planned rehearsals. During this period we started with very few props, and we even dispensed with those we had after two rehearsals. So in this way we were deeply taken up with the body language of the music, which I think is what really makes *Pelléas et Mélisande* such an extraordinary opera – the way the music embodies the French language in its half spoken, half sung way is so incredible that, unless you are completely an intellectual or completely technical, you can’t really find your way. You have to let yourself go inside that and trust that you will be guided by the music itself and the way Debussy phrases it. For me, Strosser’s approach in his production provided the ideal condition for the realization of that. I felt we could in this way perform theatre from inside instead of finding help from outside.”

And José van Dam performed in another radical production in Paris, when the stage director was Robert Wilson.

“When you think about it, Pelléas is at home doing nothing, Arkel is at home doing nothing, Geneviève is at home doing nothing. Golaud is the only person in the opera who is working. So even in this respect Golaud is solitary. All through the opera he is alone in his own world – for instance, when he is with Yniold and he tries to make him spy on Pelléas and Mélisande, he is not communicating at all with his child. I loved the way Robert Wilson’s production portrayed this isolation in Golaud. In Act 4 when he rants and raves at Mélisande and he is meant to take her hair and drag her around the room ..... ‘À droite et puis à gauche! À gauche et puis à droite!’..... Bob Wilson would not allow me to grab her hair, and that was for the same reason as before – Golaud is in his own world and Mélisande is in hers. That made a fantastic force at this moment. Golaud is furious but he is so isolated that it is all contained inside him.”

Shortly after François Le Roux and Colette Alliot-Lugaz performed in Strosser's experimental production they both took part in a much more traditionally staged production in Paris – at least on the surface of how it looked with its sets. The producer was Gian Carlo Menotti.

“Performing in Strosser's version helped me to handle Menotti's production, which was so completely different. When Colette and I began our very first rehearsal with Menotti he said to us: ‘For me, *Pelléas et Mélisande* is a verist opera and the only idea I have is that Pelléas is really wanting to go to bed with Mélisande.’ That of course was the complete opposite of what we had done with Strosser. I looked at Colette and without saying a word she and I thought we would try to see which way we could approach that new perspective for us. We had to compromise really. Of course Menotti was a very interesting man and a remarkable composer, but I think he felt like many producers have with *Pelleas et Melisande* that he needed to make it simply accessible to the majority of the public, and so by explaining the reality of the situation it would work. In complete contrast, Strosser said to Colette and me that for him *Pelléas et Mélisande* is like an *auberge espagnole*: all the phrases can have a meaning for each of us, but maybe not exactly the same. So his idea was not to obstruct the connection between the phrase that is spoken and which rings a bell with any of us, not to obstruct that connection with an image that would be a complete mask on what the phrase can mean for different people.”

Some people have suggested that, perhaps like *Parsifal*, the very act of staging *Pelléas et Mélisande* will in some way reduce one major element of its suggestive power: “the mysterious correspondences between Nature and Imagination,” in the composer's own words. Whether or not one prefers to see the naturalistically symbolic setting that, perhaps paradoxically, Maeterlinck so specifically delineated, for those who love the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* it is indeed Debussy's expression of the often elusive and evanescent border-lines between what can and cannot be understood and what can and cannot be known that is so inspired. In the way he wedded magically poetic suggestion of the intangible – the symbolic powers of nature, the environment and fate – to profound psychological penetration of the palpable – the deeply seated interior feelings and real human reactions of people, he remarkably encapsulated Maurice Maeterlinck's expression of the vagaries between fantasy and reality, and the certain and the uncertain, that can afflict peoples' lives. There are quite a number of music-lovers and musicians who do not relate to this scenario. Maybe Debussy was prophetically alluding to the likes of them as well as Golaud when he made that cryptic comment to Henri Lerolle: “it also shows you shouldn't be completely frank, even with young girls.”