

Debussy's Prism: An Approach to *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Pelléas et Mélisande is commonly classified as a twentieth-century opera because its first performance took place in 1902, but Debussy had essentially completed the score in 1895. Maeterlinck's play had its premiere in 1893 but I would like to go back two years earlier to a conversation Debussy had with Ernest Guiraud, his old harmony teacher from the Conservatoire, in which Debussy described the kind of poet he sought:

“One who only hints at what is to be said. The ideal would be two associated dreams. No place, nor time. No big scene. No compulsion on the musician, who must complete and give body to the work of the poet. ... A painting executed in grey is the ideal. No developments merely of the sake of developments. ... My idea is of a short libretto with mobile scenes. .. A variety of scenes in regard to place and character. No discussion or arguments between the characters whom I see at the mercy of life or destiny.” (Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*. New York: Macmillan, 1962, vol.1, p.205)

It is hard to imagine a better description of Maeterlinck's play. When Debussy attended the premiere in 1893 he recognized it at once as the basis for an opera and began composing music even before receiving permission from the playwright.

The years preceding *Pelléas* brought Debussy in contact with a bewildering variety of literary, artistic and musical influences. The years of *Pelléas*, especially 1893 to 1895, witnessed the assimilation of these myriad influences and the formation of a personal musical idiom. Maeterlinck's play served Debussy as a kind of prism separating the white light of *la belle époque* into the individual bands of colour which constitute Debussy's musical style. This morning I should like to sketch the course of several rays through the prism of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, with particular attention to those figures who influenced both Maeterlinck and Debussy: Poe, Wagner, and the poets of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Poe

The role of Edgar Allan Poe in the development of the French Symbolist movement endures as one of the fascinating footnotes of literary history, in particular the incongruity between Poe's modest reputation in his own country and his remarkable influence in France. The single figure most responsible for establishing Poe's position in France was Charles Baudelaire. Of the twelve volumes which compose the definitive edition of Baudelaire's works, no fewer than five are devoted to translations from Poe. The figure of the beautiful woman cultivated by the English Pre-Raphaelite poets, which we shall discuss a bit later, may be traced to Poe.

Maeterlinck wrote, “Edgar Poe exerted upon me as, for that matter, upon all those of my generation, a great, profound and enduring influence. I owe to him the birth in my work of the sense of mystery and the passion for the beyond.” (Léon Lemmonier, *Edgar Poe et les poètes français*. Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1932, pp.207-208) Half a century before Freud, Poe “probed the caverns of the psyche and brought to

the level of imaginative literature the dark scrolls—of fear, guilt, and obsession—that those caverns contain.” (Patrick Quinn, *The French Face of Edgar Poe*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1957, p.41) Debussy was no less fascinated with the works of Poe and spent most of his adult career trying to set “The Fall of the House of Usher” and other works to music. Quotations from Poe appear frequently in Debussy’s correspondence. “Monsieur E.A. Poe,” Debussy wrote to a friend in 1909, “this man although posthumous exercises an almost alarming tyranny over me.” (Claude Debussy, *Lettres inédites à André Caplet*. Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1957, p.41)

Echoes from “The Fall of the House of Usher” resonate throughout Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The Usher mansion is in a state of advanced decay and ultimately tumbles into ruins. The narrator observes “a barely perceptible fissure which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.” In Act III, Scene 3 of Maeterlinck’s play Golaud asks Pelléas, “Have you noticed the fissures in the walls and pillars of the vaults? ... The whole castle will be swallowed up one of these nights if we’re not careful. ... There are strange fissures in many of the walls.”

The House of Usher has for a moat a “black and lurid tarn,” or steep-banked pool, and the narrator imagines that “about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.” Golaud tells Pelléas that “the whole castle is built upon these crypts. Do you smell the deathly odour which prevails here? That’s what I wanted to show you. In my opinion, it comes from the little underground pool that I’m going to have you see.” (They walk in silence.) ... Well, this is the stagnant water I was telling you about. Do you sense the rising smell of death? ... On certain days it poisons the castle. ... The crypt in which this standing water is found should be walled in.”

Lady Madeleine in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” like many of Poe’s heroines, is destined to die of an unfathomable ailment. “The disease of the lady Madeleine had long baffled the skill of her physicians,” Poe writes. Mélisande’s death elicits a similar response from the doctor. “She could not have lived. She was born without reason, in order to die; and she is dying without reason.”

In addition to these specific parallels between *Usher* and *Pelléas*, one detects the influence of Poe in Maeterlinck’s scenes of fear. The very language of Maeterlinck’s play reflects the pervading atmosphere of terror: the useless repetitions, the stammering phrases, the long, awkward silences, the general incoherence of many of the speeches.

Debussy responded to the themes of fear in Maeterlinck’s play, describing the music to the scene in the castle vaults as “full of deep terror, and mysterious enough to cause vertigo in the most hardened souls.” Two devices which Debussy employs in this scene function as musical symbols throughout the opera: pedal points and rhythmic ostinato patterns.

The most extensive application of pedal points occurs in Act III, Scene 2, the scene between Golaud and Pelléas in the subterranean castle vaults. A pedal point on C appears in the timpani just before the characters enter and extends some twenty-three measures in timpani, horns, or basses, up to the point that Golaud makes Pelléas lean out from a rock which overhangs the chasm.

[Example 1: III/271-274]

The extended use of pedal points in this scene produces a peculiarly static quality in the music. This device seems particularly appropriate to represent the figure of stagnant water which Maeterlinck employs as a symbol for death.

The natural association of the pedal point with the idea of stagnation or immobility occurs in similar contexts throughout the opera. [Table 1]

Debussy also employs rhythmic ostinato patterns to convey the sense of mystery and terror in Maeterlinck's play. The most striking example of this procedure is Debussy's use of repeated triplets in moments of terror. In the first act animated triplets accompany the melodic motive known as Mélisande's Despair when Golaud attempts to recover Mélisande's crown.

[Example 2: I/107-111]

The intensity of Mélisande's response takes us by surprise: "No! No! I don't want it any more! I would rather die, die on the spot! ... If you recover it I'll throw myself in its place!" Evidently she fears that Golaud, in recovering the crown, would assume the tyrannical power of the former master who has done her such harm. Mélisande's response is not a reasoned objection but a terrified cry. Debussy's driving triplets, in a tempo marked *animé*, suggest her heightened emotional state. [Table 2]

Debussy associates a second type of rhythmic ostinato, the alternation of two pitches, with images of darkness and gloom. In Act I, Mélisande comments on the darkness of the gardens and forests surrounding the palace, and Geneviève speaks of places where the sun never shines. The woodwinds present an accompanying figure based on the alternation of two pitches a major second apart.

[Example 3: I/391-395]

The dramatic situations in which these patterns occur suggest that Debussy associated fear and darkness with the character of Golaud. The leading motive associated with Golaud carries its identity in its rhythm.

[Example 4: Golaud motive]

The examples of rhythmic ostinato in the score seem to emerge, both musically and dramatically, from the character of Golaud. The rhythmic quality of Golaud's motive seems apt for his position as the only personage in the drama to take real action. The

deeds of Pelléas and Mélisande are primarily symbolic: the tossing of a ring, the tying of hair. Golaud's actions, by contrast, are both physical and consequential: Golaud impregnates Mélisande, carries her to Allemonde, murders Pelléas and (in Maeterlinck's play but not in the opera) attempts to take his own life.

All told there is very little physical action in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Of the actions just described, only the murder of Pelléas actually occurs on the stage. For the most part both play and opera deal less with deeds than with states of mind, in particular fear and anguish. The darkness of Allemonde provides an appropriate setting for the sense of dread before the unknown which dominates Maeterlinck's play and, to a lesser extent, Debussy's opera.

The "shades of gray" connected with Debussy's ideal theatre find musical expression in the whole-tone scale, whose absence of semitones renders it a musical monochrome, a harmony identified as strongly with Debussy as the Tristan chord with Wagner. Debussy employs this special scale sparingly in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, always with specific dramatic purpose, generally to convey feelings of incomprehension, being lost, or fear of death. [Table 4] The very first words of the opera, "I shall never be able to find my way out of this forest," are set to this harmony.

[Example 6: I/28-31]

The common element linking appearances of the whole-tone scale in *Pelléas et Mélisande* is stasis. A person lost--either literally, as in the opening scene, or figuratively, as in Golaud's incomprehension--is rendered immobile by confusion, the feeling of not knowing which way to turn. A state of fear may lead to flight or, as in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, to paralysis. In this context, death appears as the ultimate immobility. The intrinsic character of the whole-tone scale makes it uniquely appropriate as a symbol for stasis. The complete absence of semitones in the whole-tone scale renders it utterly static, without melodic tendencies in any direction.

Debussy makes limited use of the whole-tone scale in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, just over two hundred measures in an opera of some three thousand. Yet the static quality inherent in the whole-tone scale influences every element of Debussy's music. Debussy weakens the forward impulse of his harmony by avoiding strong progressions and by using pedal points to liberate individual chords from their forward movement. Melodies occur in fragments rather than in sustained lines. Debussy further attenuates the forward impulse of his music through repetition. The use of rhythmic ostinato patterns, the prevalence of passages in even note values, and the partial suspension of rhythmic activity through the use of pedal tones contribute to the overall sense of immobility and stagnation which pervades the opera.

The treatment of terror and its effect on the human psyche are the special domain of Edgar Allan Poe. The effectiveness of the scene in the castle vaults lies not simply in the gloomy setting but in the elemental fears such a setting evokes. The vaults, that seldom-visited portion of the castle lying beneath the common rooms, come to represent the unexplored depths of the subconscious, unilluminated by the light of reason. Debussy

considered these wells of consciousness the source of the creative impulse. "I find an exquisite joy when I search deeply in the recesses of myself and if anything original is to come from me, it can only come that way." (Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p.233) For Debussy and for Maeterlinck, as for the French Symbolists generally, the work of Edgar Allan Poe helped to open the way to unsuspected vaults of the imagination.

Wagner and Wagnérisme

During the last third of the nineteenth century the figure of Richard Wagner exerted an enormous influence on French composers and men of letters. For an entire generation *wagnérisme* constituted a force which one could embrace or oppose but which few could ignore. For French composers Wagner's music dramas presented a welcome alternative to the banality of Donizetti and the pomposity of Meyerbeer. For French poets the theories of Wagner provided a focus for prevailing notions of a synthesis of the arts as well as elevating the question to the realm of the ideal.

For Debussy the music and ideas of Richard Wagner posed a problem with which he was to struggle throughout his career. In 1880 Debussy heard *Tristan und Isolde* and purchased a score of the opera. Sometime later Debussy attempted, on a wager, to play the entire opera from memory. Though he lost the bet, the incident suggests how thoroughly he had absorbed Wagner's music. In 1887 Debussy heard *Lohengrin* in Paris and in 1888 and 1889 made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth where he attended performances of *Parsifal*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Tristan*. Looking back on this period Debussy recalled, "1889: A marvellous year! I was full of the Wagnerian madness." (Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p.167)

At first sight there would seem to be more than a little self-deception in Debussy's pose that Wagner had been but a passing influence of his youth. In the first place, *Pelléas et Mélisande* borrows its very format from Wagner: it would only be a slight injustice to describe Debussy's opera as a music drama. The music runs continuously from the beginning to the end of each act, the individual scenes being connected by orchestral interludes. The vocal lines are based on the inflections of the French language, fluctuating between recitative and arioso without every achieving the melodic independence of aria, save only Mélisande's unaccompanied song at the beginning of Act III. The main organizing element in the opera is the recurrence of melodic motives associated with scenes, objects, personages and their feelings. Though Debussy would never admit it, *Pelléas* is a *leitmotif* opera.

In the second place, *Pelléas et Mélisande* abounds with quotations from Wagner, most notably *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*. To trace all these quotations would take more time than we have available, but one particular example will serve to illustrate the degree to which Debussy succeeded in breaking free from the Wagnerian model. While *Pelléas et Mélisande* employs elements of Wagner's vocabulary, it represents a decisive departure from Wagner's syntax. In *Pelléas et Mélisande* Debussy began to liberate chords from the context of functional harmony, one of his greatest legacies to music of the century to come. In particular, the half-diminished seventh, or *Tristan* chord, takes

on dramatic significance in *Pelléas et Mélisande* to the point that the lines of symbolic association that connect widely separated occurrences of the same chord often seem stronger than the binding force of harmonic progression that connects each chord with its immediate neighbours.

In Act II, Scene 2, when Golaud commiserates with Mélisande, commenting on the sadness of a countryside surrounded by dark forests, the word sad (*triste*) is surrounded by half-diminished seventh chords. This same harmony appears in Act IV, Scene 4 when Mélisande murmurs, “Mais je suis triste.” In this latter case Debussy employs the actual pitches of Wagner’s so-called Tristan chord and we recognize in the word-play of *triste* and Tristan Debussy’s penchant for musico-literary games.

[Example 5: Tristan Prelude, II/288-290, IV/690)

But the Tristan chord serves as more than just a musical pun. Debussy employs the Tristan chord and its inversions to draw parallels between the tragedy of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and that of *Tristan und Isolde*. [Table 3]

These examples demonstrate not only Debussy’s indebtedness to Wagner’s vocabulary but also his investigation of an original musical syntax. In finding music for Maeterlinck’s play, Debussy explored harmony as an element of musical symbolism. The half-diminished seventh, or Tristan, chord takes on a referential significance in place of functional harmonic significance. Debussy isolates this harmony as a sound symbol, attenuating or even breaking the bonds of harmonic progression.

Rossetti and Mélisande

Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* presents its central theme, the futility of human endeavour in the face of implacable fate, in several aspects. Throughout the drama one observes instances of frustrated effort: the maidservants unable to clean the threshold in Act I, Scene 1; the poor people trying unsuccessfully to light a fire in the forest in Act III, Scene 5; the gardener, in the same scene, unable to lift a tree which the wind has thrown across the road; Golaud’s abortive attempt at suicide, recounted in Act V, Scene 1.

Maeterlinck’s heavy use of foreshadowing underlines the impotence of his characters. In Act III, Scene 1 Yniold cries that Mélisande is going to leave him, foreshadowing her death; Act III, Scene 3 anticipates the theme of lambs going to slaughter; in Act IV, Scene 1 Pelléas tells Mélisande, “This morning I had a presentiment that this day would end badly.” In Act IV, Scene 4 he says, “You are so lovely that one would say you are going to die.”

The characters themselves articulate the hopelessness of their situation, their inability to carry out their intentions. In Act IV, Scene 4 Pelléas says, “We don’t do what we want to do.” Instead the characters are left in a permanent state of waiting, resignation and bewilderment. In Act II, Scene 4 Arkel says, “We only wait until we know what must take place before long.” In Act II, Scene 2 Golaud says, “We must take

things as they come.” In Act V, Scene 2 the doctor observes that Mélisande was born without reason and dies without reason.

I hope some of you are scratching your heads at this point. If these examples seem unfamiliar it is because the words do not appear in Debussy’s opera: the composer eliminated each of the passages in question when he set Maeterlinck’s play to music. Wherever possible Debussy reduced the amount of foreshadowing, excised expressions of futility and deleted gratuitous instances of frustration. Debussy evidently found Maeterlinck’s fatalism uncongenial; it was not this that attracted him to the play.

To determine the real subject of Debussy’s opera it may be helpful to place it within the context of his other works based on a text, particularly the songs. A survey of the poems which Debussy chose to set to music reveals a striking preoccupation with a particular type of woman. This ideal woman has blue eyes and long, blond hair. She is young, almost a child, often somewhat frail. She is pale of complexion and her long hair often takes on an erotic significance. [Table 5]

The mysterious, wraith-like heroines of Edgar Allan Poe, which exercised such a hold on Debussy’s imagination, also stirred the mind of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who pursued the figure of the beautiful woman throughout his career. Rossetti’s “Blessed Damozel” inspired Debussy’s cantata *La Damselle élue*. Rossetti’s poem, written in 1847, adopted the beautiful woman as an image for the poet’s introspection and the symbol for an ideal existence beyond the reality of the present world. The figure of the beautiful woman also appears prominently in the Symbolist poems which Debussy set to music. Mallarmé directly associates the figure of the beautiful woman with an ideal existence in *Soupir*, where the blue of her eyes is identified both with the sky and with a world beyond, and where the fountain symbolizes aspiration toward the ideal of “*l’Azur*.” All three of the poems which Debussy selected for his “Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé” share this image of the beautiful woman as the agent by which the poet may pass from the real to the ideal.

The motif of long, flowing hair may be observed in a drawing which Debussy made for a book by his friend René Peter. It is tempting to look for the same characteristics in the women that appear in Debussy’s own life. The composer described Rosalie Texier, who became his first wife, this way: “She is unbelievably fair and pretty, like some character from an old legend. Also she is not in the least ‘modern-style.’” (Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*. New York: Macmillan, 1962, Vol.1, p.108) Camille Claudel, though not blond-haired, has been described by Debussy’s biographer as “an ethereal, beautiful woman.” Yvonne Lerolle, the seventeen-year-old girl to whom Debussy dedicated his *Images* (unpublished) in 1894, appears in a portrait by Renoir, “Christine et Yvonne Lerolle,” with hair reaching nearly to her waist. Gabrielle Dupont, who spent around ten years with Debussy, had dyed blond hair. In 1902, three years after their separation, Debussy sent her a copy of *Pelléas et Mélisande* with the inscription, “To Gaby, princess of the mysterious realm of Allemonde. From her old devoted Claude Debussy.” Of course, as Antoine Goléa points out, “In ten years of patient and loving labour, Debussy lived more and more in the intimacy of his personages, to the point that the question of whether a ‘real’ Mélisande existed in his life

seems nearly pointless.” (Antoine Goléa, *Pelléas et Mélisande: Analyse poétique et musicale*. Paris: Imprimerie du Château-Rouge, 1962, p.20)

By the 1890's the figure of the ideal woman had become a decorative device, even appearing on a poster for salad oil. For Debussy, however, the figure of the beautiful woman seems to have retained its original creative force. The personage of Mélisande, as created by Maurice Maeterlinck, represents an extreme version of the fair lady. She is a pallid, frail creature, oppressed to tears by the darkness of Allemonde and its surrounding forest. At the end of the play she dies mysteriously, without reason. Always she is associated with water.

Above all, Maeterlinck seems to have been fascinated by the motif of Mélisande's hair. In the scene by the fountain Mélisande's hair slips into the water and she remarks, “Yes, it is longer than my arms; it is longer than I am.” The Tower opens with Mélisande standing at the window combing her unbound hair. When she leans over to reach Pelléas her hair suddenly streams down to envelope him, an experience that he describes rapturously. Then he binds Mélisande's hair to a branch in order to keep her prisoner. Hair symbolism moves from the erotic to the sadistic in the following act when Golaud seizes Mélisande by the hair, throws her to her knees, and drags her back and forth along the floor.

In creating a musical representation of Mélisande Debussy deliberately avoided traditional operatic techniques. Mélisande has no arias to sing, aside from a brief bit of unaccompanied song at the beginning of Act III. Rather, Debussy employs techniques derived from Wagnerian music drama, as well as methods of his own, to capture the elusive Mélisande in music.

In Act V Arkel describes Mélisande as “a little creature, so calm, so shy, and so still.” Quite early in the composition of the opera Debussy discovered silence as a means of expression, as he wrote in 1893: “I made use, quite spontaneously as it happens, of a means which seemed to me rather uncommon, that is to say, of silence (don't laugh!) as a medium of expression and perhaps the only way to make the most of the emotion of a phrase.” (Claude Debussy, *Esquisses de Pelléas et Mélisande*, Genève: Editions Minkoff, 1977, p.11)

One form of silence inheres in Maeterlinck's play: Mélisande speaks far fewer words than the other main characters. This tendency towards silence carries over in Debussy's musical treatment of the text. Debussy reinforces this association with another kind of silence: the orchestra falls silent when Mélisande experiences strong emotion, most commonly fear, leaving the vocal line unaccompanied. The pattern is set in the orchestral silence accompanying Mélisande's very first words in the opera, the panic-stricken “Don't touch me, or I'll throw myself into the water.” Through the use of silence Debussy emphasizes the isolation of Mélisande as a creature not of this world, a delicate, insubstantial image of another existence. [Table 6]

A second method by which Debussy creates his musical characterization of Mélisande involves a kind of tonal symbolism based on the key of F# major. Even

listeners without perfect pitch are likely to remark the special sonority of an F# major triad played on stringed instruments, the result of both the acoustical properties of the instrument itself and the psychological tension of players approaching a less frequently-used tonality. Violin players have described the sonority as rich and resonant, but also veiled.

There is some evidence in the preliminary drafts of Act IV, Scene 4, the scene with which Debussy commenced his setting of Maeterlinck's play, to suggest that the composer initially intended a simple correspondence between the tonality of F# major and the character of Mélisande, moving to this key area for her speeches, for example. Debussy soon replaced this scheme with a more subtle symbolism using the tonic chord on F# or G flat to link the character of Mélisande with references to light and to sight, especially to preternatural vision. [Table 7]

The most striking example of this practice was very likely the first to be composed: Pelléas's response to Mélisande's declaration of love in Act IV, Scene 4. He sings, "Your voice must have come to me over the sea in the spring!" while the orchestra plays the melody known as "Declared Love."

[Example 7: IV/630-633]

In each case Debussy uses strings as the basis of the orchestration, generally with a woodwind instrument playing a solo line, to set off these passages with the special sonority of F#. Debussy's use of key symbolism, like his use of silence, separates Mélisande from the other characters. By emphasizing the association between Mélisande and light, Debussy underlines a basic theme of the drama: the brief illumination of the darkness of Allemonde by the brightness of Mélisande's presence.

In light of these observations we may be inclined to modify the traditional view of Debussy's opera as the faithful translation of Maeterlinck's play to another medium. Debussy rejected the deterministic philosophy underlying Maeterlinck's drama and took every opportunity to minimize its impact by deleting lines and even entire scenes. Rather, Debussy seems to have been attracted to the character of Mélisande as the embodiment of the beautiful woman whose countenance and personality constantly recur in the poetry which he chose to set to music.

Debussy's letters attest to his preoccupation with Mélisande: "I have spent days in pursuit of this 'mere nothing' of which she is made." He enjoys the conceit of referring to her as a real woman: "Mélisande, with that sweet, morbid voice by which you know her, told me: 'Forget those petty fools, sweethearts of the cosmopolitan crowd, and save your dreams for my hair, you know very well that no other love compares with ours.'" (Claude Debussy, *Esquisses de Pelléas et Mélisande*, Genève: Editions Minkoff, 1977, p.13,14)

Through the expressive use of silence and tonal symbolism Debussy linked the outer aspects of Mélisande's appearance—her hair, her eyes, her physical beauty—to the inner elements of her personality—her beguiling innocence, her childlike sense of wonder and

terror. For Maeterlinck, the conflict of light and darkness ended inevitably in the extinction of light. For Debussy, Mélisande's illuminating presence was more compelling than a philosophy of fatalism expressed in symbolic conflict.

While the image of the beautiful woman may have lost much of its creative power for the artists of the Art Nouveau movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century, for Debussy the image retained the inspirational force experienced by Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Far from being a mere decorative emblem, the figure of the fair lady provided Debussy with a point of focus during a critical period in his artistic career.

For Debussy the death of Mélisande was not so much the working out of an ineluctable fate at the unexpected loss of a beloved companion, so that he wrote to a friend in 1895, "I really thought I was going to see you today, but I was taken by surprise by the death of Mélisande, which disturbs me and makes me tremble as I work." (Claude Debussy, *Esquisses de Pelléas et Mélisande*, Genève: Editions Minkoff, 1977, p.18) The music which Debussy composed for the death of Mélisande remains one of the most affecting passages in the opera.

Through symbolic language, connecting the internal to the external and the external to the ideal, Debussy achieved his desire "to sing of my inner landscape with the naïve condor of childhood." And so of *Pelléas et Mélisande* Debussy was able to write, "I do not pretend to have discovered everything in *Pelléas*, but I have tried to clear a path that others will be able to follow, the enlargement of personal discoveries, which will perhaps release dramatic music from the heavy restraint under which it has lived for so long." (Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p.63) In *Pelléas et Mélisande* Debussy discovered an alternative to the Wagnerian synthesis and laid the foundation of a new musical language. The opera that he imagined years before its text had even been written served as a prism separating the amorphous white light of literary and artistic influences of *la belle époque* into specific lines of development which would constitute the composer's legacy for generations to come.