SYMBOL AND MOTIVE IN DEBUSSY'S
PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

By

Patrick L. Simpson, B. A.
Denton, Texas
August, 1967
FOREWORD

It is not by accident that virtually every important study of Debussy's life or works (including the recent and definitive biography by Edward Lockspeiser) has been made from a psychological viewpoint. The peculiar nature of the composer's art, resulting from his intimate ties with the French symbolist poets and his contacts with many other extra-musical influences, makes such an approach not only advantageous, but necessary.

In this brief study of Pelléas et Mélisande, the composer's only completed music drama, an attempt will be made to trace these many and varied influences, correlate them with the composer's musical style, and thus arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of this remarkable work, along with its place in the history of the music drama.

The actual study of the structure of the opera will give equal consideration to both the literary and the musical elements. As the unique quality of this work is grasped, the justification of such an approach will perhaps be verified.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**FORWORD** .......................................................... iii

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS** ......................................... v

**Chapter**

I. **INTRODUCTION** ................................................. 1

II. **INFLUENCES** ................................................... 7

III. **THE MUSICAL FABRIC OF PELLEAS** ......................... 19

IV. **SYMBOLS AND MOTIVES IN THE DRAMA** ................. 33

V. **EPILOGUE** ..................................................... 76

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ................................................... 80
## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Act I, Page 5, Measure 7, to Page 6, Measure 3(^1)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Act I, Page 30, Measures 7-10</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Act I, Page 31, Measures 6-7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Act IV, Page 337, Measures 3-6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Act I, Page 1, Measures 1-4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Act I, Page 1, Measures 5-6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Act I, Page 2, Measures 5-6</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Act I, Page 2, Measures 7-9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Act I, Page 7, Measures 8-9</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Act I, Page 8, Measures 7-8</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Act I, Page 9, Measures 5-6</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Act I, Page 10, Measures 5-6</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Act I, Page 17, Measure 3</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Act I, Page 34, Measures 3-5</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Act I, Page 35, Measures 3-4</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Act I, Page 40, Measures 1-3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)The page numbers cited in the figures refer to the Durand edition of the orchestral score (Paris, 1950) of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18. Act I, Page 46, Measures 1-2</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Act II, Page 70, Measures 1-2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Act II, Page 71, Measure 9</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Act II, Page 94, Measures 8-12</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Act II, Page 105, Measure 7, to Page 106, Measure 2</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Act III, Page 175, Measures 1-3</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Act III, Page 217, Measures 3-6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Act III, Page 218, Measures 1-4</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Act IV, Page 333, Measures 7-8</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Act V, Page 365, Measures 1-2</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Act V, Page 365, Measure 5</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Act V, Page 392, Measure 3</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Act IV, Page 396, Measures 4-5</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1892, Claude Debussy came into possession of a copy of Pelléas et Mélisande, a symbolist play in five acts by the Belgian playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck. The work must have immediately seized the attention of the young Debussy, for correspondence with Chausson in September, 1893, reveals that Debussy had already approached Maeterlinck on the subject of acquiring permission to use the play as a libretto for an opera.

Although details of the first meeting of the two minds vary from source to source, it seems to be agreed that there was an atmosphere of amiability. Permission was granted generously and unconditionally by the author.\(^1\) There was no foreshadowing at this time of the complete breakdown in relations that was to occur at the time of the premiere of the completed opera.

According to recent sources that seem to contradict the accepted tradition that Debussy labored the greater part of

\(^1\)Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind (London, 1965), II, 200.
ten years on Pelléas, we find that the work was completed in nearly final form by the summer of 1895.\(^2\) Nevertheless, Debussy made a great number of small corrections in the score, even up to the time of the final rehearsals before the opening performance in 1902. The orchestration was not worked out in detail until the last few months before the rehearsals were to begin, and the full score was not prepared until a still later date.

The resultant combination of Maeterlinck's verse with Debussy's music was one of the most singular works of art in the annals of the music drama.

On one point there can be no debate: Pelléas is a unique opera, if only in the sense that Debussy never wrote another. In this it has something in common with Fidelio--but the absurdity of such a bracketing suggests that Pelléas is unique in other ways as well. What are they? Quality of text; quality of sound; the relationship between the two.\(^3\)

It has been often pointed out that the plot of Pelléas has many resemblances to the Tristan legend.\(^4\) We find in the story the helpless and innocent Melisande forced into marriage with Golaud. Oppressed by the gloom of his ancestral castle, her life suddenly takes on new meaning through

\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 192-195.

\(^3\)Frank Merkling, "This Ultimate Dim Thule," Opera News (December 28, 1953), p. 5.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 6.
her attraction for Golaud's half-brother, Pelléas. The unfortunate lovers are led through a series of hopeless entanglements that are resolved only through death, which is, indeed, seen to be the only certainty of life.

Through our consideration of this work, it will be well to observe the various literary influences that exerted a powerful effect on the mind of the young Debussy. Few composers have been so profoundly affected by artistic movements outside the realm of music.

Paris . . . was in one of its chronic spasms of literary and artistic ferment. A cult of sensuous hedonism had swung ideals away from the objectivity of the Parnassians and other groups proceeding from the philosophy of Comte. Taine, Renan, Flaubert and the Goncourts had been dethroned in favor of Poe and the Pre-Raphaelites. It was the era of symbolism in poetry, of impressionism in painting. Intellectual circles talked of correlating the arts in the kind of kinship to which Baudelaire had pointed by trying to express ideas in corresponding sounds. At Mallarmé's historic "Tuesdays," Verlaine, Pierre Louÿs and other poets of the avant-garde read experiments in a style intended to suggest sensory stimuli; Whistler and Odilon Redon discoursed upon symphonies in color; Robert de Montesquiou, from whom Proust's Baron de Charlus was drawn, preached a synthesis of sounds, scents and colors such as Scriabin later developed. A rival gathering-place for the exchange of hedonistic theories about art was the Libraire de L'Art Independent, a bookshop founded by Edouard Dujardin, the novelist generally credited with inventing the literary device of the interior monologue.

Debussy frequented both salons, for he had a natural affinity--partly genuine, partly a form of snobbery--with practitioners of arts other than his own. Most young French musicians of the 1880's had been engulfed by the Wagnerian tidal wave. A high-thinking minority,
swayed by the transcendental speculations of César Franck, had formed a school around the aging master. But Debussy remained outside both currents. With the possible exception of Erik Satie, archenemy of formalized art and composer of "trifles" (to the uninitiate) that anticipated later trends by a half-century, no French musician affected him. Instead, the poets and painters of late-nineteenth-century Paris helped him to master the musical language toward which he had been reaching since his earliest student days—a language, in his own words, of "inconstant moods, neither major nor minor, but both at the same time... of rhythm of infinite variety... of supple contours adapted to capturing fleeting impressions and evoking dreams."5

In consideration of the score of Pelléas, we can begin to see how Debussy carried through his artistic intentions. We will see how he dealt with this new type of literary material in a unique musical manner.

Debussy used the playwright's words exactly as he found them; his cuts were prudently few. He never expanded the sentiment of the moment into an aria or a chorus, never changed tempo into something more comfortable to the musician, never obscured a single one of Maeterlinck's arsenal of symbols. His musical treatment, moreover, was such as to allow the play to come through unscathed in its own terms; there has never been an opera, even in the days of the dilettantes of the Florentine camerata, in which literary values have been so humbly preserved. A few other composers—Mussorgsky, Strauss, Berg—have attempted a tour de force of setting a spoken play verbatim as a libretto, but they have all been much rougher with their material than Debussy.6


Not only in treatment of the text did the composer break with tradition. His concept of the role of the orchestra is also one of effective restraint.

In Debussy's scheme, music never takes over the expression of the drama, as it does for all other opera composers; he never transforms the play, as Gluck, Verdi, and Mussorgsky did. Rather his music beautifully supports the play, clarifies it, makes it more vivid and credible; but the play remains a play in essentially verbal, literary terms. It is necessary to follow every word.7

As for the vocal writing, this could form a complete study in itself. The entire opera may be said to be in accompanied recitative. The vocal line shows no purely musical coherence in that it always adheres closely to every inflection of the text.8

This uniqueness of approach harks back to a particularly personal philosophy of opera taken by Debussy. It seems only natural that a composer so profoundly influenced by literature would, as a consequence, emphasize the literary aspects of the music drama. It was not a careless statement uttered by Debussy to the singers at the first production of Pelléas when he asked that above all they forget that they were singers.9 There is no paradox here: his statement expresses

7Ibid., p. 13. 8Ibid., pp. 13-15.
his particular belief in the power of the spoken word. On this point *Pelléas et Mélisande* stands on its singular aesthetic grounds. The work may not be great opera, but it is great art.
CHAPTER II

INFLUENCES

The first performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique on April 30, 1902, marked a success for its composer, Claude Debussy, in ways that went far beyond the mere superficial aspects associated with public respect and recognition. It was for Debussy an event that would continue to increase in significance during the remaining fourteen years of his life. For this remarkable work represented the solidification of an artistic truth after which the composer had been searching. And, although he was to continue branching out in many directions from this point forward, the essential stylistic and philosophical goals of his life's work had been set.

Certainly, there is no denying the considerable public recognition gained by the composer at the time of this premiere. Unfortunately, much of the enthusiasm was a brand that the composer could hardly find to his advantage.

Innocuous as *Pelléas* may seem to us today, something in this all too simple work had struck deep into the minds of the public of that time, and as a result of fierce controversies, Debussy was now mercilessly held in the limelight, the unwilling leader of a school, the creator of a "system," the musician of the present
and the future. The remaining sixteen years of his life were spent battling with this public image. He was seldom willing to accept it; more often this pre-conceived notion of his role merely drove him to retire into further depths of his inner being.\(^1\)

During his early years Debussy's artistic explorations moved in two different directions, the first of which had rather negative aspects. When the composer entered the Paris Conservatory in October, 1873, at the age of twelve, he found himself in an atmosphere heavily laden with Wagner-worship. In addition, he was educated in the spirit of the late nineteenth-century academic reverence for the classics, and in an attitude of tradition-for-the-sake-of-tradition. These were his surroundings for nearly eleven years, during which time a negative response to the above became a persistent aspect of his art.

The second and positive direction is represented by his desire to recapture the refinement and elegance of the great pre-Classical French masters.\(^2\) This he blended with an intensely personal style born out of a great number of extra-musical influences, many of which have already been mentioned.

---

\(^1\)Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, II, 3.

There are many more influences that belong to this very personal style. His great feeling for the beauties of nature is most striking in Pelleas, as in many of his other works. Here there is the revelation through Maeterlinck's words as well as Debussy's music of a mysterious and intense communication with nature itself.

Nature holds in ambivalent embrace this melancholy realm of old, cold castles, endless grottoes, bottomless pools. We hear of stifling noontides that yield to fog, of nightly storms and rough seas. When death comes, it comes with a sunset on the sea, in late autumn.3

Indeed, from the early Printemps of 1887 and its connection with Botticelli's Primavera, through Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune of 1894 and associations with Mallarmé's most famous poem of the same title, and even up to La Mer of 1905 and the Images of 1911, we find a desire for closeness with the natural world. This is not to mention other smaller works including the many piano works and the song texts that deal with various subjects of nature.

Another aspect of Pelleas, noticeable in many of Debussy's other works, is the fascination exerted upon the composer by civilizations of antiquity.4 In the opera it is

3Merkling, p. 6.

4Ibid., pp. 6-7.
the Middle Ages. Not only is the setting of Allemonde, the world of Maeterlinck's imagination, medieval in character, but the very musical substance is of an archaic flavor. The parallel chords, modal and pentatonic scales, empty fourths and fifths all belong to this realm.

Debussy's interests did not end with the Middle Ages. References to ancient Greece and other archaic civilizations abound in the evocative titles of the many piano pieces, as well as in the song texts. In addition, we have often heard of the composer's fascination with Javanese and other Oriental music, and of his introduction of exotic and archaic scales and sonorities into various compositions.5

The most important single aspect of Debussy's work, and one which is intimately associated with all of the other aspects, is his preoccupation with the realm of the dream and the subconscious mind. This was an immediate consequence (or perhaps the cause) of his intimate ties with both the French symbolist poets and the Impressionist painters. Here we come face to face with the artistic truths shared by Debussy with these artists in related fields. These truths are most evident in Pelléas et Mélisande, because of the immediate merger of music with a symbolist play.

5Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, I, 113-115.
In the opera the philosophical ideas communicated are presented in a dreamlike way by means of a series of poetical and musical symbols found on various levels of perception. Even the characters themselves are symbols.

... the child Yniold, helpless and puzzled by what he sees; Golaud, who can watch Mélisande only through the child's uncomprehending eyes; Arkel, wiser than most but half blind, affecting the destinies of those around him by his well-meaning noninterference.

The strength of these symbols lies in their simplicity, their directness and their repetition from time to time during the play. We may use a figure of speech so habitually that we rarely notice it, but when the same imagery appears a dozen times in the course of a work, sometimes in a dialogue, sometimes in action, we are compelled to pay attention and to see beyond its familiarity. The old king is blind. The well is supposed to open the eyes of the blind. Golaud's horse runs like a blind fool. Pelléas is "a blind man fleeing from his burning house." Golaud is "a blind man looking for his treasure at the bottom of the ocean"--a particularly telling simile in a play where the heroine is continually losing things under water. There is no need to emphasize the meaning at any one time; the light touch, which leaves room for the imagination to work, is enough.6

In like manner Mallarmé, Verlaine, Louys, Baudelaire, Proust and others, all of whom Debussy knew through their works, if not personally, were intimately concerned with the inmost workings of the human mind as revealed through the dream and the symbol.7 The ideas they sought to communicate

---


7 Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, II, 190-192.
in this disturbed Victorian society were many and varied. Essentially, however, they hark back to a desire for security in a world that seemed to promise little.\textsuperscript{8} Material advances in science, a re-evaluation of traditional religion, and Darwin and Freud were driving the artist towards new realms of expression.

There is in \textit{ Pelléas} a certain moral relativity, a tempered but universal sympathy for humankind... And then there is, after all, that captivating quality of remoteness... If the Victorian era had many salutary aspects (and we are beginning to appreciate that it had), it still suffered from one uncurable malady. That was a closed horizon. Somewhere between 1837 and 1901, the last corner of the earth was charted; somewhere the machine first looked like a master rather than a servant; somewhere, it is whispered, God died. As a direct consequence, one may say, \textit{Allemonde} is blessed with a horizon that is unlimited. The known world is so small, the known fact so inclusive, the known experience so particular. Beyond stretches a frontier of infinite possibility, and the only boundary is death itself. This is the essence of mystery. It is what makes the Middle Ages seem so alluringly inaccessible to modern man.\textsuperscript{9}

Erich Fromm's comments on the nature of the symbolic writing in Franz Kafka's \textit{The Trial} provide us with much parallel material for consideration in connection with Maeterlinck's work.

An outstanding example of a work of art written in symbolic language is Kafka's \textit{The Trial}. As in so many

\textsuperscript{8}Merkling, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., p. 30.
dreams, events are presented, each of which is in itself concrete and realistic; yet the whole is impossible and fantastic. The novel, in order to be understood, must be read as if we listened in a dream—a long, complicated dream in which external events happen in space and time, being representations of thoughts and feelings within the dreamer, in this case the novel's hero, K.10

Thus, in *The Trial*, as well as in *Pelleas et Melisande*, reality is expressed through the vehicle of the dream.

This brings us directly to the very important Debussy-Poe relationship. Concerned here are two of the unfinished works of Debussy—both projected operas. It is most interesting to observe that the final work with which Debussy concerned himself during the last days of his life as he lay dying of cancer, and France itself was crumbling before the onslaught of the Germans in 1918, was *La Chute de la Maison Usher*, based on *The Fall of the House of Usher*, a short story by Edgar Allan Poe. The tale was adapted into a libretto by Debussy himself.

Only fragments of the music survive.11 What has become of the remainder, if it ever actually existed, is not known. What interests us here is both the fascination that Poe held for Debussy (a fascination held by symbolist poets as well),

---


and the particular nature of the story of The Fall of the House of Usher, its theme and symbols.

In Debussy's letters to Durand (his publishers) between 1908 and 1917, we find many references to his work on this Poe opera, including a complete revision of the libretto in 1916. During the years following the completion of Pelléas, work on this and on another projected opera based on Poe's The Devil in the Belfry proceeded sporadically.

We may find many great character similarities in Pelléas and Usher. The most striking parallels are the characters of Pelléas and Roderick Usher. Mélisande finds her similarity in the character of Lady Madeleine, but could be related as well to almost any of Poe's female characters, in their delicacy and destiny to die of some mysterious illness. The setting of each story is equally dark and gloomy, each with its mysterious tarns, musty vaults, and a theme that includes implications of incest.

The impact made by Poe on Debussy needs to be assessed in two distinct spheres: the practical sphere where far-reaching plans were made for the use of Poe's tales as librettos for operas; and the imaginative sphere where Poe's ideas are seen to be associated with the mood or sensibility of one or another of Debussy's works. . . . Debussy considered these settings of The House of Usher and The Devil in the Belfry as among the

12Ibid., p. 106.
few projects during his later years on which his heart was set, as opposed to the numerous works commissioned for one material reason or another. The letters addressed to Durand, Godet, Caplet, and Laloy, extending over eight years, reveal that his feelings were more deeply engaged in *Usher* and *Le Diable dans le Beffroi* than in *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien*, even than in the orchestral *Images* and *Jeux*. Often too, these letters disclose a network of associations illuminating not only the impact made by Poe's tales on his imagination but some of the more subtle processes of artistic creation.13

Much is revealed here that will take on a deeper meaning as we explore the realms of the dream in *Pelléas*. These symbols were to remain with the composer to the very end of his life. The very fact that he helplessly tried to complete *The House of Usher* as he lay on his deathbed confirms and illuminates our observations that Debussy identified himself with the character of Roderick Usher.

... We have a curious letter, dated 25 August 1909, to Andre Caplet: ... I have recently been living in the House of Usher which is not exactly the place where one can look after one's nerves--just the opposite. One develops the curious habit of listening to the stones as if they were in conversation with one another and of expecting houses to crumble to pieces as if this were not only natural but inevitable. Moreover, if you were to press me I should confess that I like these people more than many others--not to name them. I have no confidence in the normal, well-balanced type of person.14

13Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, II, pp. 141-142.

14Ibid., pp. 142-144.
The composer's death, in the midst of what seemed the darkest hours of his country's history up to that time, was itself like an event out of Poe's nightmarish chronicles. Debussy was destined to die, moreover, of a disease that was of such a nature that he had to suffer considerable physical pain, undergo a series of useless operations and treatments, and in the end slowly dissolve mentally from the drugs administered to ease his suffering.

These facts may seem to bear little relevance in relation to one another, still less to the study of an operatic masterpiece; but we are here dealing with music of such a remarkably individual character, where so many influences come to have surprising significance, that it becomes necessary to move through psychological realms that may at first seem unrelated to our topic. But the nature of this art is such that it demands deeper investigation, if we are to come to a fuller understanding and more meaningful appreciation. Just as a superficial examination of Mozart's The Magic Flute may reveal to us a certain level of musical and artistic understanding, so much more do we learn by examining the work in light of the composer's Masonic influences. In Debussy the problem is even more acute: for the very fabric and tissue out of which Pelléas is constructed begins to
take on new meaning when we look at it in the light of
great artistic and social movements of which the composer
was most intimately a part.

In conclusion it is interesting to cite extracts from
one particular series of reviews that appeared at the time
of the first performances of Pelleas. The reviewer is Gaston
Carraud. His views reveal great artistic intelligence and
keen judgment that appear in sharp contrast to the rest of
the early critical reaction to the work, much of which only
served to demonstrate the utter dismay and often outright
antagonism that was brought on by the novel character of
Debussy's music.15

"In his score, everything seems subordinate to the
words. Throughout the work, the declamation, which is
remarkable for its fluency and ease, seems to be en-
tirely concerned with accuracy of expression. It is
more rapid and flowing than the Wagnerian declamation,
more uniform too, and more intimately connected with
the music. It is faithfully modelled upon the simplic-
ity of our gentle tongue. Though closely akin to the
spoken word, it is yet tuneful; it merges in the accom-
panying harmony, tingeing it with the shimmering re-
fections of its harmonies and sonorities.... The
harmonic concatenations defy analysis, yet they sound
natural and clear. The tonality is often impossible to
determine, yet one has the impression of tonality. The
short, arresting, suggestive motifs are no sooner for-
mulated, than they vanish to make way for others, and
then flash back for an instant. The music subject-matter

15Leon Vallas, Claude Debussy, His Life and Works,
translated by Maire and Grace O'Brien (London, 1933), pp. 124-
130.
is subdivided to the utmost degree, yet nothing could be more uniform or consistent. This music makes not the slightest concession to tradition, convention, or custom; it repudiates all that is hackneyed, showy, or commonplace; it seems to roam with the same vagabond freedom as thought itself; and yet it has a proportion, a balance and a progression of its own. It has a form which is subject to the laws of symmetry, as all music should be; but this symmetry remains a secret; one is conscious of it without being able to ascertain its form. . . . '16

The last sentence seems a particularly appropriate commentary on the nature of the symbolist drama. In a later review there appeared the following:

'M. Debussy is really a classical composer. I am not speaking paradoxically. After the unbridled romanticism to which music has fallen prey, he has the lucidity, the tact, the restraint, and the sense of proportion that characterize the classic composers. He has the same controlled emotion as they; he has their charm and dignity of expression, their scorn of emphasis, exaggeration, and mere effect. . . . The music exists for the sake of its own beauty, its own delight. M. Debussy takes his place, more definitely than even Wagner, amongst the sensualists in music, of whom Mozart was the greatest.'17

16Ibid., p. 131.

17Ibid.
CHAPTER III

THE MUSICAL FABRIC OF PELLEAS

Already, in our introductory material, we have touched upon a number of the stylistic features of Pelleas. Through further study, we shall observe that even though the score does contain some of the most subtle and introverted music in all of its composer's works, it is, nevertheless, thoroughly Debussyan in all respects, having affinities with much of the vocal and instrumental music that preceded and followed it. The striking differences that set the work off from all preceding works in the musical-dramatic category will become apparent as we continue to study some of the most important features of its musical structure.

The work holds its unique position in the theatre because of (1) the word setting, which enables the sung text to move with almost the naturalness of speech; (2) the suggestive background of the orchestra, which supplies for the drama what may be termed a tonal envelope, without constituting itself either an accompaniment for the singers or a series of symphonic expansions in competition with them; (3) the mood expressiveness of the score, which in its reticence and lack of emotional stress takes on the mystery of the other, and ends in being profoundly human in its sympathy and its pathos.¹

¹Oscar Thompson, Debussy, Man and Artist (New York, 1937), pp. 347-348.
This much seems now apparent. With a still closer examination of the score, much of the vagueness of detail seems to gather focus. Debussy's basic technique is seen to be based on carefully timed shifts in rhythm and harmony, on a style of vocal writing that alternates between various gradations of song and recitative, on the use of motives with psychological associations, and on a conception of the orchestra as a vast chamber ensemble fully participating in the drama.²

Debussy's own ideals concerning harmony have already been cited. Tonal ambiguity is often used as an expression of loss or bewilderment. At other times, moments of profound emotion give way to simple, primitive chords. Anxiety or terror may be expressed by bare seconds, fourths, or fifths.³ The composer's wide range of harmonic expressiveness is called on to bring out every detail of the emotional inflections of Maeterlinck's text.

The rhythm, too, shows the same degree of variety and resourcefulness.

The prelude to Act I, consisting of no more than twenty-two bars, makes use of eight different rhythmic

²Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, I, 197-198.
³Ibid., p. 198.
figures. It is, in fact, a miniature overture of intensely concentrated expression. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that melodic ideas are not developed in symphonic fashion. Where the scenic action is continuous or the mood consistent, symphonic development is obviously demanded and the rhythmic basis of a theme is then expanded on a broad scale. . . . Such passages, introduced to mark emphasis or continuity, offer a dramatic contrast to the freely drawn recitative. 4

With regard to motivic development, here is one of the few points that Debussy's musical-dramatic organization has in common with Wagner's. The main difference in Debussy lies in the fact that the voices do not participate in this development. This task is given entirely to the orchestra. The motives and their variants often appear in the orchestral interlude immediately preceding the scene in which they undergo development, thus "setting the stage" for the action to follow. Of course, the appearance on stage of a given character or emotion is often accompanied by an appropriate motive or motivic variant.

Debussy's use of the orchestra follows Wagnerian concepts in the principle of continuous development. Here the resemblance ends. The texture is far lighter mainly because traditional doublings are rarely used. The strings are often divided, sometimes in as many as twelve parts; passages for one, two, or more solo strings occur often, and the composer

4Ibid.
may also call for only half the section to play, or only one or two stands. There are seldom any extended tutti passages. Even the double basses are often given independent parts. The bassoons assume a lyrical role; the lower registers of the flutes and clarinets are exploited with marvellous effects. The horns are called on for many rich color effects, and the trumpets and trombones are used sparingly, though effectively.

Much use is made, in all the instrumental choirs, of special color effects. In the strings there is a frequent use of the tremolo, especially the fingered version. There is often the direction, sur la touche, indicating that the player should bow over the fingerboard, thus imparting a veiled quality to the sound produced. The opposite effect, sul ponticello, produced by the player bowing quite close to the bridge, is also requested in various places in the score. The horns are asked to produce a wealth of color effects, with frequent alternation of stopped and open notes clearly designated. Mutes are used in all the instruments as often as not. The harps are called on for a wide variety of atmospheric effects, singly and in combination.

The orchestra of Pelleas is richer than that of L'Après-midi d'un Faune or the Nocturnes, though it is more subdued than that of La Mer or the orchestral Images. It has an ethereal, poetic beauty entirely of
its own, bearing a family resemblance to the orchestra of Parsifal, in which Debussy admired the effects 'illuminated as from behind', but more affecting in detail and subtlety.\(^5\)

The vocal setting of the words is striking in its simplicity and speech-like naturalness (as already described by Carraud). Golaud's opening soliloquy will serve as illustration:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{J' \ no \ pourrais \ plus \ sortir \ de \ cet- \ te \ for \ - \ et!}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Dieu \ c'est \ j'ai \ cet- \ te \ ê \ - \ te \ min \ me \ - \ né.}
\end{array}
\]

Fig. 1--Act I, page 5, measure 7, to page 6, measure 3.

The narrow compass of this line is characteristic of the vocal writing throughout the work.\(^6\) In fact, the range of a fourth or fifth seems to suffice not only for the vocal writing, but, as we shall see, for much of the melodic material in the orchestra as well. In another illustration from Geneviève's monologue in Act I, scene II, we find a

---

5Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, I, 199.

chant-like declamation with frequent repetitions of a single tone. Again notice the narrow compass, as well as the use of the Phrygian mode. Notice, however, the introduction of a foreign note (creating the interval of a diminished fourth) to emphasize the intense expression on the word *sanglote* (sobbing).

"Un soir, je l'ai trouvée tout en pleurs au bord d'une fontaine, dans la forêt où je m'étais perdu.

Fig. 2--Act I, page 30, measures 7-10.

el-lo pleu-re tout à coup comme un enfant, et san-glo-te,

Fig. 3--Act I, page 31, measures 6-7.

Indeed, only in times of great emotion does the vocal line really launch into song. The final scene of Act IV, where Méliande and Pelléas meet for the last time, provides many examples of passionate lyrical writing:
This very restrained vocal style, where melodic writing is held in reserve for the most intense emotional moments, is not only in accord with the Classical French practice, such as we find in the operas of Lully and Rameau, but is closely related to the even more ancient ideal, that of the early Florentine founders of opera, Peri, Caccini, and Gagliano.\(^7\)

Turning now to consideration of the motivic elements in \textit{Pelléas}, we may first cite the opening four measures of the work in which the orchestra gives forth the opening motive that forms the basis for not only much of the melodic material in the first two scenes, but for the entire opera:

\(^7\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 499.
Fig. 5--Act I, page 1, measures 1-4.

The first scene takes place in a dark forest where the distant and archaic dream-world is suggested by the bare fifths and octaves of the first and third measures, and by the organum-like settings of this same theme in measures eight through eleven. In addition, the presence of only five scale tones in measures one through four gives us the feeling of the pentatonic scale, with a tonal center of D.\(^8\) The use of the pentatonic scale, together with other exotic scales, the modes, and traditional major-minor, is characteristic of Debussy's music from his earliest works.\(^9\)


In sharp contrast to the almost static harmonic quality of the first motive, the second motive appearing in measures five and six has a strong harmonic and rhythmic motion:

The whole-tone scale makes its appearance here, along with its characteristic augmented triads. The first chord might be analyzed in traditional terms as an Italian-sixth with an added note on A-flat which moves not to a dominant chord, but rather to an augmented chord on A-flat with an added note on B-flat.

The tonal ambiguity of the seventh and eighth measures presents interesting problems of interpretation. It is true that the note, D, is emphasized in the melody line, but the bass note, A-flat, exerts a strong pull away from the tonal center established in the first four measures, and receives further emphasis through its repetition on every rhythmic
pulse. Still further emphasis is given by the full bar of A-flat timpani roll in the seventh measure. This insistent tritone relationship occurs throughout much of the entire opera and is closely related to the functions of the whole-tone scale and the augmented triad. It has the effect of dividing the octave into equal parts, much as the twelve-tone system was later to divide the octave into semitones.

Measures twelve and thirteen provide us with an interesting variant of the harmonization of the Golaud motive. Here we see the typical Debussyian non-dominant seventh and eleventh chords (the ninth and thirteenth chords appear often, as well, at various points in the score):

![Winds](image)

Fig. 7--Act I, page 2, measures 5-6.

This harmonization, contrasting with the darker harmonization of measures five and six, gives a freshness and clarity to the motive on its second appearance. The shift
of mode here is striking, moving as it does from the whole-tone scale to the Dorian mode.\textsuperscript{10}

This passage leads us directly to the third and final motive to appear in the opening prelude. This is the motive associated with the character of Mélisande. Like the first motive, it appears first in a pentatonic setting. The oboe announces this theme, high in its most penetrating and expressive register; indeed, this instrument is most frequently associated with the Mélisande motive, throughout the entire opera:

\includegraphics{fig8.png}

\textbf{Fig. 8--Act I, page 2, measures 7-9.}

In these opening bars of \textit{Pelléas}, we come immediately into contact with the essential features of Debussy's harmony, which is in many ways the first truly "modern" approach to harmony of a non-functional nature. Our analytical methods that have served us in earlier music now begin to break down

\textsuperscript{10}John Vincent, \textit{The Diatonic Modes in Modern Music} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1951), pp. 67-68. Also see p. 83.
and we are compelled to seek new viewpoints of interpretation in order to deal with this new philosophical approach to chords and chord-structures.

Several recent studies on Debussy's harmony have tended to seek hidden rules for the nature and succession of his chords and thereby to establish plans of his musical forms of which the exploratory composer himself must surely have been unaware, even subconsciously. Debussy's technique is admittedly difficult to define, but, if only for the reason that it is largely empirical, the key to his technique is not likely to be found in abstract, technical arguments. . . .

. . . later critics less finely attuned to the workings of Debussy's mind attempted to discover a deeper significance in the fleeting nature of his harmony. Arguing that since there is seldom cadential harmony in Debussy's works, only chords which have an isolated, "monistic" value in themselves, Albert Jakobik maintains that the form of a work of Debussy is determined by the relative complexity of his chords. . . .

Other writers have investigated Debussy's use of the Gregorian modes and the pentatonic scales, notably Julis d'Almendra and Constantin Brailoiu, the latter listing no less than 182 examples of the use of pentatonic scales in the works of Debussy, ranging from the early song *Fleur des blés* to the piano studies. This is a most remarkable compilation which allows Brailoiu to put forward the theory, nevertheless debatable, that Debussy knowingly used these scales. On the other hand, the properties of the hexaphonic or whole-tone scale must surely have been prominently in Debussy's conscious mind. If it had not been older than the major and minor scales, the whole-tone scale, used systematically in *L'Isle joyeuse* and *Voiles*, would seem to have been designed for the express purpose of blurring the tonality. . . .

The trouble with technical analyses is that they are likely to degenerate into studies of musical puzzles, of interest to the practitioner of composition if he is so minded, and revealing little relationship to the aesthetic principles which we expect a composer's technique to serve. . . .

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the attraction of French composers--Satie, Duparc, Chausson,
and Ravel, besides Debussy—to the chord of the dominant ninth or, without its fundamental, the diminished seventh, reveals the first tonal ambiguities taking the form of a musical counterpart of Impressionism. The particular property of the chord of the diminished seventh is that it is a pivot, modulating chord which may branch out into one of eight tonalities (four major and four minor). If, however, this chord is not used to modulate into another key but is linked to other seventh chords in the form of a succession a continuous feeling of suspense is created . . . .

Once we recognize this use of chords of the seventh and ninth as a means of creating suspense we have a key to the function of other chords in Debussy's harmony. Jankélevitch draws attention to a feeling not exactly of suspense but to the kindred feeling of rootlessness. This is created by the juxtaposition of common chords, each belonging to a different tonality. Contrasted in this way, these chords do not represent a continuity of musical thought; they do not create a rational musical argument. They merely exist in space, or more precisely in musical time, as if drawn to each other by some kind of astrological "influence."11

And in regard to the subject of dissonance, we once again come to realize that Debussy's ideas on this subject belong entirely to the realm of twentieth-century music.

If Debussy's use of the chord of the seventh and the common chord have these functions of suspense and ambiguity, his use of the interval of the second, either in chords or more often alone, is designed to convey one of the many gradations of feeling between indulgence and irony. . . .

The fact is that the interval of the second, both the major and the minor second which are inversions of the minor and major sevenths were used by Debussy as also by Stravinsky and Bartók as a dissonance having a certain sonorous value in itself, regardless of

11Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, I, 240-241.
its function in a three-or-four-note chord and without any question of its resolution.¹²

This must now suffice as a brief summary of Debussy's compositional methods, and prepare us for a closer examination of the score of Pelléas. We have seen how the literary influences on the composer are many and varied. Likewise, Debussy draws on a vast number of sources of musical material and welds them into one organic style. A realization of the diversity of these influences will now begin to aid us in our further study of the symbolic and motivic aspects of the structure of Pelléas.

¹²Ibid., pp. 240-241.
CHAPTER IV

SYMBOLS AND MOTIVES IN THE DRAMA

Act I

We have seen, in brief consideration of the style of Pelleás, how the first orchestral prelude sets forth the three most important musical motives that are to occur throughout the entire music-drama. The first, consisting of four measures of a chant-like phrase, seems immediately to capture the mood of the setting of the first scene.

This setting is a dark and autumnal forest of the far-away mythical kingdom of Allemonde. Both the musical motive and the literary symbol seem almost archetypal in nature, summoning up not only visual images of some ancient land, but also any number of archaic images, drawn from the depths of the listener's subconscious mind.

The motive associated with the personality of Golaud—actually little more than an obsessively repeated rhythm—interrupts immediately, and alternates with, the Allemonde motive. As the curtain opens, and the scene begins, we observe the sturdy and strong-willed Golaud caught in a most embarrassing situation. He was hunting, and has lost
his way in this unfamiliar forest. From the hesitating quality
of the music, and its frequent changes of rhythm and texture,
we are made aware of this situation (at least subconsciously),
even before the first words are spoken. Mélisande's theme has
already put in its appearance in the prelude, and it is heard
now once again, as we see her frightened and weeping, at the
edge of a spring.

Golaud's wanderings seem to be further emphasized by the
presence of the whole-tone scale, first played by the cellos
and double-basses in undulating triplets (cf. page 5). We
shall further discover how Debussy makes frequent use of a
triplet rhythm to indicate the presence of water, or the sea.

As Golaud discovers the sobbing Mélisande, a rhythmic
variant of her motive appears in the orchestra, played by the
oboe:

Fig. 9--Act I, page 7, measures 8-9.

The motive here is inverted and changed rhythmically.
In this variant, it is interesting to note the intervallic
similarity to the Allemonde motive, a variant of which occurs
only a few measures later:
This preference for the intervals of the fourth and fifth (and the tritone as well), along with the stepwise motion of the second, is quite characteristic of practically all of the thematic permutations throughout the entire score. The variants of both motives have the interesting tritone relationship that was observed earlier in the prelude; that is, the D-to-A-flat-tonal-center relationship between the two opening motives.

As the stage action proceeds, Golaud approaches Mélisande and speaks to her. His cautious approach is heralded by the hollow octaves in the orchestra (Fig. 10), and is contrasted by Mélisande's sudden alarm, represented by unexpected triplet rhythms, rapid harmonic changes, and accelerating tempo (page 8, measures 9-10). This is extremely typical of the great sensitivity with which Debussy follows each emotional inflection on the stage with coincident commentary in the orchestra.
Golaud's attempts to calm the frenzied Mélisande are echoed in the orchestra by somber, slow-moving chords (page 9, measures 6-7). He notices that her garment, though torn by briars, is that of a princess. He is further struck by her great beauty, which inspires another motive in the orchestra:

![String Music Notation]

**Fig. 11--Act I, page 9, measures 5-6.**

Once again the characteristic use of the ninth chord is observed, adding to the richness of the texture.

Two more themes that appear in the next few measures also trace their relationship to the intervals of the second, fourth, and fifth. The first appears when Mélisande proclaims that everyone has done her great harm:

![String Music Notation]

**Fig. 12--Act I, page 10, measures 5-6.**
In the following theme, appearing at the point where Golaud solemnly introduced himself, we see two fifths interlocked, followed by stepwise movement:

\[ \text{bassoons} \]

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{\textcopyright{}}
\end{array} \]

Fig. 13--Act I, page 17, measure 3.

Golaud, on questioning this strange princess, finds that her golden crown has fallen into the spring. He offers to retrieve it, but she forbids it, saying she will throw herself into the water if he should try. This symbol of the crown, one of the most obscure of all the symbols in the drama, has what is often termed a "floating" meaning, such as is found in much symbolist literature, particularly in Kafka. The significance of such a symbol seems to verge on clarity, only to shift suddenly to another remote meaning. This ambiguity of meaning, though often confusing, actually imparts a certain literary strength in that a vast number of emotional implications may be drawn from a single image. The further revelation of the meaning of the crown will be discussed at a later point, as we begin to see new implications with the continuing progress of the drama.
After the incident with the crown has passed, Mélišande is still reluctant to give Golaud much information, only speaking incoherently about being born far away, and being a fugitive lost in these unfamiliar woods. Little by little, she is persuaded by Golaud to follow, although he very ominously admits that he does not know where he is going. "I am lost also."

The musical organization of the first scene, though hardly following traditional principles, and always intimately linked with the subtleties of the literary text, seems, nevertheless, clear and substantial. There is a definite recapitulation of the undulating cello triplets (page 25, and following), and the Allemonde motive, which opens and closes the scene in its original form. We have further observed how all of the melodic material then derives itself from the prime motives set forth in the orchestral prelude.

With regard to derivation of clear-cut melodic material, this opening scene is one of the least economical in the entire opera. Within its one-hundred-and-sixty bars, many new melodies appear constantly, each deriving from the prime motives, each expressive of some particular emotional or dramatic nuance. In succeeding scenes, almost without exception, we shall see how Debussy restricts this melodic derivation more severely.
The harmony in this scene is constantly non-functional in nature, with continued insistence on long pedal points which function to stabilize the persistently ambiguous harmonic movement.

At the close of the scene, the orchestra continues to develop the motivic ideas in the following interlude. The wavy triplet pattern that opened and closed the scene persists for nearly half of this forty-six-bar interlude (see pp. 25-27). This is followed by a powerful statement of the Golaud motive (page 28, measure 5, and following), and again by the theme based on the interlocking fifths that appeared earlier in the scene (cf. Figures 13 and 14). This subtle connection between the Golaud motive ending of scene one and the gentle woodwind arpeggios that open scene two, could easily go unnoticed, so dissimilar are the two themes:

\[ \text{flutes, clarinets, oboes} \]

Fig. 14--Act I, page 30, measures 1-2.

The action of the beginning of this scene proceeds as follows: the setting is a hall in a castle by the sea, half a year later. Geneviève, mother of the half-brothers Pelléas
and Golaud, reads to the aged and half-blind King Arkel a letter which Golaud has written to Pelléas, in which he tells of his impending return with his bride, Mélisande. Although six months have lapsed since the marriage, Golaud admits that he knows as little about her past as he did the day on which they first met.

The atmosphere of the beginning of this scene is a marvelous study in Debussy's ability to suggest in the music the surroundings of the ancient castle, its dark chambers and gloomy towers. The beautiful recitation of Golaud's letter by Geneviève has already been cited as an example of the chant-like quality of much of the vocal writing (see Figures 2 and 3). This line is supported by only a few sparse chords in the orchestra (pages 30-34). The effect, very simple and restrained, is greatly moving.

Also moving is the manner in which Debussy lets the five notes of Mélisande's motive gently intrude on the vocal line as the end of the letter is reached (see page 34, measure 4). Arkel's reaction, measured, yet showing great wisdom and compassion, is introduced by yet another theme based on the interlocking fifths:
Fig. 15--Act I, page 34, measures 3-5.

Several measures later another theme appears also showing characteristic intervallic relationships to the three main motives that appeared in the first orchestral prelude. Here again are the intervals of the second and fourth:

This brief scene is thus concerned with the continuing development in the orchestra of the above themes, as well as the Mélisande motive. The climactic point of the scene seems to have been reached as Arkel utters prophetic words that seem to have rather Freudian overtones: "It may well be that there occur no events that are without meaning" (page 38). Arkel
had wished that Golaud marry a princess of a neighboring kingdom, and thus ameliorate old resentments and quarrels. Here, he accepts this decision of Golaud's with an almost fatalistic compassion.

At this point, Pelleas enters, accompanied by his motive in the orchestra:

![Musical notation]

Fig. 17--Act I, page 40, measures 1-3.

Pelleas is saddened by the arrival of a letter telling him of the serious illness of his close friend, Marcellus, of a nearby kingdom. He desires to leave at once, but Arkel persuades him to stay, reasoning that the continued illness of Pelleas' own father should be a stronger obligation to him. The scene terminates with a recurrence, in the orchestra, of the delicate woodwind arpeggios that opened the scene.

The orchestral bridge that connects the second and third scenes is given to an expressive and vigorous development of the motives of both Melisande and Golaud, each often appearing
in counterpoint with the other (see page 44, measure 10, to page 45, measure 10).

Scene three takes place in the gardens of the old castle near the sea. Debussy takes full advantage of this setting to create some of his most beautiful and delicate seascape music. There are only two really clear-cut themes throughout the entire scene. One is a little rhythmic variant and extension of Mélisande's motive that appears time and again during the course of action:

![Fig. 18--Act I, page 46, measures 1-2.](image)

The other theme is Pelléas' motive which appears, at his entrance to the gardens, in the violas and English horn (page 49, measure 3, to page 50, measure 3). Golaud does not appear in this scene, but his unseen presence is felt in the rhythm of the muted horn calls that accompany the opera's only brief vocal ensemble, an off-stage three-part chorus (contralto, tenor, and bass), that represents the voices of a ship's crew heard across the waves, lost in the dense fog (page 55, measure 2, to page 65, measure 1).
The harmony here shows a great variety of texture. There is a preference for major and minor triads, often moving through many different tonal regions in a short period. To achieve variety, Debussy may use various coloristic effects by adding intervals to the triads, giving then, chains of seventh, ninth, or thirteenth chords (page 66). Occasionally he may reverse the process, by omitting the third of the triad, giving then, hollow progressions of empty fourths, fifths, and octaves (page 64).

A great variety of expressive orchestral effects are found in this scene. For example, there is the alternation and superposition of muted and unmuted colors (see especially pages 46-49), the almost constant use of divided strings, the tremolo (page 48, measure 7), and the special color effects such as the sur la touche (page 55, measure 4), all handled skillfully and notated down to the minutest details. Debussy even requests very special color effects from the horns, asking in one place for cuivrez sans dureté; that is, forcing the sound slightly, but without producing too much of a hard quality in the sound. (see page 47, measure 5).

The wealth of detail as regards dynamic level is also striking. There are frequent accents, diminuendos and crescendos, all given in microscopic detail. The resulting pages
of the score often bear a striking similarity to the meticulous markings of Webern, also in regard to the great predominance of the pianissimo level.

The action on the stage occurs as follows: Geneviève and Méliande are walking through the sea-side gardens, talking of the denseness of the forests. At this point, Pelléas enters. The conversation that follows has an undercurrent of foreboding, as they watch the departure of the ship that brought Golaud and Méliande, and hear the far-off voices in the fog that shrouds the sea. Pelléas talks of the nightly storms that have been occurring, though the sea now remains calm. He takes Méliande's arm as they enter the castle, her hands being full of flowers she has gathered. As she hears of his intention to depart the next day, she asks, "Oh! Why must you leave?"

In considering the first act now as an organic entity, we can see how, although cast in a sort of shadowy half-light, the music, nevertheless, manages to achieve a considerable variety. The first orchestral prelude, though devoid of large dynamic climaxes, manages to attain a considerable amount of contrast through skillful use of a great variety of diverse rhythms and textures, as well as through contrast in register and orchestration. In each of the succeeding three scenes, there is further atmospheric and emotional contrast in the music, to correspond closely with the dramatic
structure. The first scene introduces a great number of clear-cut themes, and there is wide variety in the style of the vocal writing. The second scene is, by way of contrast, rather nebulous in thematic organization, with little contrast in vocal style. The third scene, with the delicate seascape music, is something again quite different. Here, the atmospheric mood persists over a longer period, and there is a logical reason for more expansive symphonic development, especially in the central part of the scene where the chorus is heard.¹

In considering the dramatic exposition of ideas in this act, we have already been introduced to all the important characters (with the exception of Golaud's little boy, Yniold), and begin to understand a certain amount about their individual personalities. As for the symbols, we find in them a close relationship to the characters, who are in their own way symbolic, though at the same time very real and human.

Already, we find the symbols falling into two distinct categories. There is almost a separation of yin and yang, or darkness and light, and possibly also a contrast between spirituality and earthliness. Thus, we have the dark forest, the gloomy castle, the blindness of Arkel, the fog-bound sea, the

¹Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, I, 198.
nightly storms, and a certain portion of the personality of Golaud. All of these dark motives find their contrast in the innocence and beauty of Mélisande, the youth of Pelléas, and the compassion and wisdom of Arkel, all symbols of light and spirituality.

The relationship between the poetic imagery and the musical development may not at first seem clear, yet this subtlety is later seen to be a source of strength.

All through the opera the orchestral part supports the drama as impressively as the vocal line. . . . This sensuous "background music"--for it is never more than that--has dramatic value both in general and in particular. In general its great role is to make palpable the brooding atmosphere of Maeterlinck's play, and to project this by rather obvious symbolism. . . . No composer has ever been more adept than Debussy at what Virgil Thomson calls "music in the landscape genre." Of course, what a musician does in "painting" landscapes or seascapes in Iberia, or La Mer, is not to present literal images, but suggest powerfully the moods they convey. So does the impressionist painter; so does Maeterlinck, who is not interested in the genus of the trees in the forest, or in the state of decomposition of the wells, but in the feelings that they can evoke, poetically, in the audience. Debussy's method is much the same as Maeterlinck's in this respect, but much more convincing, using sonorities and rhythms instead of words and verbal symbols. Since for the poet the overall mood is of primary importance, as a representation of fate, the opera can reasonably abandon itself to mood-painting, and yet remain essentially within the underlying dramatic conception.2

---

2Kerman, p. 14.
We have already begun to realize that these thin but taut lines of motivic organization run throughout the music in close accordance with the symbolic organization of the play, as a result of the repetition and continuing metamorphosis of thematic fragments that are constantly emerging and then receding into the moody background. We see how on each succeeding appearance of the prime motives (or their variants) the listener can recapture the emotional essence of preceding dramatic events.

A leading motive acts like a recurring image, with the difference that the verbal symbol has some meaning, however limited, at its first appearance, whereas the musical symbol can only absorb meaning by association. This is something that Debussy understood even better than Wagner, and he arranged it so that his leading motives clarify themselves very gradually in the subconscious... The meaning of a leading motive is nothing less (or more) than the whole complex of all the associations, dramatic and musical, that attach to its every appearance.3

Act II

In contrast to the first act, the second act begins in a rather lighthearted mood. The day is sunny, and Pelléas and Mélisande are walking by an old fountain among the great trees of the parks by the castle. Pelléas' theme, with the added extension of a graceful downward arabesque, is one of the main organizing themes in this scene, along with the rippling

sixteenth-note arabesques that seem to symbolize the play of sunlight and dancing waters (Figures 19 and 20, respectively).

The pair investigate this mysterious "Fountain of the Blind." Pelléas remarks, "One can hear the water sleep," as he and Mélisande lean over the waters. Mélisande says she would like to see the bottom, and Pelléas answers, "It has never been seen; perhaps it is as deep as the sea."

In a joyful mood, Mélisande childishly plays with her wedding ring, tossing it up in the air, watching it shine and glitter in the sunlight. Then, it suddenly disappears into the well. A delicate touch of tone painting occurs here in the music, with the sequence of chords that begin with a D-major seventh chord, followed by triads of C major, B major, A major, and F minor, with the outer voices moving in contrary motion, finally arriving at a resting point of D major. This
series of chords, with the remote relationships, seems to evoke the widening circle of water in the mysterious well4 (page 88, measures 9-11). Mélisande is bewildered as to what to tell her husband concerning the loss of her wedding ring. Pelléas answers, "The truth . . . the truth."

The rapid series of events in this scene requires careful consideration. We have here an interesting series of symbols of light and spirituality. First, there are the personalities of Pelléas and Mélisande. Then there is the well; it should be a symbol of spirituality, but seems rather to be lacking in curative powers, since the old king is blind. There is here a parallel with the personality of Mélisande, the essence of youth and beauty, who is yet constantly menaced by the shadows and gloom of her dwelling. The symbols of light are associated with a quest for beauty and love; the crown in the first act, and the wedding ring here, are seen to be symbols of materiality, or mere devotional love. These both disappear in the depths of the well (from Jung we know that water is often a symbol for the subconscious mind). In the case of the ring, it is clear that the rays of the sun were the cause of Mélisande's losing the ring. The sun is a spiritual symbol, and infinitely superior to gold. Pelléas, similarly, has

4Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, I, 198.
warmth and life, and represents the kind of love that Mélisande would prefer; she has ample reason for desiring to lose the ring. Therefore it disappears in the water just as the crown in the first act. Pelléas' encouragement that she tell Golaud the truth about the ring is an added foreshadowing of events.

Debussy begins to do some foreshadowing of his own in the following orchestral interlude. Here, the Golaud motive appears, along with a new motive that gathers increasing importance throughout the remainder of the opera:

Here, the dissonant major second intervals in a low register with octave leaps upward, plus the tritone relation between the B of the seconds and the pedal F, signify the jealousy and violence of Golaud's nature. This motive appears in various guises. Sometimes only the second is heard, or only the octave, either melodically or harmonically (see page 95, measures 6-10). At other times, a melodic seventh with a dotted rhythm is heard.
Scene two is another sharp contrast, for Mélisande is found in company with Golaud, who has been involved in a horseback accident while hunting. This violence is another foreshadowing of things to come, and foreshadowing, as well, are his words: "The horse shied like a blind fool." (But which indeed was blind?)

Mélisande tries to comfort Golaud, and just as she does, for no apparent reason, she breaks into tears. Several magical things occur at this point in the music. Mélisande's motive, completely absent from the preceding half-happy scene, suddenly bursts forth in a moment of unexpected dramatic force in the orchestra:

![Musical notation image](image)

Fig. 22--Act II, page 105, measure 7, to page 106, measure 2.

She then confesses her unhappiness in the castle, and while Golaud questions her as to the reasons behind her tears, we can observe the careful pacing of her answers in the musical

5Kerman, p. 13.
rhythm. At first her answers come slowly, and then Golaud asks if it is some person that has offended her; she replies "no, no!" so quickly that Golaud knows he is on the right track. "Is it the king? Is it my mother? Is it Pelléas?"

"No, no! It isn't Pelléas, it's no one"--and the truth is revealed at last.

There is fine insight in his (Debussy's) setting, a moment later, of Golaud's words comforting his wife. "Can't you fit yourself to the life we lead here? Is it too sad for you here? True, this castle is very old and gloomy, cold and deep, and those who live here are already very old...." The richness and sober lyricism of the vocal line shows suddenly that Golaud too feels the oppressive gloom of the castle, which is of course the symbol for life itself. That is Golaud's tragedy; he is by no means insensitive to the pathos of existence, but he tries--vainly, ironically, according to Maeterlinck's philosophy and his play--to do something about it. If he were all petit bourgeois, with no sense of life's sadness, we would sympathize with him less, and the drama would be less true and meaningful.⁶

Golaud then betrays his own irrationality. On seeing that her wedding ring is missing, he becomes angry, and asks harshly where she has left it. Frightened at this outburst, she lies helplessly, saying she must have lost it while with Yniold at a grotto by the seashore. Golaud orders her to search for it at once; since she is fearful of going alone in the darkness, he asks her to take Pelléas with her.

The final very expressive orchestral statement of Mélisande's motive at the close of the scene gives us greater insight into Mélisande's character, the symbolic features of her personality, and the nature of her musical motive. Since her motive did not appear in the first happy scene, only to come back again with great dramatic force in this highly emotional scene, we begin to realize that this motive is not just an identifying "tag" for the fragile personality of Mélisande. Rather, it symbolizes sadness and human suffering. Here again, we observe the various levels on which the symbolic materials in the music, as well as in the play, operate during the course of the dramatic action.

The final scene, which takes place once more by the sea (as did the closing scene of the first act), finds Pelléas and Mélisande at the mouth of a grotto. They know only too well the ring is not there, but take note of the place so they may describe it to Golaud. As a sudden moonbeam illuminates the interior of the cave, three old beggars are seen sleeping on a ledge. At this point, Pelléas leads the frightened Mélisande away.

The musical organization of this scene is very loose-knit, corresponding in this respect to the second scene of the first act. The themes are all short-lived, even short in relation to themes in other parts of the work. There are fragments of
each of the main motives of Mélisande, Golaud, Golaud's violence, and variations of these (pages 135-136). The seascape figurations and color effects are present here much as they appeared in scene three, although the colors are more somber, and the atmosphere menacing (cf. page 46 with page 134). The fifths that appeared in the lower depths of the orchestra in that scene also appear here, in altered figurations (page 135, measures 1-3). The moment that the moonbeam enters the cave is brilliantly illustrated through the use of the harps and the string tremolo (page 144, measures 2-5). The appearance of the sleeping beggars is aptly depicted through the sound of empty fifths moving through the various registers of the strings and harps (page 146, measures 1-4).

In the second act, then, we are made even more aware of the dominating theme of the entire play—that is, the often fatal and tragic entanglements of human destiny. The hopeless love that is germinating between Pelléas and Mélisande can end only in futility and destruction. It has been pointed out that in this play there is an underlying streak of sadism.7 There is the contrast between innocence and brutality that will continue to mount as the dramatic action proceeds to its inevitable

7Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, I, 190.
conclusion, which is death. This, in Maeterlinck's philosophy, is then the only certainty in life, the only resolution to the hopeless entanglements of existence.

Musically speaking, there may be pointed out several important similarities and differences in the corresponding three scenes of the first two acts.

The contrast of light and darkness is the rule as we compare the scenes emotionally. In the first act, Mélisande appears with Golaud; however, in the second act, Mélisande appears with Pelléas. Musically, the acts have a great deal in common, since they both make use of a great deal of rather clear-cut melodic material. The closing scenes of both acts have similar functions in that they share thematic material; but structurally, Act II, scene III has more in common with Act I, scene II, in that the material contained in each is so fragmentary. Thus, we see that the separate scenes in each act perform similar functions in relation to one another, and the two acts then taken together contrast with, and complement each other. The basic principles of artistic organization--variety and coherence--are thus present here, though in a very subtle and personal form.
Act III

The first scene of act three opens at the exterior of one of the towers of the castle. A winding stairway passes beneath a window, where, combing her long and beautiful hair, Mélisande is singing as Pelléas enters. As she leans toward him from the window, her hair streams down, surrounding him. He seizes her long tresses and kisses them. Some frightened doves fly about them and Mélisande interjects, "They will be lost in the dark." Mélisande then discovers that her hair has become caught in the branches of a tree. At this point, Golaud enters and tells them to cease their play. "What children!" he remarks nervously.

The music in this scene, in close connection with the dramatic function, is of the nature of an intermezzo. The opening prelude is almost a study on the single note B, or the B-major triad. The harps sustain an arpeggio of octave B's for nine of the seventeen measures of the prelude. The violas and celli likewise sustain a pedal B (in artificial harmonics) in all but four measures. This static, motionless texture seems to communicate perfectly the warmth and darkness of the night air.

At the beginning of this scene, Mélisande's song, sounding like a strain from some ancient tune, or forgotten lay, sets the tone for the entire scene, which is one of great lyricism.
The vocal writing is here the most lyrical of any in the score, with the exception of the final scene in the fourth act. In the orchestra, lyricism is also the rule, and curiously enough, the thematic development in the first three-quarters of the scene seems little related to past motivic development, except perhaps in the scalewise movement. The following theme appears in various guises throughout the scene, almost to the exclusion of all other material:

![Solo viola notation]

Fig. 23—Act III, page 175, measures 1-3.

This new-found lyricism builds up to a great intensity, both in the vocal line and in the orchestra. Wide skips are used for practically the first time in the score (page 169, measure 9).

The purpose behind this musical about-face is quite clear. The closeness of the lovers, Pelléas surrounded by Mélisande's tresses, has temporarily shut out the world of darkness. For a brief moment, love has managed to obliterate the past, with all of its entangled web of circumstances. The effect is only temporary, for with Golaud's return, we once more arrive in the very stark surroundings of reality. It is no accident that
the most passionate outpouring from the orchestra so far in the score failed to make use of previous motives; Debussy deliberately set up this stark contrast.

The next scene carries this return to reality a step further into the realm of the nightmare. Now we find Golaud and Pelléas in the subterranean vaults under the castle. Golaud, carrying a lantern, leads Pelléas to a place where they look down on stagnant water. "Do you smell the death odor?" Golaud asks. In an agitated state, both leave the disgusting place in silence.

In this scene, the one most singularly suggestive of Edgar Allan Poe, we find an abundance of symbols, mostly dark and suggestive of the finality of death and inevitability of the tragedy to follow. This descent into the depths is also a psychological continuation of the dramatic action of the preceding scene. Both Golaud and Pelléas descend symbolically into the depths of their subconscious minds, in order to evaluate the happenings of the scene by the tower. They are both tortured by the expectation of things to come, and descend into this nightmarish world in compensation for an inability to act immediately.

The third scene finds the pair emerging onto the terrace by the sea at the entrance to the vaults. As they enter into the fresh air and sunlight, Golaud warns Pelléas that Mélisande
is perhaps with child. He warns further that what took place the previous night on the balcony is not to be repeated.

In the orchestra, the significance of this scene is underlined. The triumph of light over darkness, though here temporary, implies a certain finality. Once more Debussy also triumphs in his illustrative music, depicting the great contrast of the musty vault with the brilliant sunlight and fresh air from the sea. This is done by the beautiful scoring for the two harps and the flutes (page 193, measure 6). The horns and trumpets are called on here as well, to express the warmth and brilliance of this outdoor scene (pages 198-199).

At the close of the scene, the oboe plays the naive little theme that prepares for the arrival of the small child, Yniold:

![Fig. 24--Act III, page 217, measures 3-6.](image)

Scene four draws its great dramatic power from the presence of innocence in close contact with the seeds of violence. Under one of the towers of the castle at dusk, Golaud is seen questioning Yniold about his mother) and his uncle, Pélélas. The child answers:

![clarinet](image)
intensify Golaud's jealousy and leave him at the same time puzzled and uncertain. The motive of blindness appears again: "I am like a blind man that drags his net across the ocean floor. I am as a new-born babe lost in the forest," exclaims the tortured Golaud (pages 228-229). As a light appears in Mélisande's window, Golaud lifts the boy to the window to ask him what he sees. The child is frightened and excited, and tells only that Pelléas is there with Mélisande, silently watching the light.

The music in this scene, with its sustained and constantly intensifying mood, develops along rather expansive symphonic lines. Many themes are here present, including a curious little extension of Mélisande's motive that takes on considerable importance in this scene:

![violas](image)

Fig. 25--Act III, page 218, measures 1-4.

The errant triplets that opened the first scene of act one also put in an expected appearance here to emphasize, no doubt, the wanderings of Golaud's mind as he struggles with his jealousy (page 237, measure 4). The mounting intensity of the scene is prepared rhythmically with great care.
Golaud's questioning and the boy's erratic answers are reflected in the initial stopping and starting of the orchestral commentary (see pages 218-223). Finally, however, a series of jagged and syncopated rhythms slowly intensifies with the quickening tempo, until the obsessively repeated triplets carry the scene to its violent emotional apex, heightened by one of the rare appearances of the fortissimo dynamic level (page 251).

The symbols here are only too clear. The helplessness of the child, contrasted with the mounting violence of Golaud's anger, is most evident. Pelléas and Mélièsande are seen staring into the lamp--the pair here are decidedly aware of the darkness closing in around them. As this act closes, the dramatic action has gained the momentum that will carry it through the remainder of the drama.

Act IV

The first scene takes place in an apartment in the castle. The seventeen-measure orchestral prelude establishes the mood of concealed agitation (page 252-254). The fountain motive--from the first scene of the second act--is heard once again as part of the intricate motivic apparatus that organizes this lengthy scene. At one point this motive appears in contrapuntal combination with the motives of Golaud and of Pelléas (page 253, measure 3).
As Pelléas secretly meets Mélisande, he tells her that he is leaving, and that they must meet for the last time this evening, at the old fountain. As Pelléas leaves, Arkel enters. There is a tender meeting here as the old king offers his pity. "I have observed you here since you first came, never complaining, but always with a strange and frightened air, with the look of someone awaiting some unknown terror, all the while in a sunny garden. . . . You are too young and lovely to be living day and night in the shadow of death. . . ."

At this point, a motive from the second scene of the first act (Figure 14) enters in the orchestra (page 267, measure 7). This ushers in a very passionate and lyrical outburst that emphasizes the intense feelings of the old man and the girl, both caught in the cruel machinery of fate (pages 268-272). Golaud's motive asserts itself, following this unexpected orchestral climax, and Golaud himself enters seconds later.

Golaud is visibly shaken, and there is blood on his forehead. He says he has passed through a thorn-thicket and has only scratched himself. He violently repulses the puzzled Mélisande as she seeks to wipe his brow. He demands his sword. At this point, the orchestra becomes a great confused mass of conflicting motives (page 275, measure 6).

"What do you see in Mélisande's eyes?" Golaud asks of Arkel. "I can only see a great innocence," is the reply.
Golaud raves incoherently, and seizes the terrified Mélisande by the hair, throwing her to the floor. He laughs hysterically "like an old man." Arkel is stunned, and begs Golaud to stop. Finally, his composure retained, he releases Mélisande, utters a cryptic warning, and leaves. The uncomprehending Arkel is stunned by this display; his compassion for the suffering Mélisande seems infinite. "If I were God, I would have pity for the hearts of men."

Carried through to a violent pitch by the throbbing triplets that also characterized the scene with Yniold, the orchestra then dies to a whisper at these last words of Arkel (page 298, measures 7-8). There then begins the most extended and complex orchestral interlude in the entire score, comprising some fifty-six measures (pages 299-306). It is a monumental synthesis of the dramatic action up to this point. In the first thirty measures, the full orchestral sonorities are called on, brass and all, for the most impassioned moments given to the orchestra in the entire score. The motives developed are those of Golaud and Golaud's violence (see Figures 6 and 21). This first section is like a cry of anguish, a final resignation to the inevitable crushing blow of fate. What the voices could not express or continue in the preceding scene, the orchestra carries to a final conclusion. The most striking point about this interlude is the persistence of the
two motives; several times it seems that new material attempts to introduce itself, but is rejected. This seems to reinforce further Maeterlinck's bitter philosophy. Love cannot triumph over violence and darkness; only death can do this, and even compassion can do little to compensate for suffering.

The third scene is an important interlude that provides relief from the intensity of the preceding scene. We are once more at the fountain in the park, and it is near sunset. Yniold is seen playing here. He tries hopelessly to move a large stone under which has rolled his little golden ball. Frustrated by his efforts, he then hears the bleating of the sheep. He calls out to the shepherd that is tending them, but is not heard. Then the sheep cease their noise. Yniold is puzzled at this, and calls out again to the shepherd. "Why have they no more to say?" he asks. "Because they are not on the path to the sheepfold," finally answers the shepherd. Yniold is still bewildered, and calls out asking where they are going. But it is too late; the shepherd is gone.

The most curious thing about the music in this scene is the fact that it begins to develop very clearly and rationally, with clear-cut rhythms and melodies. Here is one of the few times in the work that the music could virtually stand on its own without the voices. This music seems to symbolize the unproblematic, imaginative world of the child, as contrasted
with the frustration of the adults. But even here, towards the end of the scene, the organization soon falls completely apart, and a state of bewilderment recurs.

The final dénouement of the drama, however, the final carrying out of the act of violence, occurs in the final scene as the lovers meet at this same fountain for the last time. As they meet here, Pelléas attempts to explain why he must now leave, and inevitably confesses his love for her. "I love you also," replies Mélisande, and adds that she has loved him since their first meeting. The grating sound of the castle doors being closed interrupts and now they know there is no return. As they embrace desperately, Mélisande catches a glimpse of Golaud hidden in the shadows, his sword bared. Pelléas has no weapon. As they embrace for the last time, Golaud comes upon them. Pelléas is killed, and Mélisande flees through the forest.

In the orchestral action, the motives of Pelléas and of Golaud's jealousy dominate the first part of the scene. Once again, the great rhythmic variety in the orchestra strongly intensifies the feeling of tension. Most dramatic, however, is the use of silence in the orchestra. Perhaps it has never been used more effectively than in this scene. As Pelléas

---

8Kerman, p. 15.
and Méliande declare their love, the orchestra is absolutely quiet (page 332, measures 4-6). A few measures following this most tender moment, the orchestra starts anew, but with completely different thematic material:

![Musical notation](image)

**Fig. 26--Act IV, page 333, measures 7-8.**

The symbolism here is rather clear. Once again, this intense feeling of oneness between the pair has shut out reality, just as it did in their meeting by the fountain the first time. Just a few measures still later, Pelléas' words, "your voice . . . it is as fresh and as free as the water!" brings back again the motive of the fountain, which finally merges with the original form of Méliande's theme. The lyricism of the following moments is almost paradisiacal in the voices as well as in the orchestra. The tranquillity is finally shattered by the return of the violence motive, with the bare seconds, and the confused rhythms that dominated the first of the scene (page 346, measure 4). Still, out of this dread confusion, there emerges, just before Pelléas' death,
the new love theme, triumphant, in the fullest orchestral sonority (page 36, measure 5, to page 362, measure 5).

If the first two acts can be seen to have important similarities in structure and dramatic exposition, then the third and fourth acts may also be compared as regards final dramatic development. The third act can be said to confirm and establish Golaud's jealousy, and the fourth act is the final confirmation of the deed of violence.

Act three, scene one, is the mid-point of the opera. It contains the most lyric vocal writing, and (as explained above) a large amount of material not to be found elsewhere in the opera. Similar characteristics may be found in the central section of act four, scene four. Act three, scene two, with the descent into the depths, counterbalances the first scene. Act four, scene one--actually two scenes in one--contains a similar contrast. Mélisande first appears with Arkel, whose wisdom and compassion build to great heights. In contrast, she is then confronted with the violence and brutal behavior of Golaud.

The child Yniold appears once in each act. His function of contrasting innocence with violence has already been pointed out, and his appearance at the beginning of act four, scene four has the added function of extending the range of the tragedy.
We see helplessness on all levels: age (Arkel), graying maturity (Golaud), youth (the lovers), and childhood (Yniold, who cannot retrieve his golden ball behind the great rock . . . who cannot understand where the sheep are being conducted . . . who cannot quite grasp his own feelings--"I shall go tell someone something about this. . . .")

The variety in vocal writing, alternating between soaring lyricism and nearly spoken recitative, manifests itself at key points in these two acts. In the third act, the lyrical first scene is balanced by the following three scenes, rather predominately lyrical, so that the scene where the lovers declare their feelings, in nearly spoken recitative, is thrown into great relief.

The symbolic progression in each of the two acts is almost identical: a transformation of light into darkness. In the third act, there is the joy and sensuality of the scene at the tower, balanced by the darkness of the vaults. Then there is the emergence into sunlight, balanced by the violence of the scene with Yniold and Golaud. The fourth act begins with Mélisande's meeting with both Pelléas and Arkel. This is followed by the brutal scene with Golaud. Then there is the little scene with Yniold and the sheep, a highly effective intermezzo. Concluding this act is the tragic final meeting of the two lovers. This scene contains within itself a brief

---

moment of light as they proclaim their love—but the light is all too soon snuffed out by the appearance of Golaud and the killing of Pelleas.

Act V

The final act, in one long scene, takes place in an apartment of the castle which is to be Mélisande's death chamber. She has given birth prematurely to a tiny child, and lies unconscious on a bed, attended by Arkel and a physician. Golaud, who has attempted to take his own life, is present also. He suffers excruciatingly from guilt and remorse for the terrible deed.

The music of the orchestral prelude introduces two important themes that constitute much of the material in this act. The first is a sad transformation of Mélisande's motive, with the perfect fourth replaced by a diminished fourth.

Fig. 27—Act V, page 365, measures 1-2.
The scoring here is exquisite, with the somber viola color blended with harp harmonics (at the unison), on the off-beats. The theme is obsessively repeated, mostly in the lower-range instruments, through a good portion of the first half of the act. The function here is rather like that of a ground bass, and the emotional effect seems to be the depiction of the final labored breathing of the dying Mélisande.

Another little motive passes through the flutes and clarinets:

Fig. 28--Act V, page 365, measure 5.

It is rather like a sad little bird-call, and seems especially descriptive of the last dim hour of daylight on a bleak autumn day. The characteristic seventh and following descending scale line are the source for much of the succeeding thematic material. The hollow fifths, reminiscent of the prelude to the first act, appear occasionally in the very dimly-lit orchestral texture.

Golaud is announced by his motive, in the muted horns, as he speaks: "I have killed without reason!" The horns
immediately echo the four notes of Mélisande's theme; the two themes then quietly alternate as the doctor notices that Mélisande is regaining consciousness. She expresses her desire that the great window be opened so that she may see the setting sun. (Once more, the great symbol of spirituality and love). The sad little bird-theme is heard passing through the orchestra, and the oboe and English horn play an inverted variant of Mélisande's theme, which seems to fit in with what she says: "I no longer understand all that I say, you see . . . I don't know what I am saying . . . I cannot say what I wish . . . ."

Golaud asks to be alone with her for a few moments, and the others comply. He begs her forgiveness, and is amazed to find that she has no recollection of the deed of violence. In the orchestra, the undulating triplets seem to recall the incessantly repeated triplets of the final scenes of the previous two acts, but only as if in a vague recollection of the past terror. Golaud is still tortured by the past; he must know if there was anything between the two. "Did you love Pelléas?" he asks.

"But of course I loved him. Is he here?" the unknowing girl asks as Pelléas' theme is heard in the flute, along with a later recollection of the exquisite love theme of the fourth act. "You do not understand me. You do not wish to understand
"... " Golaud continues. "Was yours a guilty love? ... say it, say it!"

"No ... no, we were not guilty," says Mélisande, as Golaud realizes that he is destined never to know the truth—simply because he is incapable of understanding it. Golaud is crushed at this realization and the rushing triplets in the orchestra (outlining the interval of the tritone) mount to a sudden violent climax.

But Mélisande is now far removed from this violence. Arkel and the doctor re-enter the room as Golaud declares that he is doomed to die like a blind man. A little dotted figure, with a rising second, appears in the horn and celli:

![Fig. 29--Act V, page 392, measure 3.](image)

It is treated at length until the very end of the scene. The bare fifths and octaves appear here again, as Mélisande asks if it is the beginning of winter. "I am afraid of the great colds."

Arkel asks now if she would like to see her little daughter; she seems hardly aware that she has given birth to the
child. The flutes play the Mélisande motive, this time doubled in thirds, the first time that the motive is given that sonority. Mélisande finds that she lacks the strength to lift her arms to hold the child, and Arkel raises the child so she can be seen. Another motive floats by in the oboe, then is passed to the solo cello and English horn:

![Musical notation]

*Fig. 30--Act IV, page 396, measures 4-5.*

This is the motive of the little child, and it appears only once more, at the end of the scene, with Arkel's solemn pronouncement: "Now it is the turn of the poor little one."

The stillness in the orchestra is now almost unbearable. The horns sustain hollow octaves, while the lower strings once more pluck the ground-bass version of Mélisande's motive. Here the servants enter the room. Golaud asks why they have come. The hollow fifths appear in the orchestra. As Arkel speaks, the motive from the second scene of the first act puts in its final solemn appearance (Figure 15). It is as if the pages of a book were at last closed with an overpowering finality.
"Softly now," the wise Arkel insists, in a grave and hollow voice, "One must speak softly now . . . The human soul is very silent . . . The soul would like to depart alone. She suffers so timidly. But the sadness, Golaud. The sadness of everything that we see."

Death comes with the closing darkness and the tolling of a bell. Arkel tells Golaud he must not remain. Mélicande's motive, in the form it took in the third scene of the first act, when she first met Pelléas, is heard once more as Arkel pronounces: "There must be silence now . . . It was terrible, but not your fault. She was such a poor little being, so tranquil, so timid, and so silent. She was a poor mysterious little being as indeed we all are . . . There she lies, looking like the older sister of her child. Come, only the infant should remain here in the chamber . . . It must live on now, in her place."

The dotted figure with the ascending second that appeared earlier in the scene now is heard inverted, as a four-three suspension in a series of common chords. The transparency and radiance of these last measures of orchestral coda is almost like a blend of music and silence; the harp, muted strings, flutes in low register, muted trumpet in lowest register, and muted horns, all at a barely audible pianissimo, fade into the last great silence.
CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

The many influences that prompted the composing of Pelléas have been discussed already in previous chapters, and may now be briefly summarized. We have seen how many techniques used may be traced back to the Classical French opera of Rameau and Lully, and even earlier, to the Florentine Camerata.

We have further observed the influences of the symbolist poets, of Edgar Allan Poe, and of the impressionist painters. Wagner, too, cannot be overlooked both for his concept of the leading motive and continuous orchestral development, which Debussy put most effectively to use in his music drama, and his negative influence which caused Debussy to look to understatement and even silence as an expressive vehicle.

As to the place of Pelléas in the history of French opera, the continuation of the Classical line has already been observed. But, Debussy's concept of the music drama had very little in common with the mainstream of French nineteenth-century opera, from Berlioz through Massenet, and further had little immediate influence on early twentieth-century opera in his country. Dukas' setting of Maeterlinck's Ariane et Barbe-Bleue, which followed Pelléas by several years, certainly owes a certain debt to the earlier work,
but also shows a great deal of influence from Wagner that seems to set the work aside in a rather eclectic category.

The real twentieth-century operatic heritage that finds its origins in *Pelléas* and the unfinished Poe operas must be found in countries outside France. The deep concern with symbolism, and with the study of the subconscious mind, may be traced through several prominent twentieth-century works, including Berg's *Wozzeck*, Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, and Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*.

Though each of these mentioned works has a distinct character of its own, and bears the unmistakable stamp of its individual composer, each has remarkable affinities with Debussy's earlier works. Thus, the rising of the blood-red moon in Debussy's *Maison d'Usher* has its parallel in the murder scene in *Wozzeck*, and in the blood motive of *Bluebeard's Castle*. The gloomy castle in *Pelléas*, the ghastly House of Usher, the haunted house in *Turn of the Screw*, and the castle of Bluebeard are all symbolic views of reality.

*Wozzeck* and *Turn of the Screw* each find a particular expressive symbol in the figure of the child, helplessly surrounded by a ghastly world of violence. The devastating final scene of *Wozzeck*, where Marie's little boy uncomprehendingly learns of his mother's death, could be an epilogue
to the final scene of *Pelleas*, and a fitting parallel to the two scenes where Yniold unknowingly dwells in the midst of violence.

The contrast of innocence with violence is further recognized in Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, where Judith and Bluebeard are easily seen to be counterparts of Mélisande and Golaud. Many other similarities, too numerous to mention, also exist between the symbols in these operas and the earlier operas of Debussy.

Each of these mentioned works show similarities in the various composers' use of the orchestra, construction of the vocal line, mood expressiveness, and so on, though these features are ultimately bound up with many other external influences as well. What mainly concerns us here is the total effect of the music drama in Debussy's philosophy. Once again, this is the concept that opera must be, above all, expressive of the text. Music must enhance, intensify, and do anything but dominate the dramatic action. His philosophy has proven sound in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, just as in succeeding twentieth-century works that have partaken of the same philosophy.

Much of the philosophy that we have spoken of in connection with these composers' works finds strong ground in the belief in the power of the symbol. Late nineteenth and all of twentieth century literature has not been able to
escape from the influence of the Symbolists, and it is only logical that our contemporary composers of opera should be affected by these lines of thought as well. Not only has this interest resulted in the creation of a remarkably new concept of the music-drama, but also it has, perhaps, brought us closer to the now ancient ideal of combining the arts into an entity more powerful than its component parts. If we believe in Pelleas et Melisande as an example of achieving this idea, to a certain extent, then we may find in this realization the further basis for a theory of aesthetics that will lead us to new discoveries in our quest for a fuller understanding of artistic truth.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Thompson, Oscar, *Debussy, Man and Artist*, New York, Dodd Mead and Co., 1940.


Articles


Music
