

# Part II

## NEW PERSPECTIVES ON *PELLÉAS* *ET MÉLISANDE*



## 3

## Mélisande's Charm and the Truth of Her Music

*Jann Pasler*

We have often thought of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* as radically new. Scholars have tended to concentrate on how the work points to the future of French opera, whether through its relationship with Wagner or its embrace of symbolist theater. This essay, in contrast, situates the opera in the context of French musical traditions and tries to shed light on why Debussy may have seen himself as “un musicien français.” I do not examine his interest in Rameau, but rather what he learned at the Conservatoire and how he built on his predecessors' operas, particularly music still in repertoire in 1902 that audiences would have been able to compare with *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In 1888, the year Debussy finished his last year in Rome and submitted *La Damselle élue* as his third and last envoi to the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the minister of public instruction and fine arts Gustave Larroumet gave an important speech at the Paris Conservatory. While reminding students of the “importance of their art” and their “duty” to uphold France's greatness in the world, he defined explicitly what they were to aspire to: charm and elegance as preeminent qualities of the French spirit.<sup>1</sup> How Debussy responded set the foundation for some of his most profound innovations.

### Learning Musical Charm

Many consider charm to be something superficial—the antithesis of the metaphysical, something rooted in the flesh as opposed to the mind or the spirit, enabling escape from everyday concerns to the physical rather than the sublime or the transcendental. In women charm has served as a tactic for seeking social mobility or escaping male domination. During the Second Empire under Napoléon III, French intellectuals such as Emile Zola denounced as decadent lives based on leisure and enjoyment of feminine charms such as

those immortalized in the music of Offenbach. But after the siege of Paris in 1870, the French defeat to the Prussians in 1871, the loss of their land, and especially the blow to their Gallic pride, some French began to rethink conventional notions of weakness and strength. Charm could be a means of exploring the inherent strength of the feminine. The subject of Camille Saint-Saëns's first tone poem, *Le Rouet d'Omphale*, written during this turmoil in 1870 and 1871, is "feminine seduction," which the program defines as "the triumphant struggle of weakness over force." The work shows how the musical charms of Omphale could subdue the forceful Hercules. Many meanings were possible. At the time Hercules could connote the working class forced into bondage by the weak effeminate government of Second Empire monarchists, the country itself too lax as Germany attacked, the socialist monster feared by bourgeois republicans, or German strength and virility—something the French both envied and feared.<sup>2</sup> Since republicans considered artistic beauty a metaphor for an ideal social order, we need to rethink not just the musical, but also the political and social meaning the French associated with charm and its importance in their identity. Charm could serve a political purpose.<sup>3</sup>

If the French public wanted to reflect on and learn about the nature and power of charm, what better place than through music. In 1884 Debussy's piano teacher at the Conservatory, Antoine Marmontel, published a book of essays on musical aesthetics in which he defined music as the "gift of charming and affecting people." He explains, "Music acts directly on our senses to speak to the soul, but its aim is not to transmit precise and distinct ideas, rather to give sensations, to establish a current of feelings from the soul of the composer to that of the listener, . . . to unite in the same feeling the hearts of all listeners vibrating in unison." For Marmontel it was the "vague and the indefinite" in music that defined its charm.<sup>4</sup> Saint-Saëns too described charm as a crucial aspect of music. It is that which "insinuates itself in the veins and penetrates all the way to the heart."<sup>5</sup> It is the essence of music's power that causes the listener to be receptive to the music and whatever it is communicating. As such, charm enacts music's beauty and contributes to its social utility.

Learning to express seduction and enchantment by a beloved's voice, one of the most prevalent themes in nineteenth-century French opera, was a critical aspect of a young composer's training at the Conservatory. Texts about the power of charm and using the language of charm characterized many cantata libretti that young composers set to music in preparation for the Prix de Rome competition, their final public exercise at the Conservatoire. *Endymion*, first used in the 1885 Rome competition, was the most popular libretto in the 1880s and early 1890s. This story of a handsome shepherd in love with Diane was used in exams by student composers *eight* times from 1887 to 1893.<sup>6</sup> Not much takes place in it, but composers got to practice setting "Your enchanting voice makes me drunk and caresses me." Many of the female characters in the

Prix de Rome libretti are seductresses or women vulnerable to seduction whose primary value lies in their feminine charm. Antony curses his partner in *Cléopâtre* (1890) for “enchaining” his soul, using her “charms” to surprise him. Raymondin struggles “against the charms” of the beauty in *Mélysine* (1896). In *Myrrha* (1901) the “dear and blond enchantress,” a Greek slave, has a “sweet and conquering power” over the king. Often these women foreground the importance of the voice as the source of their charm and the key to eliciting desire in others. They enact this charm in a romantic duo in which the lovers come into closer intimacy and feel ecstasy, that is, loss of self. A third character often represents the call of religion or duty, thereby introducing conflict or collusion.

One of Debussy's student works, *Diane au bois*, begun before competing for the Prix de Rome in 1883, concerns the character Diane from the myth of *Endymion*.<sup>7</sup> The extant portion of Debussy's score consists of the duo in which Eros seduces Diane, taken from the ending of a play by Théodore de Banville. Guiraud advised Debussy to put it aside until after he had finished his studies, and with the freedom of working in Rome the composer returned to it as a possible first envoi.<sup>8</sup> Banville's story appealed precisely because it did not resemble those normally used in cantatas and called for music that escaped the conventions of love duos. Although attracted by the sound of his flute, Diane, “pure and white,” tries to resist Eros. After momentarily admitting “I love you,” she implores, “Leave, I hate myself...forget all this.” Resisting the musical equivalent for feminine seduction so enjoyed by Massenet and other French composers, Debussy sought for Diane and her “saintly coolness” “a phrase of a beautiful coolness that arouses no idea of passion.”<sup>9</sup> When she confesses her unhappiness (on an augmented second), he hushes the orchestra into silence for two long measures. When the two characters begin to express their mutual love only to triangulate, pointing to the drunkenness of nature, the “shadow and odor of the leaves,” Debussy has them sing together in parallel thirds. Trying to convey “the sensation of something lived,” a Diane who only over time “loses her strength,”<sup>10</sup> the composer withholds the move into unison on “I love you” until the last two measures. Scholars have pointed out that this work, albeit never completed, served as an important predecessor to his later music.<sup>11</sup>

That Debussy began his first opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, with the love scene and duo at the end of Act IV suggests the influence of his Conservatoire training and his interest not in seduction, but in the irresistible nature of love. When he had finished a first draft of it in September 1893, Debussy wrote his friend, the composer Ernest Chausson, aghast at the result: “That's not it at all. This resembles the duo of Monsieur Un Tel or anybody, and especially the ghost of old Klingsor, alias Wagner. So I tore it up and began to look for a little chemistry of more personal phrases.” Significantly, he continues, “I've tried to be as

much Pelléas as Mélisande.”<sup>12</sup> The first audiences for the opera responded most to this duo. One critic observed that Pelléas and Mélisande sing as “passionate lovers, thank God, and not like cantors reciting a perpetual mass in plain chant,”<sup>13</sup> perhaps a reference to the rest of the opera. Debussy’s experience in writing cantatas at the Conservatory also gave him practice in creating drama with minimal means and, most of all, in letting the voices and their words be heard clearly. The Académie demanded this. Sometimes he used simple declamation unaccompanied or over static oscillating patterns in a reduced orchestra, rarely song covered over with dense orchestration, as in Wagner.

Whereas the Endymion story concerns the woman’s weakness in love, the stereotype of the exotic woman provided French composers with a significantly more compelling context in which to ponder the nature and meaning of musical charm as enacted on men and the societies they represent. This brought a new complexity of meaning to French music. In 1892, as Debussy was just beginning to ponder writing his first opera, two important premieres at the Opéra took Paris by storm: Ernest Reyer’s *Salammbô* in May and Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila* in November. Both were composed in the 1870s, when the French were exploring the merits of strong women resembling Judith, women who use their charms for a political purpose: to conquer their enemies. To engage her seductive charms and her “puissance enchanteresse,” Dalila destabilizes Samson with music that is reminiscent of the “weakness,” the chromatically descending tritone he uses to symbolize his anguish. “To enslave” Samson and “enchain” him to herself, she musically links the memory of his “caresses” with her idea of love. Starting where he left off singing “I love you,” she goes on to entreat him in one of the most powerful moments of the opera, “Respond to my tenderness, give me ecstasy,” symbolized musically by three interlocking chains of chromatically descending lines that end on a tritone. When Samson moves into unison with her at the end of the stanza this is the surrender that loves calls for—Samson’s music follows Dalila’s, the man loses his will to the woman’s. The public was taken in by the charm of this romantic duo, particularly the irresistible intertwining of the two voices—a musical emblem of sex. Sixty-one performances followed in two years and the work was still in the Opéra’s repertoire in 1902.<sup>14</sup>

Also in 1892 Debussy’s composition teacher, Ernest Guiraud, died while working on his masterpiece for the Paris Opéra, *Frédégonde*, later finished by Saint-Saëns and Dukas. This opera, based on the barbarism, ferocity, and power struggles of rival Frankish aristocrats in sixth-century France, has two seductive women, Frédégonde and Brunnhilde, representing two competing dynasties. Civil war between eastern and western France erupted from their mutual aversion. Like Dalila, foregrounding her seductive powers and “bewitching” nature, Frédégonde uses her charms with a purpose. In their love

duet of Act IV, which had the most success with audiences at the Opéra in 1895, her husband sings, “Come, divine enchantress” as she tries to convince him to condemn his own rebel son (with a previous wife) and, in his place, consecrate her sons. Love does not win, but seduction does. With too much seductive power, these women have too much force, and, when they are motivated by hate they are not just dangerous, but deadly.

Increasing problems in conquering and governing their colonies, rising hostility to the *femme nouvelle*, and enhanced confidence in their own national strength with the first stage of Franco-Russian alliance in 1891 could explain the attitudes toward women implied in these works.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless it was important to Debussy to work with a female character. Some Rosicrucian groups—and Debussy was purportedly a member—considered “the feminine principle as embodied in women to be the Savior of the Race, the vibratory center between God and man.” But not these strong, willful women like Dalila, Salammbô, or Frédégonde. Debussy put aside an opera project he had begun earlier on Flaubert’s *Salammbô*.<sup>16</sup> Taken with Ibsen, like many of his contemporaries in the literary world, Debussy looked north for a different kind of female icon. He had already chosen a text by the Pre-Raphaelite English poet Rossetti for his *Damoiselle élue*. And he had become increasingly drawn to Symbolism, which had a considerable influence on him after 1890, when he started attending Mallarmé’s Tuesdays.<sup>17</sup> Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, promoted as the finest example of Symbolist theater, was published in 1892, and Debussy bought a copy; he also went to see its sole performance in May 1893. Debussy was drawn to this work in which the woman does little to express her will, but instead submits to fate. In such a context, how could the composer, through a woman like Mélisande, charm audiences with his music?

### Mélisande’s Predecessors

The kind of woman who interested Debussy had roots in a more naïve kind of French exoticism and in charms that involved no overt manipulation. In some ways Mélisande is like Mignon, star of the ever popular opéra-comique (1866) by Ambroise Thomas, director of the Conservatoire between 1871 and 1896. When Mignon introduces herself, she reveals that she is from “a far-away country,” her origins as unclear as those of Maeterlinck’s Mélisande, who comes by boat from a foreign land. Both are beyond time and place, and yet white Europeans. As the male characters point out, Mignon is the embodiment of “grace and charm.” She is also innocent, modest, and, above all, naïve. Recalling Arkel’s way of speaking to Mélisande, the men around Mignon constantly refer to her as a “poor child” who implicitly calls on men (and God) to protect her. Like Mélisande, she seems resigned to her fate, but she is also

fearful, a bit cold and illusive to those around her. Of course the stories of these operas are not similar. Golaud is hardly like Wilhelm, the protector. Mignon is nostalgic for her homeland; Mélisande, as Elliott Antokoletz has argued, is traumatized and numb.<sup>18</sup> Mignon is proto-bourgeoise; Mélisande may be an aristocrat, for she once notes that she lost her crown. Still both are characters from adaptations of northern European literary works, difficult to build a drama around, and both represent an ideal, albeit not the same ideal. Debussy certainly knew *Mignon*, although I am not suggesting that he consciously meant to reference it. Between 1866 and its thousandth performance on May 13, 1894, *Mignon* never left the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique and was performed there an average of thirty-five times a year. Throughout 1902 it alternated with performances of *Pelléas*, at first earning more receipts per month than *Pelléas*, but beginning that June earning substantially less than *Pelléas*.<sup>19</sup>

The allure of the simple, the mysterious, and especially the foreign in Debussy's opera also comes from the singing and the vocal writing, that is, how singers used their voices to embody the characters. This too has a long history in France. References to *Mignon*'s success note that great singers who knew how to act used the "grace and tenderness" of their voices to suggest those of *Mignon*. Célestine Galli-Marié's "sweet and supple" voice was praised for translating Mignon's character perfectly. In her rendition of the role in London, Christine Nilsson was admired for taking Mignon's character to heart so much that audiences could not tell where she left off and Mignon began.<sup>20</sup> Critics abroad also emphasized the "purity" with which this role was sung, this purity perhaps a reference to the vocal timbre required to sing this music.<sup>21</sup> This kind of close identification of singer and subject drew listeners into the work, encouraging a deep connection with its characters.

Other French composers too composed with a certain *kind* of voice in mind for their main female characters, even a certain individual. Because they associated a singer's vocal quality with the character being portrayed, composers often played an important part in casting decisions. Saint-Saëns and Reyer conceived their works *Samson et Dalila* and *Salammbô* for strong and powerful voices, Pauline Viardot and Rose Caron, both with a tone capable of suggesting tragedy. At the suggestion of his librettists, after hearing her perform *Mignon* Delibes conceived *Lakmé* for an American singer, Marie Van Zandt, who subsequently paraded the opera around Europe, becoming associated with it. In composing *Thais* Massenet had in mind the naïve sound of another young American, Sybil Sanderson. The effect of these voices was crucial to understanding the opera, often the essence of the story represented. Even if Debussy had made good contacts in the world of opera singers, he did not want to call on the powerful voice of Gabrielle Krauss, who had premiered his 1883 cantata, *Le Gladiateur*, and later become famous for her performances of Gluck. Neither did he envisage Rose Caron, who in 1884 had premiered his prize-winning cantata, *L'Enfant prodigue*,



and later Reyer's *Salammbô* at the Opéra in 1892. Instead, for the role of Mélisande he first thought of the singer who premiered his *Damoiselle élue*, Julia Robert.<sup>22</sup> The conductor André Messager's choice of his protégée, Mary Garden, a Scottish singer trained in the United States, turned out to be just as appropriate. She was petite, with a sweet voice resembling that of a child, and most of all had an accent, adding a strangeness that, as with Van Zandt and Sanderson, the French found particularly appealing. Debussy wrote to Messager, "One would have to have one's ears stuffed with toilet paper to resist the charm of her voice. For my part, I can't conceive of a timbre more sweetly insinuating . . . impossible to forget."<sup>23</sup> The second Mélisande at the reprise of the opera in 1908 featured another singer with an accent, the American Maggie Teyte.<sup>24</sup> Valorizing this accent (and a story about a castle near the sea) may have been a subtle means of signifying the distant past of France, whose racial origins many linked with the Celts, a people who lived in Brittany as well as the British Isles.<sup>25</sup>

As in *Lakmé*, *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, and most other operas in France that featured exotic women, we first hear these women's voices before we see them. The seduction begins while they are hidden behind veils or, in the case of Mélisande, in the shadows. In their beauty and idealism these women cause "dreaming" in the listener, as if the recognition that something illusory, but deeply human, is happening through the music. Composers of Orientalist operas help the process along by placing the characters near water, having them sing near it or about it as if it can reflect and tell us about their beauty. Act I of *Les Pêcheurs de perles* is set at the beach. Allusions to water, especially springs, also signal the erotic, especially young love. In *Lakmé* the chorus of "amorous couples" encourages Lakmé and Gerald to come down to the "source," with its "quiet murmuring" and "pure water" awaiting them. Salammbô too, as she anticipates seeing Mathô, sings of the "pure waves of the fountains" to the accompaniment of oscillating arpeggios and trills. In *Thais* Athanaël stops at the water and descends into the well immediately before their love duet. In Debussy's opera both Golaud and Pelléas meet Mélisande near the sea. In their love duo Pelléas waxes lyrical for the first time as he feels her voice rain on him like pure water.

Many Orientalist opera librettos treat voices as the source of other kinds of power or the medium for other voices. In *Samson et Dalila* it is the voice of God (speaking through Samson); in *Lakmé*, that of duty (speaking through the soldiers or the priests) and of love (sung by the "amorous couple" near a forest); in *Salammbô* it is other-worldly voices who remind the virgin of her patriotic calling. In each case these voices are presented as if omniscient and infallible. Those who hear them, whether they are imaginary or invisible, are to heed what they say. Especially when veiled or off stage, the voices can also be a metaphor for the voice of the composer. They suggest that, as the veiled Leila exhorts her people in *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, we should "listen to [his] voice."<sup>26</sup>

But in *Pelléas et Mélisande* we first hear Mélisande crying, not singing. When she confesses her love in Act IV, it is in a barely audible whisper. Her vocal lines remain as close as possible to actual speech, following the flux of feelings in the moment and keeping any lyrical expression to an absolute minimum. Lydia Goehr sees this absence of what we normally think of as singing as a negation of the work's exteriority, marking Debussy's most significant departure from Wagner.<sup>27</sup> As in *La Damoiselle élue*, outer stillness hides inner drama, more often expressed in the orchestra than by the singers. Danger in the opera, unlike in those with other exotic women, does not come from Mélisande's voice, but from the sounds of nature that herald the arrival of Golaud and the fate of the lovers.

This gesture, I would argue, is not just a reaction against Wagner. In some ways it recalls *Mignon*. When Wilhelm asks her about her name, her age, and her parents, Mignon responds that she doesn't know in a series of repeated C's, alone and accompanied by a violin, suggesting her lack of voice as well as touching simplicity (ex. 3.1). Music here is meant to translate character. That which accompanies the laughter and exuberant vocalises of her counterpart Philine often includes leaping octaves, grace notes, and virtuoso showmanship and borrows rhythms of the polka and waltz, giving musical form to Philine's seductive playfulness, pride, and self-confidence. Mignon's mezzo voice and more restrained melodic lines suggest her modest, pious, affectionate, and docile nature as well as her touching sadness. Mignon is a desiring female, but not an overtly seductive one.

Mignon's charm, like that of Mélisande, is of a different nature than Philine's, not only veiled and discreet, but also what the French called "douce-amère," a lyrical sensibility in which the character seems close to tears. It finds its fullest expression in what French critics called a "déclamation épurée": declamation without ornament, refined, sober, expressive, and true. They focused on the "presque rien" of this passage, for it seemed to capture the essence of music as well as of Mignon. Ernest Reyer called it the effect of a "science rentrée," or how Thomas used his considerable knowledge and skill to produce the appearance of simple grace. Reyer explains, "The most exquisite compositional work hides under the most charming grace, a tenderness, a charm, a poetry that enchants you from the beginning."<sup>28</sup> Some of Debussy's writing can be described similarly, particularly vocal lines with few pitches and bare, if any, orchestral accompaniment. Already in 1866, stripping melody of ornaments, rejecting conventional ways of communicating dramatic sentiment, and seeking a truer form of expression were seen as new and modern.<sup>29</sup> Seeking musical phrases that were natural and in close relationship with real human situations, melody that was "less lyrical" than Italian melody, "less elevated and penetrating" than German melody, but "more human," as those of *Mignon* were described, were goals Debussy shared with Ambroise Thomas.

EXAMPLE 3.1. Ambroise Thomas, *Mignon*, Act I, scene 6.

M. *Mignon.*

main. Wilhelm (spoken): Ils m'ap - pel - lent Mi - gnon, Je n'ai pas d'au - tre  
 Quel es ton nom?

M. *Mignon.*

nom. Wilhelm (spoken): Les bois ont re - ver - di, les fleurs se sont fa -  
 Quel âge as-tu?

M.

né - es! Per - son - ne n'a pris soin de comp - ter mes an - né - - es. Wilhelm (spoken):  
 Quel est ton père?  
 Quel est ta mère?

M. *Mignon. dim.*

Hé - las! ma mè - re dort, Et le grand diable est mort!

### Seeing before Hearing

If there is seduction in *Pelléas*, it begins in the visual domain. Hearing Mélisande's voice is not enough for Golaud. He must see her. After seeing her, he remarks on her beauty. Mélisande tells Pelléas she has loved him since she first saw him. Pelléas says he must see her one last time before leaving and judges her feelings by her eyes, demanding, "Where are your eyes?" and accusing, "Your eyes seemed somewhere else." During his most passionate

moment in Act IV he admits he'd never *seen* someone as beautiful as she. The seduction scene à la *Roméo et Juliette* takes place with the sight and touch of her hair. "Look, look, I'm kissing your hair," Pelléas tells Mélisande. Golaud too, when frustrated and demanding her secret, expresses himself by pulling on her hair, a physical emblem of her sexuality in the tradition of Baudelaire. In the only performance of the play, however, the whole thing was done behind gauze scrims with minimal decor, complicating the audience's perception of the visual. What audiences saw was merely a suggestion rather than a depiction, a stimulus to the imagination.

By contrast, at the production of the opera the decor and costumes were much more realistic—"d'une beauté romantique," as critics noted—and the rapid and numerous backdrops for each scene were important in keeping the audience's attention alert, preventing them from getting bored. Some, who were not taken with the music, said the sets' beauty was compensation worth the performance—which may have been the director's intention.<sup>30</sup> Still, whereas one might think the realism of these sets could contradict the mystery of the characters' lives, in a way the sets contributed to one of the points of the opera: outer beauty is little in and of itself without inner beauty, which usually remains hidden.

Of course Debussy wanted Mélisande to charm audiences into looking *behind* the veils she wraps around herself, as he once explained to Chausson. However, it is not just her voice that interests him, or even its beauty. As in many French operas on exotic subjects, her voice is a medium of truth. Truth for many late nineteenth-century French, especially Freemasons, meant moral truth, truths that both regulate and inspire.<sup>31</sup> In late nineteenth-century France republicans, many of whom were Freemasons, believed that music giving voice to truth gives rise to a taste for order and beauty in life as well as in art. Some even considered "expressive truth" as the "first quality" of French music.<sup>32</sup> Debussy may not have agreed with this association of truth with moral truth, and some critics who saw the opera as decadent claimed that listening to it would *ruin* one's character, not improve it.<sup>33</sup> Still expressive truth is very important in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In his book on aesthetics Debussy's teacher Marmontel wrote, "The first law of the beautiful in the arts is *la vérité d'expression*, the idealized but also *living and true* manifestation of a thought, a passion."<sup>34</sup> By this he meant the accuracy of the declamation, the expressive character of the sung words, "la parole chantée," the movement and action, all essential elements of the opera.

Rousseauian connotations of this word aside, Marmontel calls transparency the "essence" to which a young French musician should "cling as a soldier to his flag."<sup>35</sup> Where transparency differs from French notions of clarity is in its function as the medium of not just language, but of truth. Yet finding the truth

in Maeterlinck's play is not straightforward in any way that music can unveil. Golaud recognizes Mélisande's beauty immediately upon seeing her. However, even if he is constantly asking her questions, he never learns her truth. She dies, and he himself fears dying a blind man. Even when it comes to Pelléas and Mélisande, they do not always tell the truth, such as in their claims of feeling love at first sight. Truth, like much of life itself, the opera suggests, hides in obscurity, ungraspable and difficult to know. Much of the play juxtaposes the clear and the obscure, as if what is visible is only part of life.<sup>36</sup> As with the fountain at the beginning of Act II that could reputedly heal the eyes of the blind and now has gone still, a constant analogue exists in the text between seeing and hearing, blindness and silence.

### The Truth of Silence

Like the play's producer, Lugué-Poë, who dreamed of creating a theater that would link poetry and silence, Debussy wrote to Chausson, "I'm using something that is quite rare, silence as a means of expression and perhaps the only way to underline the emotion of an phrase."<sup>37</sup> In *Le Trésor des humbles*, Maeterlinck had written, "True life is made of silences." Silence is the "refuge of our souls," the place where souls are most free. It is "the angel of supreme truths." Maeterlinck believed that "all silences are different," and that the "quality" of shared silences "reveals the quality of your love and your souls." *Pelléas et Mélisande*, both the play and the opera, suggests how "the quality" of silences, especially the first silence between two lovers, could determine the characters' "destiny."<sup>38</sup>

Many of the silences that punctuate the musical flow in the opera are followed by unaccompanied voices, with the orchestra remaining silent, refusing expressive commentary. In example 3.2, Golaud wonders out loud, "I hear crying" ("J'entends pleurer"). We wonder: Whose crying? It is a girl by the water who doesn't hear him. Who is he, we also wonder? Sounds uttered by the singers—Mélisande's crying and a cough by Golaud, punctuated by pizzicato strings three measures before rehearsal number 7—also refuse musical expressivity.<sup>39</sup> In the second instance of unaccompanied singing Golaud explains that he had been there forty years ago. Why, we ask ourselves?

In Act II, scene 1 (ex. 3.3a) Debussy holds back the orchestra when Pelléas asks Mélisande if Golaud met her at the fountain, then interrupts it when Mélisande becomes scared of something below the water, and again when she realizes that she dropped her ring (ex. 3.3b). In these cases the unaccompanied melodic line remains within a very restricted pitch range. Melodic stasis allows for clear enunciation of the words and underlines the dramatic immediacy.



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EXAMPLE 3.2. Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Golaud, Act I, scene 1.

EXAMPLE 3.3. Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act II, scene 1. (a) Pelléas. (b) Mélisande.

Virtually all such occasions of orchestral restraint come at moments when the characters are asking questions, whether explicitly or implicitly, seeking the truth, perhaps to know their destiny. This tactic recalls the scene with Mignon when Wilhelm is trying to find out who she is. Another precedent, which some see as a source of this passage in *Mignon*, comes in Gounod's *Faust* (ex. 3.4) when, on a single note in the garden scene, with little to no accompaniment,



Marguerite asks herself who has just addressed her, whether he is noble or not, and what his name is.<sup>40</sup> In Debussy's opera, however, such questions are rarely answered.

EXAMPLE 3.4. Gounod, *Faust*, Marguerite, Act III.

The musical score for Marguerite's aria in Act III of Gounod's *Faust* is presented in two systems. The first system features the Bsn. (Bassoon) part with dynamics *p* and *pp* *sostenuto*, the Viol. dolce (Violin) part with *p*, and the vocal line for MARG. with lyrics: "e vou - drais bien sa - voir quel é - tait ce jeune". The piano accompaniment includes *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *pp* markings. The second system includes the Ob. (Oboe) and Clar. (Clarinet) parts with *1st* and *cresc.* markings, and the vocal line with lyrics: "hom - me; Si c'est un grand sei - gneur, et com - ment il se nom - me?". The piano accompaniment continues with *pp* and *dim.* markings.

When Mélisande asks Pelléas what they should tell Golaud if he notices the missing ring (ex. 3.5a), Pelléas responds, unaccompanied, “La vérité.” But the curtain falls, posing more questions than were answered. What is the truth here? Not just the truth about the ring, but why it was lost. What

is going on between the two characters? When they both quietly utter “I love you” and “Since when have you loved me? Since always” (ex. 3.5b and 3.5c), the revelations come out as strange, to them as well as to us.<sup>41</sup> This kind of truth arises out of a certain “quality of silence” that suggests the “certitude” of their love, as Maeterlinck may have imagined.<sup>42</sup> It also raises as many questions as it answers. Later *Mélisande* charms us with the illusive nature of her own paradoxical truth: “I’m happy, but I’m sad.”

EXAMPLE 3.5. Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. (a) Act II, scene 1. (b) Act IV, scene 3. (c) Act IV, scene 3.

(a)

La vé - ri - té la vé - ri - - - té

(b)

M. Je t'aime aus - si...

P. Je t'ai-me Oh! qu'as-tu dit, Me-li-san-de!

(c)

M. De-puis tou-jours...

P. Tu m'ai-mes? tu m'ai-mes aus-si?... De puis quand m'ai-mes tu?

In her long unaccompanied solo on her hair at the beginning of Act III, Maeterlinck and Debussy give us a rare window onto *Mélisande* as she contemplates her own beauty without benefit of orchestral commentary or orchestral enhancement (ex. 3.6). In some ways this dreamy oscillating lullaby recalls Ophelia’s mad song in Ambroise Thomas’s *Hamlet*. Both women, blond and fragile like tender flowers, celebrate their voices with music unlike elsewhere in the operas. Both do so at moments of discontinuity, as they look back over their lives, feeling strangely free. Both use music to enter a dream-like state, its instability suggested in the unsettlingly way Debussy sets “mes cheveux” both on and off the beat of the repeating folk-like melody. The off-stage chorus in *Hamlet* suggests the presence of divine voices, as if Ophelia thinks she is going to heaven. After a pause, marked by a fermata (a kind of halo), *Mélisande*, sounding almost like a trumpet with her dotted rhythms, directly invokes her patron saints, three archangels: Saints Daniel, Michel, and Raphael. These recall the angelic voices that Joan of Arc listened to, another reference to the French medieval past. Is



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EXAMPLE 3.6. Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mélisande, Act III, scene 1.

Modéré et librement

Mes longs che - veux des - cen - dent jus - qu'au seuil de la tour Mes che - veux vous at - ten - dent tout le long de la

tour et tout le long du jour et tout le long du jour

Saint Da - niel et Saint Mi - chel Saint Mi - chel et Saint Da - niel je suis né un di - man - che un di - man - ché mi - di

this also a presentiment of her death? The solo culminates in the strangest and most useless of revelations: “I was born on a Sunday, Sunday at noon.” As Catherine Clément points out, this is not just the Lord’s day, but also the hour of pagan madness in southern Italy.<sup>43</sup> If *Mélisande* is a witch, as Clément suggests, and *Ophelia* mad, is it because they are women who evoke questions more than answers?

When the characters are anxious and impatient, Debussy exposes the questions at the heart of this drama in unaccompanied vocal lines, sometimes in narrow ranges restricted to one or two pitches, at other times in exposed dissonances, the vocal line passionately charged with diminished fifths. Golaud poses questions to elicit the truth from *Mélisande* as she is dying. Querying her crying, he outlines the tritone F–Cb. Then, pronouncing her name, he leaps down C–F# (ex. 3.7a). *Pelléas*, anxious to see *Mélisande* one more time, calls out to her in a short passage spanning a rising tritone, E–Bb (ex. 3.7b). Whereas in an early work Debussy uses the tritone to set the word “pleasure,”<sup>44</sup> here these tritones, with their two contradictory centers of gravity, suggest the contradictory feelings of Golaud

EXAMPLE 3.7A. Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Golaud, Act II, scene 2.

M. Je suis... Je suis ma-lade i -

Go. a r'il Mé - li - san - de Pour quoi pleu - res - tu tout à coup?

ci... Je ne sais pas... Je suis ma-lade i - ci

Tu es ma - la - de Qu'as-tu donc, qu'as-tu donc Mé-li-san - de



EXAMPLE 3.7B. Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 3.

M. Pel-lé - as! Oui.

P. Mé-li - san - de! Est - ce toi, Mé-l - i - san - de?

and Pelléas, both desirous as well as intensely fearful of disappointment. Such passages, unadorned by orchestral accompaniment, allow us, along with the characters, to look for the truth not in clear expressive melodies, but in the emptiness and ambiguities of sound—Debussy’s “*détermination épurée*”—as well as silence.

Debussy could have used moments of visual obscurity in the play to draw attention to his music. Instead, because he too was interested in the unseen as well as the unspoken, much of his opera—its unresolved harmonies (Willy), floating rhythms, sense of formlessness (Curzon), absence of perfect chords, and what some critics called its constant cloudiness (d’Harcourt)—seems to withhold any expectation of clarity.<sup>45</sup> For the few moments when the mists clear or Debussy wants to suggest the impact of Mélisande’s beauty on Pelléas or Golaud, his music emerges from its shapeless tremoli and stately rhythms to form momentary musical arabesques, almost self-sufficient sine-wave curves with livelier rhythms. The first time Golaud exclaims “Oh, you are beautiful,” the orchestra reaches out with a harmonic caress in one such curving line. Ecstasy, as expressed by Pelléas’s intense and prolonged lyricism, is later presented as the feeling one has when the truth comes fully into the light. In some ways this duo is what listeners expected: it culminates with the lovers singing in unison for two measures, the music reaching a crescendo just before Golaud bursts in and strikes down Pelléas.

But such moments are rare. The paucity of this kind of music in the opera suggests that clarity of thought and feeling are rare in life, as rare as it is to understand truth, be it about fate, love, or merely sincerity and innocence. As in *Diane au bois*, nature gives us clues, as does Debussy’s music, more often than not remaining gently in the shadows and waiting for us to notice her. But truth, like Mélisande, can disappear and die before we grasp it. If the “*intellect moyen*” could not understand a thing, as Léon Kerst wrote in *Le Petit Journal*, Debussy did not object.<sup>46</sup> He was looking to create a new ideal, one that used its women and their charms not as a metaphor for the social order or French identity in the world, but as a conduit to a new kind of music.



## Truth and Beauty

The notion of associating women with truth was increasingly appealing during the last decade of the nineteenth century, and some endeavored through images of women to unite truth and beauty. As the Symbolist theorist Charles Morice put it in 1889, “Beauty is the dream of the truth.” Morice suggested that an analysis of the successive states of consciousness and the technique of suggestion could go further than any philosophy in unveiling internal truth and the mystery of destiny. This, to his mind, was the ultimate goal of poetry.<sup>47</sup> If these ideas sound like Debussy’s, they should. Morice claimed Debussy told him he owed the formation of his thinking to Morice.

*Pelléas et Mélisande* was premiered amid the fashion for Beauty with a capital B. Many critics of the time associated musical beauty with Gluck, whose *Énéide en Tauride* was revived at the Opéra in May 1893. Gluck’s women are passive like Mélisande; they submit to fate, allowing the orchestra to comment on their meaning. But whereas Gluck endeavored to strip music of all “useless ornament,” Debussy concentrated on turning all music into ornament, that is, rethinking its structures as well as its melodies. Looking to Palestrina, Lassus, Bach, and Javanese counterpoint as his models, he believed the principle of ornament to be the basis of all art. The Belgian critic Octave Maus was perhaps the first to point this out in Debussy’s music. He described *Pelléas et Mélisande* as “a melodic line whose rhythm is precise and supported by a succession of harmonies.”<sup>48</sup> Debussy recognized that listeners sought emotions through melody. His great innovation was to conceive of all the elements of music—the textures, rhythms, and harmonies—as an arabesque in constant metamorphosis, a beauty announced by Mélisande’s long solo, but also synonymous with that of nature and the human soul. In this sense Mélisande’s solo on her hair harkens to something larger about music. Like Golaud and Pelléas in their musical response to Mélisande’s beauty, Arkel remarked, looking at her, “One has such a need for beauty alongside death.”

With Mélisande, then, while Debussy sensed the waning of the seductive model of musical meaning, he also explored new forms of musical charm serving as conduits to new notions of truth. At the Conservatoire he had learned how to write music that enchants, duos that express desire. But Maeterlinck’s play encouraged him to go beyond these conventions and look for charm in the unspoken or the unexpressed, in arrested moments and illusory questions, many of them remaining unanswered. He was drawn to not only the mystery of the instant, to quote Vladimir Jankélévitch,<sup>49</sup> but also what I would call the charm of the instant, its immediacy punctuated by a silent orchestra. Like his predecessors he sought transparency between music and character, although he, like Maeterlinck, rejected strong, assertive women as emblems of France

and as agents of French culture. The resemblances between Mélisande and Thomas's Mignon or Ophelia are ironic, given Debussy's disdain for the Conservatoire's director. Yet they nonetheless create a kind of continuity in French musical culture, whether Debussy would acknowledge this or not. With Mélisande Debussy created music whose charm caresses without enchainning the listener to one meaning or another. Resonant stillness and silence open us to the vast impenetrable vistas of truth and bring us into an intimacy with the unknown—so fitting in the unstable cultural, social, and political climate of the modern era.

## NOTES

An initial version of this paper was delivered at the Symposium on Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, October 17, 2003.

1. Gustave Larroumet, *Discours prononcé par M. le Ministre des Beaux-Arts*, séance publique annuelle du samedi 4 août 1888 (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1888). Earlier Ernest Renan, in *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale de France* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1884), had contrasted France with Germany in these same terms, suggesting the two peoples have distinct qualities, the Germans superior in the intellectual domain, the French, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, remarkable by their charm.

2. See Jann Pasler, "Crossdressing in Saint-Saëns' *Le Rouet d'Omphale*: Ambiguities of Gender and Politics," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Lloyd Whitesell and Sophie Fuller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 191–215.

3. I theorize musical charm in my  *Useful Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

4. Antoine Marmontel, *Eléments d'esthétique musicale et considération sur le beau dans les arts* (Paris: Heugel, 1884), 259, 275.

5. From a Saint-Saëns letter cited in J.-L. Croze, "La Musique à l'Académie de Médecine," *Le Soir*, July 21, 1895.

6. Bachelet in 1887, Dukas and Galeotti in 1888, Andres and Bouval in 1890, Tariot in 1891, Mouquet in 1892, and Bloch in 1893.

7. James R. Briscoe, "'To Invent New Forms': Debussy's *Diane au bois*," *Musical Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1990): 144. Briscoe dates the composition between 1881 and 1886. For an analysis of *Daniel* and Debussy's other Conservatory training, see John Clevenger, "Debussy's Rome Cantatas," in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane F. Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9–98, 299–362.

8. Debussy's letter to Henri Vasnier, June 14, 1885, in Claude Debussy, *Correspondance*, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 29.

9. Debussy's letter to Henri Vasnier, late November 1885, in *ibid.*, 44–45.

10. *Ibid.*; Debussy's letter to Claudius Popelin, December 7, 1885, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 46.

11. Briscoe, in "Debussy's *Diane au bois*," sees this duo as an early exercise in opera as well as an attempt to reconcile the old and the new (132). Although *Diane au bois* follows the standard operatic practice of recitative/aria, the structure is continuous, most likely inspired by Wagner, albeit Wagner perhaps understood via Massenet (166).

At the same time, Debussy follows French tradition in insisting that the “accent remain lyrical without being absorbed by the orchestra” (169). See Debussy’s letter to Henri Vasnier, October 19, 1885, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 43. I am grateful to Jim Briscoe for lending me his transcription of the score. See also Richard Langham Smith, “Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,” *19th-Century Music* 5, no. 2 (1981): 98–99; Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 37; David Grayson, “Debussy on Stage,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 68. On Wagner’s influence, see David Grayson, *The Genesis of Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986); Steven Huebner, “Massenet and Wagner: Bridling the Influence,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 5, no. 3 (1993): 223–38, and his *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), part I; Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 62–78.

12. Debussy letter to Chausson, October 2, 1893, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 160.

13. Florencio Odero, “La Musique,” *La Renaissance latine*, 1902, 122.

14. See Jann Pasler, “Contingencies of Meaning in Transcriptions and Excerpts: Popularizing *Samson et Dalila*,” in *Approaches to Meaning in Music*, ed. Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 170–213; Jann Pasler, “Politics, Biblical Debates, and Judith in French Dramatic Music after 1870,” in *The Sword of Judith: Essays, Sources, Images*, ed. Henrike Lahnemann, Elena Ciletta, and John Nassichuck (Cambridge, England: Open Book Publishers, 2009), 393–414.

15. See Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), chapter 12.

16. This is mentioned in his letter to Vasnier, October 19, 1885, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 42–43.

17. Recent studies of this include Elliott Antokoletz, *Musical Symbolism in the Operas of Debussy and Bartók: Trauma, Gender, and the Unfolding of the Unconscious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Mallarmé: Un clair regard dans les ténèbres: Peinture, musique, poésie* (Paris: Biro, 1998).

18. See Antokoletz, “Music as Encoder of the Unconscious in *Pelléas et Mélisande*,” this volume.

19. In May 2002 average receipts per performance of *Mignon* were 8,455 francs, as opposed to those of *Pelléas*, at 5,546 francs. However, in June average receipts for *Mignon* dropped to 3,761 francs, while those for *Pelléas* rose to 6,206 francs. *Mignon*’s average receipts remained less than those of *Pelléas* until that December, when they climbed back up to 6,991 francs, as opposed to 6,418 francs for *Pelléas*. See Jann Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power: Forces behind the Reception of Debussy’s Opera,” in *Writing through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 183–84. This suggests that, even if Debussy’s opera did not have the same appeal as *Mignon*, its success drew audiences temporarily away from *Mignon*.

20. *Le Ménestrel*, Apr 1872, 123; De Retz, “Saison de Londres,” *Le Ménestrel*, July 11, 1875, 252.

21. See, for example, *Le Ménestrel*, Oct 1875, 358, and August 8, 1880, 287.

22. Richard Langham Smith, “The Parcentage of *Pelléas*,” *Music and Musicians* 22 (September 1973): 40.

23. Debussy letter to André Messager, July 8, 1902, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 674.

24. In his essay in this volume, “Debussy’s Ideal Pelléas and the Limits of Authorial Intent,” David Grayson suggests that Debussy also chose Jean Périer as Pelléas with similar concerns in mind.

25. For more on these connections, see L. A. Bourgault-Ducoudray, *Trente Mélodies populaires de Basse-Bretagne* (Paris: Lemoine, 1885); Jann Pasler, “Theorizing Race in Nineteenth-Century France: Music as Emblem of Identity,” *Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2006): 459–504.

26. For a fuller discussion of such issues, see Pasler, *Useful Music*.

27. Lydia Goehr, “Radical Modernism and the Failure of Style: Philosophical Reflections on Maeterlinck-Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*,” typescript from the author, later published in *Representations*, spring 2001, 55–82.

28. Ernest Reyer, 1866 review, cited in Marie-Hélène Coudroy-Saghai and Hervé Lacombe, “*Faust et Mignon* face à la presse,” in *Sillages musicologiques*, ed. Philippe Blay and Raphaëlle Legrand (Paris: Conservatoire national de Paris, 1997), 103.

29. Paul Bernard (1877), cited in Hervé Lacombe, *Les Voix de l’opéra français* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 278.

30. Paul Flat, “Théâtres,” *Revue bleue* 1007, 593; A. Mangeot, “*Pelléas et Mélisande*,” *Le Monde musical*, May 15, 1902, 156.

31. Félix Pécaut, *L’Education publique et la vie nationale* (Paris: Hachette, 1897), xxii.

32. See Pasler, *Composing the Citizen*, chapter 3.

33. Camille Bellaigue, cited in Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power,” 204, 209.

34. Marmontel, *Eléments d’esthétique musicale*, 246, 255.

35. *Ibid.*, 421.

36. Richard Langham Smith, in Roger Nichols and Richard Langham Smith, *Claude Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), shows the importance of dark/light symbolism in the action of the play (107–39). He sees *Mélisande* as “the agent through whom man may achieve ‘the light’” (115).

37. Aurélien Lugné-Poë, *Le Sot du tremplin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930), 223; Debussy’s letter to Chausson, October 2, 1893, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 161.

38. Maurice Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles* (Brussels: Labor, 1986), 16–23. I am grateful to Richard Langham Smith for directing me to this text.

39. I am grateful to David Grayson for pointing out Golaud’s cough, indicated in the piano-vocal score.

40. In his “Gounod,” *New Grove* 2, Steven Huebner points out “how bold the understated first appearance of Marguerite” in the first act of *Faust* appeared to early audiences.

41. Annegret Fauser, in “Debussy’s Challenge,” *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Royal Opera House, May 2007, points out a musical antecedent to this truth-telling. At the end of Bizet’s opera the orchestra suddenly goes silent as Carmen tells Don José, “Je ne t’aime plus” (18). With Carmen also in repertoire with *Pelléas* at the Opéra-Comique, French audiences would most likely have recognized this allusion.

42. Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles*, 22.

43. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 113–14.

44. The tritone B–F comes on the last syllable of “plaisir” in “Le plaisir est ma loi,” in the “Ode bachique” from Théodore de Banville’s play, *Hymnis*. See Briscoe, “Debussy’s *Diane au bois*,” 138.



45. These reviews are discussed in Pasler, "Pelléas and Power."
46. Ibid.
47. Charles Morice, *La Littérature de tout à l'heure* (Paris: Perrin, 1889); Paul Delsemme, *Un Théoricien du symbolisme: Charles Morice* (Paris: Nizet, 1958), 174, 180.
48. Octave Maus, "Pelléas et Mélisande," *L'Art moderne*, 25, 1902, 178.
49. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Debussy ou le mystère de l'instant* (Paris: Plon, 1976)

