
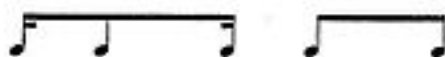
	<p>Claude Debussy and the Ghost of Old Klingsor</p> <p>Arthur Wenk</p> <p>Toronto Wagner Society November 16, 2009</p>	
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avec une grande emotion

Piano



Perhaps not quite what you were expecting? The excerpt comes from *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, the final movement in Claude Debussy's *Children's Corner Suite*, completed in 1908. Those few measures say a good deal about Debussy's complex relationship with the music of Richard Wagner, so it may be worthwhile to explain what's happening here. Those of you who were, quite reasonably, expecting to hear the opening of the "Tristan" prelude, given those very familiar first two notes, get the joke right away: with those irreverent grace notes, Debussy is thumbing his nose at the old master. But the parody goes deeper than that. A cakewalk is, in itself, a parody: a dance in which plantation slaves made fun of the fine manners of the white folks living in the "big house" by grotesquely exaggerated movements in a syncopated rhythm.



[Demonstrate] So Debussy is really poking fun at Wagner as the "big daddy" of the plantation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century European music. Whether that puts Debussy himself in the position of slave merely testifies to the complexity of the relationship between the two composers.

Debussy and Wagner: A Conflicted Relationship	
1872	Debussy studies the overture to <i>Tannhäuser</i> with his teacher

	Lavignac at the Paris Conservatoire. “The young professor and his eager pupil became so absorbed in the novel Wagnerian harmonies that they forgot all sense of time. When they eventually decided to leave they found themselves locked in and were obliged to grope their way out, arm in arm, down the rickety stairs and the dark corridors of the crumbling scholastic building.”
1880	Debussy hears <i>Tristan und Isolde</i> in Vienna on his first trip with Madame von Meck and purchases a score
1885	Debussy, at the Villa Medici to take up the <i>Prix de Rome</i> : “At that time I was a Wagnerian to the point of forgetting the simplest rules of courtesy.”
ca. 1886	Debussy, on a wager, attempts to play the entire score of <i>Tristan und Isolde</i> from memory
1887	Debussy hears <i>Lohengrin</i> in Paris
1888-1889	Debussy travels to Bayreuth and attends performances of <i>Parsifal</i> , <i>Die Meistersinger</i> , and <i>Tristan</i> . (“1889! A marvelous year! I was full of the Wagnerian madness.”)
1893	Debussy performs extracts from <i>Das Rheingold</i> at the Paris Opera to illustrate a lecture by Catulles Mendès
1894	Debussy earns 1000 francs by playing and singing the whole of Act I of <i>Parsifal</i> at the home of Henri Lerolle
1902	“After some years of passionate pilgrimages to Bayreuth, I began to have doubts about the Wagnerian formula, or, rather, it seemed to me that it was of use only in the particular case of Wagner’s own genius.”
1902	“Certainly my method of composing—which consists above all of dispensing with ‘methods of composing’—owes nothing to Wagner.”
1903	“Wagner, if one may be permitted a little of the grandiloquence that suits the man, was a beautiful sunset that has been mistaken for a dawn.”
1910	“I am no longer an adversary of Wagner.”
1914	“ <i>Parsifal</i> is one of the loveliest monuments of sound ever raised to the serene glory of music.”

I draw your attention in particular to the incident around 1886 in which Debussy bet that he could play the entire score of *Tristan und Isolde* from memory. Though he lost the bet, the incident suggests how thoroughly he

had absorbed Wagner's music and the extent to which he was conscious of this mastery.

As if Wagner's music were not sufficiently seductive on its own, Debussy received a full blast of *wagnérisme* from the French poets of his time. To trace the influence of Wagner on French literature would require much more time than I have this evening, but suffice it to say that the literary world of the *fin de siècle* embraced Wagner with a good deal more enthusiasm than understanding.

### Opera and Drama

#### Wagner

- Melody based on inflection of speech
- Unifying musical motives to link elements of the drama
- *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a union of all the arts

#### Wagnérisme

- Poetry based on inflection of speech
- Unifying literary symbols link elements of the poem
- Mallarmé's ideal theatre: no sets, no scenery, no costumes—stage in the imagination of the reader
- *Son* (the musical component of a word) combines with *sens* (the meaning of the word) [no need for instruments!]

The concept of the union of the arts had great appeal at a period which saw considerable cross-influence among painters, poets and musicians. For French poets, the theories of Wagner seem to have provided a focus for prevailing notions of a synthesis of the arts as well as elevating the question to the realm of the ideal. Stéphane Mallarmé, poet and aesthete of the Symbolist movement, claimed Wagner as an ally in the pursuit of the ideal. But the ideal theatre, in Mallarmé's conception, would have been completely unrecognizable to Wagner, for everything took place in the mind of the reader, with no need for sets, scenery or costumes. Even worse, there was no music, at least not the kind of music that Wagner wrote.

French poets cultivated a literary *musique* based on the sounds of vowels, the *son*, which they distinguished from the meanings of the words, the *sens*. In Mallarmé's version of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, music and word could be combined in poetry, with no need for sounding notes. (Wagner had nothing on Mallarmé when it came to co-opting the competition.)

Debussy was a regular visitor at those weekly Tuesday night gatherings in which Mallarmé, his head encircled with cigar smoke, would expound his theories of poetry. Debussy thoroughly assimilated the Symbol-

ist aesthetic, in which a word occurring at one point in a poem could resonate with its repetition perhaps several lines later, an idea to which we shall return.

Given the double-barreled assault of Wagner's influence on a composer looking for new forms of musical expression, it seems only natural that Debussy would want to write an opera. In fact, he spent considerable time reflecting on the kind of opera he would like to write, and how it might differ from the Wagnerian model. In 1889 Debussy's conversation with his old composition teacher, Ernest Guiraud, was happily recorded by one of his friends.

Debussy on Opera (I): 1889 conversation with Ernest Guiraud	
Debussy:	Wagner superimposes the words upon a continuous symphony, all the while subordinating this symphony to the words. Not always sufficiently. His works only partially realize his declared principles of the essential subordination. He lacks the audacity to apply them.
Guiraud:	From which it follows that you are "liberal Wagnerian?"
Debussy:	I am not tempted to imitate what I admire in Wagner. I imagine a different dramatic form: music begins with what the word is incapable of expressing; music is made for the inexpressible; I should like it to have the air of emerging from shadow and, off and on, returning there. ... Nothing should hold back the pace of the drama: every musical development that the words do not call forth is a fault.

It would be several years before Debussy found what he was looking for, in the form of a strange play by Maurice Maeterlinck entitled *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Even a brief synopsis reveals the absence of action in the usual dramatic sense.

#### *Synopsis of Pelléas et Mélisande*

Golaud, prince of Allemonde, discovers Mélisande by a stream in the woods. She has lost her crown in the water, but does not wish to retrieve it. They marry and she soon falls in love with Golaud's half brother, Pelléas. The two meet by a fountain, where Mélisande loses her wedding ring. Golaud grows suspicious of the pair, has his son Yniold spy on them, and discovers them caressing, whereupon he kills Pelléas and wounds Mélisande. She subsequently dies in childbirth, leaving Golaud still uncertain about the

extent of her intimacy with Pelléas.

Characters talk, look around, and worry for five acts, but seem incapable of action.

The play had but a single performance, on May 17, 1893. Debussy, a member of the audience, recognized the libretto he had been seeking and immediately started work writing music for an opera, beginning with the famous love scene in Act IV. He soon realized that the effort willy-nilly engaged him in an all-consuming wrestling match when he discovered that “the ghost of old Klingsor, alias R. Wagner, appeared in every measure.”

#### Wrestling with a Ghost

- Exorcism
- Parody
- Acquiescence
- Transcendence

Debussy’s first response was **exorcism**: he tore up his manuscript for Act IV, Scene 4. Clearly this could not be a productive approach if he really intended to compose an opera.

A second response was **parody**, not in the sense of poking fun, as in *Golliwogg’s Cakewalk*, but a more reverential, self-conscious use of Wagner’s almost overbearing influence. Debussy employs the half-diminished seventh, or “Tristan” chord, as a kind of musical word-play, to set the word “*triste*” [sad].

#### The “Tristan” Chord

- Act II, Scene 2: when Golaud commiserates with Mélisande, commenting on the sadness of a countryside surrounded by dark forests
- Act IV, Scene 4: when Mélisande murmurs, “Mais je suis triste.” [But I am sad]
- Act I, Scene 1: Golaud’s repeated question, “Why are you weeping?”
- Act I, Scene 1: Golaud tells Mélisande not to cry that way.
- Act II, Scene 2: Golaud asks, “What is it, Mélisande? Why are you suddenly weeping?” and at the end of the scene when Mélisande exits in tears
- Act IV/Scene 4: the treatment of the word *mort* [death] uses the same pitches as Wagner’s setting of the word *Tod* [death] in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Bass

Et la cam-pa-gne peutsem - bler triste aus - si a-vec tou-te ces fo-rets,

Piano

T T T T

"Tristan" chord

Soprano

mais je suis tri - ste

Piano

Tristan chord  
(closed position)

The image shows a musical score for Bass and Piano. The Bass line is in the lower register with the lyrics "Pour - quoi pleu - res tu?". The Piano part consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains several chords, with two marked "T" and "3". The lower staff has a bass clef and contains a melodic line with a slur and a "3" marking. Below the piano staves, the text "'Tristan' chord" is written.

Debussy completed a first draft of the opera by 1895 but had to wait another seven years before it received a production, by which time the height of Debussy's infatuation with Wagner had passed. As the premiere of *Pelléas et Mélisande* approached, Debussy continued to reflect on the influence of Wagner. As we read his words we need to keep in mind the ongoing struggle with the ghost of old Klingsor and the tone of defensiveness this struggle casts upon the writing.

Debussy on Opera (II): Article in *La Revue blanche* (1901)

Wagner has set us a number of precedents in how to fashion music for the theater. One day we shall see how useless they all are. ...Music has a rhythm whose secret force shapes the development. The rhythm of the soul, however, is quite different—more instinctive, more general, and more controlled by many events. From the incompatibility of these two rhythms a perpetual conflict arises, for the two do not move at the same speed. Either the music stifles itself by chasing after a character, or the character has to sit on a note to allow the music to catch up with him. Nevertheless, there are miraculous moments where the two are in harmony, and Wagner has the honor of being responsible for some of them. But they are for the most part due to chance, and more often than not awkward and deceptive. All in all, the application of symphonic form to dramatic action succeeds in killing dramatic music rather than saving it, as was proclaimed when Wagner was crowned king of opera.

Let me particularly call your attention to the phrase “miraculous moments,” and ask that you call it to mind when I speak later about Debussy’s conception of Wagner as a miniaturist.

When *Pelléas et Mélisande* finally went into production it became evident that the orchestral interludes that Debussy had composed to connect the scenes did not always provide sufficient time for the necessary changes of set to take place. Debussy had to return to a work he had thought complete and furnish additional music under time pressure. Given these circumstances, we should not be surprised that Old Klingsor should score a few points. Echoes of *Parsifal* abound in these last-minute extensions, evidence of Debussy’s unconscious **acquiescence**. Listen to this excerpt from *Parsifal*:



Now hear the similarity between Wagner’s music and that of Debussy’s interlude between the first two scenes of Act I in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.





Now this may well have been a conscious imitation on Debussy's part, in which case we should include it in the "parody" section. After all, the excerpt from Act I of *Parsifal* forms part of the so-called Transformation Music in which Gurnemanz leads Parsifal from the forest to the Grail Castle. The passage from *Pelléas et Mélisande* comes from the first orchestral interlude, as Golaud leads Mélisande from the forest to shelter, and eventually to Allemonde castle. Whether parody or not, the comparison makes manifest Debussy's indebtedness to Wagner.

Not all of the correspondences show such an apparent connection to their source, but an unmistakably Wagnerian, specifically Parsifalian, style of chromatic harmony infuses this writing. Listen to this excerpt from *Parsifal*.



Notice the similarity in harmonies generated by voice-leading in this passage from the orchestral interlude between the first two scenes in Act II of *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

It may well have been the orchestral interludes that provoked Richard Strauss’s grumbling comment during a 1907 performance of Debussy’s opera: “But all that is *Parsifal*.”

Strauss could have gone a good deal further. Many critics have called attention to the discrepancy between Wagner’s theory, as enunciated in *Opera and Drama*, and his practice, particularly as regards allowing the development of musical ideas to take precedence over the theoretical requirements of self-restraint. In several respects Debussy’s opera conforms more closely to the strict demands of *Opera and Drama* than Wagner’s own music.

*Pelléas et Mélisande: Fulfillment of Opera and Drama*

- Continuous music from beginning to end of each act, with individual scenes connected by orchestral interludes
- Vocal lines based on inflections of French language, fluctuating between recitative and arioso without ever achieving musical independ-

ence of aria

- Melodic motives associated with objects, personages and their feelings

Debussy's "reply to critics" in 1902, the year of the opera's premiere, though never mentioning Wagner by name, clearly alludes to Debussy's continuing struggle with the ghost.

Debussy on Opera (III): *Pelléas et Mélisande*: A Reply to the Critics (1902)

My wish was that the action should never be halted, continuing uninterrupted. I wanted to dispense with parasitical musical phrases. On hearing opera, the spectator is accustomed to experiencing two distinct sorts of emotion: on the one hand the musical emotion, and on the other the emotion of the characters—usually he experiences them in succession. I tried to ensure that the two were perfectly merged and simultaneous. Melody, if I dare say so, is antilyrical. It cannot express the varying states of the soul, and of life. Essentially it is suited only to the song that expresses a simple feeling.

I have never allowed my music to precipitate or retard the changing feeling or passions of my characters for technical convenience. It stands aside as soon as it can, leaving them the freedom of their gestures, their utterances—their joy or their sorrow.

Debussy, continuing to reflect on the problem of creating music drama, holds *Tristan und Isolde* in special regard.

Debussy on Opera (IV): *Tristan und Isolde*

What I admire most in this work is that the themes of the symphony are also reflections of the action. But the symphony does not violate the action: the music is not the essence of the drama. There is a constant equilibrium between musical necessity and the thematic evocations, which intervene only in so far as they are necessary to give the orchestra the coloring appropriate to its decorative role. I fear that in the *Ring* the themes become tyrants.

Perhaps in self-defense against critics who found too much of Wagner in *Pelléas*, Debussy utters a declaration of independence from his foe.

Debussy on Opera (V): "Why I Wrote *Pelléas*" (1902)

After some years of passionate pilgrimages to Bayreuth, I began to

have doubts about the Wagnerian formula, or rather, it seemed to me that it was of use only in the particular case of Wagner's own genius. He was a great collector of formulae, and these he assembled within a framework that appears uniquely his own only because one is not well enough acquainted with music. And without denying his genius, one could say that he had put the final period after the music of his time, rather as Victor Hugo summed up all the poetry that had gone before. One should therefore try to be "post-Wagner" rather than "after Wagner."

The translation fails to capture Debussy's word-play at the end of the passage: one should write *après Wagner* rather than *d'après Wagner*. This brings us to the fourth and final aspect of Debussy's struggle with the ghost of Klingsor. I have called it "**transcendence**"; others might prefer a less exalted description, but I'll let you judge for yourself after I have made my case.

I should like to argue that Debussy transcended Wagner by misapprehending him, or, if that seems too strong, by ignoring aspects of Wagner that we consider to be essential elements of his genius and regarding Wagner as a miniaturist. Now "miniaturist" is a word virtually none of us would ever apply to Wagner. We stand in awe at Wagner's creation of large-scale musical structures. Even if we cannot fully fathom how Wagner managed to pull it off, we understand how the dissonance that famously begins the Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* receives its ultimate resolution only in the conclusion of Isolde's final aria, the celebrated Transfiguration (misnamed Liebestod, in a confusion that began with Franz Liszt).

Debussy had no use for Wagner's command of musical architecture. Instead he seems to have deconstructed Wagner's music down to the molecular level, the level of the individual symbol. In other words, he seems to have read Wagner the way the Symbolist poets read a sonnet, with individual words resonating not necessarily with the words immediately around them but with the same or similar words scattered throughout the poem. This perspective, which loyal Wagnerians might regard as thoroughly perverse, gave Debussy the key to creating genuinely original compositions which rightfully earned him the title of "father of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music."

I should like to examine three aspects of transcendence in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

#### Aspects of Transcendence

- Non-symphonic development of leitmotifs
- Extended musical symbolism

- Global tonality

### **Non-symphonic development of leitmotifs**

One modern writer has endeavored to distance Debussy from Wagnerian leitmotif practice.

#### Modern defense of Debussy's Leitmotifs

“In place of the heroic leitmotifs characteristic of Wagner's scenes Debussy creates brief, subtle motifs that implied rather than signaled both the main characters of the opera and certain recurrent symbols, such as the fountain, the forest and the sea. These leitmotifs are often little more than brief rhythmic cells or oscillating intervals that hint at, rather than declare, the emotions and events depicted on the stage. They are certainly a far cry from a Wagnerian leitmotif, which Debussy irreverently dismissed as a helpful device designed to accommodate ‘those who are unable to follow a score.’” Déirdre Donnellon, “Debussy and musician and critic,” in Simon Trezise (2003), *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*.

It may be instructive to compare the ways in which Wagner and Debussy treat the melodic motives associated with the title characters in *Parsifal* and *Pelléas*. The Parsifal motive occurs some two dozen times, making it an important secondary motive, in contrast to the so-called Grail, Faith, and Sacrament motives, which constitute the primary thematic material in *Parsifal*. The Pelléas motive similarly plays a secondary role, in contrast to the motives associated with Mélisande and Golaud.

Appearances of the Parsifal motive are equally divided between statements, or simple variations of the motive, and developments, in which some portion of the motive receives extended musical treatment. Statements of the Parsifal motive frequently occur at some striking moment in the drama.

#### Statements of the Parsifal Motive

- The offstage shooting of the swan
- The moment when Parsifal breaks his vow and hurls his arrows away
- When Parsifal springs at Kundry in a rage and seizes her by the throat
- At Parsifal's baptism by Gurnemanz
- As Gurnemanz invests Parsifal with the mantle
- As Parsifal elevates the Spear

Developments of the Parsifal motive mark consequential episodes in Parsifal's career.

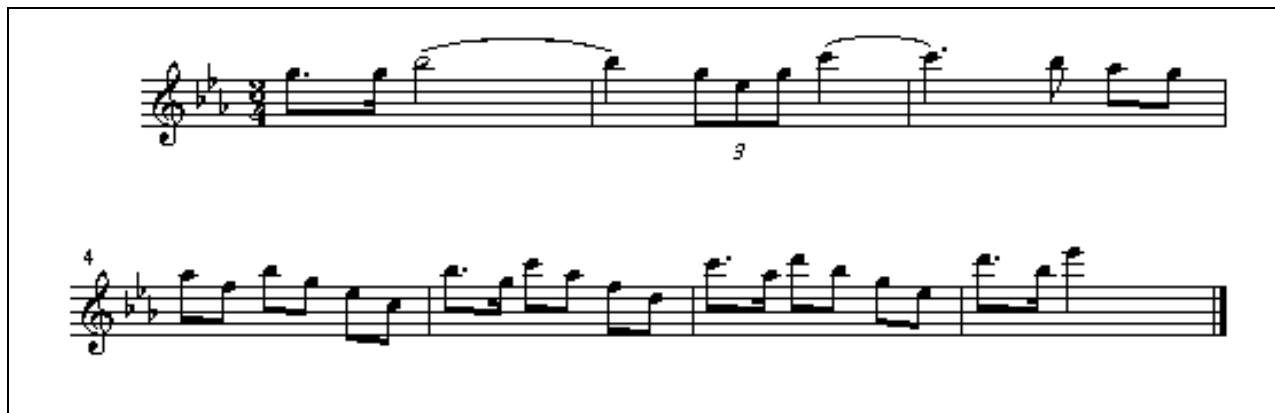
### Developments of the Parsifal Motive

- Parsifal's explanation of his past
- As Klingsor summons his forces to meet Parsifal
- As the Magic Garden fills the stage with flowers and the Flower Maidens throng about Parsifal
- As Parsifal, clad in black armor, approaches the holy spring.

Statements of the Parsifal motive tend to be firmly rooted in functional tonality, starting on the tonic and moving to the dominant.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the Parsifal motive. The first system consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The melody in the treble clef begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, Bb4) followed by a quarter note (C5), then a quarter note (Bb4), and a quarter note (A4). The bass clef part starts with a quarter note (G3), followed by a quarter note (F3), a quarter note (E3), and a quarter note (D3). The second system also has two staves. The treble clef part begins with a quarter note (G4), followed by a quarter note (A4), a quarter note (Bb4), and a quarter note (C5). The bass clef part starts with a quarter note (G3), followed by a quarter note (F3), a quarter note (E3), and a quarter note (D3). The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and a final double bar line.

Wagner develops the Parsifal motive by an extension of the distinctive rhythmic figure, by a new continuation of the opening measure or, as in Act II, by a sequential treatment of the last part of the theme.









This is presumably the kind of procedure Debussy objected to in his conversation with his composition teacher Ernest Guiraud.

Debussy in conversation with Guiraud

Wagner *develops* material in the manner of the classical composers. Instead of the constituent themes of a symphony, placed at specific spots, he has themes which represent people or things, but he develops these themes like those in a symphony.

So what about Debussy’s treatment of leitmotifs? The modern defense that I quoted earlier is correct up to a point. Appearances of the Pelléas motive generally take the form of brief statements with no common pattern of harmonization. Indeed, most variants of the motive avoid any clear tonal allegiance. While Debussy occasionally returns to the motive in its original form in order to make a strong reference, for the most part the motive undergoes considerable variation, depending on the dramatic context.

Development of Pelléas Motive	
Pelléas’s first appearance	
Mélisande’s complaint that Pelléas doesn’t like her (minor mode)	
Beginning of the scene in the castle	

vaults (low register; the even rhythm suggests walking)	
Agitated version as Yniold describes the times he has seen Pelléas and Mélisande together	
Episode of increasing intensity reflecting Golaud's jealousy and Yniold's fear	
Extended sequential development reflecting Pelléas's rapture just before his declaration of love to Mélisande	

These examples would seem to be “a far cry from a Wagnerian leitmotif.” But Debussy could not so easily escape the grip of Old Klingsor. Consider these examples.

#### Statements of the Pelléas motive

- Mélisande tells Golaud, “It is something stronger than I,” as the orchestra provides a musical reference to Pelléas.
- Mélisande complains that Pelléas doesn't like her, again to the accompaniment of his motive.
- Pelléas recounts his father's observation that Pelléas has the look of someone who will not live long.
- In the final scene, Golaud accepts responsibility for everything that has happened; the orchestra suggests that he is thinking specifically about the death of Pelléas.
- Mélisande asks for Pelléas and declares that their love was not blameworthy.

In each case the orchestra refers to Pelléas in terms of his motive, the very calling-card technique that Debussy deplored in Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Debussy's use of melodic motives in *Pelléas et Mélisande* attests to his deep indebtedness to Wagner as well as his determination to avoid what he con-



sidered Wagner’s lapses in balancing “musical necessity and thematic evocations.”

### Extended musical symbolism

Where Wagner employed melodic motifs—and very occasionally distinctive rhythms or harmonies—as dramatic symbols, Debussy spreads his symbolic net much wider to encompass virtually every aspect of the musical fabric. Debussy transcends Wagner’s practice by attaching symbolic significance not just to fragments of melody but to a wide range of musical procedures.

Musical Symbolism in <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i>		
<i>Musical Element</i>	<i>Immediate Significance</i>	<i>Extended significance</i>
Melodic motives	Personages, objects, feelings	Their alteration in response to changing circumstances
Rhythmic ostinatos	Terror, darkness, gloom	fear
Pedal points	Castle vaults, stagnant water	Fear of death, immobility, incomprehension
Whole-tone scale	Being lost	Fear of darkness or death
“Tristan” chord	Sadness ( <i>tristesse</i> )	Points of correspondence between <i>Tristan</i> and <i>Pelléas</i>
Low registration	Golaud	Violence, death
High registration	Mélisande	Relationship between Pelléas and Mélisande
Wide compass		Renewal, great beauty

Debussy’s extension of Wagner’s principles includes musical timbre.

Debussy on Timbre

Debussy in 1908: “Musicians no longer know how to decompose sound, to give it in its pure state. In *Pelléas*, the sixth violin is just as important as the first. I try to employ each timbre in its pure form. ... We’ve learned too well to mix timbres; to throw them into relief with shadows or masses of sound without letting them play with their own meanings. Wagner went quite far in this direction, doubling and tripling most of his instruments. The limit of this style is Strauss, who f--- up the whole thing. He joins the trombone and the flute. The flute gets lost and the trombone assumes a

strange voice. I try, on the contrary, to preserve the purity of each timbre, to put it in its proper place. Strauss's orchestra is nothing but a composite, like an American drink in which eighteen substances are combined; all the individual flavours disappear. It's an orchestral cocktail."

By preserving the identity of each timbre Debussy is able to establish a symbolism of instrumental sonorities comparable to the symbolism of melodic motives. Submerged within the overall symphonic texture these timbres remain neutral; when brought to the foreground certain sonorities reveal their dramatic significance.

Symbolic Associations of Timbres in <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i>		
<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Direct Association</i>	<i>Extended Association</i>
Horn	Golaud	Darkness, death
Trombone, tuba	Violent death	
Trumpet	Peaceful death	
Oboe	Mélisande	Mélisande's sadness
English horn	Mélisande	Mélisande's pain or suffering
Harp	Water	Renewal, freshness, change
Timpani	Darkness	Impending disaster, death

A particularly noteworthy contrast occurs in Debussy's symbolic use of the trombone and the trumpet, each representing death of a different kind.

Symbolic Use of Timbre	
Trombone (violence and violent death)	Trumpet (peaceful death)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Golaud: I would rather have lost all I own than to lose that ring. You don't know what it is. [with Death motive]</li> <li>• Golaud: I shall not sleep until I have the ring.</li> <li>• Golaud (dragging Mélisande by the hair): To the right and to the left!</li> <li>• Golaud: Absalom!</li> <li>• Golaud; Simply because it is the custom. [with Death motive]</li> <li>• Mélisande: There is someone behind us.</li> <li>• Pelléas and Mélisande spot Golaud.</li> </ul>	<p>In the final act a solo trumpet, playing the Mélisande motive, accompanies her peaceful death. Arkel says, "We must not disturb her. The human soul is very still. The human soul departs alone." The sound of the solo trumpet returns briefly at the very end of the</p>

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After slaying Pelléas, Golaud pursues Mélisande into the forest. [with Death motive]</li> </ul> | opera. |
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Debussy envisioned a music which would emerge from silence and return to silence.

#### Debussy on Silence

“Silence is a good thing and God knows that the empty measures of *Pelleas* witness my love of this kind of emotion. ... Music is made for the inexpressible; I should like it to have the air of emerging from shadow and, from time to time, returning there.”

During rehearsals for *Pelléas et Mélisande* one of Debussy’s most frequent comments was, “*Piano, piano*, less loudly, I implore you.” Debussy’s preoccupation with soft sounds may be seen in the variety of expressions he employs in the orchestral and piano-vocal scores of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In addition to the common indications of *piano*, *pianissimo* and *diminuendo*, Debussy employs a variety of other indications.

#### Toward silence in *Pelléas et Mélisande*

- *pianissimo possible*
- *presque plus rien*
- *perdendosi*
- *à peine murmuré*
- *en allant se perdant*
- *dans une sonorité douce et voilée*
- *en s'affaiblissant*
- *morendo*
- *aussi doux que possible*
- Mélisande’s first words are to be sung “*presque sans voix*.”

In a musical texture whose normal dynamic level remains extremely low, the slightest nuances of sound may be appreciated. Debussy offers a lyrical description of this procedure in a letter to Henri Lerolle.

#### Silence in the Grotto Scene

“I believe that the scene in front of the grotto will please you. It tries to be all the mysteriousness of night where amid so much silence, a blade of grass disturbed from its sleep makes a quite unsettling noise.”

Markings of *forte* and *fortissimo* occur infrequently in the score of the opera. Debussy reserves these elevated dynamic levels for passages of text which oppose the normal tendencies of the opera. Mostly conversations occur in hushed tones. As King Arkel tells Mélisande in Act IV, everyone in the castle goes about in whispers. Throughout the drama an air of stagnation and immobility hovers over Allemonde. Louder dynamic markings accompany exceptional expressions of movement. Very little happens in this muted world. Action, when it does occur, happens loudly.

*Forte* markings to accompany action

- Mélisande: I'll throw myself in its place. [referring to her lost crown]
- Pelléas: Don't throw it so high. [referring to Mélisande's wedding ring]
- Mélisande: I threw it too high in the rays of the sun.
- Golaud: You must go right away, do you hear? [ordering Mélisande to find her wedding ring]
- Golaud: I know Pelléas better than you do; make haste.
- Yniold [atop Golaud's shoulders]: Let me down!
- Pelléas: Where are you going?
- Golaud: Ah! Don't try to escape!
- Golaud: There'll be no more fleeing now.
- Golaud [dragging Mélisande by the hair]: Right and left! Left and right!
- Yniold [describing sheep heading to the slaughter]: They're crying and they're hurrying! They want to go to the right.
- Pelléas: ... joy and pain, like a blindman fleeing his burning house.
- Pelléas: I must go away forever.
- Pelléas: Come.
- Pelléas: All the stars are falling!
- Arkel [referring to Mélisande, dying]: Why does she stretch out her arms this way?
- Arkel [to Golaud]: No, don't come closer.

The active verbs, underlined by *forte* markings, contrast with the prevailing atmosphere of passivity.

Debussy's use of fleeting melodic motives, momentary illumination of pure timbres, and music that emerges from silence and returns to silence have produced such an identifiable musical style that we tend to forget the

difficulty of creating a new musical language. Debussy comments on his innovations in the article, “Why I Wrote *Pelléas*.”

Debussy, “Why I Wrote *Pelléas*”

For a long time I had been striving to write music for the theater, but the form in which I wanted it to be was so unusual that after several attempts I had almost given up the idea. Explorations previously made in the realm of pure music had led me toward a hatred of classical development, whose beauty is solely technical and can interest only the mandarins in our profession. I wanted music to have a freedom that was perhaps more inherent than in any other art, for it is not limited to a more or less exact representation of Nature, but rather to the mysterious affinity between Nature and the Imagination.

### **Global Tonality**

The most radical of Debussy’s achievements emerged as a direct consequence of his contest with the ghost of Old Klingsor. I have alluded to Wagner’s titanic control of large-scale musical architecture, and have suggested that Debussy scarcely seemed to notice it, preferring to look upon Wagner through a miniaturist lens. This predilection has enormous consequences for the musical structure of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, an outcome that Debussy scholars seem largely to have overlooked. Debussy’s opera succeeded in renouncing a dramatic, linear, architectonic conception of music in favour of a poetic, global conception. In place of a hierarchy of tonal events joining the simplicity of the fundamental idea to the complexity of its final elaboration, Debussy formed a web of symbolic associations joining the physical to the psychological, the immediate to the general.

To begin with, *Pelléas et Mélisande* is not a tonal opera in any usual sense of the word. To be sure, on a measure-to-measure basis, you usually feel as if you’re in some particular tonality, either because of chord progressions drawn from the notes of a particular scale or because of an extended pedal point. But this hardly constitutes structure in the traditional sense. In a symphonic work, for example, we expect tonal relationships on the small scale to be subsumed within larger structural considerations so that one can talk about measure-to-measure progressions within the context of an overall tonal scheme.

But *Pelléas et Mélisande* has no such overall tonal scheme! I’ve placed an exclamation point after that sentence because it represents such a radical departure from the tradition of western music. Local tonal centers defined by individual phrases do not partake of architectonic arrangements to define the tonality of a section, a scene or an act. How can a piece be

considered tonal if it has no large-scale tonal structure? Debussy's remarkable contribution lies in a poetical conception of structure, and not just any poetry but the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, in which individual words, used symbolically, resonate through an entire sonnet. This, I suggest, is what Debussy has done with individual tonalities in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Tonal Symbolism in <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i>	
Major Keys	
C	Sensation: seeing, hearing, touching
C#/Db	Caring, solicitousness for Mélisande
E	Mélisande's beauty; truth or purpose
F	Symbols associated with Golaud's love for Mélisande: letter; signal of acceptance; kiss; ring
F#	Light, revelation, vision
Gb	Mélisande, moonlight
Minor Keys	
a	Injury, pain, lying
c	Watery depths, death
c#	Fear
d	Forest, darkness, incomprehension
d#/eb	Death, vengeance
e	Narration, explanation, quotation
f#	impending disaster

Let's consider a brief excerpt from Act I, Scene 3, in which Genevieve tells Mélisande about the peculiarities of the world in which she has come to live.

Alto

Il y a des en-droits où l'on ne voit ja - mais le so-leil.  
 There are pla-ces near-by which ne-ver have a glimpse of the sun.

Piano

Whole-tone chords e minor

The whole-tone scale, whose absence of semitones makes it completely amorphous, seems an apt representation of darkness, confusion and fear, and if we look at recurrences of the whole-tone scale we see how Debussy has used this harmony symbolically.

#### Whole-tone Scale

- Opening scene, when Golaud realizes that he has lost his way.
- Mélisande's despair at being lost.
- Tower Scene when Mélisande, her hair tangled in the branches, hears Golaud approach.
- Throughout the scene in the castle vaults, when Golaud symbolically threatens Pelléas with death by making him smell the deathlike stench rising from the abyss.
- When Golaud drags Mélisande by the hair and threatens to kill the lovers.
- Golaud's fruitless efforts to question Mélisande and Yniold at various points in the drama.
- The paralyzing fear that Pelléas and Mélisande experience in the final love scene when they realize that Golaud has seen them embrace and wait for him to attack them.
- In Act V the whole-tone scale completes the ellipsis in the doctor's explanation of Mélisande's gesture: "It is probably towards the child. It is the struggle of the mother against ..."

Returning to the excerpt from Act I, Scene 3: a few measures later, as Genevieve continues her description, we hear a dramatic shift to F# major for the word “light.”

Alto

Re - gar - dez de l'au-tre co - te, vous au-rez la clar - te de la mer.  
 Butlook there on this o - ther side you are flood-ed with light from the sea.

Piano

F# Major

In *Pelléas et Mélisande* Debussy reserves this special tonality for instances of light, clarity, and revelation.

#### F# Major

- Golaud’s letter referring to the signal lamp: “I’ll see it from the bridge of our ship.”
- Genevieve with Mélisande: “Look on the other side, you’ll have the light from the sea.”
- In the scene between Golaud and Yniold, the window is lighted up and the light falls on them. Yniold cries, “Ah! Ah! Mama has lighted the lamp. There’s a light, Papa!”
- After Mélisande tells Pelléas that she loves him, he exclaims, “One would say that your voice had passed over the sea in springtime. I never heard it until now. One would say that it had rained on my heart. You say it so frankly!”

What appears as the final item on our list was actually the first to be composed. Debussy began the composition of the opera by setting the declaration of love in that magical tonality of six sharps.



The resulting musical structure is so novel that it has no name. I have described it as global tonality, for lack of a better term, thinking about the way lines of longitude radiate from one pole, touch points all along the way, and gather at the other to make a satisfying, though unconventional, whole.

In an article entitled, “Why I Wrote *Pelléas*,” Debussy gives evidence of his long struggle.

#### Why I Wrote *Pelléas*

I do not pretend to have discovered everything in *Pelléas*, but I have tried to forge a way ahead that others will be able to follow. These are the fruits of my experience, which will perhaps release dramatic music from the heavy yoke under which it has lived for so long.

You can almost see the image of a wrestler releasing himself from a pin. Robin Holloway, in his book *Debussy and Wagner*, summarizes the relationship this way:

#### Debussy and Wagner

“Though his attitude toward Wagner, ranging as it did from early devotion to later hostility, was unbalanced in both directions, in his music [Debussy] is the one composer who, neither resisting Wagner’s sway nor succumbing slavishly to it, eventually produces music which while it is extraordinarily original and masterly in its own terms, could none the less not have existed were it not for Wagner’s example.”

In this presentation I have tried to show that the struggle with the ghost of old Klingsor, which at first seemed such an obstacle, in the end turned out to engender a new musical language. By 1910, Debussy could honestly say, “I am no longer an adversary of Wagner.”