



GLYNDEBOURNE
EDUCATION

Opera Experience



Pelléas et Mélisande

Claude Debussy

*Lyric drama in five acts
Libretto by the composer;
abridgement of the play by
Maurice Maeterlinck*

First performed at the
Opéra Comique, Paris
30 April 1902

Written by Glyndebourne Education
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Pelléas et Mélisande



Preparing for a workshop

This pack contains information about the basic storyline and characters of *Pelléas et Mélisande* - it would be useful for your students to know something of this before the workshop. The entire pack will not take long to read.

Breaks and refreshments

There will be a break of approximately 30 minutes during the workshop, and about one hour and 45 minutes between workshop and performance at the theatre.

Please ensure that the students bring drinks, snacks and a packed meal as food and refreshments will not be available.

Parking

Please allow adequate time for parking before a workshop as workshops must start promptly (please make sure you check the start time of your workshop)

Information

Students below year 10 should not attend the workshop.

If you would like further information, please contact Glyndebourne Education on 01273

815023 or email at tessa.chisholm@glyndebourne.com

Pelléas et Mélisande

What will happen in a workshop



Many of the students who will attend our workshops have never been to see an opera before. The workshop will serve as an introduction to opera itself as well as the specific opera to be seen that evening.

The afternoon will consist of:

Warm up activities

Musical exercises

Dramatic exercises

Listening to singers from GOT Company

Discussing the opera

By the end of the workshop, the students will be ready to see and hear and enjoy the opera with genuine understanding.

Students should wear comfortable clothes suitable for physical activities (if you would like to please bring a change of clothes for the evening performance).

Pelléas et Mélisande

Characters

Arkel

King of Allemonde, a mythical and now-sick nation, struck by famine. Arkel is the ancient, and nearly blind patriarch of the family.

Bass

Geneviève

Arkel's daughter-in-law. Mother of Golaud and Pelléas.

Mezzo Soprano

Golaud

Elder grandson of King Arkel. A serious-minded widower.

Baritone

Pelléas

Younger grandson of King Arkel. Golaud's passionate half-brother.

Baritone/Tenor (Debussy wrote the role in his own voice-range and can be sung by either a high baritone or tenor)

Mélisande

Mysterious figure with undetermined royal connections. A troubled soul, apparently haunted by her past.

Soprano

Yniold

Golaud's son by a previous marriage. Paragon of innocence.

Treble

A Shepherd

Bass

A Doctor

Bass



Pelléas et Mélisande

Overview

The mythical kingdom of Allemonde is in decay. Famine sweeps the land, and its ruler, Arkel, is blind and decrepit. Into this world comes Mélisande, whose history is shrouded in mystery - all she will tell her future husband, Golaud, is her name. Golaud and his half-brother Pelléas are grandsons of Arkel and soon after Golaud's marriage, his brother slides irrevocably into love with the illusive, long-haired Mélisande.



Golaud's suspicions are first aroused when Mélisande confesses that she has lost her wedding ring - in fact she dropped it in a well when she fooling around with her brother-in-law. Golaud's suspicions deepen further when he discovers the two having an intimate moment. When his shrouded threats of violence fail to deter his brother, Golaud is forced to take drastic steps and kills Pelléas after catching the lovers in an embrace.

Meanwhile, Golaud has got Mélisande pregnant and following Pelléas' death, their daughter is born. Propheying a life full of misery, Mélisande gives up on life and slips into death.

Pelléas et Mélisande

Synopsis

Act One

Scene One

A Forest

Golaud has lost his way in the forest whilst hunting. He finds a young woman weeping beside a fountain. She too is lost, and is distraught at the loss of her crown, which has fallen into the water. She is scared of Golaud's touch, but eventually tells him her name - Mélisande. He can find out no more about her but eventually persuades her to leave with him as darkness descends.

Scene Two

Breakfast in Allemonde, some six months later

Pelléas has given his mother Geneviève a letter that Golaud has written to him. She reads it to Arkel who is nearly blind and we learn that Golaud has married Mélisande, although all he knows about her is her name - she will still not tell him where she is from, or what has happened to her. Golaud explains that he is worried about returning home - Arkel had intended for Golaud to make a political marriage with Princess Ursule, to end the conflicts with their kingdoms. But he controls his anger and expresses his awareness of a bigger picture in which destinies are controlled by fate.

Pelléas enters and asks to leave Allemonde to go to his friend Marcellus who is dying. Arkel reminds him that Pelléas' own father is seriously ill and persuades him to remain to greet Golaud's bride.

Scene Three

The castle grounds

Mélisande is being shown the castle grounds by her mother-in-law Geneviève. The forests are dark around them - it is hard to find light in the castle. Pelléas joins them and he and Mélisande watch the ship that brought her to the castle leaving the port - sailors sing in the distance. Pelléas tells Mélisande that he may leave the next day. She asks him why - he doesn't answer.

Pelléas et Mélisande

Synopsis

Act Two

Scene One

A fountain in the castle grounds

Deep in the park, Pelléas leads Mélisande to his favourite, secret place - a fountain whose water could once cure the eyes of the blind. The youngsters play by the water, and as Mélisande's hair falls into a well she tells Pelléas that it's longer than her entire body. She starts playing with the wedding ring Golaud gave her, throwing it carelessly into the air. On her final throw, she fumbles and the ring falls to the bottom of the water, just as a distant clock strikes twelve. She panics, but Pelléas says they must simply tell Golaud the truth about the ring.

Scene Two

Inside the castle

On the stroke of noon, as the ring fell, Golaud was thrown from his horse. He is badly injured. Mélisande looks after him tenderly, but starts to cry and confesses that she feels sad and sick in the suffocating world of Allemonde. Golaud comforts her, but as he does so he notices that she is not wearing her wedding ring. She lies to him and says that she dropped it on the beach, in a grotto. He becomes incredibly angry and orders her to go with Pelléas into the night and find it. She protests, but to no avail.

Scene Three

In the sea grotto

Mélisande and Pelléas pretend to look for the ring on the beach, even though they both know that it is at the bottom of the well. They are alone in the dark together and as the moon breaks through the clouds, Pelléas urges Mélisande to take his hand. She is scared to see three starved beggars lying asleep in the grotto. Pelléas explains that there is a terrible famine in the land. Mélisande runs away in fear. Pelleas remains fascinated staring at the peasants in the moonlight

Act Three

Scene One

Outside a castle tower in the grounds

Mélisande is brushing her hair, and singing to herself. Pelléas is outside and hears her. He persuades her to let her long hair fall out of the tower. He wraps himself in it in ecstasy, getting as close to her as he can and only stops himself when Golaud interrupts them - he tells them off for behaving like children and sends Mélisande off to bed.

Scene Two

The castle vaults

Golaud takes his brother into the horrible suffocating stench of the castle vaults and terrifies him with visions of death and horror.

Scene Three

Outside the vaults

Pelléas at last escapes from the vaults and his brother and breathes the outside air. Golaud warns him not to spend so much time with Mélisande - he has noticed something developing between them. He also tells Pelléas that Mélisande is pregnant.

Scene Four

Near Mélisande's window

Yniold enters and his father, Golaud pretends to play with his son, but soon starts asking Yniold about Pelléas and Mélisande. He is desperate for his son to confirm his suspicions that they are having an affair and becomes increasingly furious. Yniold becomes more and more upset and admits that he saw them kiss once, but his answers neither confirm nor deny Golaud's suspicions. Finally in a brutal act of violation, Golaud brutally forces his son to look through Mélisande's window to see what she and Pelléas are doing. But once more his jealous suspicions remain unconfirmed - the couple simply stare silently at the lamp.

Act Four

Scene One

Lunch in the castle - some months later

Mélisande, now noticeably pregnant agrees to meet Pelléas by the fountain in the castle grounds secretly at night. Pelléas' father appears to have made a recovery and has mysteriously told his son that he must go on a journey.

Scene Two

Arkel approaches Mélisande and tells her how he has silently pitied her unhappiness since she arrived. He feels that her youth and beauty rejuvenate the castle and him, and he asks that he can touch her young flesh to remind him of joy and happiness. Golaud interrupts in a bad mood and picks a quarrel with Mélisande, accusing her of lying and deception. He condemns her lack of innocence and eludes to his suspicions of her adultery. He ends up by savagely attacking her, dragging her along the floor by her beautiful hair. Eventually Arkel manages to stop him and Golaud leaves, saying that he will wait for his time of revenge. Arkel declares obliquely "if I were God I would have pity on the hearts of men" but can offer no comfort to Mélisande.

Scene Three

Inside the castle

After realising that the ball he wants to play with is trapped under an immovable heavy stone, Yniold happily watches the sheep at the castle. They are silent and Yniold wants to know why - it is because they aren't on their way to their stables, but to their deaths.

Pelléas et Mélisande

Synopsis

Scene Four

The fountain, outside the castle gates

Pelléas is waiting for Mélisande. He is scared that she will not come and that he will have to leave forever without revealing his true feelings. She arrives, straight from her fight with Golaud. They are uncomfortable together at first, until he confesses that he loves her - she replies that she loves him as well. Pelléas' joy at this is tempered by Mélisande's feeling of sadness that she cannot escape. Suddenly they hear the castle gates shut and they realise that events have overtaken them and they are locked out together. Their ecstasy is interrupted as Mélisande sees something moving in the shadows. It is Golaud and they momentarily forget their fear and kiss each other in front of him. Enraged, Golaud kills Pelléas and chases Mélisande into the darkness.

Act Five

Pelléas is dead. Mélisande has given birth to a daughter but lies as if near death. The doctor can't understand what is wrong with her. She awakes and Golaud asks to be left alone with her. She appears to have no recollection of Pelléas' death or of her child. Golaud asks for her forgiveness - but demands that she tell him whether she loved Pelléas. She says that she did but when he asks whether the love was "guilty" she insists not. Golaud accuses her of lying and she slips away from him when she realises that she is to die. Arkel returns and shows Mélisande her little daughter. Mélisande prophesies tears for her daughter. The arrival of the serving women of the castle make Golaud realise that Mélisande is about to die, though remains in a state of jealous suspicion. Mélisande dies leaving her child motherless to face the world alone.

Pelléas et Mélisande

Achille Claude Debussy

(b. St. Germain-en-Laye, nr Paris
22.08.1862; d. Paris, 25.03.1918)

An eccentric youth

The eldest of five children, Debussy was the only child to stay with his parents - the others, for financial reasons, were entrusted by their mother to her sister-in-law. He never attended school and was taught at home by his mother, though with variable success - even aged thirty, his spelling was still poor. He was not a particularly happy or sociable child, sitting for many hours on his own, delighting in small delicate ornaments and engravings.

When Debussy was seven, following the death of his brother, Achille and his sister were taken to Cannes by their aunt. It was here that the young Achille had his first piano lesson. Within a year, Debussy was receiving lessons from a former pupil of Chopin who believed that he should become a musician. Debussy's father soon gave up the idea of sending his son into the Navy and instead instituted a strict regime of daily practice.

11 years' hard labour

So it was that in 1873, an introspective and awkward 11 year old, Debussy entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he was to remain for the next 11 years. He was rigorously trained in piano, singing at sight, transposing, analysing and reproducing harmonic or contrapuntal texture, before learning how to actually construct music himself. During this time, the fledgling composer changed his name from Achille (which he found ridiculous) to Claude and became a very able, though not brilliant pianist. His use of consecutive fifths and octaves and non-resolved sevenths, all avoided by classical composers, caused a stir within the Conservatoire. When asked by the Registrar what rule he followed, he replied "Mon plaisir".

The Italian Job

In 1885, Debussy won the Prix de Rome for his cantata *L'Enfant Prodigue*. As part of his prize, he was to spend three years at the Villa Medici in Rome. However, he was not happy there and left after only two years, though not before meeting Verdi and Liszt and immersing himself in Wagner, the composer who dominated cultural Paris in the 1880s. Back in Paris he formed a life-long friendship with Erik Satie.

The French Revolution

Debussy had long struggled to find an operatic subject capable of stimulating him and wrote sketches for several potential texts. In 1889 he mapped out his ideal opera -

The ideal would be two associated dreams. "No place. No time. No big scene. Music in opera is far too predominant. Too much singing and the settings are too cumbersome. The blossoming of the voice into true singing should occur only when required."

Pelléas et Mélisande

Achille Claude Debussy

In 1892, aged 30, Debussy read Maeterlinck's symbolist drama *Pelléas et Mélisande* and realised he had finally found the basis for his opera. This project was to occupy him for the next ten years (during which time he also wrote his famous orchestral piece, the *Prelude a l'Après-Midi d'un Faune*).

The work's understated and subtle interpretation of opera (there are only four fortissimos) offered a truly revolutionary alternative to the thundering passions of late nineteenth-century opera. Indeed, there is really no "action" to speak of - hardly anything happens in *Pelléas* except in the sense that memories happen. "I shall always prefer a subject where, somehow, action is sacrificed to feeling" Debussy once wrote.

A Belgian Uprising

It would not be unfair to suggest that more drama surrounded the creation of the work, than the piece itself. On hearing the score, Georgette Leblanc, Maeterlinck's mistress, was extremely keen to sing the role of Mélisande. Maeterlinck suggested it to Debussy who was delighted by the idea.

Maeterlinck then read in a paper that another singer had been engaged to sing the role and was already rehearsing with Debussy. Enraged, Maeterlinck jumped into the street through a window and set off to beat Debussy with a cane! Although the fault lay mostly with the theatre and not with Debussy himself, the row between the two men escalated until there was even talk of a duel, with followers of Debussy volunteering to fight for him. The affair eventually blew over, but Maeterlinck refused to see the opera. And on the night of the Dress Rehearsal, he was responsible for distributing satirical pamphlets to the waiting audience, which ridiculed Debussy's work and resulted in outbursts of laughter during the performance.

Critical Reception

The critics were divided over the opera's merits. During one rehearsal a Conservatoire professor berated the "filthy score" for its "errors of harmony" (unbelievably, a conservatoire pupil was later expelled for having been found in possession of *Pelléas*). Yet the first performance went off without too much trouble and many of the critics hailed it a masterpiece, albeit a perplexing one. Gustave Bret said "This music overwhelms you, drives deep into your heart with a power of inspiration that I admire but cannot fully understand".

Joining the dark side...

During the gestation period of *Pelléas*, Debussy's music finally gained critical recognition and he became music critic for the *Revue Blanche*. It was also during this period, in 1899, that he married Rosalie (Lily) Texier. He was earning practically nothing from composing and had to give a piano lesson on the morning of his wedding so that they could pay for a wedding breakfast.

Pelléas et Mélisande

Achille Claude Debussy

In 1902, the year that *Pelléas* finally opened, Debussy was awarded the Croix d'Honneur but found life in the public eye extremely distasteful. The following year, he travelled to London to review Wagner's Ring Cycle at Covent Garden and worked on his three symphonic sketches, *La Mer*, which were finished in 1905 at Eastbourne.

Family Affairs

In 1904, Debussy left his wife for Mme Emma Bardac. Devastated, Lily Debussy shot herself and was taken to a nursing home, wounded near the heart. Mme Bardac was the wife of a prominent financier and the mistress of Gabriel Fauré. She was a well travelled woman, with a sparkling and a delightful singing voice. In the Autumn of 1905, a daughter, Claude-Emma, was born. Her parents married some time later. Debussy wrote the piano pieces *Children's Corner* for her, with the dedication "to my dear little Chouchou, with her father's affectionate apologies for what follows". Claude-Emma was to die in 1919 aged only 14.

After the scandal of his marriage breakup, the critics were out for his blood. In the *Le Temps*' review of *La Mer*, the critic concluded with "I neither hear, nor see, nor feel the sea".

Increasingly withdrawn...

With rivalry growing between the followers of different composers in France, notably Ravel, Debussy tried to distance himself, both mentally and physically. He travelled extensively, conducting his own works. But he was sick and on a trip to England, he had to cancel work in Edinburgh and Manchester due to the onset of cancer.

His last stage work was the ballet *Jeux*, for Nijinsky. It was performed by Diaghilev's Russian Ballet in 1913, the same year as Stavinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloë*.

Indian Summer

During the First World War, he had a brief period of productivity, but was becoming ever thinner and weaker. His last work was the sonata for piano and violin. On May 5 1917, he performed for the last time, playing this same piece, but was clearly extremely unwell.

He died on 25 March, 1918, while Paris was being shelled by the Germans. The funeral was a small affair, with only one oration, before the body was removed to the cemetery at Passy.

Pelléas et Mélisande

Opera Glossary

aria A song for solo voice reflecting how the character feels (usually miserable) about what has just or is about to happen.

auditorium Space within the theatre occupied by the audience.

baritone Middle-range man's voice, lurking somewhere between bass and tenor.

bass Lowest male voice. Often plays characters with dubious moral fibre.

chorus A body of singers who (mostly) sing and act as a group to make the crowd scenes a bit more plausible. Also the term used for any musical number sung by this group.

conductor Hand-waving-head-honcho, positioned to obscure the view of the lady sitting in the centre of the front row. Makes sure everyone is performing the same piece.

contralto (or alto) Low-pitched woman's voice. Not to be confused with... counter tenor High-pitched man's voice. Nearest we have nowadays to a castrato (from the verb to castrate...ouch...)

ensemble From the French word for "together". When two or more soloists try to have their say at the same time (can get rather messy...). Ensemble for two is a duet, three is a trio, four a quartet and so on.

finale The final number of an act - sung by an ensemble (see above).

intermezzo A piece of music played between the acts of an opera (usually just long enough for the prima donna to put on her sixth frock of the show).

interval A (welcome) break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around, catch up on what's been happening, join the chorus at the bar...

libretto The text of an opera. Written by a librettist.

mezzo-soprano Female singer who can't quite reach those top notes. Not much glass-shattering action here.

orchestra Group of musicians found in the pit.

overture Music at the start of the show. Sets the scene, warms up the orchestra and reminds the audience that the performance is about to begin.

prima donna The leading woman singer in an operatic cast. Not to be confused with Guy Ritchie's wife...

props Mobile pieces of the set which help to make it all a bit more believable.

proscenium arch Wall in front of the curtain, dividing the stage from the auditorium.

recitative The bits which aren't the songs. Closer to the rhythm of speech and often accompanied by just a harpsichord or piano. Used to further the action of the story (we'd never get home if the plot was told through the arias...).

repetiteur from the French for to repeat. This tortured soul sits in on rehearsals and pretends to be an orchestra at the piano.

score The full score contains all the sung and orchestral parts in the opera. The vocal score has the voice parts and a piano reduction of the orchestra (for rehearsals - see repetiteur).

soprano High female voice. Watch out for those delicate window panes...

synopsis Outline of the plot. Especially useful during the interval when it is once more light enough to find out what on earth is happening.

tenor A high male voice. The good guy, pure of heart and all that.