

SECRETS AND LIES, OR THE TRUTH ABOUT PELLÉAS

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Let us begin at the end: with the single scene that makes up Act V of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Of all the incongruities that trouble Debussy's opera, those of the final act are somehow most troubling. No other scene offers such a diverse assortment of characters, voices, points of view: Arkel, Golaud, the Médecin, Mélisande. Peering into a bedroom of the castle, we watch the resident sage, his aggrieved grandson, and a doctor doling out prescriptions for a dying princess, alongside an unexplained newborn and several silent female attendants. What are they doing here? The unlikely figures crowd both the stage and the plot, vying for our attention and derailing the dénouement. The bourgeois melodrama has taken a dramatically wrong turn. In the previous act the cuckolded Golaud kills Pelléas right on cue, but the story refuses to stand in judgment. By the end of Act V, the domestic tragedy has become a ghost story. When death finally brings the action to a halt, it is no one's fault, and yet the equivocal ending mocks as much as it moves us. The scene's obstinate plea, *Il faut*

dire la vérité [You must tell us the truth], goes unanswered. Right to the end, the play has held its tongue.

The plea for truth belongs, of course, to the opera's most miserable character, but it might as well be our own. Judging from the controversial reception of the very first *Pelléas*,¹ it seems that Debussy's audiences had just as much trouble deciphering the opera's meaning, and a century of performances has hardly made things easier. We still struggle to comprehend Mélisande's veiled actions. Like Golaud, we wonder why she lies, and why she dies. Chalk it up to mystery, the guidebooks tell us, but that does not solve the problem. For Pierre Boulez, to call *Pelléas* a "mystery" is simply to skip all the hard work, to substitute (as he puts it) a "flat, soothing, modest, and moreover simpleminded image" for a real explanation.² Debussy did not shrink from the drama's contradictions. Why should we?

Indeed, Debussy may have added to those contradictions when he made his well-known cuts to Maeterlinck's original play. As if taking a cue from Mélisande, he left out a few key elements of the story, in effect concealing them from his operatic audience. I will return to these cuts at the end of my paper, but here I want to think about the act of cutting itself. Yes, shortening the play no doubt made the

work more suitable for a sung staging, but the deliberate omissions also made the story itself more compelling. Or so Maeterlinck might have said. "A truth concealed," he once wrote, is "precisely what we live for." The remark evokes the near religious zeal of a whole generation of symbolist poets, and, for this reason, raises intriguing questions for the drama of *Pelléas*, especially in Debussy's elliptical retelling. For, to hide a truth deliberately is of course just another way to tell a lie.³ But how does music hide the truth? That is the question I want to explore with you today.

It's hard to ignore the possibility of musical concealment in an opera that seems so interested in prevarication. In Act II, for example, when Mélisande has dropped her wedding ring into the well, she fears the consequences: "What do I tell Golaud?" she asks. Pelléas answers: *la vérité . . . la vérité . . .* Tell the truth, he says, yet the next scene finds her less than equal to the task. Later, in Act IV, after Mélisande has told Pelléas that she loves him, he begs for confirmation. "You're not lying?" Her response: "I never lie; I only lie to your brother." This may sound like nonsense: in Carolyn Abbate's words, the sentence has gone "ethically and logically awry."⁴ But the doubling contains a clue that helps to

explain a condition of speech throughout the whole play, one that grows only more pointed in Act V. The two-faced reply illustrates Maeterlinck's view of what made tragedy "beautiful." This was, once again, a hidden thing, "concealed," he said, "in the words that are spoken *alongside* the strict and apparent truth." *I never lie; I only lie.* The repetition belies the lie, so to speak, opening up a space where the truth can hide. The goal of tragedy was ultimately to make this space audible. For Maeterlinck, tragedy involved the counterpoint of two simultaneous dialogues, in which one would be able to hear "above the ordinary dialogue of reason and sentiment," as he put it, "the more solemn and uninterrupted dialogue of the play's intended meaning."⁵

I am certainly not the first to point out that music was the ideal medium for the sort of polyphony Maeterlinck had in mind.⁶ Nor could a post-Wagnerian composer like Debussy have missed the obvious Wagnerism of Maeterlinck's symbolist vision, with its suggestion of a continuous, contrapuntal exchange between speech and its other, between the singing voice and a wordless orchestra. Debussy made ample use of this sort of Wagnerian allusion in *Pelléas* in those countless motifs that sound *against* the vocal line of his opera, motifs that come across as portents or signs of

what may or may not be happening on stage. But he also evoked this simultaneity in another way, by means of a technique employed by Maeterlinck himself. By juxtaposing certain motifs—placing them side-by-side—he created another impression of parallel discourses. I want to turn now to a few telling examples of this technique to consider how it serves to inform, at a very basic level, the peculiar incongruities—and even the *failure* of dialogue—that marks the final act of *Pelléas*.

THERE AND HERE

Perhaps the most obvious example of this orchestral technique in *Pelléas* occurs even before the curtain rises, in the well-known opening measures of Act I. From its first groan, Debussy's orchestra evokes an impression of dim antiquity, carving out a fragment of plainsong in stolid half-notes. The figure suggests an immense murmur, or an ancient cosmic sigh, whose sheer weight draws it to the bottom of the orchestra. Then, it vanishes. A different music takes its place, high in the winds, a tri-tone away. With its more articulate rhythm and brighter timbre, this melody sounds a sort of anxious trill: indecisive, edgy, almost dissonant. It is the motif that will soon be

attached to Prince Golaud, reappearing just at the moment he announces, to an empty stage: "I am lost."

→ **EX. 1 [PLAY Track 1: first two iterations]**

Here we have, then, counterpoint of a very different order: theatrical décor knocking against a human profile; the "forest theme" vs. "Golaud's theme." Call the figures what you like. It is the space between that counts. In fact, one might argue that the combined effect of Debussy's opening measures re-enacts, in an unusual way, the scene evoked in the first quatrain of Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances." There we also find an unsettling image of man, navigating a dim path through "forests of symbols," as Baudelaire puts it, symbols that do not speak but "watch him with knowing looks." Heard side-by-side, Debussy's two musical images suggest a similar optical distance, and the same kind of silence. Imagining them as counterpoint helps to bring out the sense of this unwitting interaction, and unheard dissonance. Vast and remote, the first motif is somehow always there; it is simply *inaudible* to the second. If only that intrusive trill had some access to the space between, if only it could cock an ear across the separating barline; then it might be able to find its way to the other side. But, as Debussy represents it, it can't. Here is not

there. To the ears of "Golaud," the forest speaks an alien language.

That, I'll admit, is a lot to squeeze from a few measures of music. But what I am suggesting is that this troubling orchestral exchange—and the idea of inaudibility it contains—acts as a kind of symbol for the whole opera, a musical trope for the tragedy that is about to ensue. *Pelléas* will proceed, right to its last act, under the sign of this *malentendu*. The result is a disquieting drama, cruel and without catharsis: a kind of modernist theater of the mis-heard. At least, that would be one way to summarize the plight of Golaud, a figure whose aural awareness only deteriorates over the course of the play. And, to return to my main point, it is also how we can begin to understand the strangely incongruous dialogues that crowd the opera's final act. Let me now take a moment to sketch a few of the more telling incongruities—especially the excruciating exchange between Golaud and Mélisande that forms the centerpiece.

Once again, it is the orchestra that will spell out the terms of this *malentendu* before a single word is spoken. As in the prelude to Act I, the opening measures of Act V feature two musical figures, side by side, whose sheer difference describes something about the symbolic

space in which the action will take place. Sounding first is a claustrophobic version of the motif that has been associated with Mélisande throughout the opera. The fresh pentatony of the Mélisande theme, recalling shepherd's pipes and folksong, now hides under a shroud. The flattened scale degrees and muted timbre are useful in evoking the oppressive air of the infirmary that will soon appear behind the curtain. But the oppression disappears, unexpectedly, in a puff of wind. High flutes and clarinets—instruments of the *wood*—intrude with a distinct pastoral freshness, temporarily dispelling the gloom. The contrast works in much the same way, then, as that of the Act I Prelude. We are offered two possible worlds, one "here," the other "out there." The difference is that, in this scene, both musical figures have to do with Mélisande. Or perhaps I should say, with two different ideas of "Mélisande." If the former lies stretched before us, the latter is somewhere else again. She is in the room and not in the room at the same time.

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EX. 2 -- PLAY Track 2

It is significant that the Doctor utters his first pronouncement over that initial, compressed motive, speaking of her in the distant third person. "She couldn't die from that little wound . . . a bird wouldn't die from

it." But Arkel changes the subject. Observing Mélisande from some other, more reflective place, he notes how "slowly" she sleeps, "as if her soul had frozen," his imagination now supported by a frozen version of the second, pastoral wind figure. Then, as if stirred by Arkel's thoughts, Mélisande awakens moments later to the sound of the same music. Her first words: "Open the window."

→ **EX. 3 -- PLAY Track 3, 4, 5**

Mélisande's request could be understood in terms of the much-discussed references to light and darkness that fill Maeterlinck's play.⁷ But, viewed as part of the poetics of tragedy we have been exploring, the demand suggests another possibility. For the window also opens a space *within* the dialogue—a kind of alternative route for a soul about to thaw and take wing. And this space will ultimately produce a very different music, leading, as Maeterlinck put it, to "the more solemn and uninterrupted dialogue" of the play's deepest meanings. Debussy certainly understood the point. If the woodwind is our clue, then this bird is about to return to the forest. In fact, from the sound of it, she is more than halfway there.

That Arkel enables this passage—by opening a window—is both significant and unsurprising. For he is halfway

there himself. His music has always had a bit of the forest in it, redolent of plainsong and the same archaic modes we heard in the opera's opening measures. As he says to Mélisande in Act IV, he is an old man on "this side of death," ready to "open the door onto a new era." By Act V, Arkel's prophecy may seem to have gone "disastrously wrong," as one critic puts it,⁸ but it turns out to be right; we have simply misread the signs. The happy ending he foresees is not about the future but the past, not a progress but a return. The window is a corridor to that past—to a space so deep inside the language forest that only the old, or the nearly dead, can access it. The events of Act V make clear that Mélisande and Arkel both have ready access. Indeed, later in the scene Debussy evokes their connection in an unusual way, as if literally depicting the "solemn and uninterrupted dialogue" that Maeterlinck himself had in mind. Riding the same wavelength, Arkel and Mélisande speak of the setting sun, and of her newborn child, over an orchestra that has all the freshness of Debussy's *Faun* and *La Mer*. Their final symbolic exchange is, in fact, the only passage of continuous conversation in the entire act—perhaps the entire opera.

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EX. 4 -- PLAY Track 6

[Editorial note: here there is no music on the handout, just text; I may want to expand this section to discuss how Debussy represents the continuity of character through an unusually shared phrase structure. M & A declaim their lines as two parts of the same melodic/harmonic line.]

Now, this kind of continuity stands in stark contrast, of course, to the conversation between Mélisande and Golaud just moments earlier. There we find the couple momentarily alone, the remorseful husband begging forgiveness in a piteously exposed phrase of unaccompanied recitative. Mélisande's pardon comes easily, almost thoughtlessly, in cadences that reflect neither pain nor pity. Her response, in fact, is an ancient chanson: a song so remote it cannot speak to Golaud's more modern guilt.

→ **EX. 5 -- PLAY Track 7**

By now this sort of *malentendu* has become familiar territory, but Debussy draws its edges more sharply in this final dialogue between husband and wife. In a stunning confessional aria Golaud freely admits his wrongdoing, then begs for one last thing: the truth. "Il faut dire la vérité à quelqu'un qui va mourir!" [You must tell the truth to someone who is about to die!] The plea brings on a cross-examination: "Did you love Pelléas?" "Did you love him with a guilty love?" Each of his questions stacks the

deck. Each yields the same response. Mélisande's denials are not defensive but dreamy, uncomprehending. Golaud counters by trying harder. He threatens ("Don't tell lies on your deathbed"); he makes promises ("I'll forgive whatever you tell me"). In that incongruous way we sometimes talk to foreigners, he even raises his voice, as if his shouting might bridge the language gap. But hurling words does little good. When Golaud bellows his last and most desperate demand ("Quickly! Quickly! The truth! The truth!"), he gets back the most "foreign" reply of all. Mélisande answers like a docile schoolgirl, murmuring her first French lesson: La vérité . . . la vé-ri-té . . . On her lips, the truth that Golaud seeks is just a word.

→ **EX. 6 Play Track 8**

VÉRITÉ/SONORITÉ

This answer no doubt stands as the starkest image of mishearing in the opera, a résumé of the miscommunications that have plagued Golaud from the very first scene. Once again, we are presented with a counterpoint of parallel objects; once again, they clash, like the two versions of "Mélisande" presented side by side at the beginning of Act V. This time, however, the two figures sound all too confusingly the *same*. Both have the ring of "truth," but

the setting makes it plain that, as verities, they are different. To recall Maeterlinck's terms one last time: next to a "strict and apparent truth"—Golaud's truth—there another lies, concealed. At last, we see this lie for what it is: **La vérité . . . la vérité . . . la vérité . . .** The truth that Mélisande conceals is nothing but an *echo*.

Indeed, it had been hiding all along, in those uncanny repetitions that fill the play, disrupting conversation's natural course. *I never lie; I only lie*. It was this aspect of Maeterlinck's technique that Kandinsky noted with special appreciation in his famous essay from 1912, on "the spiritual" dimension of art. By emptying words of apparent meaning, such repetitions brought forth another, more telling property: what Kandinsky called their "interior resonance." But this was more or less the lesson taught by Baudelaire, as well, in the poem we have already mentioned. For if symbols seemed to impede man's passage through the natural world, the forest nonetheless produced another effect. Baudelaire describes it in the second quatrain as a "long echo," a "shadowy and deep unity vast as night, vast as light," where "perfumes, colors and sounds answer each other." It is this realm of shadow and sound that the articulate Golaud, always hunting for signs, will never be able to grasp.

Such an image thus helps to explain the failure of communication that informs the whole of *Pelléas*, not to mention the uniquely detached position of Mélisande within it. For, like an echo, she too always lies *elsewhere*—in that interior space between words, between motives, across the separating barline. In this sense, the echo forms an object lesson for the entire play, whose hidden truths, heard rather than seen, move the intended meaning precisely to that “other” place far from the drama’s surface. Maeterlinck, in fact, took pains to represent that resonance at even larger levels of the play’s structure. And there is one more instance I want to point out as a way of bringing my argument to a close. I am thinking of those strange and troubling scenes that Maeterlinck conceived for the opening of both Acts I and V, scenes that Debussy eventually chose to cut. Each one featured a cluster of servant women. In Debussy’s reading they are forced, in a sense, to go underground, only to emerge in the drama’s final moments.

In Maeterlinck’s first scene, the servants try in vain to wash the stone of the castle door, lamenting, like so many Lady MacBeths, “we will never get it clean.” In Act V, they gossip about the strange events that have transpired in the morning: how they had discovered Pelléas at the

bottom of the well; how Golaud and Mélisande lay collapsed at the castle's door, covered in blood. The repetition encourages us to read the play's events backward (was it *blood* the servants washed from the steps in the opening scene?). Or, one might say, the doubling turns everything that happens *between* Act I and V into an echo of that initial, unspoken deed. Mélisande's flight at the end of the Act IV murder—when she tears her dress—now resonates with the fear she displays the first act, when Golaud spys her in the forest—wearing the same torn dress—weeping by a stream. "Don't touch me!" she cries. "Who is it that hurt you?" he asks in return. Heard from the reverse perspective, the question seems not incongruous but chilling; for the answer seems all too clear. It was Golaud himself.

By eliminating the servant's truth-telling, Debussy may have compromised the clarity of this reading, but he did not eliminate the eerie echo, the sense of a resonant space "between" the words, the scenes, the acts. Indeed, he heightened it. By its very nature as music, the opera turns the drama into very different sort of resonant space. As an evocative acoustic phenomenon, the orchestra produces a reverberation of higher order, one more powerful than any Maeterlinck could have suggested in words.

Which brings me to my final point. It was precisely the unique possibilities of orchestral drama that Debussy seems to have had in mind as he began imagining the opera's last act in 1894. In a letter to his friend Henry Lerolle, he described a new idea for the death of Mélisande: he wanted to "put an orchestral group on the stage," he said, to represent the "death of all resonance."⁹ Debussy never carried out that plan, of course, but two details suggest its consequences. At the moment of Mélisande's death, as the servants fall to their knees, he introduces the sound of a distant bell, *outside* the orchestra pit (the original score reads: *une cloche sur le théâtre*). This sound from elsewhere, a bit of detached orchestral resonance, summons our Echo—mythical daughter of Earth and Air—to her natural home, back in the shadowy forest. Her silent parting, which produces no drama, yields but one onstage effect. It takes the wind out of Golaud. In Example 7, you'll see his own last utterance—a repeated grunt ("Oh! Oh!")—scored as two diamond-shaped notes, a notation indicating a spoken, rather than sung, delivery.¹⁰ In effect, the singer is robbed of his most important weapon: his vocal resonance. If the "truth" of *Pelléas et Mélisande* lies always on that *other* side, not hunted down in spoken words but heard in hidden repercussions, then Debussy's

final gesture teaches a telling lesson. La vérité excites the air to ring, and leaves Golaud at last disarmed.

NOTES

¹ Jann Pasler, “Pelléas and Power: The Reception of Debussy’s Opera,” in Joseph Kerman, ed., *Music at the Turn of the Century: an 19th Century Reader* (Berkeley, 1990), 129-150.

² Pierre Boulez, “Miroirs pour Pelléas et Mélisande,” in *L’Avant-scène opera* 9 (Paris, 1992), 96.

³ As Rousseau himself put it: “mentir, c’est cacher une vérité que l’on doit manifester” [to lie is to hid a truth that one should divulge]. *Rêveries, IVe promenade*.

⁴ Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001), 176.

⁵ Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des Humbles*

⁶ See especially Susan Youens, “An Unseen Player: Destiny in *Pelléas et Mélisande*,” in Parker and Groos, eds. *Reading Opera* (Princeton, 1988), 60-91.

⁷ See especially Richard Langham Smith, “[Title? Symbols of Darkness and Light]” in Smith and Nichols, eds., *Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande*. (Cambridge, 199?).

⁸ Cf. Youens.

⁹ David Grayson, *The Genesis of Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande* (Michigan, 1986), 33.

¹⁰ I owe thanks to Roger Moseley for inspiring me to think about these diamonds, and the last words of *Mélisande*.