

EDITOR'S NOTE: This issue coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the first performance of Debussy's *"Pelléas et Mélisande"*—an historic event in the development of opera. In the article below, the veteran French critic René Dumesnil recalls the partisan struggles which broke out during that first performance of a half century ago. On the page opposite, Martin Cooper—an English authority on French music—analyzes the achievements of *"Pelléas et Mélisande"* as they appear to him from a fifty-year vantage point.

"Pelléas"—1902

RENÉ DUMESNIL

WE, the survivors, still talk about it among ourselves almost every time chance brings us together again at the theatre where the conflict took place. Our meetings are haphazard; we are not organized into any kind of society, but we do form a kind of freemasonry which is much better. We are bound together by memories comparable to those which, in the past century, united the men who recalled the "battle of 'Hernani,'" as they referred to the near-riot at the first performance of Victor Hugo's tragedy. Well, our "battle of 'Pelléas'" was no less violent. Indeed, it was more than a battle. It was a real war of attrition that lasted for weeks and months, flaring up anew after a short respite, remaining for a long time undecided, but ending at last, all the same, thanks to our stubbornness, in a victory for us, the defenders of Debussy. As Louis Laloy has said, it was "a triumph of obstinacy."

How could there possibly have been all that opposition? What state of mind prevailed in the musical world in the spring of 1902, on the eve of the event?

There were two enemy camps, between which floated, irresolute, a great mass of indifferent people. To one side, ranged under the banner of Academicism, were the defenders of sacrosanct traditions. On the opposite side were drawn up the ranks of those who were convinced that everything living constantly transforms itself, that the history of art is but a progressive enlargement of doctrines and systems sometimes resembling a return towards the past and those forms which have been unjustly forgotten. For them Claude Debussy was like a flag around which to rally. Whenever one of his works was played he found himself confronted with increasingly bitter enemies, but also with enthusiastic followers in ever growing numbers, ready to spring to his defense.

It was known that he was composing an opera and that this lyrical work would be, to the theatre, what the "Nocturnes" (presented at the Lamoureux Concerts, December 9, 1900) had been in the realm of symphonic music. It was said that *"Pelléas et Mélisande"* aimed at nothing less than to combat Wagnerianism—this at a period when a veritable Wagnerian cult existed not only in the theatre but on the concert stage as well. To attack a god! What daring! What audacity!

No sooner had the rehearsals begun at the Opéra-Comique than a campaign of disparagement was organized. Perfidious news items appeared in the Parisian papers, tendentious gossip circulated. It seemed to be a veritable conspiracy—and was, in fact.

I was a student at that time, and wherever students foregathered—in the Law Schools, at the Sorbonne, in the School of Medicine—Debussy had his followers. Whenever his name appeared on a concert program, there we were, perched in the highest gallery at the Châtelet Theatre or lined up as standees at the Cirque.

At last, the dates were set for the opening. Following a "répétition générale" for a select audience on the afternoon of April 27, *"Pelléas"* would be presented for the general public on the night of April 30. Too unimportant; all of us, to be invited to the matinée performance, we hurried to the theatre as soon as the box office was opened to secure seats for the first night. In those days there was a "parterre" at the Opéra-Comique—the back rows of the orchestra—which sold at a much cheaper rate. I secured an excellent seat, for which I paid the modest sum of 3 francs 50 centimes, plus my three hour wait in line.

The matinée performance had been tumultuous. We had heard about it and so went prepared for battle, confident of success, having gained some valuable experience in minor student insurrections. We were confident; but

we were well aware that the entire character of Debussy had earned for him more enemies than friends, and knew that those enemies, out for his blood, would shrink at nothing. Were they not selling at the theatre entrance a "Select Program" containing a satirical analysis of the piece? In it you read such phrases as "Pelléas remains alone with his little sister-in-law (ahem!)" or "Golaud is a simple fellow, who, when apprised of what is going on, is surprised."

Everything transpired as anticipated. The reading of the letter in the second scene was greeted with snickers. Our imperious cries of "Hush!" put a stop to the laughter and our applause at the fall of the curtain drowned out the boos and whistling. In the corridors some arguments degenerated into violent disputes. In the next act, the Tower Scene almost brought the house down. The scurrilous "Select Program" had prepared the way for this with its comment: "Golaud pumps the little Yniold, who innocently lets the cat out of the bag." Hubbub. Shouts. Insults. A fat man two rows ahead of me singled me out and, having exhausted his supply of arguments, ended up by calling me "an Yniold"! My reply being, I believe, scathing, he informed me that we should meet again, at the end of the performance. (I did not see him afterwards; no doubt he did not look for me very seriously.)

After the death of *Mélisande* there was a thunder of applause, ours, in the midst of a storm of hisses and boos.

PATIENCE would be needed to make the public accept this masterpiece. We realized this, and during the weeks that followed we met time and again at the box office. Without preliminary meetings or any discussion of rules and regulations, without any oaths of allegiance to *Mélisande*, a league had tacitly been founded: a "Davidsbund," Schumann would have called it, with Eusebius and Florestan, Julius and Raro against the Philistines. Every evening that *"Pelléas et Mélisande"* was played, as though by secret order, there they were, fifteen or thirty of them, faithful to the countersign, and applauding with all their might, all their hearts.

What they applauded was a music so young and new that still, at the end of fifty years—and a half century is a very long time—they find it as new and fresh as it was that evening of the 30th of April, 1902. And still, though they know it by heart, it arouses in them the same profound emotion.

(Translated by Herma Briffault.)

"Pelléas"—1952

MARTIN COOPER

HAS any historian quite faced the role played by fashion in the development of the various arts? We accept the fact that the artist can create a fashion—Byron's floppy ties and sardonic aloofness, for instance—but is it fully recognized how much the artist himself, and even the greatest, is molded by the fashions of his day both in what he expresses and how he expresses it?

Debussy's "Pelléas et Mélisande" is the one classical expression in opera of a mood, a fashionable way of thinking, prevalent sixty years ago, in what we call "the Nineties." We have just moved out of the valleys that immediately surround any masterpiece to a point of vantage from which we can see Debussy's achievement in perspective. Such perfection as he achieved naturally discourages imitation, and even before his death music had moved to ideals diametrically opposed to his; but now we can examine what it is that has made "Pelléas" the first indisputable masterpiece of the twentieth century, the role played by fashion in its conception, and the mastering and amalgamating of that fashion with Debussy's own personality.

Debussy was consciously an anti-body to Wagner, for whose music he felt a mixture of violent attraction and repulsion. Whether Debussy had lived or not, the fashion for emotional overstatement set by Wagner was bound eventually to provoke a reaction in favor of understatement (though the extremist rejection of any emotional statement at all was not historically foreseeable). Fifty years after, this characteristic of Debussy's music seems very much less noticeable than when "Pelléas" was first performed; and perhaps the only way to get some idea of the revolutionariness of this particular aspect is to hear "Pelléas"—as I did recently—immediately after a season of Wagner. With the ears still full of the erotic thunders of "Tristan" no one can fail to be staggered by Pelléas's declaration of love and Mélisande's answer—"Je t'aime," "Je t'aime aussi," the simplest recitative, moving within the span of a major third, and quite unaccompanied.

To contemporary listeners Debussy's new language seemed (as all new

musical idioms seem) to portend the death of "melody." Debussy himself astonished even his admirers by declaring that his ambition was not to reduce but rather infinitely to extend the province of melody in music, to make every phrase, however apparently insignificant, "sing." And we can now understand both what he meant and why he was misunderstood. What Debussy rejected was the formal melody of the Italian opera and the "unendliche Melodie"—long, asymmetrical, but clearly cantabile lines—of Wagner; and he rejected them because he found them psychologically unreal. What he put in their place was a mosaic of short cantabile phrases, often arranged in two-bar patterns and then repeated with a slight variation (see the opening twelve bars of "Pelléas" itself). This melodic mosaic wholly precludes the expression of the conventional operatic sentiments—all heroism, rhetorical love and hate, noble meditation or elegiac melancholy—and favors the simple, almost conversational tone of everyday life. It corresponds exactly to the substitution of poetic prose for the alexan-

drine verse or the heroic couplet, and it meant, in just the same way, a vast enriching of the scope of melody, only in an entirely new direction.

The absence of the heroic, the naturally grandiloquent, emotions from Debussy's music is matched by the absence of the human will from the story which he chose for his libretto. Maeterlinck's characters are passive puppets in the hands of a fate of which they are hardly even conscious, to which they certainly never refer. I think that this will-lessness, this passivity of the characters, is the trait that, after fifty years, we find most difficult to accept in "Pelléas et Mélisande." But consider for a moment the fashions against which both Debussy and Maeterlinck were reacting—Wotan with his abortive "Wille zur Macht" and his interminable narrations and reflections, the spectacular conversion of Thais, or Canio sobbing his heart out in front of the curtain. Debussy and Maeterlinck were concerned with bringing back mystery onto the stage, not theatrical mysteriousness but the inescapable mystery which lies at the bottom of every human relationship.

THE sense of that mystery is generally stronger in 1952 than it was in 1902; so many of the pleasant superficialities of life have been removed that we have perhaps a clearer vision of what life itself really is and the mystery at its root. Maeterlinck and Debussy shared an inkling of what poets, philosophers, and even scientists now proclaim; and if they gave it an expression which sometimes seems to us a little ludicrous, they were in a sense pioneers, with no models to work from.

They were pioneers in what they had to express, but partly creatures of fashion in the way they chose to express it. This must always be true of the greatest and most original artists. No single artist is the sole source of his own work, however original. Claude Debussy's greatness lies in the fact that he found perfect—what we still call "classical"—expression in music for the anti-intellectual ferment of the Nineties. That he managed, with Maeterlinck, to put this new atmosphere or "climate of opinion" onto the operatic stage was perhaps the greatest of his feats. "Pelléas" remains, after fifty years, not only a classic of the Nineties, the first rallying point of the reaction against Wagnerian domination in the opera house, but one of the great lyrical dramas of all time, where fashion is used and superseded and a window opened on the most secret and mysterious tracts of the human soul.



—By Georges Villa (Paris, 1902), from Bettmann Archive.

"Debussy enkindling the bastion of art."