

"Pelléas"—1952

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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."

A Biography of Wolf

ELISABETH SCHUMANN

WHEN I was asked to review Frank Walker's "Hugo Wolf"* I accepted this task only too readily. I had read this fascinating book last summer while on a concert tour throughout Britain and I was delighted to get an excuse to re-read it thoroughly once more. Only then, when I had assumed my new assignment of "book reviewer," did misgivings overcome me. I want, therefore, to explain at the very start, that I am writing this review as a lieder singer—not as a book critic. I would, for instance, not presume to speak about Mr. Walker's style, fluid and lucid as it seems to me. What I have to say must, of necessity, be a very personal opinion of this much-overdue biography of one of the great representatives of the German lied.

To get first things said first, I feel that Mr. Walker has achieved the true—and oh, so rare—goal of a biographer, namely to submerge his role of author so completely that Hugo Wolf, the genius, emerges as clearly and vividly as any biographical figure (and what a complex one at that) could possibly emerge. It is hard to understand why it took so long for someone to give up a convincing Hugo Wolf biography. That Mr. Walker has succeeded eminently in doing just that is a happy event for many musicians and music lovers. But more than that, I am convinced that this book will hold the interest of readers who do not especially care for music but who might perhaps win insight into the sometimes unbearable tortures a creative genius has to go through.

For me, as an ardent Wolf admirer, the book is, of course doubly interesting. How often does the re-creative artist wish he could have been privileged to know the creator whose works he interprets!

I was not privileged to know Hugo Wolf. But soon after I had arrived in Vienna to sing as a member of the Vienna State Opera I had the good fortune to coach most of the Wolf songs with *Studienrat* Ferdinand Foll. He was, as Mr. Walker shows, one of Wolf's tireless and loyal friends, and a wonderful musician and accompanist. On evenings when I did not

sing, I would make appointments to study with Herr Foll at his studio in the opera house. From him I learned every tempo, every nuance, and every intention of Wolf's works. Foll's knowledge of his friend's marvellous songs was so thorough and so intimate that it is impossible to imagine anyone better qualified to have handed down the Wolf tradition.

Of course, I had been familiar with these lieder before I ever came to Vienna. I had heard the great Julia Culp, who by her unique artistry seemed chosen to become Wolf's first apostle.

It seems to me that Wolf did for the lied what his great idol Richard Wagner did for opera. There is in his songs an interwovenness, an interrelation of words and music that, up to then, could not be found in any of the other lieder compositions, whether by Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, or Brahms. And, again for the re-creative artist, especially the mature one, there is one thing about the Wolf lieder which I appreciate ever more: Wolf was so marvellously selective in the poems he set to music. While Schubert, for instance, could find inspiration from almost any lyric that came his way (which does not mean that lyrics like "Erlkönig," "Gretchen am Spinnrade," and many others have not superlative words), Wolf *never* set an inferior poem to music. I suppose he did not have the overflowing creativeness of Schubert who, judging from his enor-

mous output, must have never stopped scribbling notes on music paper. (And *what* notes at that!) Still, think of the warm humor of "Wie glänzt der helle Mond," the indescribable atmosphere of "In der Frühe," or the pure lyricism of "In dem Schatten meiner Locken." I will hold them up against any other lied you can name.

Last year, when I went on my first concert tour of South Africa, my managers felt apprehensive about the Hugo Wolf group which, for some time now, has been as indispensable a part of my program as a group of Schubert songs. I was told that Hugo Wolf was hardly known in South Africa, that I could sing his songs in Johannesburg or Capetown but not in the other cities of my tour. I feel strongly about singing Hugo Wolf wherever I go. I thought it was time that someone did sing Wolf in this apparently still unconquered territory. When I wrote my managers to that effect they were kind enough to let me have my way. I am happy to say that even a subtle song like "Wie glänzt der helle Mond" (perhaps my special favorite) was understood and loved—whether I sang it in Johannesburg or in the small African town of Kroonstad. And I, personally, was tremendously happy to have been able to introduce Hugo Wolf to audiences who, even in 1951, had not heard his songs.

As I said at the start, I cannot thank Mr. Walker enough for having written his book. Only much later, when you mull it over, do you realize what effort, what research, and—last not least—what love must have gone into this biography. While you read it you are not conscious of all this. And this is as it should be. You are transformed into the very era, the very world that centered around a genius: Hugo Wolf.

Hugo Wolf on Applause

WOLF [in his music criticisms] wished in certain circumstances to forbid applause. If the Viennese public were to witness an eclipse of the moon, a thunderstorm, a rainbow, an earthquake or volcano, it would seem that their first reaction would be to applaud the good Lord for his excellent performance. . . . There were occasions when it was by no means out of place. "Continue to applaud, but only where the work of art itself invites applause—at resounding conclusions, in pieces of cheerful, festal, warlike, heroic character." At other times it was offensive and

stupid. He instanced Beethoven's "Coriolan" Overture:

The eye still stares drunkenly forward, as if into a magic mirror, wherein the gigantic shadow of Coriolanus slowly floats away, the tears still run, the heart throbs, the breath is caught, the limbs are incapable of movement—and the last note has scarcely died away, when you are again cheerful and contented, making a noise and criticizing and clapping. Oh, you have looked into no magic mirror, you have seen nothing, felt nothing, heard nothing, understood understood; nothing, nothing, nothing at all! But you applauded well.

—From "Hugo Wolf," by Frank Walker.

*HUGO WOLF. By Frank Walker. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 502 pp. \$6.50.