

A Debussy-Maeterlinck "Pelléas"

The childish faith that good things come in threes is not only verified but glorified in the Metropolitan's new production of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, its first in decades and the best ever. The trio of talents responsible for this moody, moving, and memorable exploit are Desmond Heeley, who gave the stage a fresh look into the mysteries of the timeless forest and ghost-haunted castle where the events occur; Paul-Emile Deiber, who motivated each character in the action to a rarely believable totality; and Colin Davis, who made the orchestra another participant in the drama.

One could cite the names in any order and still come up with one of the first importance last. Heeley comes to my place of priority for the positive way in which he has resolved the most difficult of all the assignments: how to make the scenic elements of *Pelléas* perform their necessary function without either overweighting the stage with cumbersome set pieces or leaving the action unsupported by suitably defined surroundings. Heeley's artistry is premised, first of all, on the clear belief that the scenery should serve the music rather than vice versa. His technical skill is defined by a choice of means that makes this point of view not only reasonable but productive.

Working within a traditional box set with borders, Heeley has evolved a scenic scheme utilizing a network of netting on which designs have been imposed and painted. This, too, is traditional enough. The contemporary note is provided by the material of which the designs are made, a German-developed plastic that is applied almost like paint. When it dries, it is translucent, permitting lighting from either the back or the front. From this resource and an imaginative use of projections, Heeley has created a *Pelléas* which is stimulus to eye and mind.

Additionally, but far from incidentally, virtually everything that is seen is flown (lowered or raised) rather than moved from side to side. With one or two exceptions, the stage is never blacked out, which has the further important consequence of keeping the audience constantly involved visually. As a final dividend, this permits those who know how and why Debussy wrote *Pelléas* as he did the pleasure of hearing the orchestral interludes that connect one scene with another without the intrusive babble of conversation that inevitably arises when a curtain is drawn in any theater.

Given this point of advantage, conductor Davis could—and did—evolve a musical treatment that flowed in unbroken sequence from first to last. As any well-versed operagoer knows, *Pelléas* poses probably the knottiest problem of all the works infrequently but repeatedly heard in the world's opera theaters. It is relatively easy to serve Debussy's purpose convincingly in an intimate theater such as England's Glyndebourne, where Vittorio Gui achieved a memorable result not many years ago. It is quite another matter to expand the scope of the score to serve more than five times as many listeners in the Metropolitan.

That Davis achieved the dangerous extreme within a well-calculated scale of artistic tolerances was a tribute to two things: his own high powers of discrimination and the brilliant realization of the on-stage drama under Deiber's consistently creative direction. This was perhaps the rarest kind of *Pelléas*, in which Debussy's invasion of the poetic world created by Maurice Maeterlinck resulted not in musical rape but in artistic procreation. With Deiber building strongly on the conflict of character between the two brothers through whose possessive purposes Mélisande is buffeted unto death, the dramatic force and counterforce enabled Davis to evolve a musical treatment congruent to the surroundings as well as to the score. It is a tribute to his persuasiveness that the Met orchestra responded like so many virtuosos.

If this suggests very little of the mystical, impalpable, evanescent character usually imputed to *Pelléas*, *la vérité* is times change, and artistic concepts change with them. Given a trio of talents such as Heeley, Deiber, and Davis confronted with the problem of making *Pelléas et Mélisande* compatible with the surroundings in which this production was performed, the pertinent question is not how much like the old traditions the outcome can be but how much of the essence can be preserved in the new conditions.

To this taste, that essence was strong, palpable, and enduringly present, thanks to a beautifully suitable group of performers admirably qualified to carry out the concept arrived at by its three mentors. Judith Blegen was not Rudolf Bing's first choice for Mélisande, but the inability of Teresa Stratas to participate in all the rehearsals did not penalize the outcome. It provided the highly musical, uncom-

monly pliable Miss Blegen with her first major opportunity to enlarge the impression she made in Santa Fe only two-and-a-half years ago as the violin-playing Emily of Menotti's *Globolinks*. Slight, appealing in the tradition of the best Mélisandes—Sayão, Bori, Teyte, in the New York canon—Miss Blegen has resources of vocal power that made her death scene altogether believable. The choice of Barry McDaniel as Pelléas resulted in a debut that earned him high marks for vocal resourcefulness in difficult circumstances.

Deiber's emphasis on the dramatic involvements of Maeterlinck and Debussy would have sagged without the powerfully projected characterizations of Thomas Stewart as one of the most persuasively tormented, soul-searching Golauds in memory; Giorgio Tozzi as a not merely aging but almost antique Arkel, tortured by the involvement of his two sons—Golaud and Pelléas—with Mélisande, whom he also loves; Lili Chookasian as an inspired choice for Geneviève; Clifford Harvuot as an eloquent physician; and young Adam Klein as the boyish soprano voice for Yniold.

In the first of Bruno Maderna's two programs as guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Helga Dernesch made a debut that both clarified and clouded her reputation as the next great Wagnerian dramatic soprano. Tall, slender, almost slim by Teutonic standards, she could pass anywhere as the visible daughter of a Nordic god. She chose to alter the printed sequence by beginning with Berg's *Der Wein*, and descended abruptly from Olympian to earthly stature by reading the settings of Baudelaire's *Le Vin* from a printed score.

There was solidity in the sound she produced, especially rich at the bottom, pliable in the middle, a little hard at the top. But Berg's writing calls for resources of color, of timbre, and of verbal articulation that Miss Dernesch does not command. She was more surely related to the Wagner songs, with their exploitation of the idiom that soon grew into *Tristan und Isolde*. Above the well-articulated octave from E to E (suggestive of a mezzo background), Miss Dernesch worked hard for tones that should be within ready reach of a well-equipped Brünnhilde.

Maderna's favor as a conductor ranged from a vigorous performance of Mendelssohn's *Scotch* Symphony to a less than subtle one of Mozart's *Prague*. His own views as a composer were conveyed in a violin concerto whose soloist, the excellent Paul Zukofsky, listened almost as much as he played. The patchy, disconnected texture of brass and string exchanges could hardly have interested him more than it did the restless audience. □

The Impact of IMPACT

TROY, ALA. Daphne (let this serve as her name) is a little white girl who attends school in rural Alabama. When a court order required that her school in Union Springs be integrated, 250 of her schoolmates were sent by their parents to white private schools. Daphne's family was on welfare and couldn't afford private school tuition. She was offered a scholarship to a white private school, but Daphne herself turned it down because there were "better classes" in the integrated public school.

The "better classes" that Daphne wanted included the very special arts experiments provided by IMPACT, a powerful and pertinent abbreviation of the unwieldy Interdisciplinary Model Programs in the Arts for Children and Teachers, a project funded at \$1-million by the Education Professions Development Act and developed jointly by—and take a deep breath!—the Arts and Humanities Program, the Bureau of Educational Personnel Development of the Office of Education, the National Art Education Association, the American Educational Theatre Association, the Music Educators National Conference, and the Dance Division of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation. In spite of these cumbersome credits IMPACT is a direct hit.

Agencies representing national, state,

and local experts in arts education cooperated in a project involving schools in Oregon, Ohio, Pennsylvania, California, and Alabama. Because of the added complication of integration in the Deep South, and in rural communities at that, Alabama interested me most. And from what I saw in Union Springs, Goshen, and elsewhere, it seemed that integration was working better here in the rural, presumably redneck counties of the South than in the presumably enlightened North.

Sara Ogletree, the bright, efficient, and highly personable principal of the Union Springs Elementary School, is quite frank about the situation. "We integrated because of a court order. Now it is up to me to make it work." With a fine staff of white and black teachers, and with guest arts instructors provided by IMPACT, such as Murray Louis in dance, Miss Ogletree has made it work. Her young charges are 500 pupils, kindergarten through third grade, drawn from the 3,000 inhabitants of Union Springs. "Thirty per cent are farm children, thirty per cent are from factory families, thirty per cent are welfare. The other ten per cent? I don't know where they come from," says Miss Ogletree. "They just come and go. They all come from families whose average income is less than one thousand dollars a year."

Miss Ogletree was enthusiastic about

the success of the arts program in her newly integrated school. "The children are cleaner, neater, and more carefully dressed than ever before. A small thing, perhaps, but the parents must feel some pride in what we are doing. The most important thing of all is that each pupil's I.Q. has gone up. The dance challenges have done a lot."

Mr. Louis—the Murray Louis Dance Company and the Nikolais Dance Theater have recently concluded a joint engagement at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—sits by his drums in the cheery classroom in Union Springs. He rolls out a rhythm and props up his battered feet (most modern dancers practice and perform with bare feet and subject them to all manner of punishment). The kids are spaced out in a double classroom; they sit on the floor and stretch their lithe little bodies. They breathe in rhythm, they reach upwards and outwards, they giggle, but they are serious about what they are doing.

Now they have stand-up exercises. One little black girl stands on her head and grins upside down. Daphne tries but falls down; a black boy helps her find her balance. Now Murray moves away from exercises and gets closer to dance. There are walking, running, leaping, and turning patterns. Arm rhythms are added. "Make shapes with your bodies," says Murray. The little ones start their adventures into space: slow, fast, faster. Sometimes they copy one another, but mostly each releases the individual dance that lies within him or her.

Murray starts them counting rhythms or numbers of steps—all the arts classes are carefully related to academic studies—and then he has them make shapes, not alone but with each other, in touchings, in partnerings. White and black fingers interlock trustingly as joint shapes are evolved. A blonde Anglo-Saxon hugs a descendant of Africans as Murray praises their wildly imaginative patterns in space. There is no embarrassment at all. They are all children. There seems to be no sense of race.

Probably the last thing in the world that Union Springs wanted was integration, but when the law said they must, they did, and it has worked superbly. IMPACT, along with eager local teachers, has seen to that.

Now we rush to Goshen with no time for lunch. Murray Louis's dancers, who serve as his assistants in all the assigned schools in the Troy area, gobble some canned peaches, with lots of syrup, for quick energy. This time, the kids at Goshen Elementary, kindergarten through fourth grade, sit in the bleachers in the big gym and watch as the Louis dancers present an improvised lecture-demonstration. The first

Children at Union Springs Elementary School in Alabama get set to somersault as dancer Murray Louis, an IMPACT guest arts instructor, conducts.

