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SYMBOLS IN DEBUSSY'S *PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE*

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Introduction

There is a substantial literature on the symbolist movement in general, and also much written specifically about *Pelléas et Mélisande*. There is, however, rather less to read about the use of symbols in Maeterlinck's symbolist plays. Discussion is often not so much of the actual symbols deployed in the dramas as of the aesthetics of the symbolist movement (cf. e.g. Ousterhout (1971) and Hanak (1974)).

Where the symbols are discussed, it is usually under the false assumption that they are fixed objects which can be translated (with a little effort) into words (cf. e.g. Knapp (1975: 74) on the cave and (75) on the castle vaults). Bosc (2011) presents a more insightful reading and compares the symbols in *Pelléas et Mélisande* to parallel ones in Maeterlinck's other dramas. Postic (1970: 74–92) has penetrating remarks, for example, on the symbolism of Mélisande's wedding ring and of her hair, but his view of the play as dominated by Destiny diminishes the usefulness of his chapter in studying Debussy's opera, in which the action is not dominated by inexorable forces.

The major work on musical symbols in Debussy's opera is Antokoletz (2004). This lengthy and meticulous harmonic analysis is problematic, however, because the author repeatedly uses verbal tags to describe many of the themes and harmonic and melodic fragments in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. For example, the first two themes to be heard in the opera are labelled 'Forest Theme' and 'Fate Theme' (Antokoletz believes that the characters' fates are predestined) but neither label is justified by their subsequent appearances. There are certainly three themes in the opera which function as leading motifs: those associated with Mélisande, Pelléas and Golaud and maybe some others, but Antokoletz's widespread verbal labelling of musical material is unjustified and no spectator could consciously appreciate many of the transformations of musical material which he detects. The book sheds some light on Debussy's compositional process but has little to offer to those studying the opera as a music drama. Rolf (2007) presents a much more circumspect approach to labelling in her section on *Leitmotifs* (pp. 132ff.).

Christian Annoui (2012: 78) has noted that the action of *Pelléas et Mélisande* revolves around two axes radiating from the ground floor of the castle: each of them spans the distance between light and darkness. There is a horizontal axis from the *clarté* of the sea to the darkness of the forest and a vertical axis from the brightness of the sky

and of the light in Mélisande's tower to the darkness of the subterranean chasm which threatens to undermine the castle. (The castle's gardens represent a liminal space, carved out by mankind, between human habitation and the darkness of the surrounding forest.) For example, in Act I scene 3, Mélisande, Geneviève and Pelléas are trapped horizontally between the perpetual darkness of the forest and the sea, which oscillates between darkness and momentary light as they watch a ship departing from the harbour. By contrast, the cave of Act II scene 3 shares vertically both in the darkness of underground and in the *clarté* of moonlight from above. Light can signify (among other things) enlightenment (as, for example, in that scene, where the sudden sight of the three blind beggars in the moonlight shocks Mélisande), and darkness symbolises obscurity and, at times, death (cf. Act III scene 2, in the castle vaults). All three of these scenes are analysed below.

There is, however, another dimension: time. One of the most important comments on symbols was made by Carl Jung, who devoted much thought to them:

> The true symbol differs essentially from [a mere sign or symptom] and should be understood as the expression of an intuitive perception which can as yet neither be better apprehended nor expressed differently[1].

So true symbols are not a disguised indication of something that is generally known but rather an effort to elucidate, by analogy, something which is as yet unknown and only in the process of formation. Maeterlinck himself said: '... le symbole le plus pure est peut-être celui qui a lieu à son insu et même a l'encontre de ses intentions' [the purest symbol is perhaps that which has its place in [the poet's] unconscious and even against his intentions][2]. Except for such simple symbols (actually, allegorical signs) as the royal crown and the wedding ring, the meaning of which is familiar from their use in our culture, the symbols in Maeterlinck are not static objects, phenomena with a meaning which is capable of one-to-one translation[3]. With all the real symbols in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, we are observing a journey through time: we should speak not so much of symbolic objects as of symbolic experiences of encounter, which give insight into truths that are impossible to express by any other means. Except of course in music!

Debussy's score, when heard in actual production, makes these processes real for the audience when, for example, principal characters watch the departure of the ship, explore the shifting colours of the dark and then brilliant sea-cave, or confront the treacherous darkness and stench of the abyss below the castle vaults. Debussy's orchestral fabric portrays both the evolving wonders which surround the characters and the shifting pattern of their inner responses to them, which for Maeterlinck formed the core of the dramatic experience[4].

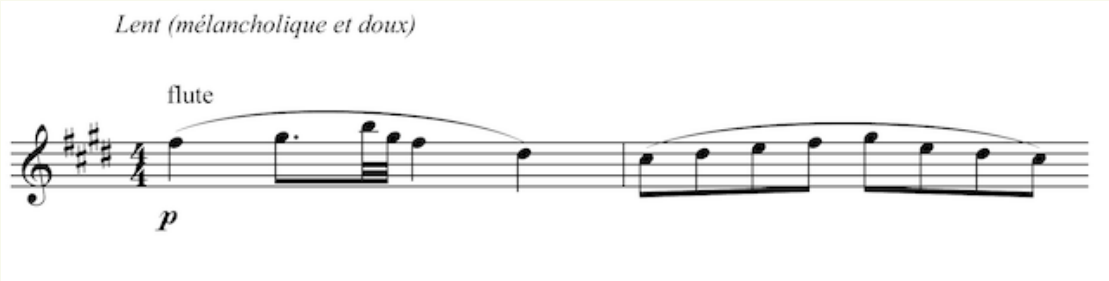
In this paper, I explore the processes at work in the text and the music of the four major encounters with a symbol in *Pelléas et Mélisande*: that with the ship in Act I scene 3 (the most complex of all the scenes in the opera which involve a symbol), that with the cave (Act II scene 3), the vaults and abyss beneath the castle (Act III scene 2) and Yniold's interactions in Act IV scene 3 with the immovable stone and with the sheep. I shall occasionally reference features of the Welsh National Opera's Châtelet production directed by Peter Stein in 1992, as it is almost unique among recordings on DVD in its fidelity to the *mise-en-scène* and stage directions required by Maeterlinck and Debussy[5].

The Ship (Act I scene 3)

To understand Debussy's musical illumination of Act I scene 3, which is the first time we see Pelléas and Mélisande together, we need to chart the process of the encounter in Maeterlinck's text between Geneviève, Pelléas and Mélisande and the ship which is leaving the harbour for an uncertain fate[6].

The scene is in five sections. The development through them, and especially the encounter with the departing ship, parallels and illuminates the psychological development of the two principal characters. They have sought out the light as an escape from the gloom that encircles their lives in the castle but the scene moves from momentary glimpses of brightness to uncertainty, the prospect of a storm and possible shipwreck. When Geneviève has gone, Mélisande can still see some beacons but Pelléas cannot. Why? Pelléas has already hinted that he is falling in love with his brother's wife with 'On s'embarquerait sans le savoir et l'on ne reviendrait plus' [one could put out to sea without knowing and never return] (I. 40.10–11: VS 44–5)[7], and he reaffirms it more clearly in his last line of the scene.

Example 1. (I. 35.1: VS 39)



This shocks Mélisande into a sudden exclamation and the curtain falls after her ensuing question, 'Oh! .Porquoi partez-vous?' [Oh! Why are you leaving?] is met with silence.

1. Geneviève contrasts the gloom of the encircling forests with the *clarté* (literal and metaphorical illumination), which she and Mélisande have sought out. Pelléas joins the two women, also in search of the sea and its light, but then Geneviève sees that the sea is, in fact, dark and Pelléas foresees a gathering storm. Debussy focuses the scene from the outset on Mélisande and an extended version of the main theme associated with her in Act I scene 1 (Ex. 1) is heard as the curtain rises. As Geneviève describes the gloom around the castle, the music is quiet and resigned with a gentle pathos, but her prophecy that Mélisande will see *clarté* evokes a glorious chord of F sharp major (I. 37.4: VS 41) and, fascinatingly, another bright chord sounds only two bars later as Mélisande hears a noise below them, which turns out to be Pelléas. Will he bring light to her? The music remains light and positive as Pelléas arrives and as Geneviève sings, 'il fait un peu plus clair d' ailleurs; et cependant la mer est triste' [here it is a little lighter than elsewhere: but the sea is gloomy] (I. 40.4–5: VS 43–4). Debussy now abandons *clarté* and paints the gloom and the coming storm in the orchestra with a sudden low G minor chord, I. 40.5: VS 44[8]. Pelléas broods on the recent storms, but then remarks that 'la mer est si calme ce soir' [the sea is very calm this evening]. The motif, which has already been associated in Act I Scene 1 with Golaud, now sounds out on a muted horn (I. 40.9: VS 44). In Debussy's conception of this scene, adding greatly to the illumination which he has already bestowed on Maeterlinck's text, Mélisande's older, jealous husband is an unseen presence in the minds of both principal characters[9].

2. Mélisande sees that something is putting out to sea, and Debussy adds to the play-text the evocative calls of the ship's crew, 'Hoé! Hisse Hoé!', heard at once from an offstage chorus (1. 41.2–3: VS 45). These voices echo the Golaud theme in their rhythmic and melodic contours because, in Debussy's vision, Golaud's unseen presence in the thoughts of Pelléas and Mélisande is totally intertwined with their unfolding encounter with the ship. After this, when Pelléas optimistically hopes that they will see the ship properly when it enters 'la bande de clarté' [the patch of light], the orchestra does not respond with another F major chord: the music remains dark and becomes agitated (I. 42: VS 46).

3. The characters now describe an interaction between the light and the mist, with beacons also visible: when the ship eventually comes into the light, it is already far out to sea. Indeed, when the mist lifts a little and Mélisande sees a small light that she had not seen before, once again Golaud's motif sounds in the orchestra (I. 42.4–6: VS 47). Does his sinister presence in her mind corrupt even this little piece of light? Golaud is then absent from their thoughts for a few moments. When Pelléas and Mélisande see more lights and then the ship, delicate, fast, animated figurations chart their growing excitement and warmth of emotion (I. 42.6ff.: VS 47–8), as, in Peter Stein's production, Mélisande looks at Pelléas for the first time in the scene, then turns sadly away on 'it's already quite distant'.

4. Mélisande recognises the ship as the one which brought her to Allemonde. Pelléas foresees that it will have rough weather and Mélisande fears that it will be shipwrecked. The music reaches its climax on 'C'est le navire qui m'a menée ici' [It is the ship which brought me here]. It is, in some way hard to define, the focal point of the scene (perhaps it implies that Mélisande is now trapped in Allemonde, for good or ill) and Debussy marks it with uncharacteristically complex music. Mélisande's full motif (Ex. 1) floats over the lower textures in a flute then oboe solo, but those lower textures include, as well as unsettled *tremolo* triplets in the lower strings, another clear articulation of Golaud's motif on the horns and the Golaud-related cries of 'Hoe! Hisse Hoé!' from the ship (I. 43: VS 49). Pelléas then sings that the ship will have a bad night.

The ship now disappears into darkness. Mélisande fears that it will be wrecked, as will her life, torn between Golaud and Pelléas, and her vocal line droops a minor second on the last syllable of *naufrage* [shipwreck] (I. 44.4–5: VS 50). Golaud is still a dominant presence in the thoughts of all three: when the ship finally disappears and the almost ethereal chorus falls silent, Geneviève's decision to leave is motivated by the summons of Golaud's motif in the horns (one bar before I. 45: VS 51).

5. After Geneviève makes an excuse and leaves, Pelléas can see nothing more but Mélisande can still see some beacons. The wind is rising and Pelléas offers to hold her hand, tentatively, accompanied by absolute silence in the orchestra. In Debussy's world of understatement, this is almost a declaration of love. (The orchestra will be silent again in Act IV, when the two declare, 'I love you', 'I love you too' (IV. 42.8–9; VS 244)). When Mélisande tells Pelléas that her hands are full of flowers, he takes her arm instead to help her down the steep path. The music changes both key and time signature (to F sharp major and 12/8; I. 47: VS 54) as it starts to slow towards the end of the Act. The sharp keys symbolise for Debussy, as for Wagner, a striving towards bliss and that is the case in these final moments of the scene. Mélisande's theme is heard again in its full glory, very expressively, high in a flute solo, as Pelléas begins to lead her down the path, followed by a no-less-expressive oboe solo, and the impact on Pelléas of her close physical presence is heard in the descending triplets of the rest of the orchestra, leading to his almost literally monotonous tonic, 'Je pars peut-être demain' [Tomorrow perhaps I will leave] (I. 3.47.4: VS 54).

The last seven bars (Ex. 2) can profitably be studied in close relation to Stein's production.

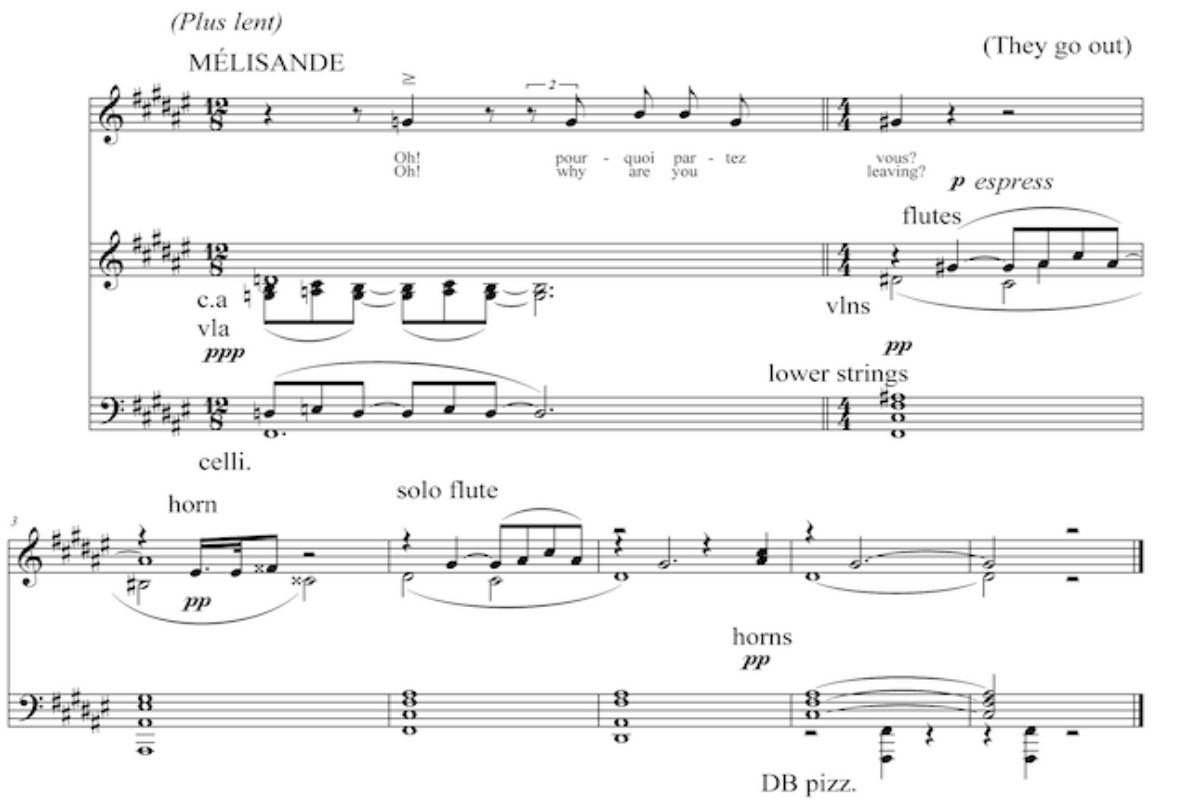
Alison Hagley, as Mélisande, has been moving down the path, but she stops suddenly to sing, 'Oh!', an accented and *tenuto* G natural (in F sharp major G should, of course, be sharp, and the flattening emphasises the shock of the moment). Mélisande is wounded by Pelléas' intention to leave. Recovering, she asks, 'Pourquoi partez-vous?' [Why are you leaving?]. The last word is *vous* [you] and on it Debussy returns her from another G natural to the key's normal G sharp supertonic. The gentle curve of *pourquoi partez,* the semitone rise to *vous* and the warmth of the string chord which underlies Mélisande's G sharp are almost seductive: they show that she is attracted to him. In Stein's production, Pelléas and Mélisande look intently into each other's eyes as she sings this line. The orchestral music now offers, in a solo flute *pp espressivo*, a shortened version of the pattern of the second part of Mélisande's theme (bar 2). Neil Archer, as Pelléas, drops his hold on her arm and turns away. After that, the music becomes even quieter. Golaud is still in Mélisande's thoughts (signalled by the fragment of his motif in the horn in bar 3) and so Hagley moves on, away from her Pelléas. In bar 4, as her question ebbs away in the solo flute, Hagley stops to look back at Archer but then, as the music dissolves still further in bars 5–6, she turns and goes. Archer's Pelléas is left alone, looking after her and then following very slowly in the emptiness, while, in bars 6–7, the music dies away completely before the curtain falls. Totally matching the dramatic situation, the harmony is unresolved in the final notes.

In this scene, the interaction between the principal characters and the offstage ship, which is heard although it is not seen, parallels the development of the relationship between Pelléas and Mélisande from initial obscurity and a desire for *clarté* to a brief burst of actual *clarté* and from that to a new insight which neither of them is yet ready to accept. For, from Section 2 onwards, Golaud is never very far from their thoughts, and the departure of the ship illuminates a process of almost unacknowledged growing mutual attraction, which, like the ship's voyage, is threatened with danger.

The Cave (Act II scene 3)

Mélisande's lie to Golaud about where she lost her wedding ring obliges her to make Pelléas take her at nightfall to explore a sea-cave. This cave is ambiguous in the geography of *Pelléas et Mélisande*: as an underground place it is naturally dark but the water of the two deep lakes and the intrusion during the scene of moonlight both furnish *clarté*. Thus, it has the same potential for a symbolic journey as the misty sea of Act I scene 3: Pelléas and Mélisande embark on an intrusion into a dark place but encounter a sudden revelation. Their journey is, however, essentially different from that of the scene in Act I. There, the *clarté* came early in the scene and dissolved towards the end into darkness while here, the *clarté* comes late and remains, with the revelation of the three old beggars, which shocks Mélisande. The two scenes are, however, similar in their musical endings: both fade away by *diminuendo* to conclude their respective Acts with nothingness[10].

Example 2. (I. 47.5: VS 54)



This scene is in seven parts.

1. An agitated *ostinato* underpins Pelléas' nervous approach and the cave's mystery is then conveyed by swirling triplets in divided celli and basses (II. 37.5ff.: VS 105). These two musical elements alternate: the *ostinato* is heard as Pelléas anticipates that the moon will soon give them light (a rare hint from Maeterlinck at something which will happen) and the swirls return as he describes the dangers of the cave. Mélisande tells Pelléas in one word that she has never been there before and

2. he invites her to enter. The swirls resume in the violas and are followed by light *pp* semiquaver scales in the violins as Pelléas enlarges on the size and beauty of the cave. Then he senses that Mélisande is trembling (tiny illustrative figurations in the flutes (II. 40.44–5; not in VS) and bids her take his hand. This is an important moment, since, at the end of the scene, Mélisande will reject his support. But now her descent into the cave has frightened her and she needs Pelléas.

3. Wondering why she is afraid, Pelléas introduces a new element, the noise of the sea behind them: 'Elle ne semble pas heureuse cette nuit' [It seems to be unhappy tonight], another ominous feature of the cave which they are entering. To illuminate this, a cymbal-stroke introduces a passage for violins *divisi* and playing *tremolandi* with the tip of the bow over timpani rolls and ominous woodwind figures, but both sections suddenly stop playing, leaving exposed an *ostinato* in the lower strings for one bar, until

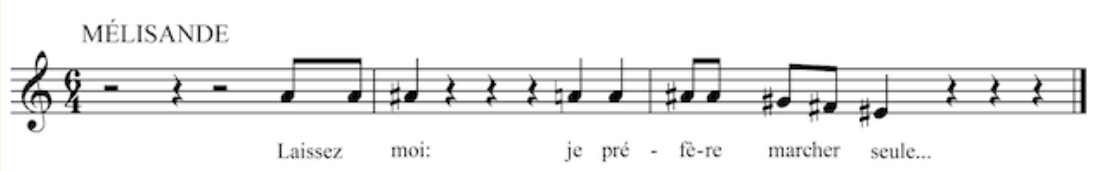
4. (II. 42: VS 111) the moon illuminates the scene. Harp arpeggios under a warm flute and oboe melody (to be played softly and expressively) then portray both the *clarté* and its liberating effect on the two characters. In Stein's production, Alison Hagley, as Mélisande, raises her hands to her face in joy and looks up smiling to absorb the glory of the moonlight.

5. That mood lasts, however, for just three and a half bars. Mélisande cries out as she sees 'three white-haired beggars sitting side by side and holding one another up as they sleep leaning against a boulder'[11]. Plangent alternations of crotchets, first in the upper strings (*divisi*) and then in the woodwind, show Pelléas' compassion for these aged victims of the famine which the country is suffering, but Mélisande reacts strongly: she simply wants to go. Pelléas assents by singing '*Venez*' [Come] and it is implied that he seeks to take her arm (Archer, in Stein's production, holds out both his hands to Hagley), since

6. Mélisande responds with a positive vocal line, very different from her cowed and reactive responses earlier in the scene: 'Laissez-moi; je préfere marcher seule ...' [Let me be: I would rather go alone ...'] (Ex. 3).

7. The curtain begins to fall, and Debussy directs the conductor that the music must '*slow and weaken from here to the end*' as the textures disintegrate towards nothingness.

Example 3. (II. 3.43.12ff.: VS 114)



This encounter with the cave is a process of discovery for Mélisande. The focal point of the scene is the moment almost at the end when Mélisande declines to be guided by Pelléas and asserts her independence by singing 'I would rather go alone'. She has discovered this independence by her journey into the dark and dangerous cave: her timidity as she went in, and needed Pelléas' support because she was afraid, vanishes once the moonlight has come and she has seen the three beggars. This is Mélisande's first encounter with ordinary people from outside the world of the castle, and indeed it is the only such encounter by any of the residents apart from Yniold's interaction with the Shepherd in Act IV scene 3. It confronts her with the reality of suffering and death (cf. Bosc 2011: 86) and elicits a strong reaction: 'Allez-nous en! ...Venez … Allez-nous en!' [Let's go out! ... Come ... Let's go out!]. But it has freed her from dependence.

Debussy's music in this scene precisely evokes the natural phenomena, the dark cave, the disturbed sound of the sea, and the moonlight shining on the beggars, and enfolds within the same texture music which illuminates the varying moods and feelings of Pelléas and Mélisande as they encounter these phenomena in succession. Debussy endows Maeterlinck's symbolic encounter with both physical and psychological reality (though of course the set designer must play a large part in evoking the physical reality) [12].

The Castle Vaults (Act III scene 2)

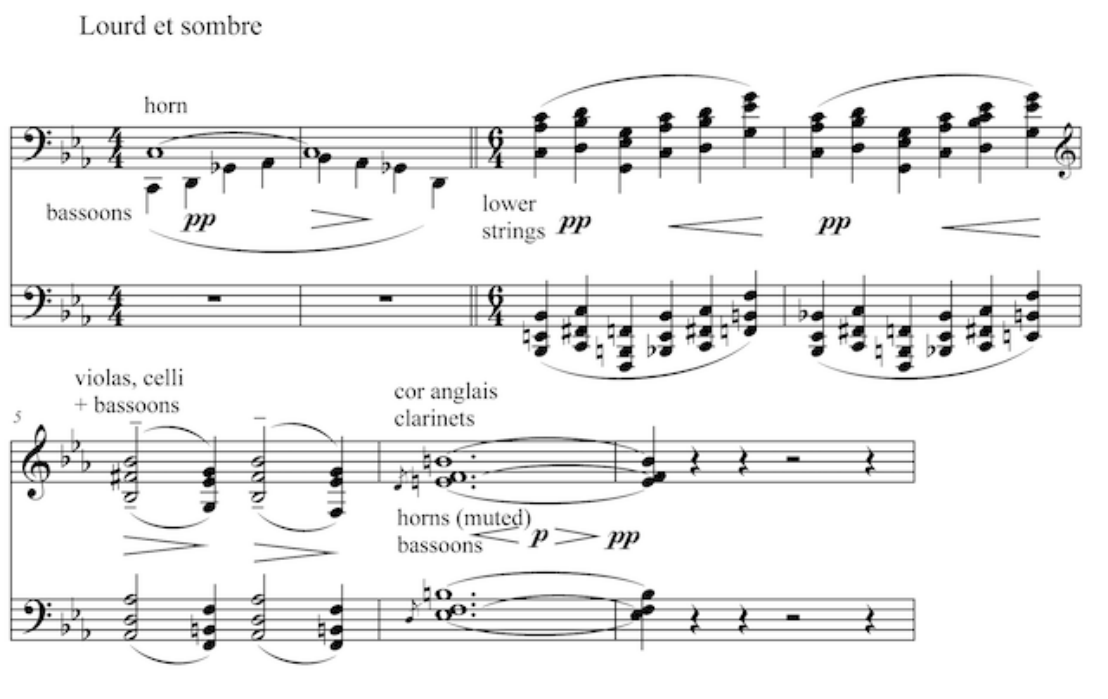
Golaud makes Pelléas descend to confront the stench of death rising from a chasm underneath the castle vaults. Pelléas goes onto a jutting rock and leans out and sings that he can see to the very bottom of the abyss. Golaud's movements and vocal tone and the gloomy, menacing orchestral music of the scene show that he is barely restraining himself from hurling Pelléas to his death.

Pelléas' unwilling journey down to view the chasm symbolises his being forced to face up to basic instincts. The castle considered vertically may be seen as equivalent to the human body: the light in the tower at the top symbolises the intellect, the ground level is equivalent to the waist, and the vaults and abyss below the castle represent the lower parts, in particular the genitals. By leading Pelléas down into the vaults, Golaud obliges him to confront the power of the erotic impulse which surges in him when he is with Mélisande (cf. the immediately preceding tower scene, Act III scene 1, where he plays sensually with her long hair and entraps her by binding it to a willow branch) and when Pelléas gazes into the chasm he is forced to recognise the lethal danger into which he will fall if he gives way further to that impulse.

But this journey obliges Golaud to confront his own instincts as well. Pelléas leans out over the abyss, supported only by Golaud's hand holding his arm, then the light from Golaud's lantern flickers. Golaud claims that he was only waving it to throw light on the walls, but he sings this with his voice trembling. This moment, the climax of their downward journey, symbolises not only Pelléas' confrontation with his dangerous love for his brother's wife but also Golaud's desire to avenge himself for that love by murder. We should remember that a 'stench of death' rises up from the subterranean depths. Golaud is in control, for the moment, of his conscious self and he confines his anger to a calm but firm warning to Pelléas in the next scene to avoid Mélisande's company as much as possible (III. 41: VS 155), a warning which Pelléas disregards, cf. Act III scene 4. In Act IV, however, Golaud will become a demented avenger, first torturing Mélisande (scene 2) and then murdering Pelléas (scene 4).

Debussy's music is very evocative, so there was no need for him to include Golaud's full description of the vaults and the chasm that are in Maeterlinck's text. Even before the curtain rises, a sinister whole-tone scale rises and falls in the lower instruments, and dissonant outcries are then evoked from the woodwind and muted horns.

Example 4. (III. 25.3ff.: VS 142)



Next there are solo timpani beats alternating between C and D and then E flat and F. These become an insistent pulsing *ostinato*, as Golaud leads Pelléas to the edge of the rock that juts out over the abyss (III. 28.1ff.: VS 144). Added to the unease generated by the steady development of the sound-pattern begun in Ex. 4, these drumbeats make the journey down to the rock an increasingly terrifying one and they sound almost alone as Pelléas leans out and Golaud asks, 'Voyez-vous le gouffre?' [Do you see the chasm?] (III. 29.3ff.: VS 145). Pelléas replies that he believes he can see right to the very bottom of it.

It has been Golaud's objective in bringing Pelléas down to the edge of the abyss to get his half-brother to confront the whole of the lethal depths which literally and metaphorically lie in front of him and, once this has been accomplished, the music changes direction. As soon as Pelléas replies and Golaud moves the lantern, a short quiet but dark and intense passage follows for woodwind (drooping seconds) and muted horns, with colour provided by *tremolandi* violas and cellos playing on the fingerboard. It portrays the changed dynamic between the two characters after Pelléas suspects Golaud of evil intent ('Vous ...' [You ...]. (III. 30.1: VS 146)) and persists until the curtain falls. After that, there is a complete change of mood while the scene changes: C major music depicts the glorious sunlight into which Pelléas and Golaud will emerge on a terrace and enjoy the sea breeze.

The journey down to the edge of the abyss is symbolic for both Pelléas and Golaud. Pelléas is (as he sings in the next scene) stifled by the dank air and intimidated by the darkness of the vaults. He is forced to encounter dark knowledge of the erotic instincts which Mélisande has awakened in him, instincts which he is trying unsuccessfully to suppress. Golaud is also exposed to dark knowledge over which he is consciously trying to maintain control. When they reach the edge of the abyss, murderous feelings about Pelléas emerge from his subconscious. Debussy enshrouds the gloomy journey towards their confrontation with ultimate darkness by using sinister music that leads both characters inexorably to the focal point, the moment where Pelléas believes that he can see to the bottom of the abyss and Golaud reveals his temptation to murder him. Characteristically, Debussy set this crucial moment to music with no dynamic rising above *pp*.

Yniold, the Stone and the Sheep (Act IV scene 3)

At sunset, Golaud's son by a previous marriage, Yniold, has two encounters, both of which lead to frustration. His attempts to lift the heavy stone and retrieve his golden ball dramatise the limits of being human. They parallel on a child's level the immediately preceding scene in which Golaud tortured Mélisande because:

> 'j'en suis si près que je sens la fraicheur de leurs cils quand ils clignent; et cependant, je suis moins loin des grands secrets de l'autre mond que du plus petit secret de ces yeux' [I am so close to her that I can feel the fluttering of her eyelids: yet nonetheless, I am less far from the great secrets of the other world than from the smallest secret of those eyes] (IV. 17.10ff.; VS 210–211).

There are always things that are beyond our power and seeing into Mélisande's mind and heart is as impossible for her husband as moving a firmly lodged stone is for his child. So, Maeterlinck reinforces the meaning of Golaud's frustration by presenting it again in the symbolic predicament of his young son. Debussy sets Yniold's first encounter to animated, appropriately childlike music as the boy attempts in vain to free his ball and describes his problem with 'cette méchante pierre' [this wicked stone] (IV. 26.6–7: VS 224). Yniold only shows his full frustration in Debussy's setting of the last line of the section: 'On dirait qu'elle a des racines dans la terre' [you would think it has roots in the ground] (IV. 27.1–3: VS 225).

Yniold's encounter with the sheep is in seven short parts.

1. Debussy deftly establishes a pastoral mood in the very first bars of this second section of the scene, as swirling triplets evoke the approach of the flock.
2. The sheep are crying, scared of the dark, huddled together. At this point (IV. 28.9ff.: VS 227) Debussy evokes the child's agitation, and the anxiety of the sheep, with more aggressive, tense woodwind triplets, which persist through the next section because
3. some of the sheep are trying to turn to the right but are prevented by the shepherd.
4. Yniold now sees them up close and marvels at how many there are. Triplets swirl again setting a relaxed mood which persists into
5. because now the sheep are all quiet and, when asked why, the Shepherd responds simply: 'Parce que ce n'est pas le chemin de l'étable' [Because this is not the way to the sheepfold] (IV. 31.1–4; VS 229–30).
6. Yniold replies, 'Ou von't-ils?' [Where are they going?] but is not answered. He sings that 'ils ne font plus de bruit' [they are no longer making any noise]. The rich orchestral textures associated with the sheep naturally cease at this point (IV. 31.16–17: VS 230) and Yniold expresses his puzzlement unaccompanied or over minimal chords.
7. It is too dark. Yniold runs off, determined 'dire quelque chose à quelque'un' [to say something to somebody], perhaps seeking an adult to explain to him what he has seen.

In the encounter with the sheep, as with the stone, Yniold is frustrated, this time in a quest for knowledge: the anxiety of the sheep and their inability to turn to the right as they want to make him upset and; at the end of the scene, he does not know where they are going. The sheep are also frustrated, first lamenting, then resisting, then quietly submitting, but ignorant of their destination. So Yniold's second encounter, like his first, reverberates back to the preceding scene with its emphasis on the limitations of understanding: the possibility that the sheep are on the way to be slaughtered overshadows the next scene in which Pelléas will be killed, and; finally Yniold's interaction with the Shepherd prefigures Act V in which Golaud embarks on a brutal quest for *la verité*, a futile attempt to find out from the dying Mélisande things which can never be known.

Conclusion

It is very important to not interpret the scenes involving encounters with symbols, or indeed any other part of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, as evidence that there is an overwhelming destiny preordaining all that happens in the opera[13]. The people in it are human beings who make choices for themselves, not victims of an unseen destiny. As Bernard Williams rightly remarks (1975: 391):

> There is emphasis in the story of Pelléas on the *imperfection* [Williams' italics] of action, because of the characters' lack of understanding of it; but it is to trivialize this, and to lose its tragic quality, if one reduces it to a blank, external and preordained fate.

Claudia Maurer Zenck (2004: 27) acutely notes that the composer rejected Maeterlinck's almost Beckettian vision of destiny: 'Debussy could not accept a dark doom as a personified *deus ex machina*; he took Fate, instead, as nothing but a symbol for the constraints of life at the end of the nineteenth century'[14] — and he replaced it with music which reveals the psychological motivations of the love triangle between the three principal characters.

The analysis presented here supports Williams' argument. The characters' search for understanding is central to all four encounters. Each journey of interaction with a symbol influences and changes those involved, but in none of them is there a feeling of inexorable destiny. Rather we see, in each scene, a pattern of uncertain characters penetrating to the depths of conscious human knowledge and coming up against its limitations. Debussy's setting of Maeterlinck's play presents a genuinely tragic vision of the state of mankind.

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Brockett and Finlay (1973: 266).
2. Interview with Jules Huret (1891), cited by Angelet (1994: 53). Angelet comments ibid. that Maeterlinck opposed 'le symbole authentique, né de l'inconscient, à l'image rationelle, déliberée et lucide, et qu'il qualifiait d'allégorique' [the authentic symbol, born from the unconscious, to the rational, intentional and lucid image, which he described as allegory].
3. It is obvious what is going on in Act II scene 1, where Mélisande, in company with Pelléas, plays at tossing up and catching her wedding ring over an almost bottomless well and drops it.
4. Cf. Maeterlinck (1911): passim.
5. DGG 440 073 030–9 (1992). Pierre Boulez's lucid, precise and powerful reading of the score is another strong feature of this DVD. *Pelléas et Mélisande* has, unfortunately, on several occasions, been a victim of concept productions by Regietheater directors more anxious to impose their own ideas and *mise-en-scène* than to respect and respond to the complex meanings of Maeterlinck's text and Debussy's score. This subtle and delicate opera suffers even more than others from such an insensitive approach.
6. Cf. Ewans (2016: 199–210).
7. All references to the score are by act, rehearsal figure and, where necessary, bar numbers after that rehearsal figure. For the convenience of readers using the vocal score, which has no rehearsal figures or bar numbers, page references to that score are given as VS numbers.
8. Here and elsewhere in the opera, Debussy uses registers (musical heights and depths) to illuminate the text, Cf. Wenk (1983: 44–5).
9. Roger Nichols is wrong to suggest (1982: 14) that the appearance here of the theme associated with Golaud indicates that 'Golaud too is calm "at the moment"'. Elsewhere, Nichols (in Nichols & Langham Smith (1989: 67)) tries to tie the ship to Golaud: 'Golaud too, like the sailors, is heading blindly towards a storm'. This interpretation cannot be right: Golaud is not present during this scene, so the music, and the symbol of the departing ship, cannot convey his emotional state, but only that of the three characters who witness the ship's departure.
10. Debussy thereby sets up a contrast with the violent tutti closures of Acts III and IV.
11. Pierre Citti (1989: 14, 146) claims that the three beggars symbolise Pelléas, Mélisande and Golaud. That is the kind of allegorical interpretation which this paper regards as illegitimate, and it would not be apparent to a spectator of Debussy's opera.
12. The design by Karl-Ernst Herrmann for this scene in Stein's production shows very effectively the depth of the sea-cave, the two lakes and, subsequently, the moonlight shining on the three old beggars.
13. Cf. esp. Youens (1988). The notion also permeates and flaws Antokoletz (2004). Maeterlinck once wrote that his plays before 1901 exhibited 'énormes puisssances invisibles et fatales' [colossal invisible, fatal powers] but the opera is not the play (quotation in Citti 1984: 9). Kerman (1956: 176), states that Mélisande is passive and resigned. This would hardly occur to a spectator who sees a gifted soprano interpreting to the full the character's words, music and actions, as does (for just one example) Alison Hagley in Peter Stein's production. For a properly nuanced treatment of Mélisande, cf. Attfield (2010: 499–525).
14. 'Debussy konnte kein dunkles Verhängnis als entpersonifizierten deus ex machina akzeptieren, aber er nahm das Fatum als nicht als Chiffre für die Zwange des lebens im ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert'. (Debussy himself remarked that: 'The drama of Pelléas [...] despite its dream-like atmosphere contains much more humanity than so-called "slice of life" plays' ('Pourquoi j'ai écrit Pelléas' [1902], quoted in Orledge (1982: 51)).

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, when interpreting *Pelléas et Mélisande*, we should not speak of static symbols, which are potentially translatable into verbal language, but of symbolic encounters which unfold through time, the meaning of which is almost incapable of expression in words, which is why Debussy's music is so effective in illuminating Maeterlinck's enigmatic play. The four main scenes of interaction between characters and symbolic events or processes are analysed to shed light on the use of symbolism by the playwright and composer in *Pelléas et Mélisande.* The Conclusion argues against the common view that this opera portrays victims of destiny.

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