

Escaping the Wagnerian Catacombs:
Debussy, Schoenberg, and Maeterlinck's
Pelléas et Mélisande (1892)

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Abstract

Wagner's music dramas and aesthetic writings galvanized the cultural life of Paris, Berlin, and Vienna in the *fin-de-siècle*. Claude Debussy and Arnold Schoenberg were two leading composers that matured during the polemical epoch following Wagner's death. Each incorporated Wagnerian elements into his own works but later sought to separate from Wagner's example. We can see and hear the intensity of their compositional struggles and attempted schism from Wagner in their 1902 operatic and 1903 symphonic tone poem settings of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892) by Belgian Symbolist writer Maurice Maeterlinck. This comparison of Debussy's and Schoenberg's *Pelléas* settings examines how the composers position themselves in relation to the Wagnerian tradition. Why was each composer drawn to Maeterlinck's play at the same time in different musical capitals? How did Maeterlinck's play offer each young composer a way to develop his own compositional style, and how did this respond to Wagner?

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Introduction

Wagner's music dramas and aesthetic writings galvanized the cultural life of Paris, Berlin, and Vienna in the *fin-de-siècle*. French and German composers of operatic and programmatic works viewed Wagner's legacy as both a model and an obstacle. In Paris a gulf separated the Wagnériens from the anti-Wagnériens; critics and musicologists labeled emerging French works *d'après-Wagner* (in the style of Wagner) or *après-Wagner* (post-Wagner), with fraught political connotations in terms of nationalism and the direction of French opera in relation to German models. In the Austro-German spheres, the New German School composers revered Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz; their proponents, such as Richard Strauss and Alexander von Zemlinsky, composed programmatic music including operas and symphonic tone poems. The Viennese anti-Wagnerians such as Eduard Hanslick championed instead the absolute music tradition carried on by Johannes Brahms through his symphonies, overtures, and instrumental chamber works. These divisions were sharp but not impenetrable; in the *fin-de-siècle*, French and Austro-German composers combined Wagnerian techniques and styles with those of eighteenth-century French composers or Brahms. Some composers even used Wagnerian ideals while simultaneously disparaging them.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) were two leading composers who matured in Paris and Vienna during the polemical epoch following Wagner's death in 1883. Each incorporated Wagnerian elements into his own works but later sought to separate from Wagner's example. We can see and hear the intensity of their compositional struggles and attempted schism from

Wagner in their 1902 operatic and 1903 symphonic tone poem settings of Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892). French Symbolist writers were intrigued by Wagner's union of music, drama, and dance, and many wrote late Romantic fairy tales set, like Wagner's music dramas, in the distant past of myth and folklore. Belgian Symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) was one of those writers whose plays hark back to an idealized medieval past and who inspired a broad range of musical responses by *fin-de-siècle* composers. And yet Maeterlinck also offered a different path to those like Debussy and Schoenberg who sought to engage with and ultimately overcome the staggering influence of Wagner.

This thesis will explore how these two composers worked through their ambivalent relationship to Wagner in their settings of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892) while at the same time opening up new directions in their later works. While the two composers' relationships to the Wagnerian legacy evolved in very different ways due to their cultural and national locations as well as their own compositional developments, their settings of *Pelléas* served as a turning point away from Wagner, freeing each to develop his own musical style, composing according to his own intuition rather than relying on academic techniques. By examining these two very different works together it is possible to build on the rich literature concerning Debussy's and Schoenberg's complex relationship to Wagner to better understand why Maeterlinck's play proved to be such an important touchstone for them.

My argument for *Pelléas* as an opera emerging from the Wagnerian catacombs is based on the already rich literature by Abbate, Holloway, Grayson, and

other Debussy scholars.¹ Drawing on the work of Walter Bailey and Walter Frisch, I will demonstrate below how *Pelleas* embodies Schoenberg's complex position in regard to Wagner in the hybridity of its overall structure.² The large-scale plan and tonality reference Wagner, but the method of expositional development is Brahmsian. At the crux of my argument is Mark Benson's study that has demonstrated Schoenberg's compositional struggle during *Pelléas* that led to his rejection of Wagnerian techniques in favor of Brahmsian developing variation. This shift in the final section of Schoenberg's tone poem betrays a conflict that I find similar to that explored in Abbate's and Holloway's studies on Debussy.

But in this thesis I will also argue that considering these two works together sheds new light on Debussy's and Wagner's compositional development during these years, their relationship to Wagner, and the possible reasons why they both turned to Maeterlinck at this juncture in their careers. By focusing on the influence of Maeterlinck on Debussy's and Schoenberg's later works, I will suggest previously unrecognized similarities between the two composers and their dramatic works.

My goal in this comparison of Debussy's and Schoenberg's settings of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* is to examine how the composers position themselves in relation to the Wagnerian tradition. Why was each composer drawn to Maeterlinck's symbolist play at the same time in different musical capitals? Debussy

¹ Carolyn Abbate, "Tristan in the Composition of *Pelléas*," *19th-Century Music* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Autumn, 1981): 117-141. Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1979). David A. Grayson, *The Genesis of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986).

² Walter B. Bailey, *Programmatic Elements in the Works of Schoenberg* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984). Walter Frisch, *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg 1893-1908* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993).

was twenty-eight and Schoenberg twenty-six when beginning to set Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*. Both independently created settings of *Pelléas* without knowledge of the other's plans. How did Maeterlinck's play offer each young composer a way to develop his own compositional style, and how did this respond to Wagner?

Debussy's struggle to compose an opera in a manner different from Wagner's served as a major preoccupation for the French composer even before his nearly career-long engagement with *Pelléas*. His early failed attempts to complete an *après-Wagner* opera are essential to understanding Debussy's compulsion with moving beyond Wagner's example and how Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* offered the composer a way out.

Even while still an admirer of Wagner in the 1880s, Debussy recognized Wagner's music could not serve as a model for his own. In a letter to Eugène-Henri Vasnier from October 19, 1886, two years before his first trip to Bayreuth, the twenty-four year old Debussy writes:

I have, moreover, undertaken a task which is perhaps beyond my strength, one having no precedent, I find myself compelled to invent new forms. Wagner could be useful to me, but I don't need to tell you how ridiculous it would be to try that. I could take up just his particular method in the linking of scenes, but besides that, I would like to reach the point where the vocal expression ("l'accent") remains lyrical without being absorbed by the orchestra."³

Debussy distanced himself from Wagner's example, simply stating:

Without denying his genius, one could say that he had put the final period after the music of his time... One should therefore try to be "post-Wagner" (*après-Wagner*) rather than "after-Wagner" (*d'après Wagner*)."⁴

³ Grayson, *Genesis*, 226.

⁴ François Lesure, collected and introduced, and Richard Langham Smith, trans. and ed. *Debussy on Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 74.

In the 1890s and beyond, as Debussy struggled to move beyond Wagner in his own operatic writings, Debussy would more aggressively disparage Wagner's models. In his earlier attempts in the 1880s, however, Debussy was more concerned with finding a libretto that would be flexible enough for him to "invent new forms" and sustain his musical ideas.

Debussy's incomplete operatic and programmatic orchestral projects in the 1880s can be partially explained by his problems with the texts and stories he chose, including Théodore de Banville's *Diane au bois* (1864) and *Zuleima*, based on *Almansor* (1821) by Heinrich Heine.⁵ He bemoans the incongruity between the words and his ideas for musico-dramatic action. In a letter to Vasnier, from Villa Medici, June 4, 1885, Debussy writes:

I've changed my mind about my first 'envoi'. *Zuleima* is not the right sort of thing at all, so I shan't be going ahead with it as I intended. It's too old and too stuffy. Those great stupid lines bore me to death—the only thing great about them is their length—and my music would be in danger of sinking under the weight. Another thing, and more important, is that I don't think I'll ever be able to cast my music in a rigid mould. I hasten to add I'm not talking about musical form, merely from the literary point of view.⁶

The *Zuleima* text was too old, stuffy, and rigid for Debussy's conception. Already he is interested in achieving a more natural way of expression that characterizes his later use of recitative, silence, and restrained orchestral and vocal passages in *Pelléas*.

I would always rather deal with something where the passage of events is to some extent subordinated to a thorough and extended portrayal of human

⁵ *Zuleima* was set to a poem by Georges Boyer based on Heinrich Heine's *Almansor*. David Grayson, "Debussy on Stage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66.

⁶ François Lesure, selected and edited, and Roger Nichols, trans. and ed. *Debussy Letters* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 8.

feelings. That way, I think, music can become more personal, more true to life; you can explore and refine your means of expression.⁷

Diane au bois and *Zuleima*, operatic and orchestral projects that he abandoned in the 1880s, failed in their stories and content to sufficiently move Debussy to write something out of the Wagnerian mold that he found so bloated and formulaic.⁸

Debussy was attuned to interdisciplinary artistic movements and was particularly interested in the poetry of the *fin-de-siècle*. He attended Stéphane Mallarmé's Symbolist literary salons, and before his 1902 setting of *Pelléas* he had composed dozens of songs using the poetry of *fin-de-siècle* writers Mallarmé, de Banville, Théophile Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, Paul Verlaine, and many others. In 1889, Debussy described to his former Conservatoire teacher Ernest Guiraud his conception of the ideal poet whose writing could serve a dramatic musical work. Note that Debussy's description contains more examples of the shortcomings he finds in Wagnerian and *d'après*-Wagnerian French opera than of prescriptions for his model opera. His ideal poet is:

One who only hints at what is to be said (*celui des choses dites à demi*).
The ideal would be two associated dreams. No place, nor time. No big scene. No compulsion on the musician, who must complete and give body to the work of the poet. Music in opera is far too predominant. Too much singing and the musical settings are too cumbersome. The blossoming of the voice into true singing should occur only when required. A painting executed in grey is the ideal. No developments merely for the sake of developments. A

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ After twice abandoning his *Zuleima* project, Debussy did premiere the work in December 1886. However, Debussy was plagued with misgivings about his *ode symphonique* (now lost), and the Académie des Beaux-arts jury was unsympathetic to his work, which they found to be "strange, bizarre, incomprehensible, and unperformable. Despite a few passages that display a certain individuality, the vocal part of the work is uninteresting, with respect to both its melody and declamation." Grayson, "Debussy on stage," *Cambridge Companion*, 66-67.

prolonged development does not fit, cannot fit, the words. My idea is of a short libretto with mobile scenes. I have no use at all for the three unities. A variety of scenes in regard to place and character. No discussion or arguments between the characters whom I see at the mercy of life or destiny.⁹

Debussy maintained his strong inclination to write opera that offered something beyond the prevailing Wagnerian example. In this conversation we see that he had a clearer idea of what he did not want rather than thoughts as to how he would go about achieving this and “[inventing] new forms.” He wanted to write for the orchestra and voice in a way that was less predominant and more restrained, developing each only in key passages. That his ideas for how to compose this new form of opera were not fully formed anticipates Debussy’s problem of how to replace or adapt Wagnerian formulae throughout his composition of *Pelléas*.

Debussy’s interest in a short, dream-like libretto which only hints at a dialogue and in which characters lack awareness and control over their own destinies looks forward to *Pelléas* (1892), which came almost too late for Debussy:

For a long time I had been striving to write music for the theater, but the form in which I wanted it to be was so unusual that after several attempts I had almost given up the idea.¹⁰

The shadowy, ambiguous, mysterious dreamscape of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas* resonated with the composer’s conception of an opera that could move beyond Wagner and open up a new direction for French opera. Debussy writes:

The drama of *Pelléas*—which despite its atmosphere of dreams contains much more humanity than those so-called documents of real life—seemed to suit my purpose admirably. It has an evocative language whose sensibility is able to find an extension in the music and in the orchestral setting. I also

⁹ Edward Lockspeiser. *Debussy: His Life and Mind, Vol. I, 1862-1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 205.

¹⁰ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 74-75.

tried to obey a law of beauty that seems notably ignored when it comes to dramatic music: the characters of this opera try to sing like real people, and not in an arbitrary language made up of worn-out clichés.¹¹

Again Debussy emphasizes his intent to capture in his characters' singing genuine human expression and emotion. Debussy explains the singing style of his characters in opposition to what he sees as Wagner's "arbitrary language made up of worn-out clichés." These oppositional explanations helped Debussy's audiences understand that he was not trying to follow the Wagnerian status quo of large orchestral forces that announce the appearance and reappearance of characters through leitmotifs, but was rather offering an alternative through which a more natural, human expression could be achieved.

Debussy composed *Pelléas* between 1893 and 1902, though he claims to have begun the project in 1890 when he was twenty-eight years old. Debussy continued revising his only completed opera throughout the rest of his life, marking a twenty-seven year engagement with Maeterlinck's work until the composer's death at fifty-five years of age, in 1918. While his "acquaintance with [Maeterlinck's] *Pelléas* dates from 1893," Debussy asserts in his essay "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *Pelléas*" that the project began even earlier, "[representing] some twelve years of my life." In 1890 Debussy began another unfinished opera *Rodrigue et Chimène* (1890-93) with a libretto by Catulle Mendès.¹² Also in that year was the publication and performance of Maeterlinck's first play, *Princesse Maleine*, based on a Brothers Grimm fairy tale and hailed by *Le Figaro* critic Octave Mirbeau as "superior in beauty to what is most

¹¹ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 75.

¹² Abbate has written about the Wagnerian elements in *Rodrigue*. Abbate, "Tristan in *Pelléas*," 118-120.

beautiful in Shakespeare.”¹³ Debussy was interested in setting this work, though Maeterlinck had already promised the rights to Vincent d’Indy, who never followed through with his project.¹⁴ Maeterlinck did, however, offer Debussy his consent for setting *Pelléas* in 1893.

Even armed with his ideal libretto, Debussy had difficulties “[inventing] new forms” for an *après-Wagner* opera, and the challenges of adapting or re-writing Wagnerian methods staggered his work on *Pelléas* in the early years of its composition. Despite his increasing antipathy towards the German composer in the 1890s and beyond, Debussy found himself at times unable, at times unwilling to completely erase Wagner from his score. Debussy even included direct musical references to Wagner’s *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, and *Die Meistersinger* in order to provide commentary on the action of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas*.¹⁵ Though he had championed Wagner’s music early in his career and made pilgrimages to Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889, Debussy sought to look beyond Wagner through his *Pelléas* setting.

These "Wagnerian methods" include endless melody, through which traditional cadences are eliminated and the music is continually melodic.

Schoenberg considered this technique to be musical prose. Other Wagnerian *lois*

¹³ Octave Mirbeau, literary critic for *Le Figaro*, wrote this favorable review in 1890. Maeterlinck’s philosophical essays were also keenly read by contemporary audiences. Richard Langham Smith “The play and its playwright,” in Roger Nichols and Richard Langham Smith, *Claude Debussy Pelléas et Mélisande* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2.

¹⁴ Despite his initial interest in *Princesse Maleine* (1890), d’Indy never set this work. Around this time he was working on *Fervaal*, action musicale with prologue and three acts, Op. 40 (1889-93); *Karadec*, incidental music after André Alexandre, Op. 34 (1890); and *String Quartet No. 1 in D*, Op. 35 (1890).

¹⁵ Abbate, “*Tristan in Pelléas*,” 137-138. Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1979), 77-94.

include chromatic "expressive" harmony, elaborate orchestration, and leitmotivic technique. In this thesis I focus on leitmotivic technique because it was a crucial issue for Debussy and Schoenberg.

Schoenberg, on the other hand, was still under Wagner's influence on the eve of his *Pelleas* project. In his essay "My Evolution" (1949), Schoenberg chronologically lists the composers whose styles he assimilates into his early opuses:

I had been a 'Brahmsian' when I met Zemlinsky [in 1895]. His love embraced both Brahms and Wagner and soon thereafter [in 1897] I became an equally confirmed addict. No wonder that the music I composed at that time mirrored the influence of both these masters, to which a flavour of Liszt, Bruckner, and perhaps also Hugo Wolf was added. True, at this time I had already become an admirer of Richard Strauss.¹⁶

Schoenberg's early instrumental works were markedly Brahmsian,¹⁷ though in 1897 he, like Zemlinsky and Strauss before him, bridged then-rival techniques: Brahms's developing variation and Wagner's model and sequence, which are discussed in Carl Dahlhaus's essay "Issues in Composition."¹⁸ Following Brahms's death in 1897, Schoenberg began looking to programmatic works for inspiration, as seen in his early works *Verklärte Nacht*, Op. 4 (1899), a string sextet based on a naturalistic poem by Richard Dehmel, and *Gurrelieder* (1900-01/1911), a Wagnerian-style song cycle and later a massive cantata set to Danish novelist Jens Peter Jacobsen's poems

¹⁶ Arnold Schoenberg, "My Evolution" (1949) in Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea Selected Writings*, ed. Leonard Stein and trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 80, 82.

¹⁷ Schoenberg's first Brahmsian period ended at its apex with the completion of his D-Major String Quartet in 1897. Frisch, *Early Works*, 33.

¹⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, trans. Mary Whittall, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four studies in the music of the later nineteenth century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

chronicling a medieval love tragedy. Like Debussy, prior to his *Pelleas* setting Schoenberg too had begun sketches for several unfinished operatic and symphonic tone poem projects.

At the *fin-de-siècle*, Schoenberg was pulled in many directions by Wagnerian, naturalistic, and folkloric poetry, stories, and plays. He looked to ancient heroic legends and modern intellectual discussions in writing his own libretti for a variety of unfinished operas and tone poems. Before 1898 he began sketches for an orchestral work based on *Hans im Glück*, a Brothers Grimm tale. Schoenberg's extensive libretto fragment based on German folk tales dated July 28, 1901 was to become *Die Schildbürger*, a comic opera. *Odoakar* (1900) was a Wagnerian-style work with heroic characters and alliterative verse form. Chronicling the rise and fall of Odoacer, the first barbarian ruler of Italy from 476, the libretto conveys the story with an ironic tone reflective of Schoenberg's interest in wordplay, puns, and paradoxes.¹⁹ *Aberglaube (Superstition)* (1901) was an extended libretto draft incorporating naturalistic and mystical erotic elements characteristic of Dehmel poems. A mixture of speeches and dialogue among a circle of artists and university students, the prose-like form and juxtaposition of direct and indirect action anticipates Debussy's setting of *Pelléas*.²⁰

Despite these early attempts, when he began composing *Pelleas* in 1902, Schoenberg had yet to complete an opera or even a libretto for an opera, following Wagner's practice of setting his music dramas to his own texts. The diversity of his

¹⁹ Joseph Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

fin-de-siècle projects, specifically his use of stylistically varied inspirations as well as his attempts to combine opposing compositional techniques (Brahmsian and Wagnerian), shows a composer who was looking for “a direction that was much more [his] own.”²¹ Would he follow Brahms’s absolute music tradition and continue composing instrumental chamber works, or would he turn to Wagner and Strauss and compose large-scale tone poems and extended music dramas? Neither prediction would materialize, for after working through his setting of *Pelleas*, Schoenberg realized his interests lay beyond Wagnerian techniques and purely absolute forms and could be explored through tonal and structural experiments such as the emancipation of the dissonance and small-scale forms. But what drew Schoenberg to Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas*, and how did this work allow Schoenberg to work past the Wagnerian influence to discover what truly interested him in composition?

In 1949, Schoenberg explains Maeterlinck’s appeal to *fin-de-siècle* composers:

It was around 1900 when Maurice Maeterlinck fascinated composers, stimulating them to create music to his dramatic poems. What attracted all was his art of dramatizing eternal problems of humanity in the form of fairy-tales, lending them timelessness without adhering to imitation of ancient styles.²²

The eternal human problems in *Pelléas*, which centered on a medieval love tragedy as *Gurrelieder* had done, captivated Schoenberg. The work had Wagnerian resonances, but Schoenberg saw this play, or “dramatic poem” as a “fairy-tale.”

Schoenberg’s diverse range of literary sources for his *fin-de-siècle* instrumental

²¹ Ibid., 48.

²² Nuria Schoenberg Nono, ed. *Arnold Schoenberg Self-Portrait: A collection of articles and program notes and letters by the composer about his own works* (Pacific Palisades: Belmont Music Publishers, 1988), 116.

programmatic works encompassed both fairy tales and Wagnerian-style stories, making his choice of Maeterlinck seem inconsequential. *Pelléas's* amorphous shape; indirect, shadowy language; unclear passages of time in between scenes; and characters at the mercy of an omnipotent Fate allowed the young Schoenberg the flexibility to work through his multiple influences to solve compositional challenges and move beyond Wagner in his later works.

Schoenberg composed his tone poem *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5, in Berlin between July 1902 and February 1903, during part of his two-year stay that ended later that year. In Berlin, Schoenberg's mentor Richard Strauss, Wagner's heir and a member of the New German School, helped the young composer secure funding and acquire teaching positions, even employing him to copy parts for his *Tailliefer*, Op. 52 (1903), a ballad for soloists, choir, and orchestra.²³ Schoenberg studied Strauss's New German School symphonic tone poems and chose this genre rather than an opera (as he later claimed to have planned), for his setting of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*. Strauss may have even suggested that Schoenberg set Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*, though the play had been available in German translation by at least 1897 and Schoenberg knew about Maeterlinck's work by 1900.²⁴ At nearly forty-five minutes, its length was exemplary of New German School symphonic works. In 1902, Schoenberg saw his music in line with Strauss and the heirs of Wagner and the New German School.

Though Schoenberg began *Pelleas* using both Brahmsian and Wagnerian approaches, he ended the work disillusioned with the episodic nature of Wagnerian

²³ Steven Vande Moortele, *Two-Dimensional Sonata Form: Form and Cycle in Single-Movement Instrumental Works by Liszt, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Zemlinsky* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

leitmotivic development, preferring instead the Brahmsian technique he later called developing variation. Throughout his eight-month composition period for *Pelleas*, then, Schoenberg, like Debussy before him, incorporated and rejected Wagnerian techniques. In “A Self-Analysis” (1948), Schoenberg reflects:

I became aware of the inferiority of [Wagnerian leitmotivic] technique when I composed the final section of the symphonic poem, *Pelleas and Melisande*. In the greater part of that work, sequences made up a considerable contribution toward achieving the necessary expanse of the presentation, such as is required for easier understanding. At the very start I knew that restriction could be achieved by two methods, condensation and juxtaposition. The first attempts that I made prior to this recognition—to use variation, often with far-reaching changes—did not satisfy me perfectly, though in ‘developing variation’ lies a far greater aesthetic merit than in an unvaried sequence.²⁵

Schoenberg here admits this Wagnerian unvaried sequence “did not satisfy [him] perfectly,” and he intuitively and intellectually turned away from the Wagnerian formula.

²⁵ Schoenberg, “A Self-Analysis” (1948), *Style and Idea*, 77-78.

Chapter 1

Maeterlinck's Wagnerian Drama?

What did Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* provide each composer in working through and overcoming the Wagnerian shadow? Maurice Maeterlinck, born one week after Debussy, was a Belgian Symbolist mystic playwright whose timeless fairy tale dramas highlighted the inner psychology of his characters and their inability to control their own destinies. We sense in Maeterlinck's plays, as in Wagner's music dramas before, his characters' helplessness and lack of self-direction that similarly pervades the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860).

Maeterlinck's dramas were staged in *fin-de-siècle* Western Europe alongside the avant-garde plays of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg. *Pelléas's* first production by Aurélien-François Lugné-Poë, at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens in Paris on May 17, 1893, featured a screen between the audience and actors, obscuring the action of the symbolist drama and underlining the veiled way in which man faces his destiny.²⁶ Though he must have read the play beforehand, Debussy attended this first production of *Pelléas*. Soon after this he received permission from Maeterlinck to set the play and began sketches for the opera. In a December 1893 letter to Ernest Chausson, Debussy reflects on his meeting with Maeterlinck:

He claims he doesn't understand anything about music and wanders through a Beethoven symphony like a blind man through a museum. But in fact he's all right and talks in the most entrancing and simple way about his extraordinary discoveries... At one point I thanked him for entrusting *Pelléas*

²⁶ Grayson, *Genesis*, 14.

to my care and he did his best to demonstrate that he was the one who ought to be grateful because I was being kind enough to set his words to music!²⁷

Schoenberg, in turn, had been familiar with the written play from at least 1900; it is unclear whether he would have seen the first Berlin production by director Max Reinhardt in 1903. This production began after Schoenberg had completed his tone poem, so it would not likely have had a direct influence on his Op. 5.²⁸

In considering what about the written play appealed to both Debussy in Paris and Schoenberg in Vienna and Berlin, I will turn to discussions of Maeterlinck's work. Theater scholar Patrick McGuinness identifies the idiosyncratic nature of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*:

Pelléas et Mélisande constantly alludes to a form of action—unseen, unsuspected, invisible—that lies outside the scope of what passes for its 'plot', and which prompts characters to undergo gradual but inexplicable changes of which they themselves remain unaware.²⁹

Maeterlinck's dramatic popularity faded soon after the *fin-de-siècle* Zeitgeist, and his plays are known today primarily through their musical settings. The Belgian playwright seems to have anticipated problems with the enigmatic style of *Pelléas* as early as 1892, as he writes to his friend Gérard Harry:

But I am now beginning to doubt that [*Pelléas*] is worth very much and that anybody will pay attention to it! I do not really know how one could begin to analyze it: nothing, or almost nothing, happens; it is hardly more than the drama of a desire. And its action, most of the time, is not only internal, but takes place without the protagonists' knowledge.³⁰

²⁷ Letter to Ernest Chausson, early December 1893. Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 60.

²⁸ Max Reinhardt's staging of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* opened at the Neues Theater, Berlin, on April 3, 1903. Schoenberg finished his setting in February 1903.

²⁹ Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and The Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

McGuinness argues that the features of *Pelléas* about which Maeterlinck was most concerned – its vagueness, lack of action, and utter obliviousness of its characters – gave composers the freedom to elucidate the playwright’s works:

Maeterlinck’s theatre of suggestion, evanescence, hidden motives, and ambiguous discourse, of multiple silences and fractured speech, has ensured that its *openness* to interpretation—musical, critical, or directorial—remains its most salient characteristic.³¹

In addition to its confluence of national aesthetic styles, Maeterlinck’s simple, sparse dialogue made the works easily translatable, lending further appeal to a broad cross-section of European composers.³² *Pelléas* is the first translated text that Schoenberg set. Later he turned to Maeterlinck’s *Herzgewächse* (*Foliage of the Heart*), Op. 20 (1911), and, for his setting of *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21 (1912), he drew on Otto Erich Hartleben’s 1893 translation of Belgian Symbolist poet Albert Giraud’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1884).

The diversity of *fin-de-siècle* European compositions that responded to Maeterlinck’s mystic symbolist works supports McGuinness’s argument. Composers who set pieces to Maeterlinck’s poetry, prose, and plays include Ernest Chausson (song cycle *Serres Chaudes*, 1893-96), Paul Dukas (opera *Ariane et Barbe-bleu*, 1906-1907), Arthur Honegger (*Prélude for Aglavaine and Sélysette*, 1916-1917), and Vincent d’Indy (*Princesse Maleine*, incomplete) in France; Engelbert Humperdinck (incidental music to *Der Blaue Vogel*, 1910, and the opera *Das Wunder*, 1911) in Germany; Alexander von Zemlinsky (*The Maeterlinck Songs*, 1910-1913) in Austria; Bohuslav Martinů (overture to *La mort de Tintagiles*, 1910) in Czechoslovakia;

³¹ Ibid., 127.

³² By the early 1900s there were at least five translated editions of *Pelléas*. Smith, “The play and its playwright,” *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande*, 3.

Anatoly Lyadov (incidental music to *Soeur Béatrice*, 1908) and Sergei Rachmaninoff (his unfinished opera *Monna Vanna*, 1907) in Russia.³³

Pelléas was set no fewer than five times, most famously by Debussy (1902) and Schoenberg (1903) but also by William Wallace (1897), Gabriel Fauré (1898), and Jean Sibelius (1905).³⁴ Wallace's, Fauré's, and Sibelius's compositions served as incidental music to accompany performances of Maeterlinck's play, whereas Debussy's and Schoenberg's settings were complete concert pieces in their own right.

Fin-de-siècle writers recognized in Maeterlinck's mystical works, as well as in the French and Belgian Symbolist Movement, strong Wagnerian resonances.

Maeterlinck's contemporary, Belgian Symbolist Iwan Gilkin, described *Pelléas's* characters as:

³³ Erik Satie was interested in setting *Princesse Maleine* as well but gave up the idea when he learned of Debussy's work on *Pelléas*. Paul Griffiths and Richard Langham Smith. "Maeterlinck, Maurice." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/subscriber/article/grrove/music/17425>, Accessed October 16, 2012.

³⁴ Two of these composers shared with Debussy and Schoenberg a complicated relationship to Wagner's music and legacy. William Wallace was an avid Wagnerian who wrote a biography of Wagner entitled *Richard Wagner as he lived* (1925) as well as a book *Liszt, Wagner, and the Princess* (1927) about the composers' conversations with Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein. Sibelius, too, admired Wagner in the 1890s, but like Debussy and Schoenberg, he grew disenchanted with the deliberate leitmotivic system. Fauré, on the other hand, admired Wagner without following his example. James Hepokoski and Fabian Dahlström, "Sibelius, Jean," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed March 29, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/subscriber/article/grrove/music/43725>.

the brothers and sisters of the heroes of those tales resurrected in the nineteenth century through the genius of Tennyson, Burne-Jones, and Richard Wagner.”³⁵

Though Maeterlinck’s play does not include music, Gilkin’s account nevertheless references Wagner’s aesthetic influence on Maeterlinck. Author and literary critic Arthur Symons similarly highlights Wagnerian elements in the Belgian Symbolist’s works. He writes in 1908:

[Maeterlinck] has realized, after Wagner, that the art of the stage is the art of pictorial beauty, of the correspondence in rhythm between the speakers, their words, and their surroundings. He has seen how, in this way, and in this way alone, the emotion, which is but a part of the poetic drama to express, can be at once intensified and purified.³⁶

While the allegorical décor of *Pelléas* and the “mysterious significance and profound music of the words” of Maeterlinck are derived from the same Romanticism as the scenes and libretti of Wagnerian operas, Grange Wooley argues against confounding Wagner’s aesthetics with the general influence of German romanticism, or French Symbolism and British Aestheticism for that matter.³⁷ Maeterlinck admired the worlds of William Shakespeare, Edgar Allen Poe, and contemporary Romantic poets like Lord Alfred Tennyson. Maeterlinck’s staged dramas drew on the works of Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, whose allegorical and historical depictions of human suffering, blind love, and eternal beauty evoke Aesthetic ideals of form

³⁵ Smith, “The play and its playwright,” *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande*, 4-5.

³⁶ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York, NY: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1971), 313.

³⁷ Grange Woolley, *Richard Wagner et le symbolisme français: Les rapports principaux entre le Wagnérisme et l’évolution de l’idée symboliste*. Thèse pour le doctorat de l’université (Paris (Ve): Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1931), 153-154.

and composition over message or meaning.³⁸ Rather than drawing on a single example, then, the literary, visual, and musical influences of German Romanticism, French Symbolism, and even British Aestheticism all contribute to Maeterlinck's quasi-medieval realm of shadowy language and action.

The Wagnerian presence in Maeterlinck the Symbolist's dramatic style is unsurprising given the French Symbolist fascination with Wagner, Schopenhauer, and medieval times.³⁹ Maeterlinck's plays were set in the same characteristically timeless, quasi-medieval realm as Wagnerian music dramas, and his powerless characters were subjected to an omnipotent Fate that controlled their destinies. And yet with its concurrent influences of German Romanticism and British Aestheticism, Maeterlinck's works were marked by a certain vagueness of national origin that seems to have liberated Debussy, Schoenberg, and others to set Maeterlinck's dramatic works. *Pelléas's* kingdom of "Allemonde"—derived from "alle" (German for "all") and "monde" (French for "the world")—together make a word that is very close to *allemande*, the French word for "German." The Belgian Maeterlinck's Wallonian origins, like the derivation of "Allemonde," represent a point of contact between the French and the Germans – his work espoused a German romantic style clothed in French.⁴⁰

³⁸ Smith, "The play and its playwright," in Nichols and Smith, *Claude Debussy Pelléas et Mélisande*, 4.

³⁹ Ibid., 2. Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the past: the medieval revival in fin-de-siècle France* (Aldershot, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2003).

⁴⁰ "...though he was writing in French, we can detect, beneath the French trappings of the language, a German body of thought." ("... quoiqu'il ait écrit en français, on devine, sous le vêtement français de la langue un corps de pensée bien allemand"). Woolley, "Wagner et le symbolisme français," 152-153.

Historically, a similar national hybridity within the French Symbolist movement integrates both French and Wagnerian elements. French Wagnerians Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) led the Symbolist interpretations of Wagner's aesthetic theory, which in turn shaped the contemporary debates on Wagnerism in French literature and music as well as more broadly in national social and political culture. Baudelaire's *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* (1861) offers a "portrait of the artist as the self-conscious theorist of his own creative practice." Wagner's operatic myths were for Baudelaire and a generation of French artists, intellectuals, and politicians, "universally intelligible."⁴¹ Following the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) and Wagner's death in 1883, French Wagnerians tempered the Wagnerian aesthetic message in France, downplaying the composer's national supremacist politics in favor of a Schopenhauerian pessimism that "increasingly retreated into the ahistorical mists of Teutonic myth or into the exquisite solipsism of decadent aestheticism."⁴²

As host to Debussy and young French Symbolists at his Tuesday gatherings, and as mentor to publishers of *La revue wagnérienne* (1885-1888), Mallarmé exerted considerable influence on French Wagnerism in the 1880s and throughout the *fin-de-siècle*. His 1885 essay "Richard Wagner, reverie d'un poète français" articulates how to adapt Wagnerian aesthetics to the French Symbolist movement. Focusing not on Wagner's music (of which Mallarmé had heard very little), but

⁴¹ Richard Sieburth, "The Music of the Future: Symbolist Poets Publish *La Revue wagnérienne*, 1885, February," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 790-791.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 793.

rather on drama, Mallarmé championed Wagner's union of music, dance, and poetry, which he argued was "more strictly imaginative and abstract" for the French than for the Germans. Mallarmé therefore suggests that the Wagnerian myths of a collective (German nationalist) past "should be replaced with a poetico-philosophic fable or symbol that is at once ancient, contemporary, and eternal."⁴³ Maeterlinck's *Pelléas* responds to Mallarmé's call for French Symbolism in the tradition of Wagnerian medieval fairy tales, further lending support to the hybridity of Maeterlinck's *fin-de-siècle* mystical dramas and their wide-ranging appeal.

More than merely encompassing the mood of German Romanticism, Maeterlinck writes his love scene in *Pelléas* in a way that echoes the famous tryst between Tristan and Isolde in Act II/2 of Wagner's eponymous 1859 opera. This work, drawn from a twelfth-century legend made popular through French medieval poetry, chronicles a Celtic love triangle between King Marke; his adopted heir, Tristan; and the King's bride, Isolde. Both scenes begin with the lover (Isolde/Pelléas) waiting, followed by a love duet, a signal of danger, and the murder of Tristan/Pelléas.⁴⁴ This scene takes on significance not only as the climax of Maeterlinck's drama and Debussy's opera, but in an operatic context, *Pelléas* becomes a Wagnerian story. *Tristan* was acknowledged as one of the greatest operas. Furthermore, it was musically daring in its extreme chromaticism and tonality. Inspiring generations of composers and listeners with its progressive harmonies, such as the Tristan chord (a half-diminished seventh chord) first heard

⁴³ Ibid., 794-795.

⁴⁴ Abbate, "*Tristan in Pelléas*," 124.

at the beginning of the *Prélude*, *Tristan* became an opera with which all later composers had to reckon with.

The Wagnerian medieval fairy-tale and plot resonances would not have been lost on either Debussy or Schoenberg, both of whom were familiar with Wagner's *Tristan*. Debussy had been an ardent Wagnerian in the 1880s, even making pilgrimages to Bayreuth in 1889 and 1890. In 1889 he won a bet that he could play *Tristan* at the piano by heart. During the composition of *Pelléas*, in the winter of 1893-94 and in 1895, he earned money through performances of "*séances wagneriennes*," in which he played the piano and sang through entire Wagner operas.⁴⁵ Schoenberg, too, was enamored of Wagner, and claims that by 1899 he had listened to all Wagner's operas twenty or thirty times.⁴⁶

Yet, the flexibility of Maeterlinck's style proved an additional challenge for both composers. In setting a story with a direct Wagnerian resonance at the dramatic climax, to what extent would Debussy and Schoenberg be tempted to use Wagnerian techniques as a model? If not, what other tools did they have at their disposal? *Pelléas's* plot, as well as both Debussy's and Schoenberg's use of character and mood themes – or leitmotifs – and interludes pay homage to Wagner's operatic technique. As we shall see in the chapter that follows, each composer's relationship to these techniques during and after the compositional process highlights the difficulties each faced in looking beyond Wagner and finding musical techniques more suited to their own ideals for twentieth-century music.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁶ Bailey, *Programmatic Elements*, 5.

Chapter 2

Debussy's and Schoenberg's Settings of *Pelléas*

In this chapter I explore how Debussy and Schoenberg approached Maeterlinck's plot. Both used Wagnerian-style interludes to connect scenes and leitmotifs, or character and mood themes, to depict the emotional development of the characters throughout the unfolding of the drama. I describe several of the leitmotifs (Fate, Mélisande, Golaud, and Pelléas) and scenes to give a sense of what Debussy and Schoenberg found most intriguing in Maeterlinck's drama.

This chapter also reveals Debussy's continued troubled relationship to Wagnerian techniques and how this *après-Wagnerian* preoccupation colored and at times obscured his use of Wagnerian *lois*. Schoenberg's adoption of Wagnerian techniques was unproblematic, as the Austrian composer saw his work aligned with the heirs of Wagner and the New German School. I begin with a comparison of how Debussy and Schoenberg adapted Maeterlinck's play in their own settings. See Table 1, page 25, for scene comparisons.

Table 1: Scene Comparison of *Pelléas et Mélisande*: Maeterlinck, Debussy, and Schoenberg

Maeterlinck's Play (1892)	Debussy's Opera (1902)	Schoenberg's Tone Poem (1903)
Act 1/1. The gate of the castle Act 1/2. A forest. Act 1/ 3. A hall in the castle. Act 1/4. Before the castle.	Act 1/1. A forest Act 1/2. A room in the castle Act 1/3. Before the castle	Melisande wandering in the forest
Act 2/1. A fountain in the park. Act 2/2. An apartment in the castle. Act 2/3. Before a grotto. Act 2/4. An apartment in the castle.	Act 2/1. A well in the park Act 2/2. A room in the castle Act 2/3. Before a grotto	Episode at the fountain in the park Golaud's growing jealousy
Act 3/1. An apartment in the castle. Act 3/2. One of the towers of the castle. Act 3/3. The vaults of the castle. Act 3/4. A terrace at the exit of the vaults. Act 3/ 5. Before the castle.	Act 3/1. One of the towers of the castle Act 3/2. The vaults of the castle Act 3/3. A terrace at the entrance of the vaults Act 3/4. Before the castle	Tower scene - Melisande's hair Vaults of the castle
Act 4/1. A corridor in the castle. Act 4/2. An apartment in the castle. Act 4/3. A terrace of the castle. *Act 4/4. A fountain in the park.	Act 4/1. A room in the castle. Act 4/2. A room in the castle. Act 4/3. A well in the park. *Act 4/4. A well in the park	Golaud pulls Melisande's hair *Love scene in the park
Act 5/1. A lower hall in the castle. Act 5/2. An apartment in the castle.	Act 5/1. A chamber in the castle	Entrance of women servants in the castle Final scene of Melisande's death

* This scene shares a parallel plot structure to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II/2

As seen in Table 1, Debussy set fifteen of Maeterlinck's original nineteen scenes in his opera; Maeterlinck agreed with Debussy's decision to shorten the drama and even suggested scenes to cut. In a letter to Chausson, Debussy writes about his meeting with Maeterlinck in Ghent in November 1893:

For *Pelléas* he's allowing me to make whatever cuts I like and went as far as to suggest some important ones – *extremely useful ones even!*⁴⁷

The four scenes Debussy removes are episodes involving minor characters and do not significantly alter the drama. Additional revisions avoid repetitions of words and phrases which, set to music, disrupt the already disjointed continuity of the dramatic action and the incongruous expressions and dialogues of the characters.

The almost direct use of Maeterlinck's play as Debussy's opera libretto was one of the first of many similar instances in twentieth-century French opera. This version, unmediated by a librettist, maintains the playwright's vision and shows the extent to which Debussy's and Maeterlinck's dramatic ideals are aligned.

In comparison, Schoenberg incorporated about eight scenes, seven of which coincide with Debussy's, demonstrating that they both independently considered these scenes to be the most significant to Maeterlinck's drama. Schoenberg further compressed the drama to merely the three characters of the love triangle among Pelléas, Mélisande, and Golaud, concentrating on the changing emotions of the protagonists through techniques of Brahmsian developing variation and Wagnerian leitmotivic development. Despite its condensed cast of characters and scenes, Schoenberg's *Pelleas* is forty-five minutes in length, typical of the extended length of

⁴⁷ Debussy's letter to Chausson was written on a Thursday evening in early December 1893. Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 60.

New German School tone poems in the *fin-de-siècle*. Schoenberg may have begun the work with this idea for the appropriate length of a tone poem and then structured the action accordingly.

In 1949, the composer reflects:

[*Pelleas und Melisande*] is inspired entirely by Maurice Maeterlinck's wonderful drama. I tried to mirror every detail of it, with only a few omissions and slight changes of the order of the scenes...⁴⁸

Whereas Debussy's through-composed opera is broken into fifteen scenes, Schoenberg's tone poem can be divided into four parts. In Berg's 1920 analysis, written with Schoenberg's tacit approval, he shows how the piece has a symphonic structure, thereby demonstrating that it can be heard as both absolute and programmatic music:

In the four main parts of this symphonic poem the four movements of a symphony are clearly demonstrable. These are: first, a large sonata movement; second, a three-part movement consisting of three short episodes (suggesting a scherzo-like character in at least one scene); third, a broadly spun-out Adagio; and finally, a finale in the form of a reprise.⁴⁹

Schoenberg apparently never wrote a plot synopsis for concert audiences, though he published program notes for the 1949 recording. His unpublished prose outline from 1902 suggests the range of human emotions that inspired him to work through Maeterlinck's play. Part I corresponds with Act I; Part II with Acts II, III, and IV; and Part III with Act V.

I
I. Melisande, Fate

⁴⁸ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 110.

⁴⁹ Alban Berg, trans. Mark DeVoto, "Pelleas and Melisande Brief Thematic Analysis" in *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, Volume XVI, Numbers 1 and 2* (Los Angeles: Arnold Schoenberg Institute, University of Southern California, June and November 1993), 273.

- II. Golaud, timid Melisande Fate—large
 - III. Golaud Melisande Fate—large warning
- II
- I. Melisande dreamy, Pelleas youthful; King Arkel premonition Love motiv, fate motive (I.)
 - II. Ring lost, Golaud, Ring looked for. Fate motive II. Larger
 - III. Golaud distrustful, jealousy menace and distrust; G. and Yniold,⁵⁰ Grotto, atmosphere of harm
 - IV. Love scene (large and expansive) Fate motive, jealousy—Golaud kills Pelleas and wounds Melisande
- III
- I. Atmosphere of harm
 - II. Golaud and Melisande, Entrance of the serving women
 - III. Melisande’s expiring⁵¹

Instead of describing the plot development, the outline consists only of character names and qualities (timid Melisande, Pelleas youthful, Golaud suspicious, Jealousy, Menace, and Mistrust); scenes (Ring lost, Love scene); and occurrences of Fate (large, large warning, greater force). This outline suggests Schoenberg’s interest in the character’s emotional developments and the “eternal problems of humanity.”⁵² Recall that Debussy, too, prefers music portraying emotion over action. Debussy wrote in 1885:

I would always rather deal with something where the passage of events is to some extent subordinated to a thorough and extended portrayal of human feelings. That way, I think, music can become more personal, more true to life; you can explore and refine your means of expression.⁵³

⁵⁰ Yniold is Golaud’s son from a previous marriage. Schoenberg later decides not to include this character.

⁵¹ Translated in Bailey, *Programmatic Elements*, 62-66.

⁵² Schoenberg claims that he and other *fin-de-siècle* composers were to attracted to Maeterlinck’s “art of dramatizing eternal problems of humanity in the form of fairy-tales, lending them timelessness without adhering to imitation of ancient styles. Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 116.

⁵³ Letter to Eugène Vasnier from the Villa Medici, June 4, 1885. Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 8.

Much of Schoenberg's music, as the prose outline suggests, follows a complex contrapuntal web of character leitmotifs that represent their reactions under changing scenarios. Three of these scenes (the love scenes between Pelleas and Melisande) are portrayed as episodes with interludes driving the action.

Both Debussy and Schoenberg's settings include interludes, a Wagnerian practice of linking dramatic scenes. The interlude is comparable to traditional transitional passages in instrumental music, though it creates a dramatic effect in the context of a programmatic narrative. Debussy's interludes are purely symphonic, and thus allow closer comparison to Schoenberg. However, they serve a different narrative function. Debussy's scene-changing transitions are sparse rather than large full-scale orchestral passages like Wagner's or Schoenberg's.

Furthermore, Debussy's interludes are more atmospheric and break up the already disjointed action, contributing to a sense of timelessness and ambiguity of place.⁵⁴

Schoenberg's interludes comment on Golaud's increasing jealousy. For example, Schoenberg juxtaposes each of the budding love scenes between Pelleas and Melisande with expressions of Golaud's jealousy (fountain; jealousy; tower scene; vault scene in which Golaud threatens Pelleas and then drags Melisande by the hair; love scene; Golaud murders Pelleas). Golaud's escalating malcontent is heard in Wagnerian-style interludes between each of the episodes' scenes. These passages become particularly important in his confrontation with Wagner.

Schoenberg, like Wagner and unlike Debussy, uses the interlude to further the progress of the drama. Schoenberg's motives for Fate and Golaud's jealousy are

⁵⁴ Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 76.

inversely linked. Schoenberg's Wagnerian-style interludes, then, comment on the driving force of Maeterlinck's Schopenhauerian drama – Fate combined with a character's jealousy determines the tragic outcome of this love triangle. Schoenberg writes interludes only in Part II of his tone poem (which portrays the growing love between Pelleas and Melisande) rather than throughout the entire work. Each of the three episodes ends in a passage that becomes increasingly agitated and frantic and is marked by thicker orchestral textures, particularly in the low brass and low strings; *accelerandos*; and the appearance of Golaud's jealousy leitmotiv. These jealousy interludes create a particularly striking contrast to the romantic love episodes that feature solo melodies in the woodwinds and strings.

Debussy links scenes using Wagnerian-style interludes, a technique he had admired since at least 1885. "The only thing of [Wagner's] I would want to copy is the running of one scene into another."⁵⁵ Debussy's storytelling takes place during the scenes themselves, and rather than commenting on the action or using large-scale orchestral forces to continue the drama in between the scenes, the interludes are thinly textured and diffuse. The inner parts of the interludes as well as the dramatic scenes are static and the harmonic movement unguided.⁵⁶ They act to distance places (such as the forest, castle, and the well in the park) from each other as well as to obscure the continuity of action and the passage of time, further contributing to a dream-like, episodic drama.

⁵⁵ This is an excerpt from Debussy's letter to Eugène Vasnier from the Villa Medici on October 19, 1885. Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy's Letters*, 12-13.

⁵⁶ There are two interludes in Act I; two in Act II; three in Act III; and one in Act IV. Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 85.

The length of Debussy's interludes seems to have more to do with the difficulty of the set changes at the technologically outdated Opéra Comique, where *Pelléas* was premiered on April 30, 1902, rather than a specific dramatic function. While some interludes were composed earlier, either during the initial composition period from 1893-95 or in the orchestrations leading to 1901, many of the interludes were expanded in Spring 1902 to accommodate longer scenery and set changes.⁵⁷ For example, the interludes between Act I/1-2 and Act II/1-2 both transport the story from the same forest fountain to a room in the castle; in the Act I interlude six months have passed and in the Act II interlude the second scene occurs just minutes after the first, though the Second Act's interlude is almost one minute longer.

Another aspect of the interludes that has been touched upon by Abbate, Holloway, and other Debussy scholars is his use of specific quotations from Wagner. Debussy's interludes contain more Wagnerian references than the opera's fifteen scenes. The interludes in Act I include references to *Parsifal*; in Act II to *Götterdämmerung*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan*, and *Die Meistersinger*; and in Act IV to *Parsifal* and *Tristan*. Yet Act III's three interludes do not feature any overtly or veiled Wagnerian references. Even in breaking his claim to have removed anything Wagnerian in the opera and in using Wagnerian references, then, Debussy still does so in a way that defies a method, or rather characterizes his un-repetitive, through-composed opera. Holloway argues that:

Debussy is taking Wagnerian *minutiae* that appeal deeply to him both in themselves and for their context, and re-employing them, less or more

⁵⁷ Abbate, "*Tristan in Pelléas*," 138.

transformed, sometimes for the same purposes sometimes not, in a style so different that there would at first seem no basis for comparison. This strange trait (it is too wayward and involuntary to be called a process, let alone a technique) provides an unexpected precedent for the 're-composition.'⁵⁸

The original Wagnerian context, as Holloway notes, often corresponds to the action in *Pelléas*. For example, during the Act II interlude, Golaud falls from his horse (offstage). To signify Golaud's tumble, Debussy references a musical passage from Act III of *Die Meistersinger* in which Beckmesser collapses.⁵⁹

Debussy's internalization of Wagnerian quotations, furthermore, shows the extent to which Wagner's operas resonated with Debussy. Their re-employment in the context of *Pelléas* adds a double meaning to Debussy's work. Abbate suggests:

Debussy may be considered a Wagnerian commentator. He may even be judged a more distinctive interpreter of Wagner than the more familiarly post-Wagnerian German composers. He received from Wagner not only certain technical *lois*, but used allusion to the operas which were the source of that technique to fashion an interpretation of Maeterlinck's text, and to comment on his own musical reading of that drama.⁶⁰

Whether Debussy intended these quotations to be recognized and pointed out (in Holloway's study as were Wagner's leitmotifs in Hans von Wolzogen's thematic guide to the *Ring* cycle) remains an issue of controversy among Debussy scholars.

Abbate argues that Debussy delighted in using Wagnerian quotations:

If the identification of quotations in *Pelléas* is a sort of game, nonetheless it is a game sanctioned and even secretly encouraged by the composer. The game is meant to be discovered, and its discovery changes the music for *Pelléas* into something more than an adequate – or exquisite – reading of Maeterlinck. The opera becomes a commentary on an earlier musical corpus, and the listener's knowledge of that corpus is in turn meant to enter into his own interpretation of *Pelléas*.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 95.

⁵⁹ Abbate, "Tristan in *Pelléas*," 138.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

Holloway, on the other hand, seemingly in sympathy with Debussy's desire to portray his music as *après-Wagner*, downplays Debussy's use of Wagnerian quotations, suggesting they are "unconscious" recurrences:

...while apparently rejecting all vestiges of the Wagnerian apparatus he actually as if under some unconscious obligation reproduces extremely characteristic textures and harmonies from a Wagnerian original, in a context of an emotion so explicit that the connection, however unwitting, cannot be fortuitous.⁶²

Richard Strauss identifies several Wagnerian resonances in Debussy's opera.

During a performance he attended with Maurice Ravel and Romain Rolland in Paris in 1907, Strauss whispers to Rolland during a certain passage of *Pelléas*: "But all that is *Parsifal*."⁶³

Both Debussy and Schoenberg considered leitmotivic development to be at the heart of Wagner's technique. Leitmotifs ascribe recurring musical phrases to characters, places, ideas, objects, states of mind, and supernatural forces.⁶⁴ By 1865 music historian A. W. Ambros had used the term leitmotiv with regards to Wagner's operas and Liszt's symphonic poems. Indeed, Wagner's leitmotifs became codified through publications such as Hans von Wolzogen's 1876 thematic guide to the *Ring*, encouraging audiences to delight at recognizing the appearance and reappearance of leitmotifs throughout the course of this operatic cycle.⁶⁵

⁶² Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 82.

⁶³ Lockspeiser, *Life and Mind*, 88-89.

⁶⁴ Arnold Whittall, "Leitmotif," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed February 8, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/16360>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Schoenberg began his composition of *Pelleas* “still under the influence of post-Wagnerianism” and had no stigma in adopting leitmotifs and symphonic development. He offers an analytical explanation for the leitmotif’s appeal for himself and his *fin-de-siècle* contemporaries:

...since a young composer in this period was intent not only on illustrating the mood and all of its changes, but also on describing every bit of action, a special formulation, the Leitmotiv, seemed obligatory. The Leitmotiv, usually a small phrase, did not consume much space because development, apposition of varied phrases, cadential limitations and other establishing technical requirements, which demanded the space of eight to sixteen measures, became superfluous. A phrase of two measures followed by a sequence ordinarily required a liquidating addition of one or two measures. Thus a little independent segment could be produced which also did not require an elaborate continuation, and was, so to speak, open on all four sides. Properly employed, an aesthetic merit is gained by using no more space than the ideas demand, and this is why this technique rather proved a stimulant to the *Neudeutsche Schule*.⁶⁶

In his program notes from 1949, Schoenberg identifies his character and mood themes as “Wagnerian leitmotifs.” However, by the completion of his tone poem Schoenberg, like Debussy from the outset, would grow to reject the unvaried repetition characteristic of leitmotivic development. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, he develops leitmotifs in a Wagnerian manner until the final part of his tone poem.

Debussy eloquently summarizes his musico-dramatic contention with Wagner’s leitmotifs. In the preface to a May 15, 1901 article in *La Revue Blanche*, Debussy writes:

Music has a rhythm whose secret force shapes the development. The rhythm of the soul, however, is quite different—more instinctive, more general, and controlled by many events. From the incompatibility of these two rhythms a perpetual conflict arises, for the two do not move at the same speed. Either

⁶⁶ Schoenberg, “Criteria for the Evaluation of Music” (1946), *Style and Idea*, 130-131.

the music stifles itself by chasing after a character, or the character has to sit on a note to allow the music to catch up with him.⁶⁷

This reveals why the ambiguity, mystery, and stasis in *Pelléas* were so attractive to Debussy. *Pelléas*'s lack of action gave Debussy the freedom to develop the music by its own rhythm. Maeterlinck's simple, sparse language allowed *Pelléas* and *Mélisande* to express themselves as people would, so that the music and the characters could develop compatibly at the same rhythm and speed. Debussy's main problem with Wagner's leitmotivic system, then, is its formulaic approach that ignores the natural character development as well as patterns of speech and expression. Unlike Schoenberg, who felt the leitmotiv could "[illustrate] the mood and all of its changes" as well as "[describe] every bit of action," Debussy argues: ⁶⁸

It is totally illogical to think that a *fixed* melodic line can be made to hold the innumerable nuances through which a character passes. That is not only a mistake of taste but a mistake of 'quantity.'⁶⁹

Debussy had a different conception of music. He sought techniques that would make the singing in his opera replicate the ways in which real people communicated.

Whether Debussy then adopts the leitmotivic system that he criticizes is up for debate. Certainly he does not use such a formulaic approach, yet his recurring character themes, such as his labeling of *Mélisande*'s theme in an article in *Le Théâtre* in 1902, have been considered leitmotifs in all but name.⁷⁰ Debussy never acknowledges these themes as leitmotifs; rather, he appreciates Louis Laloy's

⁶⁷ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 36.

⁶⁸ Schoenberg, "Criteria for the Evaluation of Music," *Style and Idea*, 130-131.

⁶⁹ Nichols and Smith, *Claude Debussy Pelléas et Mélisande*, 184-186.

⁷⁰ This handwritten illustration from an article on *Pelléas* in *Le Théâtre*, 1902, is found in Nichols and Smith, *Claude Debussy Pelléas et Mélisande*, 144.

explanation of the character themes in *Pelléas* as not being “ensnared in the overly rational (hence unpoetic) net cast by Wagner.” For Laloy, Debussy’s thematic recurrences are associated with emotions and humanity rather than an “esprit de système” or allegorical function.⁷¹ Whereas later scholars Steven Huebner and Stefan Jarocinski deny the use of leitmotifs in *Pelléas*, Maurice Emmanuel, Lawrence Gilman, Robin Holloway, and David Grayson argue that there are leitmotifs (or, as Gilman calls them, “sound-wraiths”). However, even these scholars agree that what they call leitmotifs function differently from Wagner’s and Schoenberg’s in their subtlety and veiled, rather than direct or formulaic, appearances. As Holloway argues:

Consideration of the larger rather than the local aspects of Debussy’s opera touches upon a paradox – that it is precisely in his employment of Wagnerian leitmotives in *Pelléas* that Debussy stands furthest from his original.⁷²

Drawing on the similar presence of thematic recurrences or leitmotifs in both settings of *Pelléas*, I will describe several character themes in Maeterlinck’s drama as identified by Schoenberg and Debussy scholars. My musical examples from Schoenberg are reproduced from his program notes for *Pelleas* from 1949, in which he labels the themes “in the manner of Wagnerian leitmotives.”⁷³ The musical examples from the Debussy piano score reductions are derived from Lawrence Gilman’s “sound-wraith” identifications from 1907.⁷⁴ Though Debussy once published Mélisande’s Initial Theme in a *Le Théâtre* article, he never wrote a list of

⁷¹ Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 473.

⁷² Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 136.

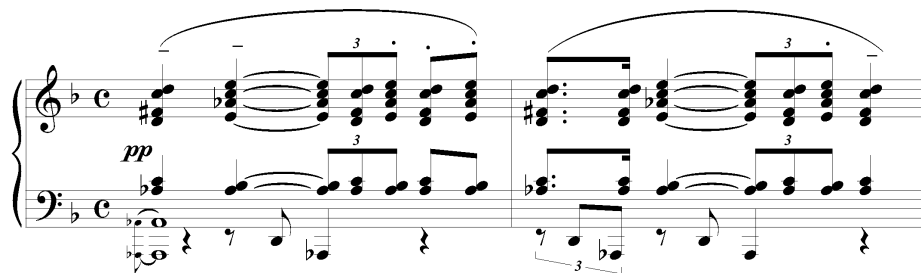
⁷³ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 110-112.

⁷⁴ Lawrence Gilman, *Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande: A Guide to the Opera with musical examples from the score* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1907), 58-84.

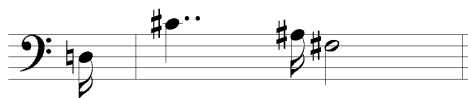
character themes; the following examples and titles are Gilman's projections of Debussy's retelling of *Pelléas*.

Following the influence of Schopenhauer, Maeterlinck's characters themselves do not exert control over their destinies and never arrive at self-fulfillment. Both composers highlight the role of a supernatural, omnipotent Fate that directs the characters in Maeterlinck's drama. In the first scene, Fate, even before the introduction of Mélisande and Golaud, colors the atmosphere of the forest, underlines the action, and interrupts the characters throughout their dialogue (real, for Debussy, or imagined, for Schoenberg).

Example 2.1: *Debussy's Fate*



Example 2.2: *Schoenberg's Destiny*



Debussy's static alternation of duple and triple figures begins and ends on the same chord, suggesting that Fate and the problems of humanity are unchanging and eternal. Schoenberg's Fate leitmotiv has a similarly ominous feel; the leap from D to its leading tone C# does not resolve upwards; instead it descends in an F# Major triad.

In each setting, Fate is thematically connected to a strong emotion – love for Debussy and jealousy for Schoenberg. Debussy’s motive that defines “Golaud’s Love” – this rising eighth note and falling triplet figure can be heard in contrast to the stagnant repeated triplet-eighth figure of Fate. The appearance of Fate in Debussy’s Prélude (mm. 5-6) and throughout the entire opera highlights Fate’s decisive omnipotent role in this drama. The similarity between the themes for Golaud’s Love and Fate interprets the power that Prince Golaud’s emotion exerts in this story. Though Golaud’s love for Mélisande is unrequited, he prevents her happiness with her beloved Pelléas, Golaud’s half-brother, by killing Pelléas and ultimately Mélisande as well.

Example 2.3: *Debussy: Golaud’s Love*

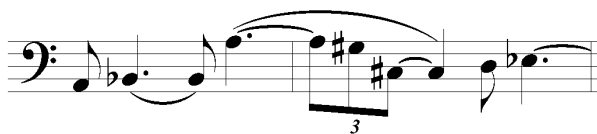


Debussy's Fate



Schoenberg’s jealousy, like his Fate motive, uses the upward leap of a major seventh followed by a descending figure and chromatic ascension rather than a resolution from the leading tone to tonic. Schoenberg’s tying Golaud’s vengeance to Fate, as Debussy had tied Golaud’s love to Fate, shows the composers’ differing interpretations in their settings of Maeterlinck’s drama.

Example 2.4: *Schoenberg: Golaud’s jealousy*



Schoenberg's Destiny



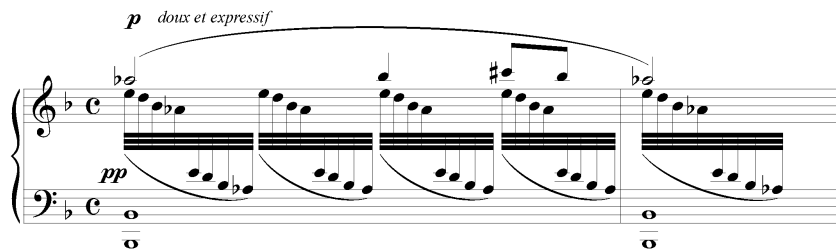
The similarity of Debussy's themes of Fate with Golaud's love suggests that love led to the tragic outcome for Pelléas and Mélisande, as it did for Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet before them. Schoenberg implicates Golaud's jealousy as jeopardizing and ultimately separating the two lovers.

Having explained the main dramatic forces and structures in the settings, I want to briefly introduce each composer's three protagonists.

Mélisande

While lost in the forest of Allemonde on a hunting expedition, Prince Golaud comes across a beautiful young woman weeping by a well, and he persuades this mysterious Mélisande (who comes from "far, far from here" / "loin, loin d'ici") to return to his family's castle.

Example 2.5: Debussy's *Mélisande*



Example 2.6: Schoenberg's *Mélisande*



The character of Mélisande is crucial to both composers' stories. Both themes feature a solo oboe. Both are introduced (after Fate) at nearly the same time in the drama (mm. 14 for Debussy and mm. 12-13 for Schoenberg). They both evoke an ambiguous young Mélisande. Schoenberg's *Mélisande*, like his Fate leitmotiv,

features a falling line in a melody that does not remotely resemble a key signature or mode. Debussy's theme starts and ends on the same note (A \flat) ascending and descending the first three notes of a pentatonic scale. Aside from the foreign mode and symmetry of the melody, we notice that this "soft and expressive" theme has, like Fate, ended as it began. Debussy later said of *Mélisande's* theme:

Notice that the motif which accompanies *Mélisande* is never altered; it comes back in the fifth act unchanged in every respect, because in fact *Mélisande* always remains the same and dies without anyone – only old Arkel [Golaud and Pelléas's grandfather, the King of Allemonde], perhaps? – ever having understood her.⁷⁵

This quote, from a letter to critic Edwin Evans in 1909, sheds light on how Debussy understood the drama and translated this into a musical setting.

Golaud

Debussy's and Schoenberg's treatment of Golaud are considerably divergent.

Debussy places Golaud's theme in a low tessitura, very sustained.

Example 2.7: Debussy's Golaud



Example 2.8: Schoenberg's Golaud



⁷⁵ Nichols and Smith, *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande*, 184-186.

Schoenberg's Golaud, heard in the horns (instruments associated with the hunt, Golaud's activity upon finding Mélisande in the woods), is stately and rhythmic. Unlike the relationships between motives that Debussy sets up, Schoenberg's theme does not relate to either Mélisande's theme or that of Fate.

Pelléas

Example 2.9: Debussy's Pelléas

Debussy's Pelléas is in a similar high tessitura to Mélisande's, both of which stand in stark contrast to the lower Golaud melody. The syncopated, off-beat accompaniment "a little bit animated" foreshadows the insecure future the young Pelléas faces.

Example 2.10: Schoenberg's Pelleas

Schoenberg's Pelleas, heard later in Part I of the tone poem, is much bolder and more active than Debussy's. In his 1949 program notes, Schoenberg describes his

Pelleas as being “contrasted distinctly by the youthful and knightly character of his motif.”⁷⁶

Both Debussy and Schoenberg set the following two scenes: the blossoming of Pelléas and Mélisande’s love at a well in the park (Act II/1) as well as Golaud’s jealousy towards Pelléas in the subterranean vaults (Act III/3).

Episode by the Fountain

In Act I, all three protagonists are introduced. Between Act I/1-2, Golaud and Mélisande marry. This wedding theme comprises the exposition of Part I of Schoenberg’s tone poem. In Debussy’s opera, the action occurs offstage during an interlude. Though Pelléas and Mélisande meet for the first time in Act I/3, both composers set the following scene. The pair is alone together at a park fountain that is supposed to cure the blind (“Blind Men’s Well”). Both set this in a dance-like style: Schoenberg’s is a scherzo and Debussy’s is in a quick 6/4. Both try to capture the excitement of the budding love and the seductiveness of Mélisande’s long hair, which falls into the well. Debussy writes, in a letter to Henri Lerolle on August 28, 1894:

Mélisande addressed me – you know that frail and gentle voice of hers: ‘Leave these silly little thoughts, good only for the great musical public, and let your dreams dwell upon my hair.’⁷⁷

Schoenberg, in his program notes, illustrates a passage featuring Melisande’s hair falling down the castle tower (Act III/2).

Pelléas is romantically interested in Mélisande, for he asks whether Golaud was close to her when the two first met by the well in the forest. In a typical

⁷⁶ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 110.

⁷⁷ Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 73.

conversation in Maeterlinck's play, the characters try to better understand the mysterious Mélisande before something else distracts her.

Pelléas: Was it also by a fountain that Golaud found you?
Mélisande: Yes...
Pelléas: What did he say to you?
Mélisande: Nothing, I don't remember any more...
Pelléas: Was he close to you?
Mélisande: Yes, he wanted to kiss me...
Pelléas: And you didn't want to?
Mélisande: No.
Pelléas: Why didn't you want to?
Mélisande: Oh! Oh! I saw something at the edge of the water.⁷⁸

Pelléas: C'est au bord d'une fontaine aussi qu'il vous a trouvée?
Mélisande: Oui...
Pelléas: Que vous a-t-il dit?
Mélisande: Rien, je ne me rappelle plus...
Pelléas: Était-il tout près de vous?
Mélisande: Oui, il voulait m'embrasser...
Pelléas: Et vous ne vouliez pas?
Mélisande: Non.
Pelléas: Pourquoi ne vouliez-vous pas?
Mélisande: Oh! oh! j'ai vu passer quelque chose au fond de l'eau...

Mélisande does not respond to Pelléas's questions. Debussy wrote of the difficulties of a conversational operatic style he sought in Act II:

I thought the second act of *Pelléas* would be child's play and it's the very devil! ... Anything resembling conversation doesn't really work in music and the man who discovers the secret of the 'musical interview' ought to be generously rewarded.⁷⁹

What follows at the end of this episode is an important moment for both composers.

Mélisande plays with her wedding ring from Golaud, and suddenly at high noon, blinded by the sun, she drops the ring into the well; at the same instant Golaud falls from his horse. As mentioned earlier, we hear Golaud's fall in the following

⁷⁸ Excerpt from Act II/1. The translation is my own.

⁷⁹ This is an excerpt from Debussy's letter to Raymond Bonheur from August 9, 1895. Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 80.

interlude in which Debussy repurposes the quotation of Beckmesser's fall from *Die Meistersinger*.⁸⁰ Schoenberg's programmatic sequence is instantaneous and richly illustrated, from the chromatic ascent in the woodwinds representing the toss of the ring to Golaud's rolling off the horse, heard in a descending, more rhythmically frenzied low brass line.

Subterranean Vaults

A second scene that intrigues Debussy and Schoenberg not so much for working past Wagner but for the descriptive dramatic elements is Act III/2 in the subterranean vaults of the castle. Golaud leads Pelléas through the death-scented castle vaults; Golaud asks his half-brother to lean over the chasm but prevents him from falling in. Though he only articulates his threat in the following scene, Golaud nevertheless elicits deathly fright. Debussy says of his vault scene:

It's full of impalpable terror and mysterious enough to make the most well-balanced listener giddy. The climb up from the vaults is done too, full of sunshine but a sunshine reflecting our mother the sea. I hope it'll make an attractive scene.⁸¹

Debussy creates an unsettling feeling in the orchestra through a canonic passage in which violas play on the downbeat and oboes on the off-beat, an eighth note apart. The upward motion at the end of the interlude, leading to the next scene is skillfully done, mirroring both the ascent from the catacomb-like vaults as well as the dizzying effect of breathing foul-smelling air.

Schoenberg introduces his vault scene with a jealousy interlude which calls for full-scale orchestral forces to relay the overwhelmingly compelling narrative

⁸⁰ Abbate, "*Tristan in Pelléas*," 138.

⁸¹ Letter to Henri Lerolle, August 28, 1894 in Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 73.

power that Jealousy and Fate produce. Schoenberg was also inspired to create a surprising atmosphere of horror; for the first time in orchestral writing, he calls for trombone glissandos below flutes flutter tonguing near the depths of their range.

Schoenberg writes in his program notes:

When Golaud leads Pelleas to the frightening subterranean tombs, a musical sound is produced which is remarkable in many respects; especially, because here, for the first time in musical literature, is used a hitherto unknown effect: a glissando of the trombones.⁸²

Example 2.11: Schoenberg: *Subterranean Vaults*

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Subterranean Vaults' by Arnold Schoenberg. It consists of five staves. The top staff is for Flute (Fl.) with the instruction 'Flutterzunge'. The second staff is for Trombone (Tr.) with 'con sordino' and features triplet markings. The third staff is for Horn (Hn.) with 'con sordino' and a 'gliss.' (glissando) marking. The fourth staff is for Clarinet (Cls.) with 'B.D.' (Basso Continuo) and triplet markings. The bottom staff is for Tam Tam. The score is written in a complex, atonal style with various rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings.

Schoenberg concludes this third episode (Part II of his symphonic tone poem) with Golaud dragging Melisande by her hair, a scene from Act IV. With their use of interludes and leitmotifs (or character and mood themes), Debussy and Schoenberg's settings draw on Wagnerian techniques.

⁸² Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 111.

Chapter 3

Debussy's *après*-Wagner take on a *d'après*-Wagner libretto

While Debussy's setting did not re-invent the wheel after Wagner, he did experiment with new forms, harmonies, and orchestral textures. Debussy draws on modes, harmonies, and recitative reminiscent of Ancient Greek and Roman drama (in the monodic style), Jean-Philippe Rameau's eighteenth-century baroque opera, and Modest Mussorgsky's mid-nineteenth-century works.⁸³ Debussy certainly dealt with the legacy of Wagner in his setting, but references to Wagner were almost always aesthetically alien with the original, just as Mélisande's character was elusive and mysterious to Pelléas, Golaud, and the characters of Allemonde. In story and musical-orchestral style and techniques, then, Debussy's opera is at once ancient and modern, Wagnerian and anti-Wagnerian.

In choosing to set Maeterlinck's quasi-Wagnerian drama, Debussy invites his listeners to make comparisons between Wagner and French *d'après*-Wagner operas on the one hand and his own restrained, self-consciously *après*-Wagner opera, *Pelléas*. Through his musically divergent setting, Debussy seeks to "release dramatic music from the heavy yoke under which it has lived for so long" and "to forge a way ahead that others will be able to follow."⁸⁴ This duality to Debussy's explanations of *Pelléas* – encompassing a desire to point out the flaws in Wagner and at the same time to offer an alternative – is central to understanding Debussy's path towards moving beyond the Wagnerian influence.

⁸³ Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 136-141.

⁸⁴ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 75.

As Abbate and others have noted, however, Debussy's published version of his only completed operatic project tells just part of the story of this composition. In a letter to critic Edwin Evans in 1909, Debussy writes:

I spent twelve years [1890-1902] removing anything *parasitic* [read, Wagnerian] that might have crept into it.⁸⁵

The darker part of Debussy's story of composing *Pelléas* is his tendency to compose *d'après-Wagner* and his striving through repeated drafts of *Pelléas* to move beyond Wagner's techniques. His struggles to write and re-write *Pelléas* in an *après-Wagnerian* manner mirror the hapless attempts of Maeterlinck's characters to control their destinies; in tackling the Wagnerian tendencies in his writing, Debussy essentially cast himself in Maeterlinck's play as a character who struggled to come to terms with his own destiny. Whether he prevailed continues to be an issue of debate.

In Chapter 2, I explored the implications of Debussy's Wagnerian quotations in the interludes. Using Wagner, whether consciously (as Abbate suggests) or unconsciously (as Holloway offers) seemed a deliberate move on his part. Many of these sections were composed late in the opera's nine-year gestation. In this chapter, I examine Act IV/4, the first scene of Maeterlinck's story that Debussy undertook, the most important scene dramatically, and the scene with a direct Wagnerian connection. We can see how Debussy's early efforts (realizing that he is copying Wagner) spur him to create more and more drafts that Abbate argues merely obscure the use of the same Wagnerian *lois* employed in earlier drafts.

⁸⁵ Nichols and Smith, *Claude Debussy Pelléas et Mélisande*, 184-186.

What is an *après*-Wagner opera? If Debussy did not follow Wagner, whose example did he embrace? Why should *Pelléas* be a model of French opera for the future, and how was it related to the French opera of the past? The French *fin-de-siècle* the *grand opéra* tradition of the 1820s through the 1850s no longer served as a model for French operatic composers. Decadent and old-fashioned, *grand opéra* harbored bitter associations of the Second Empire under Napoleon III. In their self-conscious push in the 1880s, the French attempted to recover their national origins in several Wagnerian operas. Citing the centuries-old tradition of medieval fairy-tales in *opéra comique*, dating back to Quinault's legends that inspired Lully's late operas *Amadis* (1684), *Roland* (1685), and *Armide* (1686), the French claimed that their opera tradition drawing on mythological and folkloric legends pre-dates Wagner's. Théodore Michaëlis published a series of historical canonic works from the Opéra repertoire, *Chefs-d'oeuvre classique de l'Opéra français* (1877-1884). A preface by Théodore de Lajarte's to Lalande and Destouches's *Les éléments* (1883) essentially rewrites a version of French operatic history that problematizes Germany's musical dominance by reclaiming as French dramatic elements, such as speech-melody declamation, variants of which are heard in Wagner's operas. De Lajarte writes:

I shall perhaps surprise a good many readers in saying that I consider these primitives of the [eighteenth] century as the true precursors of Richard Wagner, and that the aesthetic applied in a systematic manner and in giant proportions by the German master seems to me to be essentially the same as that which worked, as it were unconsciously, in the minds of those such as Rameau and Destouches.

d'Indy's preface to one of the final Michaëlis collection publications similarly considers the French musical lineage from the seventeenth century to the present.

Arguing that because Wagner's roots belong to French operatic practice, contemporary composers who adopted Wagnerian developments would essentially be continuing French traditions.⁸⁶

Measuring French operas of the *fin-de-siècle* using the Wagnerian yardstick was standard practice; not only his operas but also his aesthetic theories were debated more broadly in symbolist and other literary, social, and political circles.⁸⁷ Third Republic audiences, librettists, and composers including Ernest Chausson, Vincent d'Indy, and Jules Massenet looked to the Wagnerian model. Librettist Catulles Mendès, in his famous essay "Le jeune Prix de Rome," offers a Wagnerian prescription for the future of opera in France:

The musical drama in France would be a work where French inspiration, profoundly French, would be developed according to the laws borrowed from the Wagnerian system.⁸⁸

Debussy's quest for moving opera forward began in 1890 with Mendès's libretto *Roderigue et Chimène*, a story based on ancient French sources. Debussy retired this project in 1893, around the time he began setting *Pelléas*. Abbate suggests:

In abandoning *Roderigue et Chimène*, he abandoned not Wagnerism but the French operatic tradition, text and musical language alike.⁸⁹

Pelléas, on the other hand, "was in essence a Wagnerian libretto which, as yet, lacked its musical setting."⁹⁰ *Pelléas's* incorporation of Wagnerian medieval tropes, then,

⁸⁶ Katharine Ellis, *Interpreting the Musical Past: Early Music in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132-133.

⁸⁷ Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2005), 67.

⁸⁸ "Le drame musicale en France serait une oeuvre où l'inspiration française, profondément française, se développerait selon les lois empruntées au système wagnérien." Mendès, "Le jeune Prix de Rome," 135 quoted in Abbate, "Tristan in *Pelléas*," 120.

⁸⁹ Abbate, "Tristan in *Pelléas*," 120.

made Debussy's choice of *Pelléas* a Wagnerian story, but one that was French as well. How better to explain his conception for an *après-Wagner* opera than to create a vastly different musical setting using a libretto whose love scene echoes that of his "beloved *Tristan*"?⁹¹ The shadowy, obscure action and dialogue of Maeterlinck's symbolist drama allowed Debussy the flexibility to take an un-formulaic, un-Wagnerian approach to a story with a clear Wagnerian resonance.

See Table 3.1 (Page 51) for a time frame of the composition of Debussy's *Pelléas*. Act IV/4 was Debussy's "test case," the first scene of Maeterlinck's play to be set. In an opera in which Debussy repeatedly seeks to move beyond Wagner, this overtly Wagnerian scene is key to understanding Debussy's struggle. Debussy began composing Act IV/4 in the summer of 1893, just months after the play's premiere in May. Dissatisfied with the first draft, he began a second one in September to October 1893. In an oft-quoted letter to Chausson from October 2, 1893, Debussy explains his frustration with this second draft of the Love Scene:

I was premature in crying 'success!' over *Pelléas et Mélisande*. After a sleepless night (the bringer of truth) I had to admit it wouldn't do at all. It was like the duet by M. So-and-so, or nobody in particular, and worst of all the ghost of old Klingsor, alias R. Wagner, kept appearing in the corner of a bar, so I've torn the whole thing up. I've started again and am trying to find a recipe for producing more characteristic phrases. I've been forcing myself to be Pelléas as well as Mélisande and I've gone looking for music behind all the veils she wraps round herself, even in the presence of her most devoted admirers! As a result, I've discovered something which you may perhaps find valuable—I'm not bothered about the rest of them. I found myself using,

⁹⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁹¹ Following his second Bayreuth trip in 1889, Debussy tells Ernest Guiraud: "I envy you for having stayed in Paris and for not having had the desire to travel. How tedious, these leitmotifs! How they are perpetually hurled at one!... The *Nibelungen*, where there are pages which astound me, are a bundle of tricks ("machine à trucs"). They even taint my beloved *Tristan*, and it grieves me to feel myself detached from it." Grayson, *Genesis*, 226.

quite spontaneously too, a means of expression which I think is quite unusual, namely silence (don't laugh). It is perhaps the only way to give the emotion of a phrase its full value and, even if Wagner has used it, it seems to me it's only in an absolutely dramatic fashion, rather as in other doubtful dramas like those of Bouchardy, d'Ennery and others!⁹²

In May 1895 Debussy renounced a third version (or a second developed draft). On August 17, 1895 he wrote to Lerolle that the opera was complete; however, in 1900 Debussy continued revising this scene and even wrote a fourth version.

Furthermore, Debussy did not complete the orchestration until 1901 when Albert Carré agreed to produce the work at the Opéra Comique the following season. In 1902 Debussy expanded the interludes. Act IV/4 is exceptional to Debussy's composition process. Not only is it the first scene composed, but it is one of two scenes composed out of order and the only scene with so many versions.⁹³

Table 3.1: Dates of *Pelléas's* Composition, 1893 - 1895⁹⁴

Act	Month Completed
I	December 1893 - January/February 1894
II	Scene 1 finished before May 1894; the rest in August 1895
III	Scene 1 in May 1894; Scene 2 in July 1894; Scene 4 in August 1894
IV	Scene 3 in August 1894; Scene 4 in August/October 1893; Scene 4: Summer 1893, September/October 1893, May 1895, 1900
V	April/June 1895

Abbate has discovered, however, through Debussy's progress on later drafts that the final version incorporates the earlier versions' use of Wagner's rigid tonal system in which tonal regions are associated with characters and a text-determined

⁹² Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 54-56.

⁹³ Abbate, "*Tristan in Pelléas*," 121.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123. Claude Debussy, *Esquisses de Pelléas et Mélisande (1893-1895)*, Introduction by François Lesure (Geneva: Éditions Minkoff, 1977), 8.

harmonic framework. The drafts and even the final version reveal Act IV/4 to be the most harmonically conservative in the opera. That these systemic traces of textual imagery are based on characters as well as qualities of darkness and light reveal an indebtedness to Wagner that Debussy tried to obscure.⁹⁵ For example, in the initial draft when Mélisande speaks or is spoken of (by Pelléas), the tonality centers around F♯; Pelléas's responses are heard in E♭. The contrasting key is C major. In the final version of Act IV/4 Debussy still uses text-based tonality in paralleling the protagonists' vocal entrances on F♯ and F and their dominants, C♯ and C.⁹⁶

Identifying Wagner in Debussy's *Pelléas* is complicated, however, because it is unclear whether what was a Wagnerian influence was also, or instead, current French operatic practice that had already assimilated Wagnerian techniques.⁹⁷ Whereas Wagner's love scene features over-the-top romanticism, lush orchestral sonorities, daring chromatic passages, and loud dynamics, Debussy achieves these heightened emotions through orchestral and vocal restraint and silence. Each of these Act IV/4 examples from Gilman's "sound-wraiths" is marked "*très expressif*" though only in the context of *piano* or *pianissimo* dynamics.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Abbate, "Tristan in *Pelléas*," 136.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 132, 134-135.

⁹⁷ Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 468-479.

⁹⁸ Gilman, *Guide*, 58-84.

Example 3.1: Debussy's Love

Example 3.2: Debussy's Ecstasy

Example 3.3: Debussy's Rapture

Debussy certainly created an *après-Wagner* opera in his atmospheric setting with the climax of the love scene heard in *pianissimo* dynamics followed by a weighty silence. Still, in the most Wagnerian scene, Debussy did not manage to “invent new forms,” only to obscure the essentially Wagnerian character of the orchestration and vocal treatment.

Debussy’s musical vision for his opera moved beyond French models, Wagner, and classical development or formal procedures. He writes in “Why I Wrote *Pelléas*” (April, 1902):

Explorations previously made in the realm of pure music had led me toward a hatred of classical development, whose beauty is solely technical and can interest only the mandarins in our profession.⁹⁹

Debussy hears the language of the classical style in Mozart as well as in the music of the Romantics Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner. The distinction between Mozart and Wagner is whereas:

Mozart wrote architectural themes of a symphony, occurring at specified points, [Wagner] has themes representing things and people, but he develops these themes in a symphonic manner. He derives from Bach and Beethoven, as we see in *Tristan* and *Meistersinger*—not to speak of his orchestra which is a development and enlargement of the classical orchestra.¹⁰⁰

Guided by listening and pleasure, Debussy affirms that his music is not based on theory and cannot be learned.¹⁰¹ He claims to have faithfully represented the veiled language and disjointed style of Maeterlinck's play through his musical setting:

That's why there is no 'guiding thread' in *Pelléas* and why the characters are not subjected to the slavery of the 'leit-motif', as a blind man is the slave of his poodle or of his clarinet!¹⁰²

Wagner's application of symphonic form based on leitmotifs and symphonic development had the effect, for Debussy, of "killing dramatic music rather than saving it, as was proclaimed when Wagner was crowned king of opera."¹⁰³ Instead,

⁹⁹ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 74.

¹⁰⁰ Lockspeiser, *Life and Mind*, 205.

¹⁰¹ An excerpt from Maurice Emmanuel's transcription of a conversation between Guiraud and Debussy. Guiraud, referring to a half-diminished seventh chord on D, asks Debussy: "But how would you get out of this? I am not saying that what you do isn't beautiful, but it's theoretically absurd." Debussy responds: "There is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law." When Guiraud follows up, asking, "But how would you teach music to others?" Debussy dismissively replies: "Music cannot be learnt." Lockspeiser, *Life and Mind*, 206-207.

¹⁰² Nichols and Smith, *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande*, 184-186.

¹⁰³ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 36.

like Maeterlinck's dramatic language of simple words, fragmented sentences and ellipses, and veiled action, Debussy's music follows the *esprit* of the play rather than classical, or Wagnerian, syntax. Lockspeiser eloquently characterizes Debussy's "highly original technique." *Pelléas*:

[defies] analysis in terms of any of the conventional techniques... [for it] is based on a highly original technique of its own, evolved instinctively ... [and] ... designed to convey the *état d'âme* of the characters and the maze of unconscious conflicts between them... [It] is based on a novel interplay of rhythm and harmony, on a vocal style alternating between song and recitative, on the use of motives with psychological associations, and on a conception of the orchestra as a vast chamber ensemble fully participating in the drama.¹⁰⁴

This alternating vocal style was one of two strategies Debussy took in making *Pelléas* a real, true-to-life drama that seemed to draw from every day or theater rather than opera.

In Wagnerian music dramas, Debussy finds:

the words ... subordinated to the orchestral accompaniment, but not sufficiently. It is music that sings too continuously. Singing should be reserved for certain points.¹⁰⁵

His solution was for singers to forget they are singers.¹⁰⁶ Rather than giving extended, demanding, virtuosic arias or scenes, the vocalists barely sang above a restrained orchestral texture. As far back as 1885, Debussy identifies the balance of the vocal line with the orchestra: "I want to keep the tone lyrical without it being

¹⁰⁴ Lockspeiser, *Life and Mind*, 197-198.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

absorbed by the orchestra.”¹⁰⁷ Abbate sees the vocal role as secondary to the orchestra:

Pelléas is indeed a text spoken over an instrumental continuum, while *Tristan* is a symphony in which the voice lines determine the overall structure.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, a kaleidoscopic change of harmonies adds to the mystery and stasis of Maeterlinck’s episodic drama. Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas* is sufficiently vague in speech and action so as to invite a freer interpretation of voice and orchestration. Debussy negotiates the primacy of the orchestra or the vocal line depending on the function of the passage in Maeterlinck’s drama. David Grayson’s study of the four main drafts of *Pelléas* reveal:

In passages chiefly conveying factual information, Debussy employed a recitative-like style, with a vocal line that is speechlike in character and an accompaniment which supports and punctuates its inflections and cadence. For such passages, Debussy seems likely to have sketched the voice part first, concentrating on the rhythm and melodic contour of the text delivery. But for those moments that are more reflective, where characters give free expression to their feelings, the orchestra becomes more independent and prominent. In such cases, it seems, Debussy first worked out the purely musical development of the orchestra part and then superimposed the voice parts over it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Letter to Eugène Vasnier from the Villa Medici, October 19, 1885. Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁸ Abbate, “*Tristan in Pelléas*,” 126.

¹⁰⁹ Grayson has identified many of Debussy’s strategies that pointed to the importance of the voice or orchestra. For example, the voice parts were sometimes written as stems without noteheads if the vocal line remained on the same pitch. When the composer used colored pencils (blue for voice and black for accompaniment) as in Act II/1-2, observing the color of the bar line determines which part was written first. Act II, Scene 2 gave priority to the vocal line, and these pitches and melodic contour were the same in draft and final versions. Grayson, *Genesis*, 139-144.

Debussy's juxtaposition of both song and recitative speak to the freedom Debussy sought in setting Maeterlinck's play. He saw *Pelléas* as an "atmosphere of dreams" through which music was

not limited to a more or less exact representation of nature, but rather to the mysterious affinity between Nature and the Imagination."¹¹⁰

Debussy similarly differentiates his orchestra from Wagner's. *Pelléas's* orchestral forces are nearly identical to those of Wagner's *Tristan* (with the exception of a second harp and no bass clarinet). However, the texture of Debussy's orchestra is significantly lighter than Wagner's. With strings divided into as many as twelve parts and without doubling or extended *tutti* passages, *Pelléas's* orchestra more closely resembles a chamber orchestra of soloists than a large-scale symphonic orchestra for a Wagner music drama. Terror and rage are evoked not in loud, ominous *tutti* brass sections but rather by muted horns and trumpets and sparing use of trombones, as in the Grotto Scene Act II/3 and the interlude following Act I/1.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Debussy's use of instrumental timbres in the "pure state" is key. In a conversation with Victor Segalen in December 1908, Debussy explains:

People have learnt to mix timbres too much; to cast them in relief through obscurity or the sheer weight of numbers, without allowing their true characteristics to show through in performance. Wagner departs very far from this ideal; he doubles up most of his instruments two by two or three by three. But the worst of all is [Richard] Strauss who has cast all discretion to the winds... I, on the contrary, strive to retain the purity of each timbre and to put it in its proper place.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 74-75.

¹¹¹ Lockspeiser, *Life and Mind*, 199.

¹¹² Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 98.

Debussy sought to express the shadowy dreamscape of *Pelléas* using pure timbres and loosely textured orchestral passages.

The Wagnerian resonances coupled with the flexibility in Maeterlinck's language and action inspired Debussy's alternative to Wagner's music of the future. Though he was adamant about his having excised any Wagnerian traces in *Pelléas*, throughout the course of composing *Pelléas*, Debussy seems to have realized that he could not completely avoid using Wagnerian techniques. Later in the composition he included Wagnerian quotations and musico-dramatic techniques such as text-based tonality, sometimes overtly and other times in an obscured manner. Still, his musical style stands in stark contrast to the Wagnerian model. Through *Pelléas*, Debussy manages during the work's gestation from 1890-1902 and in his later revisions until his death in 1918, to create an operatic setting that draws on Wagner while at the same time moving beyond it.

Chapter 4

Schoenberg's Dilemma in embracing Brahms and Wagner

In Chapter 2, I discussed the programmatic elements Schoenberg explains in his 1949 program notes of *Pelleas*. He claims that he and other composers were attracted to Maeterlinck's

... art of dramatizing eternal problems of humanity in the form of fairy-tales, lending them timelessness without adhering to imitation of ancient styles.¹¹³

The timeless fairy-tale form of *Pelleas*, coupled with the flexibility in Maeterlinck's writing style and the abstruse action of the drama, opened up possibilities for Schoenberg to compose music that need not "[imitate] ancient styles." What exactly these ancient styles were we know not. The musical form Schoenberg did choose to fill out *Pelleas und Melisande*, Op. 5 (1902-03), was a combination of two opposing late nineteenth-century Austro-German models: Brahms's developing variations, associated with absolute music, particularly chamber music; and Wagner's real sequencing, associated with programmatic music such as operas. Like Maeterlinck's French Symbolist drama with its resonances of German Romanticism and British Aestheticism, Schoenberg's choice of a symphonic tone poem for *Pelleas* represents a point of contact between these purportedly averse styles of absolute music (chamber music) and programmatic music (opera).

Most Schoenberg scholars, drawing on Berg's 1920 analysis (that was written with Schoenberg's tacit approval), recognize the programmatic elements and character leitmotifs in *Pelleas*, but they have put music-text relationships and

¹¹³ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 116.

dramatic questions aside, opting instead to view Schoenberg's tone poem through the lens of absolute music. Berg writes:

Schoenberg's music—supported by the idea and the inner happening (*Geschehnis*) of this drama—renders the outer plot only in very broad gestures. It is never purely descriptive; the symphonic form of absolute music is always maintained. In fact, in the four main parts of this symphonic poem the four movements of a symphony are clearly demonstrable. These are: first, a large sonata movement; second, a three-part movement consisting of three short episodes (suggesting a scherzo-like character in at least one scene); third, a broadly spun-out Adagio; and finally, a finale in the form of a reprise. How such a purely musical form nevertheless agrees with Maeterlinck's drama, and how a few scenes of the play also achieve representation within these movements, are shown in the following analysis.¹¹⁴

I, too, choose to focus on absolute elements in order to demonstrate how Schoenberg used Wagnerian techniques of leitmotivic development and real sequencing throughout the composition of *Pelleas* before rejecting this procedure in favor of Brahmsian developing variation in the final part of the tone poem. The timing of Schoenberg's turning away from Wagner occurs immediately following Part III, the Love Scene, which, as I have mentioned, shares close plot parallels to the Tryst Scene of Wagner's *Tristan*, Act II. Though Schoenberg's Love Scene follows at best only tangential harmonic and formal similarities to Wagner's famous scene, is it not curious that after working through this Wagnerian section of the story Schoenberg decides that the Wagnerian example was too repetitive and no longer useful to him?

It was years before Schoenberg would return to a large Wagnerian scale – in 1911 he expands *Gurrelieder* into a massive choral cantata. In the intervening years, after working through Wagner's influence Schoenberg moved beyond the forms

¹¹⁴ Berg, "Thematic Analysis" in *Journal*, 273.

explored in *Verklärte Nacht* and *Pelleas*, returning to Brahmsian absolute music techniques while at the same time experimenting with more advanced harmonies and tonalities.

In his incorporation of both absolute and programmatic techniques, Schoenberg negotiates the division in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna between “conservative” Brahmsian absolute music and Wagnerian/New German School programmatic music. Carl Dahlhaus’s 1980 essay “Issues in Composition” eloquently lays out the formal divide between these competing styles, and his discussion serves as a useful framework for understanding Schoenberg’s formal approach to Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas*. Dahlhaus identifies the challenge in late nineteenth century symphonic composition as

[resolving] or [annulling] the discrepancy between the narrow dimensions of thematic ideas and the tendency towards large, expansive, monumental forms.”¹¹⁵

Two camps offered solutions to this compositional demand—Brahms the “formalist” (sometimes labeled “conservative”) and Wagner/Liszt’s “New German” school.

Brahms’s use of “developing variation,” the formal elaboration of reduced thematic material as an expositional procedure, was considered by Wagnerians to be “melodically insignificant,” or merely “inexpressive musical academicism.”¹¹⁶

Wagner and Liszt solved the formal problem of short themes in large forms through a process of real sequencing, an expository procedure created through a sequential structuring of motives and themes; this “web” or “woven fabric” (*Gewebe*) of leitmotifs abandoned conventional metric phrases and featured a “wandering” or

¹¹⁵ Dahlhaus, *Romanticism*, 48.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, 57-58.

“floating tonality”; formalist critics questioned the New German School’s achievement of melodic continuity in linking leitmotifs, which could result in the “mere cobbling” of a “concatenation of motives.”¹¹⁷ Schoenberg adds his own explanation of the position of the absolute music champions in criticizing the New German School:

It was the Brahmsian school which at this time fought violently against the sequences of the *Neudeutsche Schule*. Their attitude was based on the opposite viewpoint that unvaried repetition is cheap. And, in fact, to many composers sequences were a technique to make short stories long—to make out of four measures eight and out of eight measures sixteen or even thirty-two. It is especially the Russian composers, Rimsky-Korsakoff and Tchaikovsky, who must be blamed for this improper application of an otherwise acceptable technique. And it could have happened that this misuse might have eradicated every higher technical ambition.¹¹⁸

Dahlhaus suggests these stylistic debates were ultimately:

colored by aesthetic prejudices and partiality, which blinded the adherents of both sides to the fact that the composers’ problems were fundamentally the same.¹¹⁹

Schoenberg, like Struass and Zemlinsky before him, similarly realized the compatibility of these two techniques.

Schoenberg’s incorporation of both Brahmsian and Wagnerian techniques spanned from 1897 through the composition of *Pelleas* in 1902-1903, at which point Schoenberg decided the Wagnerian model and real sequence was too repetitive to be of artistic value. In “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg explains his adoption of Wagnerian techniques around this time:

... what had been [in 1883, following Wagner’s death] an object of dispute had been reduced [in 1897, following Brahms’s death] into the difference

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 46, 58-60.

¹¹⁸ Schoenberg, “Criteria for the Evaluation of Music,” *Style and Idea*, 130-131.

¹¹⁹ Dahlhaus, *Romanticism*, 57.

between two personalities, between two styles of expression, not contradictory enough to prevent the inclusion of qualities of both in one work.”¹²⁰

Dahlhaus agrees with Schoenberg’s assertion that the distinction between Wagner’s and Brahms’s strategies were more apparent than real:

both conceived of music as discourse in sound, in which every detail should be an original idea (or the outcome of one) and the whole a logically constructed chain, every link justified by what has preceded it.”¹²¹

Without abandoning Brahms’s techniques in 1897, then, Schoenberg also began looking for musical inspiration in poems and plays, experimenting with genres and techniques of the New German School, including large-scale two-dimensional sonata, which combines elements of sonata form and sonata cycle in a single-movement composition.¹²²

Comparing the poems and stories of Schoenberg’s early Wagnerian works and sketches reveal strong programmatic and formal developments (both Brahmsian and Wagnerian) that anticipate his setting of Maeterlinck’s *Pelleas*. Schoenberg’s thirty-four measure sketch for “Toter Winkel” (before 1899) develops solely by Wagnerian model and sequence.¹²³ A thirteen-measure fragmentary sketch from before 1898 based on “Hans im Glück” (Lucky Hans), a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, with its “very light, almost flippant character,” is reminiscent of the

¹²⁰ Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive” (1947), *Style and Idea*, 399.

¹²¹ Dahlhaus, *Romanticism*, 58.

¹²² Vande Moortele, *Two-Dimensional*, 199. Other examples of what Vande Moortele labels two-dimensional sonata form include Liszt’s B minor Sonata, *Tasso*, and *Die Ideale*; Strauss’s *Don Juan* and *Ein Heldenleben*; Schoenberg’s *First String Quartet* and *First Chamber Symphony*; and Zemlinsky’s *Second String Quartet*.

¹²³ Bailey, *Programmatic Elements*, 40.

opening of Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*.¹²⁴ Schoenberg's pre-1899 sketch for "Frühlings Tod" (Spring's Death), from a poem by Nikolaus Lenau (whose work served as the basis of Strauss's *Don Juan*), relies in genre and style on the New German School.¹²⁵ This more comprehensive draft features, as in the later completed works *Verklärte Nacht* and *Pelleas*, Schoenberg's incorporation of both Wagnerian ("model and sequence") and Brahmsian (small ternary) elements.¹²⁶

Pelleas, then, is the final work in a line of Schoenberg's early compositions that bridge Brahmsian/Wagnerian or absolute/programmatic styles. Like *Verklärte Nacht*, *Pelleas* is in the key of D minor, is based on a literary work, and is in a single movement.¹²⁷ From a formal perspective, Schoenberg discusses the Brahmsian, Wagnerian, and even Schoenbergian elements in his Op. 4 chamber work:

In my *Verklärte Nacht* the thematic construction is based on Wagnerian 'model and sequence' above a roving harmony on the one hand, and on Brahms' technique of developing variation—as I call it—on the other... But the treatment of the instruments, the manner of composition, and much of the sonority were strictly Wagnerian. I think there were also some Schoenbergian elements to be found in the length of some of the melodies, in the sonority, in contrapuntal and motivial combinations, and in the semi-contrapuntal movement of the harmony and its basses against the melody.¹²⁸

Critics and audiences picked up on the striking harmonic similarities to Wagner.

Schoenberg recalls a criticism after the work's premiere:

¹²⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹²⁵ Strauss's *Don Juan* is another example of what Vande Moortele has termed two-dimensional sonata form.

¹²⁶ The remainder of the sketch involves Brahmsian and Wagnerian development with extremely chromatic passages and emphasis on fully diminished and half-diminished seventh chords (channeling *Tristan*), dense textures, contrapuntal combinations of motives and themes. Ibid., 46-47.

¹²⁷ Berg, "Thematic Analysis" in *Journal*, 273.

¹²⁸ Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," *Style and Idea*, 399.

It sounds as if an orchestra playing Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* had become confused and mixed up."¹²⁹

It is interesting to note that despite the Wagnerian resonances in harmonic and formal structures in *Verklärte Nacht*, the naturalistic poem is a far cry from German Romantic legend. Two lovers walk together through the woods at night and the man pledges his devotion to the woman (who is pregnant with another man's child). Schoenberg's string sextet did "not illustrate any action or drama, but was restricted to portray nature and to express human emotions."¹³⁰ Still, while acknowledging that *Verklärte Nacht* could be considered absolute music (for appreciating the sextet without knowing what it illustrates), Schoenberg writes program notes in 1950 that describe the story through musically descriptive, rather than leitmotivic, passages.

Following *Verklärte Nacht*, Schoenberg turned to the Wagnerian story *Gurrelieder* (1900-1901), a song cycle for voice and piano taken from Jens Peter Jacobsen's poems; Wagnerian in sound and story, the work explores scenes of a Danish medieval love-tragedy that glances back to *Tristan*. After several unfinished opera drafts and sketches through which he pursued his dichotomous interests in naturalistic/Wagnerian-inspired literature and Brahmsian/Wagnerian compositional techniques, Schoenberg turns to Maeterlinck. *Pelleas* marks Schoenberg's first foray into writing for a large orchestra, and he takes up similar formalist and aesthetic ideas to his earlier works. However, unlike *Verklärte Nacht*, *Pelléas* is a quasi-Wagnerian story, yet no overt musical or harmonic references to *Tristan* are heard. Schoenberg had moved beyond merely working through *Tristan*

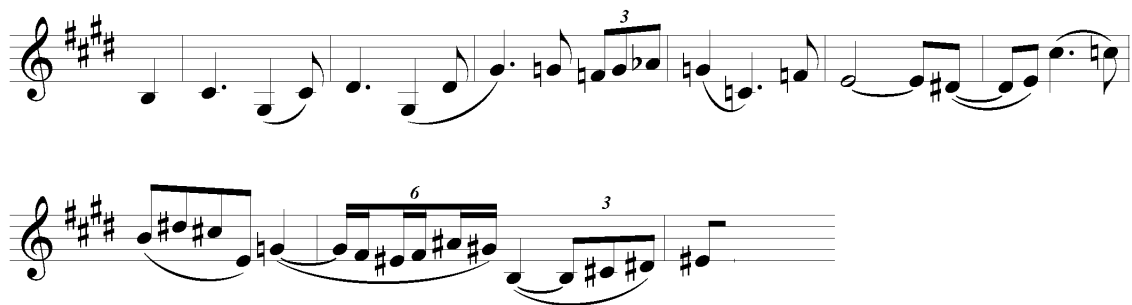
¹²⁹ Schoenberg, "How One Becomes Lonely" (1937), *Style and Idea*, 33.

¹³⁰ Bailey, *Programmatic Elements*, 31.

and the Wagnerian shadow; through Maeterlinck's open-ended drama Schoenberg incorporated character and supernatural leitmotifs and considered what Wagnerian techniques would continue to be useful to him. His answer by the end of its composition turned out to be very few.

The most Wagnerian scene, the Act IV/4 love scene, represents something different for Schoenberg than it did for Debussy. In 1949, Schoenberg said of this Love Theme (which encompasses the entire Part III of his tone poem): "Perhaps, as frequently happens in music, there is more space devoted to the love scenes."¹³¹ A slow movement with chromatic harmonies, voice-leading, and leitmotivic development, this section "seems literally to get carried away with itself."¹³²

Example 4.1: *Schoenberg's Love Theme*



Despite its length, Schoenberg's straightforward composition of the love scene (Part III) could not have been more alien to Debussy's experience of drafts and redrafts over the course of several years. This offers a sharp contrast between the two composers not only in terms of working style, but also in terms of how they viewed Wagner. Schoenberg did not suffer a Wagnerian anxiety of influence as Debussy had while composing *Pelléas*.

¹³¹ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 110.

¹³² Frisch, *Early Works*, 166-167.

Schoenberg's first draft, pages 1-4, includes 145 measures of a continuous draft in short score format; with a six-bar insert from page 8, 151 of the 159 measures of the final version (mm. 302-460) are accounted for. Benson's sketch studies reveal that the draft of music for the love scene (Part III) is:

... nearly identical to the final version. The principal melodic lines, bass lines, harmonies, keys, meters, tempos, and formal shapes of the finished composition are all present, in outline, in this first short-score draft. The correlation is so close that the draft could almost serve as a piano reduction for this section of the piece. Only the transitional passages, both before and after the love scene, underwent significant revision later.¹³³

Frisch has noted the parallels between *Tristan* and Schoenberg's *Pelleas*, Part III. Schoenberg's measure 12 features a half-diminished seventh chord that "seems an almost direct reference to the 'Tristan' chord", though the rondo-like character and sonata-like elements take on a different shape from Wagner's love duet from *Tristan*, Act II.¹³⁴

Following *Pelleas*'s murder by his half-brother Golaud at the end of this love scene/Part III of the tone poem, Schoenberg struggles to find expression for the remainder of his work. His first draft of Part IV continues the Wagnerian leitmotivic sequencing, though the music is too repetitive without leading to anything new.¹³⁵ This was the point at which Schoenberg "became aware of the inferiority of this technique."¹³⁶ Schoenberg later explains why Wagner's model and sequence is a

¹³³ Benson, "Crisis," 75-76. Like much of the tone poem, composed in short score or a three-, four-, or five-staff system (sometimes with only a single staff that contains music), Schoenberg outlines themes and formal organization quickly and broadly; one draft features a "275-measure 'endless melody' for the end of *Pelléas* as Schoenberg first conceived it."

¹³⁴ Frisch, *Early Works*, 173.

¹³⁵ Benson, "Crisis," 87.

¹³⁶ Erwin Stein, selected and ed. *Arnold Schoenberg Letters*, trans. by Eithne Wilkins

“primitive technique” with “lesser merit” than developing variation. The “new and special effort” of writing variation produces logical variations on and consequences of earlier themes rather than merely repeating unvaried or slightly varied passages.

Accommodations to the popular demands became even more imperative when Wagner’s evolution of harmony expanded into a revolution of form. While preceding composers and even his contemporary, Johannes Brahms, repeated phrases, motives and other structural ingredients of themes only in varied forms, if possible in the form of what I call *developing variation*, Wagner, in order to make his themes suitable for memorability, had to use sequences and semi-sequences, that is, unvaried or slightly varied repetitions differing in nothing essential from first appearances, except that they are exactly transposed to other degrees.

Why there is a lesser merit in such procedure than in variation is obvious, because variation requires a new and special effort. But the damage of this inferior method of construction to the art of composing was considerable. With very few exceptions, all followers and even opponents of Wagner became addicts of this more primitive technique: Bruckner, Hugo Wolf, Richard Strauss, and even Debussy and Puccini.

A new technique had to be created, and in this development Max Reger, Gustav Mahler, and also I myself played a role. But the destructive consequences did not cease because of that. And unfortunately many of today’s composers, instead of connecting ideas through developing variation, thus showing consequences derived from the basic idea and remaining within the boundaries of human thinking and its demands of logic, produce compositions which become longer and broader only by numerous unvaried repetitions of a few phrases.¹³⁷

Mark Benson richly illustrates and annotates Schoenberg’s change in technique between the first three parts that end with the death of Pelleas (characterized by model and sequence as well as techniques of developing variation) and the final section (which uses solely developing variation). Benson argues that this break from real sequencing in Part IV signals the end of Schoenberg’s Wagnerian period. Benson’s language is too strong here; though

and Ernst Kaiser (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 54-56.

¹³⁷ Schoenberg, “Criteria for the Evaluation of Music,” *Style and Idea*, 129-130.

Schoenberg turned away from model-sequence, he continued exploring New German School characteristics of extended tonality and large-scale form in his String Quartet no. 1, D minor, Op. 7 (1907-08), and the Kammer-symphonie No. 1, E major, Op. 9 (1906).

Still, Benson's discussion of Brahmsian developing variation that is interrupted by leitmotivic development in an open-ended harmonic plan in the first three parts, and the resumption in the final part of Brahmsian developing variations featuring the interaction of character leitmotifs, the introduction of new themes, and a recapitulation of earlier themes is helpful for my discussion of how Schoenberg used Maeterlinck's drama to work through and beyond the influence of Wagner.

The first three sections of the tone poem—

first, a large sonata movement; second, a three-part movement consisting of three short episodes (suggesting a scherzo-like character in at least one scene); third, a broadly spun-out Adagio"¹³⁸

proceed largely from Wagnerian leitmotivic technique. Formal "Brahmsian" theme types and compositional techniques such as small-scale sequence and linkage techniques are repeatedly interrupted by Wagnerian programmatic themes and motives in various keys. Therefore, expositions (such as the Wedding Theme and the scherzo) are unable to develop. The music is organized according to large-scale sequence (as seen in Schoenberg's early prose outline of *Pelleas*) with complex contrapuntal models featuring juxtapositions of character/mood leitmotifs in open-ended harmonic segments.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Berg, "Thematic Analysis" in *Journal*, 273.

¹³⁹ See Chapter 2, pp. 27-28.

Whereas the use of small-scale sequence and linkage techniques in the exposition of the Wedding Theme (Part 1) draw on Brahmsian developing variation, its chromatic sequencing, open-ended harmonic plan, and interruption of thematic development by leitmotifs is unquestionably Wagnerian. For example, the Golaud motive in mm. 44-45 is developed by a small-scale sequence (tonic in m. 44 and ii in m. 45); the A up-beat to m. 46 is both the end of Golaud's theme and the beginning of the Wedding Ring motive, a linkage technique.

Example 4.2: *Schoenberg's Golaud*



Where the example ends, on the second beat of m. 47, Golaud's motive returns to finish this four-measure phrase of the Wedding Theme. Though both small-scale sequence and linkage techniques are indicative of Brahmsian developing variation, in the next phrase, mm. 48-51, Schoenberg treats the earlier phrase chromatically so that it becomes a real sequence. The third and final phrase of the first period of the Wedding Theme, mm. 52-55, develops the Ring motive and dissolves into a fortissimo tutti dominant seventh of B-flat, creating a Wagnerian open-ended harmonic plan that is Brahmsian in concept. The second period of the Wedding Theme is a real sequence of the first, and later statements are interrupted by programmatic intrusions (Fate in m. 73 and Melisande in m. 83). The dense textures further obscure the motives, obviating the possibility of further development and ending in liquidation.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Benson, "Crisis," 76-80.

Pelleas's and Melisande's scene at the fountain in the woods, which I discussed in Chapter 2, comprises the beginning of the tri-partite Part II, which also includes Melisande at the castle tower letting down her hair for Pelleas to kiss and a scene between the jealous Golaud threatening Pelleas in the castle's underground vaults. This first scherzo is based on a classic antecedent-consequent relationship in which the consequent retrospectively becomes a transition. In mm. 161-207, various themes—including the scherzo melody, Melisande's awakening love for Pelleas, the Ring motive, a diminution of the Ring motive, and the Pelleas theme—are heard in a complex counterpoint that modulates every five, six, eight, or sixteen measures.¹⁴¹

The final part of the piece represents an attempt to recover the work from the “many sequences of the preceding parts [that] were only of moderate artistic value.”¹⁴² Schoenberg's solution is a return to developing variation through a contrapuntal web of character leitmotifs, the introduction of new themes, and a recapitulation of earlier themes. Schoenberg was proud of his compositional achievement, as it represents “the first time that intuitively and consciously I tried to achieve a more irregular and, and indeed, more involved form and, as I can now see, did achieve it.”¹⁴³ Just as Debussy spent years removing anything “parasitic” from his *Pelléas*,

... in his revisions [of the Unheil-Stimmung “Atmosphere of Disaster” section of part IV], Schoenberg removed nearly every trace of the modern [read, Wagnerian] techniques he had used in the earlier sections in order to achieve

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 82. See Figure 3.5 in Benson's “Crisis.”

¹⁴² Schoenberg, “A Self-Analysis,” *Style and Idea*, 77-78.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 89.

clarity of texture and form... by the time Schoenberg left Berlin in 1903, his Wagnerian phase had ended.”¹⁴⁴

In 1918 Zemlinsky was to conduct a performance of Schoenberg’s *Pelleas*, though Zemlinsky found the last section too long and asked Schoenberg if he could cut some of the musical material that recapitulates earlier sections of the tone poem.

Schoenberg’s response explains both why he thought this section the best in the entire work:

I consider the last part, precisely that from [rehearsal number] 50 on, the best in the whole work, indeed the only thing in the work, with a few exceptions from what goes before, that is still of any interest to me now. Particularly the passage 50-55 [mm. 461-504].

I very clearly remember it was here for the first time (while I was composing it) that I realized the many sequences of the preceding parts were only of moderate artistic value and it was here (and I am amazed at your remark about “the peculiar structure of two-measure periods that was at that time still one of your characteristics”, which applies to much of the rest of the work, but not at all to this part) for the first time that intuitively and consciously I tried to achieve a more irregular and, indeed, more involved form and, as I can now see, did achieve it.¹⁴⁵

as well as why earlier sections were only of “moderate artistic value.”

Furthermore, though I think you’re right in holding that it isn’t formal perfection that constitutes the merit of this work, the deficiency appears much more obviously in other passages, whereas here it doesn’t strike me as being particularly apparent. (Frankly, in this respect too I think the passage better than what precedes it).¹⁴⁶

Schoenberg’s *Pelleas* marks his engagement with, and turn away from (until *Gurrelieder* in 1911), a large-scale orchestral work in the style of Wagner and the New German School. *Pelleas* draws heavily on Wagnerian techniques of dense chromaticism, extended tonality, sequential pitch organization, and use of leitmotifs

¹⁴⁴ Benson, “Crisis,” 100.

¹⁴⁵ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 19.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

that interact as the story progresses. As Benson argues, the fourth part of *Pelleas* marks a dramatic shift in Schoenberg's compositional approach away from leitmotivic development. Schoenberg's sketches and later statements confirm his impasse with Wagnerian technique—he only managed to achieve something greater than the “moderate artistic value” from the chromatic sequencing of leitmotifs when he embraced developing variation as an expositional procedure.

Chapter 5

Debussy and Schoenberg Reappraised

As we have seen, through their settings of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902 and 1903, Debussy and Schoenberg automatically turned to Wagnerian compositional and aesthetic examples but later attempted to disengage from and move beyond aspects of Wagner's model. Each begins to compose in a way that lays the foundation for his more mature style, thereby solving problems of Wagner's musical influence. Having rejected the aesthetic merits of leitmotifs (for Debussy) and leitmotivic development (for Schoenberg), however, neither composer completes another work in the same genre as his *Pelléas* setting. These musical insights and innovations developed while composing *Pelléas* open up new directions anticipating and characterizing Debussy's and Schoenberg's later works that in one sense diverge further from each other, and yet in another sense incorporate Maeterlinck's dramatic and philosophical ideas.

Debussy begins his composition of *Pelléas* with a desire to move beyond conventional formal structures; Schoenberg, however, is slower to acknowledge the merits of writing freely, unconstrained by historical notions of harmony and tonality. In a conversation with his former *Conservatoire* teacher Ernest Guiraud in 1888, Debussy claims: "There is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law." When Guiraud follows up, asking, "But how would you teach music to others?" Debussy dismissively replies: "Music cannot be learnt."¹⁴⁷ By 1910,

¹⁴⁷ Lockspeiser, *Life and Mind*, 206-207.

Schoenberg, too, had moved beyond a reliance on learned techniques of Brahms and Wagner. In program notes from January 14, 1910 in Vienna, he writes:

I am being forced in this direction not because my invention or technique is inadequate, nor because I am uninformed about all the other things the prevailing aesthetics demand, but that I am obeying an inner compulsion, which is stronger than any up-bringing: that I am obeying the formative process which, being the one natural to me, is stronger than my artistic education.¹⁴⁸

The relationship of Debussy's *Pelléas* and Schoenberg's later dramatic works as positioned with regards to Maeterlinck's oeuvre reveals previously unrecognized similarities between the two composers. This comparison is strengthened by further examining commonalities between the two composers' uses of harmonic language, operatic projects, and attraction to Maeterlinck's work.

Significant differences between Debussy's and Schoenberg's careers have thus far rendered a comparison unlikely. The two were at different stages in their careers in terms of accepting or rejecting Wagner's examples throughout their compositions of Maeterlinck's drama. Debussy independently chose to go against the prevailing trend of French composers such as Massenet, Chausson, and d'Indy, who followed Wagner's example; Debussy offered an *après-Wagner* alternative for French opera moving forward. *Pelléas* was one of the most important works in Debussy's career, and while it took him thirteen years from the initial musical and dramatic ideas (and nine years, 1893-1902, working with Maeterlinck's play), Debussy continued revising the opera until his death in 1918. Schoenberg, on the other hand, completed *Pelleas* in only eight months. He composed his Op. 5 tone poem with the intention of working through his multiple *fin-de-siècle* influences –

¹⁴⁸ Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader*, 12.

Wagner; Brahms; Dehmel's naturalistic, mystical poetry; and his interest in the humanity of Maeterlinck's characters. While Schoenberg may have been looking for a new direction to Wagner's "music of the future," he was not trying to redefine a musical genre. His tone poem takes great liberties in local tonalities, harmonies, and key choices, but it maintains conventional large-scale sonata-allegro forms. Additionally, Schoenberg's tone poem was in line with contemporaneous settings of tone poems by his mentors Strauss (*Sinfonia Domestica*, Op. 53, 1902-03) and Zemlinsky (*Die Seejungfrau*, or *The Little Mermaid*, 1902-03). Like Strauss in the 1880s, Zemlinsky in the 1890s, and Webern after them, Schoenberg drew on late nineteenth-century Austro-German models in an effort to develop his own voice. Through his composition of *Pelléas*, Schoenberg also looked beyond post-Wagnerian models, loosening up his indebtedness to earlier examples and leading the way to his later experimental works, smaller scale pieces, and pan-tonality.

Debussy's and Schoenberg's careers and compositions, furthermore, are rarely viewed side by side because of the few published references each makes with regards to the other's works. Letters, reviews, and writings point to the conclusion that at least Debussy never attended a performance of Schoenberg's works, which were performed in Paris. Additionally, French editions of Schoenberg's music were available from at least 1906. Debussy explained, in 1914, likely referring to Schoenberg's music: "There comes a moment in life when one wants to concentrate, and now I've made a resolution to listen to as little music as possible."¹⁴⁹ Likewise

¹⁴⁹ François Lesure and Roy Howat, "Debussy, Claude," *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed February 20, 2013,

Schoenberg had opportunities to hear and study Debussy's music. A program note from 1949 reveals that he was familiar with Debussy's *Pelléas*, for he claims that had he made *Pelleas* into an opera (as planned but not executed):

It would have differed from Debussy's. I might have missed the wonderful perfume of the poem; but I might have made my characters more singing.¹⁵⁰

Partially as a result of working through the Wagnerian influence in their settings of *Pelléas*, both went through changes in their harmonic and musical language. Even after completing *Pelléas* for the 1902 première, Debussy continued fine-tuning his conception of his only completed opera. Though he moved onto additional instrumental works as well as multiple dramatic works for ballet and incidental music for theater, Debussy continued to wrestle with Wagner. In his *Children's Corner Suite* (1908), Debussy adopts a ragtime style. In the second part of "Golliwog's Cakewalk," the sixth and final piece of the suite, Debussy mocks Wagner's Prélude to *Tristan und Isolde* by using the original pitches of the Tristan chord as playful arpeggios and chordal accompaniments to undermine the serious nature of Wagner's original. Debussy's decision to reference Wagner, even as a form of parody, shows the anxiety and influence Wagner continued to exert on twentieth-century composers and Debussy in particular, even after composing *Pelléas*. In *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911), Debussy's only completed score of incidental music that, at fifty-five minutes, is about half the length of *Pelléas*, critics identified

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/07353>.

¹⁵⁰ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 116.

Parsifal-like qualities in the work scored for full orchestra with chorus and soloists.¹⁵¹

Though both Debussy and Schoenberg experimented with harmonies and tonality in their *fin-de-siècle* works, Schoenberg's direction took a different course, especially from the time of his initial pan-tonal experiments in the third and fourth movements of his Second String Quartet in 1908 and continuing in his later twelve-tone compositions following Debussy's death in 1918. Still, Schoenberg saw his own musical experimentations as being in line with those of Debussy and his contemporaries. In an interview in 1909 in which he challenged the Viennese critics who railed against his extreme experimentation in the Second String Quartet, Schoenberg writes:

...development always means a reaction against the thing that caused it... And I believe, if I contemplate my own development, that I can in effect describe the development of the last ten or twelve years of music—much in me coincides with Reger, Strauss, Mahler, Debussy, and others.¹⁵²

Schoenberg did not see his vastly different works as being conceptually alien to Debussy's, and he found the latter's contributions important to the history of twentieth-century music. In notes on "Materials for Orchestration," an unfinished book project for teaching orchestration dating from the late 1940s, Schoenberg identifies where his own music and Debussy's fits into the post-Wagnerian framework. He makes distinctions between:

¹⁵¹ Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre*, 227.

¹⁵² "With Arnold Schoenberg: An Interview by Paul Wilhelm," January 10, 1909 published in *Neues Wiener Journal*. See also "Open Letter to Ludwig Karpath" and "About Music Criticism" in *Der Merker*, October 1909. Second String Quartet premiered December 21, 1908. Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader*, 57-58.

Pre-Romantic, Romantic, modernistic Wagnerian, Mahler
Strauss & Debussy
Schoenberg—Stravinsky—Hindemith American

Schoenberg tellingly offers the number of examples he would include of each composer from Wagner to the present day; we do not know whether his criteria is the importance of or the number of works in his proposed history of western music:

... at least half of the examples should be taken from Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian composers that is 50% - 450 examples
Wagner 30% (135 examples)
Mahler 15% (67 examples)
Strauss 12% (54 examples)
Debussy 10% (45 examples)
Tchaikovsky 9% (40 examples)
Ravel 5% (22 examples)
Schoenberg 8% (36 examples)
Stravinsky 8% (36 examples)
Bartok 3% (14 examples) for total of 451 examples.¹⁵³

The Wagnerian influence looms large – examples of Wagner’s music comprise more than half of the examples of any other single composer. Even approaching the end of his career, Schoenberg recognizes the indisputable importance (and likely the influence) of Wagner on every Western composer that has followed him. It is interesting to note that Schoenberg would include more examples by Debussy than of his own work and also that he and his rival Igor Stravinsky would both have the same number of musical examples presented. In addition to Schoenberg’s sketches for a textbook, Debussy’s and Schoenberg’s settings of *Pelléas et Mélisande* point to comparable developments in the careers of each composer.

Already in their *Pelléas* settings, we have seen their more expansive, post-Wagnerian harmonic experimentations. Their uses of the whole-tone scale,

¹⁵³ Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader*, 292-93.

unresolved chords, and only occasional cadences convey the air of mystery and uncertainty that pervades Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*. Debussy's reliance on the whole-tone scale creates a dreamlike, mysterious, anachronistic atmosphere that problematizes the action of the drama. Schoenberg's use of the whole-tone scale (such as Melisande's death at the end of Part IV) differs from Debussy's, as it derives from the Wagnerian model of tonality. Additionally, Schoenberg uses stacked fourths, which both obscure the root and contribute to unstable harmonies and a sense of wandering, such as in the Forest scene where Golaud loses his way and comes across Mélisande for the first time.¹⁵⁴

Neither work maintains regular perfect cadences. For example, the trumpet resolves to the tonic C# major only in the final six bars of Debussy's opera.¹⁵⁵ Debussy's harmonic framework centers around key areas that correspond with major events in the drama, though the tonality is constantly changing.¹⁵⁶ This extended use of modality rather than a regular tonic key area was confusing to listeners such as Rimsky-Korsakov, who considered the harmonic combinations to be "incomprehensible."¹⁵⁷ Unresolved seventh and ninth chords in Debussy's opera problematize the guise of truth and highlight the veil of mystery behind Maeterlinck's non-linear dialogues. The unprepared and unresolved ninth chords function in Debussy's opera as a thickening of the melodic line, implying the many unclear transformations through which the characters undergo during the course of

¹⁵⁴ Philip Alan Friedheim, "Tonality and Structure in the Early Works of Schoenberg" (PhD diss., New York University, 1963), 204-205, 215.

¹⁵⁵ Orledge, *Debussy and the theatre*, 95.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-99.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

the drama.¹⁵⁸ This is not the same thick texture and lush orchestration as Schoenberg's tone poem; instead of heavy chromatic passages, Debussy's evocative music is modal and restrained in its orchestration. Debussy also uses bass pedal points and silence to contribute to the sense of mystery and alienation.

While Debussy's opera lacks large-scale formal and harmonic organization, Schoenberg's tone poem largely maintains conventional sonata-allegro structures in terms of unified tonality and routine progressions and cadences. Most of Schoenberg's tone poem is highly chromatic on the local level, avoiding regular cadences. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the fourth part of the tone poem in which Schoenberg rejects the Wagnerian leitmotivic example and begins composing intuitively, features a more complex harmonic language that avoids direct and implied occurrences of the tonic d minor.¹⁵⁹

Harmonically, Schoenberg considers *Pelleas* to represent in his compositional development:

a more rapid advance in the direction of extended tonality. Here are many features that have contributed towards building up the style of my maturity, and many of the melodies contain extratonal intervals that demand extravagant movement of the harmony.¹⁶⁰

Schoenberg's tone poem features the increased use of chromaticism including obscured chord progressions and harmonies with appoggiaturas and neighbor notes on the local level, contrapuntal experimentation, and German sixth chords that replace dominants and play with functional expectations.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵⁹ Friedheim, "Tonality," 207, 225, 234. Frisch, *Early Works*, 163, 172-73.

¹⁶⁰ Schoenberg, "My Evolution," *Style and Idea*, 79-84.

Just as Maeterlinck's open-ended drama led to Schoenberg's most advanced examples of extended tonality, the poetry of Stefan George inspired Schoenberg's first wanderings into atonality, or, to use Schoenberg's term, "pan-tonality." The third and fourth movements of his Second String Quartet, Op. 10 (1907-08), feature a soprano singing two poems from *Der siebente Ring* (*The Seventh Ring*). The first line of "Entrückung" ("Rapture") is "I feel the wind from other planets," suggesting the strange words evoking the unknown (as opposed to the distant past in Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*) helped Schoenberg to articulate his musical ambitions.

Schoenberg later writes about his first atonal experiments:

... in the third and fourth movements, the key is presented distinctly at all the main dividing-points of the formal organization. Yet the overwhelming multitude of dissonances cannot be counterbalanced any longer by occasional returns to such tonal triads as represent a key. It seemed inadequate to force a movement into the Procrustean bed of a tonality without supporting it by harmonic progressions that pertain to it. This dilemma was my concern, and it should have occupied the minds of all my contemporaries also. That I was the first to venture this decisive step will not be considered universally a merit—a fact I regret but have to ignore."¹⁶¹

Das Buch der hängenden Gärten (*The Book of the Hanging Gardens*), Op. 15 (1908-09), similarly features atonality in this fifteen-part song cycle based on poems of Stefan George.

Debussy's early operatic and programmatic projects include *Zuleima* (*ode symphonique*, 1886), *Diane au bois* (1880s), *Axël* (1887-89), and *Rodrigue et Chimène* (1890-92). Debussy abandoned these text-based projects largely because the stories and character portrayals did not allow Debussy sufficient flexibility in grafting his musical ideas onto the text. Though he had worked on *Diane au bois*

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 86.

since 1881, when he writes this letter to Vasnier on January 29, 1886, he has nearly decided to give up the operatic project.¹⁶²

I'm hard at it – one day I think I'm on the right track, the next I'm afraid I've made a mistake. Never before has a work filled me with such misgivings. It's so difficult to portray the countless emotions a character undergoes and still keep the form as simple as possible; and in *Diane* the scenes were constructed with no thought of their being set to music, so they could seem too long and it's the very devil to keep up the interest and ward off yawns of boredom.¹⁶³

Debussy has “nearly [given] up writing for the theater” when he discovered the ambiguous, mysterious drama of Pelléas. By following the contour of Maeterlinck's dialogues, Debussy abandons classical and Wagnerian forms and harmonies, instead creating speech-like vocal lines within constantly shifting modalities. It was this adaptability in Maeterlinck's play and the humanity of the characters that Debussy found so appealing and so compatible with his own musical ideas.

Like Debussy, Schoenberg had attempted to write operas prior to his composition of *Pelleas*; the diversity of these uncompleted projects (*Odoaker*, *Aberglaube*, and others) suggests his struggle to realize the type of opera he sought to create. Whatever obstacles Schoenberg experienced in completing these *fin-de-siècle* operatic projects he overcame in working through Maeterlinck's story in his Op. 5 tone poem. Though his *Verklärte Nacht* and earlier sections of *Pelleas* show harmonic and contrapuntal experimentation that anticipates his later compositions, he claims that it was in the Fourth Part of *Pelleas* that he began to compose intuitively. This manner of direct expression seeking to eliminate “the conscious will in art” became a driving (and, between 1909 and 1910, a halting) element in

¹⁶² Grayson, “Stage,” in *Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 67-70.

¹⁶³ Lesure and Nichols, *Debussy Letters*, 15-16.

Schoenberg's compositional life. During these two years he composed only the *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke* (*Six Little Piano Pieces*), Op. 19 (1911) and *Hergewächse* (*Foliage of the heart*) for Soprano, Op. 20 (1911), the latter set to the text of a poem by Maeterlinck.

Schoenberg's first opera *Erwartung* (1909), based on a libretto by Marie Pappenheim, is the monodrama of a nightmare of a deranged woman who walks through the woods alone at night, at the end discovering the dead body of her lover whom she may have killed. Her myriad thoughts and emotions within a single second are stretched out over the course of a half hour; in the four hundred twenty-six measure opera, no thematic materials return, and the work's unconventional harmonies and chords are pan-tonal in conception.

Schoenberg's atonal and athematic musical depiction of a character undergoing dramatic emotional developments recalls Debussy's melodic strategy in *Pelléas*. In a 1909 letter to his friend Edwin Evans, Jr., who was soon to deliver a lecture on Debussy's opera at London's Royal Academy of Music, Debussy writes:

Before all, you will do well to eliminate from discussion whether there is, or is not, melody in 'Pelléas.' It must be decisively understood that melody—or song (Lied)—is one thing, and that lyrical expression is another. It is illogical to think that one can make a fixed melodic line hold the innumerable nuances through which a character passes.¹⁶⁴

Though in his own composition of *Pelleas* Schoenberg clearly works with a set of leitmotifs that he put in counterpoint with each other in order to describe the changing relationships between characters, by 1909 he had moved away from both Wagnerian and the Brahmsian conventions, opting instead for an absence of melody

¹⁶⁴ Grayson, *Genesis*, 231.

and themes that responds to the emotional developments of his characters. Like Debussy, then, Schoenberg seeks to achieve a direct emotional expression freed from a reliance on conventional models. He writes to Ferruccio Busoni in 1909 that music:

should be an expression of feeling, as our feelings, which bring us in contact with our subconscious, really are, and no false child of feelings and 'conscious logic'¹⁶⁵

This ideal of direct emotional expression continued to have a profound impact on Schoenberg's compositional process and approach to musical structure in his works from 1909 until his composition of *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21 (1912). In 1911, Schoenberg writes in a letter to Kandinsky, a contributor to *Der Blaue Reiter Almanack* and an admirer of music as a non-representational art form:

art belongs to the *unconscious*! One must express *oneself*! Express oneself *directly*! Not one's taste, or one's upbringing, or one's intelligence, knowledge or skill. Not all these *acquired* characteristics, but that which is *inborn, instinctive*. And all form-making, all *conscious* form-making, is connected with some kind of mathematics, or geometry, or with the golden section or suchlike.¹⁶⁶

Schoenberg's 1913 opera *Die Glückliche Hand* (The Hand of Fate), Op. 18, grapples with and moves beyond the Wagnerian legacy. Schoenberg takes elements of Wagnerian music dramas (a *Gesamtkunstwerk* set to his own libretto and with specific stage directions), though the world of Schoenberg's opera is closer to that of Maeterlinck's and Debussy's *Pelléas* than to Wagner. It is not leitmotivic; there are no character themes and few themes in general. At this stage, Schoenberg is writing intuitively, though he allows himself to return to counterpoint and the development

¹⁶⁵ Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader*, 113.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

of themes in an abstract way. He envisions a sort of “magic theater” in which the audience experiences feelings by visual and auditory stimuli. In a letter to Alma Mahler on October 7, 1910, during the opera’s composition, Schoenberg writes of his goal of a “magic theater”:

I would most prefer to write for a magic theater. If tones, when they occur in any sort of order, can arouse feelings, then colors, gestures, and movements must also be able to do this. Even when they otherwise have no meaning recognizable to the mind. Music also doesn’t have this meaning!¹⁶⁷

A magic theater more closely resembles a type of Debussyian dreamscape than a Wagnerian medieval-inspired legend. In his libretto Schoenberg gives specific instructions regarding the mood and character of the *mise-en-scène* not limited to colored lighting, specified movements and gestures of the characters, and scenery and costumes. His inclusion of gestures and distancing effects from lighting recall more strongly Maeterlinck’s shadowy theater and prescriptions for actors to mimic puppets and therefore lose their individuality. Furthermore, Schoenberg’s tragic Schopenhauerian plot in which “the man” continually makes the same mistakes and loses the woman he loves, has a timeless, placeless quality representative of “eternal problems of humanity.” This was Schoenberg’s “Allemonde,” the fictitious world in which the tragic love triangle among Pelléas, Mélisande, and Golaud played out. In a lecture Schoenberg delivered in Breslau in 1928, he discusses *Die Glückliche Hand’s* *mise-en-scène* and the mood:

At the beginning, you see twelve light spots on a black background: the faces of the six women and six men. Or rather: *their gazes*. This is part of the mime performance, a medium of the stage. The impression under which this was written was approximately this: it was as if I perceived a chorus of stares... But the most decisive thing is that an emotional incident, definitely

¹⁶⁷ Auner, *A Schoenberg Reader*, 87-88.

originating in the plot, is expressed not only by *gestures, movement, and music*, but also by *colors and light*; and it must be evident that *gestures, colors, and light* are treated here similarly to the way tones are usually treated – that music is made with them; that figures and shapes, so to speak, are formed from individual light values and shades of color, which resemble the forms, figures and motives of music.¹⁶⁸

Schoenberg calls his *Gesamtkunstwerk* “making music with the media of the stage.”¹⁶⁹ His emphasis on the interaction of music with gesture, gaze, colors, light, and movement recalls Maeterlinck’s marionette theater – of actors pretending to be puppets that are pretending to be people. The actor for Maeterlinck is too obtrusive; he instead wants

a shadow, a reflection, a projection of symbolic forms...beings without destinies, whose identity would no longer come to erase that of the hero.¹⁷⁰

In a 1913 letter to Emil Hertzka, General Director of Universal Edition, Schoenberg denies the comparison of his music to a dream with obvious symbolism. Regarding *Die glückliche Hand*, Schoenberg writes:

The whole thing should have the effect (not of a dream) but of chords. Of music. It must never have the effect of symbols, or meaning, or thoughts, but simply the play of colors and forms. Just as music never drags a meaning around with it, at least not in the form in which it manifests itself, even though meaning is inherent in its nature, so too should this simply be like sounds for the eye, and so far as I am concerned, everyone is free to think or feel something similar to what he thinks or feels while hearing music.¹⁷¹

Though Schoenberg denies symbolism and the comparison to dreams, his ideas are not so far removed from those of Maeterlinck and Debussy. The Viennese language of dreams in the *fin-de-siècle* was linked to Freud’s ideas of the unconscious from

¹⁶⁸ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 32-35.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ McGuinness, *Theatre*, 107, 109-110.

¹⁷¹ Letter to Emil Hertzka, General Director of Universal Edition, 1913, Berlin, Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 15-16

The Interpretation of Dreams (1899). Schoenberg dissociates the concepts of music and dreams in a Freudian sense, through which a dream is a vehicle for exploring the subconscious and explaining the actions and emotions of a person. In this sense music would have to stand for something to be interpreted. By denying the symbol and the dream, Schoenberg is denying the need for a mediated communication; his ideal was direct expression. Mediation of any kind, even from the actor to the audience member, seems to violate Schoenberg's paradigm.

In *Die Glückliche Hand*, one singing character is reinforced by a "chorus of gazes" (rather than singers) situated behind a curtain.¹⁷² Schoenberg's inclusion of a curtain onstage recalls a distancing effect from Lugué-Poë's original production of *Pelléas* in 1893. A screen separates the audience from the actors and their shadowy movements and ambiguous dialogue. Both strategies rely on the physical separation as an alienation effect, inviting the audience to dissociate real actors or singers performing the drama (mit Musik).

According to Schoenberg's stage directions, the chorus of gazes is obscured from view, suggesting that Schoenberg, too, sought to communicate the music directly, as if it was coming from the audience members' subconscious rather than from actors or singers on stage. Maeterlinck's screen, Debussy's dreamscape, and Schoenberg's subconscious expression all draw on the ideal of an inner truth, an unmediated portrayal of humanity stripped of centuries-old conventions of melody and decades-old Wagnerian formulae.

¹⁷² Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 34.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the conclusion, Debussy and the Second Viennese School are rarely viewed side-by-side; however, Alban Berg, a student of Schoenberg and a member of the Second Viennese School, greatly admired Debussy's *Pelléas* and used the structure of this opera (many short scenes and interludes) as a guide for *Wozzeck* (1925).¹⁷³ Sketches from 1915-1916 reveal scene comparisons between the two operas, and in a letter to Anton Webern on August 19, 1918 (months after Debussy's death), Berg writes:

It is not only the fate of this poor man, exploited and tormented by *all the world*, that touches me so closely, but also the unheard-of intensity of mood of the individual scenes. The combining of 4-5 scenes into *one* act through orchestral interludes tempts me also, of course. (Do you find anything similar in the *Pelléas* of Maeterlinck-Debussy!)¹⁷⁴

The helplessness of Maeterlinck's hapless characters inspired not only Debussy and Schoenberg but Berg as well. This shows the Second Viennese School's engagement with Debussy's opera and *fin-de-siècle* French works that are often viewed in disconnected discourses on early twentieth-century pan-European compositions.

While Debussy's engagement with Maeterlinck lasted for almost thirty years, from the time he read Maeterlinck's first play *Princesse Maleine* (1890) until his death in 1918, Schoenberg's immersion with Maeterlinck's works was even longer. Schoenberg knew about *Pelléas* by at least 1900, and as late as 1942, long after symbolism had faded from popularity, he consulted Maeterlinck's *fin-de-siècle* works. Symbolism as a literary genre faded from fashion around the time that Debussy and Schoenberg completed their settings of *Pelléas*, though these and other

¹⁷³ Patricia Hall, *Berg's Wozzeck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27-28.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

composers continued to turn to Maeterlinck's dramatic writings and ideas of the theatrical avant-garde in their musical works.

Later in preparing his *Ode to Napoleon*, Op. 41, a chamber work commissioned by the League of Composers in 1942, Schoenberg consulted Maeterlinck's philosophical writing on ants to better understand a connection he saw between the ant hierarchy and the Nazi philosophy with its

... resemblance of the valueless individual being's life in respect to the totality of the community or its representative: the queen or the Feuhrer.¹⁷⁵

In searching for an animal explanation to the day's tyranny, he returned to another of Maeterlinck's *fin-de-siècle* stories. Schoenberg writes in Los Angeles in 1942:

Before I started to write this text, I consulted Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bees* [1901]. I hoped to find there motives supporting my attitude. But the contrary happened: Maeterlinck's poetic philosophy gilds everything which was not gold itself. And so wonderful are his explanations that one might decline refuting them, even if one knew they were mere poetry. I had to abandon this plan. I had to find another subject fitting my purpose.¹⁷⁶

Both Debussy and Schoenberg were drawn to the humanity in Maeterlinck's *Pelléas*. Debussy in particular was convinced that a composer could express human emotion and speech realistically without relying on Wagnerian formulae with overpowering orchestral forces. Through his setting of *Pelléas*, Debussy claims:

I have endeavored to prove that people who sing can yet remain human and natural, without ever needing to resemble madmen or puzzles. That at first disturbed the professionals, and also the simple public, who, accustomed to being moved by means as false as they were grandiloquent, do not at first understand that all that was being asked of it was a little good-will.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Nono, *Self-Portrait*, 99.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁷⁷ Grayson, *Genesis*, 231.

Direct human expression also attracted Schoenberg to *Pelléas* with its “eternal human problems in fairy-tale form.” Debussy and Schoenberg sought to communicate through Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas* that despite our powerlessness in determining our own Fate, there is a humanity that touches us all. Pelléas’s grandfather, King Arkël of Allemonde, empathizes with Golaud, Mélisande, and Pelléas, declaring, “If I were God I should have pity on men’s hearts.” That both Debussy and Schoenberg wrote human emotions into a quasi-Wagnerian drama and that each incorporated Wagnerian aspects (such as character and mood themes, interludes that comment on the development of the characters in the drama, and the size and instrumentation of the orchestras) and rejected other Wagnerian models (such as leitmotivic development) shows each composer’s grappling with the pervasive Wagnerian legacy and their inability or unwillingness, at this stage in each of their careers, to partially or completely erase the Wagnerian influence. In their settings of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas*, both Debussy and Schoenberg solved problems that opened up new paths for future compositions and honed their intuitive understanding of music and the direction for a post-Wagnerian “music of the future.”

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