

# Debussy Schoenberg Pelléas & Mélisande

ORCHESTRE DE LA SUISSE ROMANDE  
JONATHAN NOTT





**Disc 1****Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)**Pelléas et Mélisande, Suite symphonique (arr. Jonathan Nott)** (1902/2020)

(world premiere recording)

1	Act 1: A forest	1. 36
2	Act 1: Golaud & Mélisande	5. 30
3	Act 1: A forest (interlude)	4. 03
4	Act 1: Pelléas – A room in the castle	0. 32
5	Act 1: Mélisande, Golaud, Pelléas	3. 22
6	Act 2: A well in the garden – Pelléas & Mélisande	3. 30
7	Act 2: Golaud, Mélisande	3. 30
8	Act 3: Mélisande, Pelléas – One of the castle’s towers	4. 27
9	Act 3: Golaud appears	3. 03
10	Act 4: A room in the castle – Golaud & Mélisande	5. 54
11	Act 4: A well in the garden – Pelléas, Mélisande	2. 13
12	Act 4: Golaud appears; the death of Pelléas	1. 41
13	Act 5: A room in the castle	2. 52
14	Act 5: Castle maids appear	1. 37
15	Act 5: The immutability of destiny	3. 07
	Total playing time:	47. 04

**Disc 2****Arnold Schoenberg** (1874-1951)**Pelleas und Melisande, op. 5** (1905)

1	Part I: First Movement Sonata Form - Introduction, Die Achtel ein wenig bewegt (A forest – Mélisande – The immutability of destiny – Appearance of Golaud)	4. 17
2	Part I: First Theme Group, Heftig; Sehr warm, in breiter Bewegung (“ne me touche pas” – Golaud & Mélisande)	3. 29
3	Part I: Second Theme Group, Lebhaft (Pelléas; Pelléas & Mélisande) (Codetta: Awakening of mutual love; Short Recapitulation: Golaud and the ring)	4. 03
4	Part II: Scherzo with Episodes, Sehr rasch (A well in the garden – Pelléas & Mélisande)	1. 01
5	Part IIb (Ring falls into the well, Golaud falls from his horse)	0. 40
6	Part IIc (Golaud wounded in bed, Golaud’s jealousy)	0. 48
7	Part II d (Pelléas & Mélisande: Love)	0. 36
8	Part II: Episode I, Sehr langsam (One of the castle’s towers – Pelléas & Mélisande (Hair Scene))	1. 26
9	Part II: Episode Ib (Golaud appears (Hair-pulling scene))	0. 45
10	Part II: Episode II, Sehr langsam, gedehnt (The castle’s vaults – Golaud & Pelléas)	1. 28
11	Part III: Slow Movement – Introduction, Ein wenig bewegt (A well	1. 14

	in the garden – Pelléas & Mélisande)	
12	Part IIIa: Love theme, Langsam (Love scene, Pelléas & Mélisande)	1. 06
13	Part IIIb: Im Zeitmaß	2. 20
14	Part IIIc: Development, Ein wenig bewegter	2. 52
15	Part IIId: Coda (Intervention of Golaud and death of Pelléas)	0. 57
16	Part IV: Recapitulatory Finale – Recapitulation of Introduction, Sehr langsam (A room in the castle)	4. 37
17	Part IV: Recapitulation of First Theme, Etwas bewegt (Golaud)	0. 31
18	Part IV: Recapitulation of Love Theme	1. 46
19	Part IV: In gehender Bewegung (Castle maids appear; death of Mélisande)	2. 05
20	Part IV: Epilogue, Breit (The remorse of Golaud)	5. 58
	Total playing time:	42. 10

**Orchestre de la Suisse Romande**  
conducted by **Jonathan Nott**

## **Pelléas et Mélisande: French and German Perspectives**

In 1912 Arnold Schoenberg was interviewed by a journalist in Prague about the composers who influenced him: ‘What about Debussy? I asked. Your *Pelleas* was written at more or less the same time as the Frenchman’s music drama; how do you judge Debussy’s interpretation of the poetry, which is somewhat different from yours? “I like Debussy very much”, said Schoenberg modestly; “he was more mature than I was when we both approached the work, and he likely matched Maeterlinck’s style better.”’

This unusually self-effacing assessment gives an indication of the impact Debussy’s opera had on progressive musicians, not just in France but across the whole of Europe and beyond. The inspiration behind it, Maurice Maeterlinck’s play *Pelléas et Mélisande* had been published in May 1892 and it, too, had an

international appeal. Though the Belgian Maeterlinck (1862–1949) spent much of his life in France, his literary tastes were cosmopolitan, including Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Schopenhauer. One of the first pieces of music inspired by Maeterlinck’s play was an orchestral suite from about 1897 by the Scottish composer William Wallace (1860–1940). The next year, Gabriel Fauré’s incidental music was written for the first English-language production, starring Mrs Patrick Campbell who commissioned Fauré’s score. It opened at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London on 21 June 1898, and Fauré himself conducted the first night. (In 1904, Fauré’s score was used by Sarah Bernhardt for a revival of the original French version). Maeterlinck also appealed to Nordic sensibilities, and Sibelius’s incidental music was composed for a production at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki in 1905.

The first performance of Maeterlinck’s play was on 17 May 1893 at the Théâtre

des Bouffes-Parisiens. Debussy saw this production and in 1902 he recalled what had immediately attracted him to the idea of an operatic treatment: "The drama of *Pelléas* which, despite its dream-like atmosphere, contains far more humanity than those so-called 'real-life documents', seemed to fit admirably with what I wanted to do. In it there is an evocative language whose sensitivity could be extended into music and into the orchestral design."

By the summer of 1895, Debussy had completed a sketch of the whole opera in short-score. In 1898, when Debussy's friend André Messager heard some of the opera, he recommended it to the management of the Opéra-Comique; with the prospect of a stage production, Debussy completed the orchestration and made a number of revisions. The premiere — conducted by Messager — was given at the Opéra-Comique on 30 April 1902. Reactions were mixed: some

critics found the opera too static, while Paul Dukas (later to make an operatic setting of Maeterlinck's *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*) recognised its startling originality. Unconcerned by critical polemics *pro* or *contra*, the public took to the new work, and the first run made a profit for the company. Just over a decade later, on 25 January 1913, *Pelléas* celebrated its 100th performance at the Opéra-Comique.

*Pelléas* soon developed a life beyond the theatre. In 1905, the publisher Durand issued Gustave Samazeuilh's piano arrangement of the orchestral interludes that Debussy had added to cover scene changes, and in 1911 the same firm issued a *Pelléas et Mélisande* 'Fantaisie' by Leon Roques, in versions for solo piano and piano 4-hands. 'Palm Court' trios provided background music in many hotels and spas, and in 1909 Durand catered for this market when it published Henri Mouton's single-movement of selections from *Pelléas* arranged for piano, violin (or flute)

and cello. Several numbers (including all the interludes) were transcribed for small orchestra by Lucien Garban (under his pseudonym Roger Branga), and Durand even advertised a selection for wind ensemble.

*Pelléas* has long had an appeal for conductors wanting to present music from the opera in orchestral concerts. Erich Leinsdorf conducted the opera in San Francisco in 1938 and fell under its spell. He made an orchestral suite which he recorded with the Cleveland Orchestra in 1946. Mainly drawn from the music of the interludes, Leinsdorf's suite was also performed by other conductors, including Pierre Monteux. John Barbirolli conducted the 'Preludes and Entr'actes' from *Pelléas* with the New York Philharmonic in 1938, and several others have followed including more recent versions by Claudio Abbado and Alain Altinoglu. In 1983 Marius Constant produced his *Pelléas* et

*Mélisande*: Symphonie which again drew on the purely orchestral passages of the opera.

What Jonathan Nott has done with his orchestral version of Debussy's *Pelléas* is much the most ambitious orchestral reworking of the score: the creation of a single-movement tone poem lasting 45 minutes in which Nott has devised a large-scale symphonic structure through which he explores the emotional and musical journey of the three characters *Pelléas*, *Mélisande* and *Golaud*: his aim was to produce a version of Debussy's score that would complement Schoenberg's tone poem. Since a good deal of the music in Nott's version is drawn from the sung scenes (rather than the orchestral interludes), this has involved finding appropriate orchestral colours for vocal lines: capturing the expressive mood of a passage without words. How can this be done convincingly? An apparently simple but



introspective interludes), and to create a sense of symphonic development using the motifs of the three principal characters.

The end result is a remarkable achievement: a symphonic poem that is at once faithful to Debussy's original score and at the same time a 'new' work which sets the music in a formal framework that is much closer to the design of Schoenberg's *Pelleas* — giving listeners to this recording the opportunity to compare French and German musical perspectives inspired by the common source of Maeterlinck's play.

When a recording of Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande* was issued on Capitol Records in 1950, the composer not only wrote the liner notes but also recorded a promotional talk intended for American radio stations:



“This is Arnold Schoenberg speaking. I am going to give you some information about my symphonic poem *Pelleas und Melisande* which you are going to hear next. ... 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 dramatising eternal problems of humanity in the form of fairy tales, lending them timelessness without adhering to imitation of ancient styles. I had at first planned to convert *Pelleas and Melisande* into an opera but I gave up this plan, though I didn't know that Debussy was working on his opera at the same time. I still regret that I did not carry out my original intention. 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. On the other hand, the symphonic poem helped me, in that it taught me to express my characters in precisely formulated units

which technique an opera would perhaps not have promoted so well.”

Schoenberg started to compose *Pelleas und Melisande* in 1902 and finished it in February 1903. He explained later that it was ‘entirely inspired by Maurice Maeterlinck's wonderful drama’ though in his musical treatment he aimed to present some episodes — particularly the love scenes — in a more expansive way than is possible through the spoken word. He consciously modelled *Pelleas* on the single-movement symphonic poems of Richard Strauss (in particular *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Ein Heldenleben* and *Tod und Verklärung*), and some of the grandly-conceived movements found in Mahler's early symphonies (notably the first movements of the Second and Third symphonies). Schoenberg was greatly enthused by the idea of trying his hand at something similar to these and in 1899 he wrote the string sextet *Verklärte Nacht*, a programmatic piece in

a single movement, based on a poem by Richard Dehmel. *Pelleas und Melisande* was on an altogether larger scale and though Schoenberg created themes associated with individual characters, and specific moments in the story, this is not ‘descriptive’ music in any conventional sense: the ‘characters’, or rather, the musical ideas created to evoke those characters, are instead used to form the essential component parts of a complex symphonic argument. Schoenberg himself stressed the importance of several motifs, all of them introduced in the first few minutes of the work: Melisande's theme, a plangent melody shared by oboe and cor anglais [score, rehearsal figure 1]; an uneasy dotted rhythm marked by awkward leaps in the bass instruments at the very beginning of the work which Schoenberg described as a ‘Fate’ or ‘Destiny’ motif [score, bar 2]; the theme associated with Golaud first heard on horns [score, Fig. 3], a more athletic and youthful idea for Pelleas [score, Fig. 9];

and a sinister, chromatic phrase to depict Golaud's jealousy, introduced by double basses in octaves [score, Fig. 23].

However, what matters in Schoenberg's *Pelleas* is not so much which characters are associated with particular musical ideas, but rather the ideas themselves, and the ways in which Schoenberg explores their expressive potential: *Pelleas und Melisande* can be heard without specific reference to the characters and story which inspired it. When it was new, Schoenberg's score was felt by some to be a little too expansive: both Bruno Walter and Alexander Zemlinsky tried to persuade him — without success — to make cuts. But the composer always argued that the length was necessary for strictly musical reasons.

The first performance took place on 25 January 1905 in the Vienna Musikverein, at a concert given by the *Vereinigung schaffender Tonkünstler* in Wien, a society

co-founded in 1904 by Schoenberg, Zemlinsky and Oskar Posa. The programme included works by all three of them: Zemlinsky's *Die Seejungfrau*, five orchestral songs by Posa, and *Pelleas und Melisande*, which Schoenberg himself conducted. Almost half a century later in 1949, he recalled that the performance had caused something of an uproar, noting that 'one of the critics recommended putting me in a lunatic asylum, and storing all music paper well out of my reach.' More than a century later, the work is viewed very differently: as one of the finest examples of Schoenberg's early mastery of orchestral writing and symphonic form.

### **Nigel Simeone**





## Acknowledgements

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*This album was recorded in Victoria Hall, Geneva Switzerland, in June 2019 (Schoenberg) and November 2020 (Debussy).*

*The arrangement of Debussy's music on this recording is the work of Jonathan Nott. This arrangement, of which he is the sole author, may not be recorded, performed or used in any way without his permission © jonathan-nott.com.*



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