

PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE AS SYMBOLIST OPERA

by

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ABSTRACT

The **Introduction** deals with the purpose and motivation of this study. **Chapter One** defines the concept of symbolism and discusses the significant development of the Symbolist movement in the visual arts and literature in France at the end of the nineteenth century. Special attention is given to the French Symbolist literary movement and its aesthetics. A discussion of the golden section as symbolic proportional device is included in this section. **Chapter Two** focuses on Debussy's connections with the Symbolists and the influence of their aesthetics on his composition style. **Chapter Three** deals with Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Debussy's adaptation from play to libretto. A synopsis of the drama is included in this chapter. **Chapter Four** follows with a discussion of the symbolism inherent in the libretto. Specific themes are discussed as well as the symbols in the play. **Chapter Five** briefly describes the background to Debussy's composition of the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, including a reference to the revisions made to the music. **Chapter Six** follows with a discussion of the compositional techniques employed to intensify the symbolism and significant themes underlying the action in the text. **Chapter seven** provides the conclusion of the study and offers some suggestions for further research.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Acknowledgement of sources is done in the Harvard style (name, date: page number). In cases where the whole paragraph or most of it refers to one source, the author is acknowledged at the end of the paragraph after the full stop of the last sentence in the same manner. Individual sentences within this paragraph which come from another source are cited within that specific sentence. Electronic references are acknowledged with a date and no page number(s). Quotations of three or more lines are indented on both sides. Fewer than three lines are cited in single quotation marks within the text. Quotes from primary sources are acknowledged in the specific sentence or at the end of the paragraph. Only single quotation marks are used.

In cases where the first section of the paragraph is taken from one source and the last section from another, the first section of the paragraph is cited within the last sentence of that specific section (before the full stop).

Symbolism and Symbolists are written with capital letters, while symbols and the concept of symbolism are in lower case. The proportional structure golden section is in lower case. All Italian terms and words from languages other than English are written in italics. All titles of works are given in the conventional forms; long works are italicised, shorter works are in single quotation marks. Where instrumentation is mentioned, parts of an instrument group are written in capitals, whereas the indication of a whole instrument group is in lower case (e.g. Violin I and violins, or Flute I and flutes). Instrument solos

are also written in lower case (e.g. solo cello or oboe solo). References to Maeterlinck's play are written out complete, e.g. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, whilst Debussy's opera is referred to as *Pelléas* from Chapter 3 onwards.

For the English translation of the French text of the opera, the 1907 Durand vocal score is used. In some cases where a more literal translation is more supportive of the symbolism, my own translation is used instead of the translation of the vocal score.

In order to simplify discussion of motifs and themes, their labels refer to the whole motif or theme, fragments thereof, as well as variants.

With reference to the numbering of bars, each act starts with bar I and is numbered to the end of the act. In Act III, bars 331-332 of the orchestral score are omitted in the vocal score. The correct bar numbers according to the orchestral score take preference and the bar numbers in the vocal score are adapted accordingly.

Due to the nature of the content only chapters one and two are provided with separate conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) has more often than not been labelled an Impressionist, implying that his music parallels the art of the Impressionist painters; this is because in his work musical colour takes precedence over form and design (Jarocinski, 1976:11).

However, it has been documented that *Pelléas et Mélisande* is considered to be the masterpiece of French Symbolism (Lesure, 2001). This is the only opera that Debussy completed during his lifetime, and in it he succeeded in combining words and music in a way he could realise his musical ideals. In 1893 the composer started with the setting of Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*, only to finish the final version of the opera twelve years later after extensive revisions.

Jarocinski (1976:80) and Lesure (2001) also affirm that Debussy received his most important intellectual input from his acquaintances in the Bohemian world of the Symbolist writers and painters. From 1887 the composer became a frequent visitor at the literary and artistic cafés in Paris where the Symbolists regularly met and exchanged aesthetic ideas (Lesure, 2001). Inspired by Platonic philosophy, their aesthetics were a combination of mystical and occult doctrines, psychology, linguistics, science, political theory and such aesthetic issues as the relationship between abstraction and representation (Kaplan, 2001).

Debussy's musical style was mainly influenced by the artistic ideas of poets and painters. It is also documented by several musicologists¹ that the composer supported the aesthetics of the French Symbolist Movement in their search for a form of artistic expression that would stimulate the imagination and, according to Jarocinski (1976:91), would address itself 'to the whole man, and not only to his intelligence or his senses'. Jarocinski (1976:91) maintains that poetry is closer to music than painting and so it is not surprising that Debussy was first inspired by poetry. Painting had only been a source of inspiration in its imitation of poetry, attempting to employ its expressive qualities.

Debussy rejected his traditional music education at the Paris Conservatoire and later was also not attracted to the passionate form of expression of the German Romantic composers, more specifically Wagner. Therefore, having no model to work from, Debussy had to develop his own personal style and composition techniques that could realise the musical expression he aspired to in his art. Consequently the composer's music was very often not accepted favourably by the public and the critics. They tried to analyse his music according to the established tradition of functional harmony and formal structures, and as a result failed to comprehend his art. Jarocinski (1976:51) gives the following detailed explanation:

In their desire for exactitude musicologists were right to concentrate especially on the functional aspect of Debussy's *œuvre*; unfortunately, their analysis did not cover all the problems inherent in his music. The question of pure sound-quality values escaped their attention; yet these values were no less important than any of the others...By employing traditional methods in their analysis of Debussy's compositional technique, musicologists only arrived at partial results – on a par with the significant aberrations that characterised their interpretations of the aesthetic aspects of his work; for instead of seeking correspondences between his style and the poets and

¹ See Lesure (2001), Jarocinski (1976:80) and Kabisch (2001:569).

painters who were his contemporaries, they were content to adopt the current formula of impressionism.

Abravanel (1999:33) explains that since traditional musical language could not accommodate the character of symbolism, Debussy had to develop his own personal language. Symbolist art requires a different conception of composition.

Jarocinski (1976:5) states that impressionist painters aimed to depict the momentary visual experience of an image. Symbolist art does not strive to represent an image, but by activating the imagination, the experience rather evokes an emotion from the listener or spectator. Symbolist art therefore aims to incorporate a spiritual experience through the senses, whereas Impressionism strives to evoke a visual image from the musical experience.

This research does not deal with impressionism or Debussy's style as a reaction to Wagner's style. The revisions to Debussy's opera will not be discussed in great detail. Although most literature deals with Debussy's aversion to Wagner and indicates that *Pelléas et Mélisande* was composed as a reaction to Wagner's grandiloquent style, this will only be noted and not discussed in detail in this study.

My study therefore aims to determine how Debussy's style of composition was influenced by the French Symbolist movement and to discuss the compositional techniques Debussy employed to support the symbolism in his opera. The golden section

as an important symbolic proportional structure will be explained as well as Debussy's employment of the structure in his opera.

The analyses included in this study are taken mainly from existing sources. In some cases I add some of my own findings and extend the existing conclusions or criticise questionable deductions.

Literature review

Most of the biographical studies of Debussy deal in part with his acquaintances with the Symbolist writers and artists. Jarocinski (1976), in his work *Debussy: impressionism and symbolism*, discusses the aesthetics of Impressionism and Symbolism and shows how Debussy was greatly influenced by the Symbolist poets and painters.

In her comparative research on the influence of three poets, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, on the composer's style, Brown (1992) analyses the poets' Symbolist poetic techniques and finds musical parallels in Debussy's compositional techniques, with application to *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Although she draws some interesting conclusions regarding harmonic employment as well as instrumentation, her harmonic analysis is often flawed and her conclusions frequently fanciful. The given bar numbers for examples are at times inaccurate (plus or minus a bar), especially in her examples on orchestration. Some of the examples fail to support her assumptions fully. On the one hand, she focuses on elementary symbolism (how musical contour parallels the physical direction on stage) and, on the other hand, she makes far-fetched assumptions about the

symbolism of the music. Her results occasionally seem to be manipulated to suit her topic.

Langham Smith (1989) draws some valuable conclusions from his harmonic analyses of the opera, showing how the tonalities of darkness and light support the deeper symbolism within the text. Preceding the harmonic analysis, he discusses the symbolist themes in the libretto. Although his findings elucidate the underlying symbolism, he does not always supply examples or exact bar numbers. In his article, 'Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites' (1989), some analytical errors were noted.

Howat (1983), in his study *Debussy in proportion: a musical analysis*, focuses on Debussy's employment of proportional structure in his works, with special emphasis on the golden section. Through his analysis, he finds that the climactic point of the opera falls exactly on the golden section of Act IV, scene 4. In addition to his valuable analysis of the opera, Howat also provides fascinating information about Debussy's involvement with esotericism and explains logically the Symbolists' interest in the symbolic properties of the golden section as a geometrical device.

Debussy's employment of motifs or leitmotifs is dealt with in the studies of Emmanuel (1926), Grayson (1986) and Nichols (1989). Although the labelling of the motifs differs in places in the different sources, Emmanuel's identifications seem to be more reliable than those of the other commentators and his study is used as reference by several

scholars. In my opinion, the motivic elements of the opera could still be explored in greater depth.

Grayson (1986) provides a thorough background to the development of the opera and the composition process over twelve years in *The genesis of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande*. He discusses in detail the revisions to the text and the continuous adaptations to the music. In Chapter Four of my study the focus on the revisions will be restricted to those of Act IV, scene 4, since the scene is the climax of the opera, and it has been shown by Howat that it is constructed according to the golden section. Other revisions will be mentioned only briefly.

Grayson (1986:173) discovered some discrepancies between the vocal score and the full score. The few differences possibly slipped through due to the unusual chronology of the publication of the two scores. During the compositional process, Debussy made some substantial revisions to the instrumentation of his opera, probably because the full score was published more than two years after the first performance of the opera and the publication of the piano reduction. However, a number of these differences were corrected in the course of the publication of subsequent editions of both scores (Grayson, 1986:173).

At some points in the opera the key signatures in the two scores are not similar, best illustrated by three examples from Act III, scene 1. In bar 48 the F-sharp in the key signature is cancelled in the full score, whereas it is altered only in bar 51 in the vocal

score. In bar 118 Debussy changed the key signature in the vocal score to four sharps, while it remains unchanged in the full score. Finally, in bar 163 the full score changes to five flats and the vocal score to six. The inconsistent use of accidentals also occurs where the vocal part may be notated in sharps in one score and in flats in another. Nevertheless, these slight enharmonic variations did not alter the actual 'sound' of the opera (Grayson, 1986:173).

Different time signatures at the same points in the scores (e.g. 4/4 in the one and 12/8 in the other) resulted in an inconsistency in the correspondence of the vocal score to the full score in the rhythm of the accompaniment (Grayson, 1986:173).²

Limitations of the Study

Regarding the analysis of the proportional structure, Howat (1983:16-18) mentions the counting of pulse units within the music. Because music is a temporal art, a problem can arise when tempo changes are incorporated within the calculation, resulting in questionable results.

Because of the obscurity and ambiguity of the field, conclusions on the topic of Symbolism could vary to a great extent. Symbolist poetry, art and music aim to evoke a personal artistic or musical experience in the listener or spectator. Numerous messages and meanings are contained within the artwork. Since one person's experience might differ from that of another, one specific interpretation cannot necessarily be regarded as

² See Act I, bars 400-405 and bar 421.

the only correct one. Many of the conclusions reached in this study are drawn from assumptions taken from different sources, as well as from my own findings.

Other aspects of the mysteriousness of the field of symbolism are the occultism and mysticism associated with it. These features are not clearly defined or made explicit, and in certain cases, e.g. the Priory of Sion, are kept very secretive; therefore certain areas of this study have intentionally not been thoroughly documented (e.g. the Kabbala is an oral tradition).

The ambiguity of Symbolist art and the problems this creates are confirmed by Abbate (1998:95-96) in her article 'Debussy's Phantom Sounds':

Interpreting symbolist art runs the risk of seeming to cast a butterfly in iron: one finds oneself more often speaking of an imaginary music that cannot be realized than music that in fact exists. This can be frustrating, almost a parody of hermeneutic interpretation, as one seeks not for an obscure meaning, but for an object not actually there in the text.

CHAPTER ONE

SYMBOLISM

1.1. Symbolism

Symbols and symbolism originated in magic and played a significant role in the Kabbala and in the ancient cultures of Egypt, India and Greece as well as in medieval Christianity. In primitive cultures people thought that magic could mediate where science had no power, whereas in medieval symbolism the belief was that Nature was the only symbol of a superior reality (Jarocinski, 1976:25-27).

Peyre (1976:5) states that in ancient Greek culture the term 'symbol' referred to one of two parts of a tablet that was broken in half, the one part given to a house guest as a sign of hospitality. The object was usually a piece of pottery or some household utensil. Afterwards the word referred to 'every sign, formula, or rite by which those initiated in any mystery made themselves secretly known to one another' (Symons, 1958:2).

During the nineteenth century the symbol was identified as either 'a sign which requires deciphering and interpretation by the reader' or a sign that 'represents or evokes, in a concrete way, the thing (object, idea, emotion) being signified' (Brown, 1992:16-17).

1.2. Symbolism at the end of the nineteenth century in the arts

Symbolism was first identified as a literary movement by Jean Moréas (1856-1910) in the Symbolist manifesto, published in *Le Figaro* in 1886 (Lucie-Smith, 1977:54) and six years later Albert Aurier further described Symbolism in the visual arts as the 'painting of ideas' (Aurier cited in Kaplan, 2001).

Jarocinski (1976:68) states that man's disappointment with empirical science led to an intense cynicism in the spirit of the French intellectual *elite*. This scepticism in turn produced an interest in psychology and occultism. These spiritual paths were not only discovered through 'intuition, fantasy and the imagination, but also through dreams, visions, hypnotism and the practice of alchemy' (Kaplan, 2001).

In the visual arts the concept of Symbolism is more appropriately used as a collective description of a variety of art forms that do not aim to depict reality, but rather deal with imaginary, psychological and metaphysical subjects (Flamm, 2001:6). According to Kaplan (2001), Symbolist critics in France regarded Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism as Symbolist currents. By the mid-1880s the Impressionist's original goal of 'truth to visual experience' had changed (Kaplan, 2001):

...the artist had developed their technique to a point where the pictures appeared to be approximations of reality, rather than objective paintings themselves. The pictures appeared more suggestive than descriptive.

Paul Gauguin played a decisive role in the development of Symbolism in France. He stressed the importance of the emotional response to nature as opposed to the intellectual, and claimed that lines, colours and even numbers communicated meaning. He felt that intuition was fundamental in artistic creation and that one should 'communicate ideas and feelings derived from nature by means of the simplest forms, after dreaming in front of the subject' (Kaplan, 2001).

1.3. Symbolism in literature

Flamm (2001:5) argues that in literature the term 'Symbolism' is generally applied to movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which supported a wide spectrum of anti-naturalist approaches, and spread from France to the rest of Europe and parts of America. Wellek (1970:261) states that even though the strongest influence of French Symbolism was felt in Russia, the movement also inspired important poets in Great Britain (Yeats and Eliot), the United States (Stevens and Crane) and Germany (George, Rilke and Hofmannsthal) (1970:268).³ However, Flamm (2001:5) explains that as a style and period description, the term 'Symbolism' can only be applied to French literature (which flourished from 1886-1896) and to Russian literature (1894 until the First World War).

³ The strong influence in Russia could be explained by Russia's close connections with Paris at that time or the strong tradition of Symbolism that played an important role in the Russian Church and in some of the Orthodox philosophers of the immediate past (Wellek, 1970:261).

1.3.1. The French Symbolist movement

The French Symbolist Movement lasted just over a decade, from 1885 onwards. Wellek (1970:252) suggests that *symbolisme* was a short-lived name for a very small group of French poets. The Symbolists' aesthetics rejected naturalism, realism, formal structure and emphasis. The indefinite, the mysterious, even the esoteric attracted the artists, who also showed an indifference to the public (Lesure, 2001).

Jean Moréas explained that this literary revival was based on the use of methods such as 'excessive ceremoniousness, unfamiliar metaphors, a new vocabulary in which harmonies are combined with colours and lines' (Jarocinski, 1976:65). Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé were the acknowledged masters of the new generation of poets, with Baudelaire's 'Correspondances', the celebrated sonnet in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, serving as a model for the new poetic movement (Jarocinski, 1976:65).

1.3.2. Symbolist aesthetics

The essence of the Symbolist style was rooted in the conscious resistance against established literary tendencies, e.g. the rejection of the naturalism of Zola and the classic poetry of the Parnassiens. After the French were defeated in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870-1871, they lost confidence in the positive materialistic world view held by the paternal generation of the mid-nineteenth century. Poets searched for a new approach to poetry and were strongly attracted to Richard Wagner's aesthetics and especially his

synthesis of the arts in his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. One of the most important journals of the Symbolist era was the *Révue wagnérienne* (1885-1887), founded by Édouard Dujardin (Flamm, 2001:5).

Whether Symbolist artists chose to use form, subject or both as their major aesthetic focus, their purpose was to render visible the invisible and to communicate the inexpressible. Whatever they touched was manipulated to create a psychological impact, express ecstasy, ambiguity, mystification, revelation – all that is subjective, irrational, variable and subject to interpretation (Kaplan, 2001).

The poets wished to create art that was accessible to all people. Their aim was to express their inner thoughts, sensations and ideas through the use of polyvalent symbols that could be interpreted at various levels and in different ways by all (Brown, 1992:17). Wellek (1970:264-265) explains that in Symbolist poetry the relation of tenor and vehicle in a metaphor is reversed so that the image becomes the thing and the 'hidden' inner world is represented. Time, place, history and society are played down. Such poetry might also involve analogy resulting in a network of correspondences in which everything reflects everything else. Thus synaesthesia played a significant role as a stylistic device, which could be easily 'imitated and transmitted' (Wellek, 1970:264-265).

Jarocinski (1976:24) claims that the poets succeeded in creating musical poetry by avoiding the literal use of words, stimulating our sensibility not only through the

significance of the words, but also their resonance, arrangement and movement when spoken:

By the placing of stresses in a sentence, the alteration of strong and weak syllables, metrical structures and rhythms, rhymes and assonances – in a word, by all different means the result of which is to make poetry sometimes sound like music.

Metaphors, allegories and symbols were also employed as organising principles and not only as decorative content matter. The Symbolists aspired to the writing of ‘musical’ verse, by rejecting the use of the oratorical cadences of the French alexandrines and in some cases by breaking completely with rhyme. Gustave Kahn was the first poet to break away from rhyme, employing free verse in his work (Wellek, 1970:264).

The play *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Maeterlinck was described by Mallarmé as ‘already containing its own inherent silent and abstract musicality’ (Goehr, 2001:64). However, well before Mallarmé’s use of the concept, Charles Baudelaire employed the idea of musicality in ‘Correspondences’ (Goehr, 2001:64). The following lines from the poem by Baudelaire illustrate the principle that a connection between nature and the soul exists (Scarfe, 1961:36):

Nature is a temple, in which living pillars sometimes utter a babel of words;
man traverses it through forests of symbols, that watch him with knowing eyes.

‘Correspondances’ connected the senses to the spirit through its innate musicality, achieved by creating the link through harmony, rhythm, movement and formal abstraction (Goehr, 2001:64).

1.4. Symbolism and the golden section

1.4.1. The golden section and the Fibonacci series

The golden section (golden mean, golden ratio or divine proportion) has been recognised since ancient times as important in architecture, painting and in natural organic growth (Howat, 1983:2). The mathematical ratio of the proportion is defined as $a:b = b:(a+b)$ – the division of a fixed length in two, so that the ratio of the shorter portion to the longer portion equals the ratio of the longer portion to its entire length. The exact value of the proportion is irrational and approximates to 0.6180339... (Lucie-Smith, 2003:102). Lendvai (1971:17) adds that if the whole length is taken as a unit, 0.618... would be the value of the larger part, and 0.382... the value of the smaller section.

Möller (2001:1493) assumes that the golden section was most probably known to Plato and this proportion had been geometrically explained by the Greek mathematician, Euclid (325-265 BC), on a number of occasions.⁴ The theologian and mathematician, Luca Pacioli (1445-c.1510), saw in the respective portions of the golden section a symbol for the Trinity and called this proportion '*divina proportione*' (divine proportion) in his treatise *De Divina Proportione*. The expression *section aurea* (golden section) was adopted by Leonardo da Vinci, who created the sketches for Pacioli's book (Möller, 2001:1493-1494).

⁴ Gettings (1963:58) documents that, according to legend, Eudoxos, who lived around 350 BC, was the first person to explore the agreeable proportions inherent in the golden section.

The Fibonacci summation series is also closely related to the golden section. It rounds off the irrational value of the golden section to the nearest rational number and in this way provides a simpler way of calculating the golden section of any number. The series is formed by adding the previous two terms to get the consecutive term: 0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13,21,34,55,89,144... (Howat, 1983:2-3).

This number series is named after the mathematician Leonardo von Pisa (1194-1250), known as Fibonacci (meaning 'filius Bonacci'). He used this summation series theoretically to calculate how many rabbit pairs were born monthly from one pair. The numerous mathematical qualities of the Fibonacci numbers have fascinated artists and scientists for many years. The journal *The Fibonacci Quarterly* is dedicated not only to research on the mathematical features of this series, but it also publishes findings on other number series and their manifestation in nature, technology, art and architecture. Prominent examples where the employment of the Fibonacci numbers in architecture is evident are the Abbey of Cluny, the Florence Cathedral Dome and the community facilities *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille. Even in organ documents from the Renaissance up until the present the significance of this proportion is reported (Möller, 2001:1494).

Bachman and Bachman (1979:73) also refer to the manifestation of the golden section in nature and state that the sunflower has twenty-one clockwise and thirty-four counter-clockwise spirals. In addition to the appearance of the Fibonacci sequence in other plants, the bee hive and chemical structures in nature such as the hydrogen atom, the

structural measurements of the Parthenon are also based upon the principle of the golden mean (Bachman & Bachman, 1979:73). Möller (2001:1494) mentions that the golden section is regarded as a morphological principle of nature and adds that the ratio is also clearly evident in the proportions of the human body.

1.4.2. The golden section and Symbolism

As discussed in Sérusier's *ABC de la peinture*, proportional balance (including the golden section) has always been considered as fundamental to composition in the visual arts. In literature the use of number structure can be followed back at least to Virgil, integrated either as proportions or as more esoteric structures of number symbolism, or a combination of these. The Symbolists were attracted to the subject because of the potentially cabbalistic connotations and other associations of the numbers themselves, as well as for the purpose of shaping and balancing forms (Howat, 1983:164).

The mathematician Charles Henry played an important role in the Symbolist movement during the 1880s and 1890s. He was better known as the mentor to the 'Hydropathes', a large, loosely knit society of avant-garde artists in the 1880s. Jules Laforgue's art criticisms, with which Debussy was well-acquainted, were greatly influenced by Henry's scientific approach. Henry was not only the co-founder of the influential Symbolist journal *La Vogue*, but his writings were also published in Symbolist journals, including *La Revue Blanche*, in whose pages Debussy's 'Monsieur Croche' later made his début (Howat, 1983:164-165).

1.5. Conclusion

Although the Symbolist movement thrived for approximately a decade at the end of the nineteenth century in France, the movement inspired works by artists and writers who still enjoy prominence today. These artists ventured to explore a world beyond reality over which man had no control or little understanding. This inspired works of art and poetry that evoke the senses, the imagination and feeling, and move in the realm of the soul. It could be assumed that the Symbolists were familiar with the golden section, not only because of the influence of Charles Henry, but also because of their interest in mysticism, the symbolic significance of the golden section, and the proportion's manifestation in the cosmos. Having lived during this period, Claude-Achille Debussy was greatly involved with the Symbolist trend and spent much of his time with Symbolist poets and artists, whose works and ideals he deeply admired.

CHAPTER TWO

THE INFLUENCE OF SYMBOLIST THOUGHT ON DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

2.1. Debussy's connection with the Symbolists

Jarocinski (1976:79) argues that since Debussy did not have an elementary education, his only 'intellectual stock-in-trade' was what he learnt from his mother and from his friends. Lesure (2001) supports this view by claiming that Debussy's most valuable education came between the ages of 25 and 30 during the time he was closely acquainted with the Symbolists.

Debussy already showed an interest in poetry from a very early age and was soon attracted to the poetry of the Symbolists, characterised by the musicality, the underlying sense of mystery, the vagueness, emotional expression and the importance of nature in their works (Brown, 1992:1). When Debussy returned to Paris in 1887, after his two years in Rome, he experienced financial difficulties for a few years and during this time became a frequent visitor at the literary and artistic cafés where the Symbolists regularly met and exchanged aesthetic ideas (Lesure, 2001). He started off as an accompanist to male and female singers at the cabaret *Chat Noir*, which also served as the Friday meeting place of a literary and artistic group founded by Goudeau (Jarocinski, 1976:81-82).

Between 1887 and 1900 Debussy frequented various private artistic circles apart from those mentioned above, including the little *Librairie de l'Art Indépendant*, a modest publishing house run by Edmond Bailly and prominent meeting-place of the Symbolists. Here Debussy assembled with Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Henri de Régnier, Maurice Denis and later Pierre Louÿs, André Gide, Paul Verlaine and occasionally Whistler (Jarocinski, 1976:87-89). However, the most important Symbolist gatherings were the Tuesday meetings at Stéphane Mallarmé's flat, which involved everyone who was connected to Symbolism (Lucie-Smith, 1977:56).

Music played a vital role in the artistic life of that time – the 'musicalisation of poetry' became a popular concept with artists such as Mallarmé, Verlaine and René Ghil (Lesure, 2001). As mentioned above, the Symbolists were attracted to Wagner's idea of a 'total art' that was discussed in the *Revue de wagnérienne*. At first Debussy also nurtured a keen admiration for Wagner, which leaves strong traces in *La damoiselle élue* and *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*. However, after visiting Bayreuth in 1889 for the second time, he became increasingly negative about Wagner's music to the point of being regarded as a heretic by his Wagnerite friends. In 1893 he announced that he was going to publish an article to be entitled 'The Futility of Wagnerism', but it never appeared (Lesure, 2001).

Debussy's admiration of Baudelaire is evident in his *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* and Brown (1999:1) states that he remained a great admirer of the Symbolist styles of Verlaine, Baudelaire and Mallarmé. He also discovered Poe and Maeterlinck, and for a

while hoped to set the latter's *La Princesse Maleine*. Traces of his admiration for Jules Laforgue can be found in his own poetry for the *Proses lyriques* (Lesure, 2001).

Jarocinski (1976:78-79) summarises Debussy's artistic nature as follows:

Anything 'strange' had always interested him; people who were outside his own milieu, and arts which were different from his own. Anything unconventional, or which flouted mediocrity, anything that overthrew established conventions or which savoured of exoticism, of the unknown or of scandal, attracted him; while remaining an 'outsider', he indulged his imagination and allowed these experiences to kindle the flame of his art.

2.2. Debussy's aesthetics and critical writings

Debussy's musical criticism dates from 1901 to 1915. At first writing for the *Revue blanche* under the pseudonym 'Monsieur Croche', Debussy used his column to cultivate some of his less conventional ideas (Lesure, 2001). His writings reflected the prevailing spirit at that time, debating contentious issues that dominated the arts. Monsieur Croche said (cited in Jarocinski, 1976:94):

Discipline must be sought in freedom, and not in the formulae of an outworn philosophy, fit only for the weak. Do not listen to anyone's advice, but hearken only to the wind that passes and tells the story of the world.

From 1903 he started writing for *Gil Blas*, propagating the work of Rameau and praising the French national tradition, which he felt had been too much influenced by Germanic ideals. In 1913 he started publishing reviews for the *Revue musicale S.I.M.* (Lesure, 2001).

2.2.1. Nature as inspiration

After the première of *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), Debussy explained to an interviewer the reasons for writing the opera. He said that he looked for a new form for the operatic genre (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:74):

Explorations earlier 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. I wanted music to have freedom that was perhaps more inherent than [in] any other art, for it is not limited to a more or less exact representation of nature, but rather to the mysterious affinity between Nature and the Imagination.

In Debussy's view a musical response to, or association with, nature could not be validated by a straightforward imitation of it (Potter, 2003:139); therefore the association should at all times remain hidden, mysterious and elusive (Dayan, 2005:216).

In 1903 Debussy criticised the importance of the Prix de Rome to composers in an article entitled 'A Consideration of the Prix de Rome from a musical point of view'. He also stressed the mysterious connection music has to nature (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:199):

Music is a mysterious mathematical process whose elements are a part of Infinity. It is allied to the movement of the waters, to the play of curves described by the changing breezes. Nothing is more musical than a sunset! For anyone who can be moved by what they see can learn the greatest lessons in development here. That is to say, they can read them in Nature's book – a book not well known among musicians, who tend to read nothing but their own books about what the Masters have said, respectfully stirring the dust on their works. All very well, but perhaps Art goes deeper than this.

Debussy believed that because of the abstract quality of music, this art form related better to nature than poetry and painting. Similar to nature, music does not intend to represent anything specific and is therefore more suitable in reflecting nature accurately, compared to poetry and painting, which are perceived as representing something outside themselves (Dayan, 2005:223).

2.2.2. Debussy on Wagner

Debussy objected to the 'Wagnerian formula', because of its application of symphonic form, its development to dramatic action and its use of a system of leitmotifs, explaining in some detail his objection to symphonic developments in opera (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:36):

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 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...All in all, the application of symphonic form to dramatic action succeeds in killing dramatic music rather than saving it, as was proclaimed when Wagner was crowned king of opera.

He was especially derogatory about Wagner's application of leitmotifs in his operas and wrote (Jarocinski, 1976:98):

Remember that they [the characters] never appear without being accompanied by their damned *Leitmotiv*; sometimes they even sing it. This is about as crazy as if someone in handing you his visiting card were at the same time to sing what is written on it...I hate the *Leitmotiv* even when, without being exaggerated, it is used with taste and discretion.

Debussy continued that he even despised it when the leitmotif's rhythm or key is changed and he asserted that the same emotion cannot be expressed twice (Jarocinski, 1976:98).

Debussy believed that in musical drama everything, including the discreet use of the orchestra, must be subjected to the lyricism of the human voice. Debussy's admiration for *Parsifal* was because the music was reduced to more human proportions. 'Here we are spared the frantic portrayal of Tristan's unhealthy passion, the wild animal shrieking of Isolde, and the grandiloquent commentary on the inhumanity of Wotan' (Jarocinski, 1976:99).

In 1889 Debussy explained to Ernest Guiraud that his ideal of music for the theatre was different to that of Wagner and that he did not wish to imitate Wagner's style. In Debussy's music drama 'music takes over where words fail; music is made for the inexpressible' (Jarocinski, 1976:102). The music should fulfil a discreet role and seem to appear and disappear again from the shadows from time to time. The continuity of the drama should not be held back by anything, not even the musical development, which Debussy thought was unable to synchronise with the movement of speech. His explanation of this foreshadowed the ideal libretto for his music drama *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Jarocinski, 1976:102):

What kind of poet would be capable of writing an opera libretto that would satisfy these demands? He who, by leaving certain things unsaid would allow me to graft my dream on his; he who would create characters who belong to no time or place, and would not force me to compose a big scene 'for effect', but would leave me free, at certain times, to allow my art to take precedence over his and to complete what he had begun...I dream of poems that would not oblige me to write long and boring acts, but which would supply me with

mobile scenes, of different times and places, in which the characters would not discuss, but accept what life and destiny hold for them.

In an attempt to liberate French musicians from their obsession with Wagner, Debussy reminded them of their own traditional masters like Couperin and Rameau, whose music is identified by 'clarity, elegance and simple and natural form of declamation' (Jarocinski, 1976:103). French music's purpose is to give pleasure and in this light the French musical genius is a kind of 'combination of fantasy and sensibility' (Jarocinski, 1976:103).

2.3. Debussy's composition style

Louis Laloy, Debussy's first French biographer, reported that Debussy 'received his most profitable lessons from poets and painters, not from musicians' (Lesure, 2001). Flamm (2001:8) argues that although the term Symbolism does not refer to an era, or a style of a group or individual in Western music, there is a reciprocal influence between literature, art and music as these arts are closely related to one another. Jarocinski (1976:57) cites D. Chenevière, who stated that Debussy's first style period, up to and including *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was dominated by Symbolism with a shade of Impressionism.

Abravanel (1999:33) argues that in order to write Symbolist music, certain modifications to traditional musical techniques had to be made to create a new style. For this reason Debussy developed his own personal language, which was misunderstood upon its first appearance. The composer believed that each work possessed its own individual

theoretical system and particular structure, because a 'symbolist system that is valid for every work could not possibly exist' (Abravanel, 1999:33). Nichols (1998:50-51) states that until 1887 Debussy's settings of Gautier, Bourget Leconte de Lisle or Banville had been barely distinguishable from one another, but that he later created individual sub-styles for poets such as Verlaine, Baudelaire, Pierre Louÿs and Mallarmé, retaining the identifiable Debussyan style on the whole.

Debussy stressed the importance of colour (timbre) and rhythm in music; he consequently desired to create art that would be guided by the colours and the rhythms envisaged, rather than the formal or harmonic structure. The composer wrote the following (Jarocinski, 1976:104):

I am more and more convinced that music is not, in its essence, something that can be poured into a rigorous and traditional mould. It is made up of colours and rhythm... Bach alone has realized this truth.

2.3.1. Timbre

2.3.1.1. Orchestration

Debussy shared Paul Verlaine's intolerance towards the grandiloquence of Romantic poets and held the same view of composers such as Beethoven and Wagner, whose style the composer regarded as heavy-handed, conflicting with his need for obscure, grey nuance. The composer writes that 'It is necessary in some places to paint in monochrome and to be content with grisaille...' (Brown, 1992:27). Verlaine used elements of water,

air, wind and fog in his poetry in order to generate not only a sense of formlessness and freedom, but also to create an ambiguity of meaning which he constantly strove for (Brown, 1992:25-28).

Brown (1992:28) suggests that Debussy parallels this understatement in his orchestration technique, which often focuses on individual instrumental timbres rather than orchestral *tutti*s. The strings often play *divisi*, the brass are normally muted, the woodwinds are given important solo lines or figurations and the percussion is also employed timbrally, instead of rhythmically.⁵ Subtle shifts of colour are strongly evident in the last three bars of *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*, where Debussy also creates soft alternating bell-like sounds that fade out at the end of the piece instead of sharply-contrasting timbres (Brown, 1992:35).

Baudelaire employed vowel and consonant sounds for their timbral quality in 'Le Jet d'eau',⁶ where the 'a' is a flat vowel sound that reinforces a stasis within the poem, whereas the second strophe contains words suggesting upward motion or a 'vertical line' and the underlying meaning is supported by the bright vowel sounds of the words (Brown, 1992:54).

AbraVanel (1999:43) argues that Debussy's compositions are marked by structured sections of polyphonic sonority, each zone possessing its own resonant material, motives,

⁵ In *Pelléas et Mélisande* the strings play *divisi* in Act I, bars 14-17, 75-93, 386-389, and Act II, bar 402-403. Throughout the opera horns and trumpets are often muted and solos are mostly played by the woodwinds.

⁶ See Scarfe (1961:152) for an English translation.

phrases and rhythm, which develop in an independent manner. Here accompanied melody is no longer of concern, but rather a melody that is woven freely into the pattern of the work (Abravanel, 1999:43).

Brown (1992:55) reports that both Wenk and Jarocinski (1976:166-167) state that in Debussy's work particular sounds and timbres are also employed for their symbolic connotation. Some instruments have a traditional association with certain images, and Debussy develops this universal familiarity in some of his works. In 'Recueillement' (*Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*) the horn is employed to call forth images or feelings related to hunting and consequently to nature. In *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*, *La Syrinx* and *Chansons de Bilitis* the flute sound creates a pastoral tranquillity and dreaminess and in 'Les Cloches', 'Chevaux de bois', 'Les Angélus' and 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' Debussy employs bell sounds to suggest the gradual ending of the day or the beginning of the night (Brown, 1992:55-56).

2.3.1.2. Harmony

In *Conversations with M. Croche*, published in *Revue Blanche* in 1901, Monsieur Croche reiterates his rejection of functional harmony (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:48):

My favourite music is those few notes an Egyptian shepherd plays on his flute: he is part of the landscape around him, and he knows harmonies that are not in our books.

DeVoto (2003:189) stipulates that Debussy's choice of harmony is justified first and foremost for its value as sound and sonority. Pomeroy (2003:158) elaborates on this

point by maintaining that this is especially evident in the frequent occurrence of functionally non-resolving chordal sevenths and ninths. Debussy's chordal dissonance often comprises static, timbral ornamentation of the basic triad. He concludes that in many cases Debussy's 'chordal successions are better understood as textural thickenings of the melodic line than as harmonic progressions in the traditional accepted sense'⁷ (Pomeroy, 2003:158).

In Debussy's piano works a chord is often spaced in a specific way to incorporate a variety of sounds from the piano. In 'La cathédrale engloutie' a mysterious and intentional transparency is created by the parallel chords in two hands over the C pedal (bars 28-40), generating intervals of parallel fourths between the hands. Also in 'Reflets dans l'eau' colour and nuance are the only elements portraying the character of the work (Abravanel, 1999:34-35).

Debussy veiled his musical messages by avoiding strict architectural form in most of his compositions. His harmonic methods are based on the employment of modal, pentatonic, whole-tone and other exotic scales, as well as non-functional harmonic movement (Brown, 1992:29).

Both Wenk and Jarocinski discuss Debussy's symbolic use not only of timbre, but of key organisation with regards to the poetry he set to music. In Verlaine's 'Chevaux de Bois' Debussy evokes the circular motion of the horses through harmonies which shift at every

⁷ See Chapter 6 for examples of these.

couplet and which end where they begin; the piece begins and ends in E major and passes through the following keys: E, C, E-flat, B, G, E-flat, F-sharp and E (Brown, 1992:36).

Ambiguous reality is also a general feature of Mallarmé's poetry, including the dreamy *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. Debussy shares this need to obscure reality and said: 'Let us not disillusion anyone by bringing to the dream realities which are too precise...' (Brown, 1992:62). Debussy's unclear tonal centres (or use of bitonality), phrase structures and overall architectural organisation, as well as his use of ambiguous rhythms and whole tone harmonies all indicate his rejection of clearly-stated ideas, resulting in music with an ephemeral quality (Brown, 1992:62-63).

2.3.2. Rhythm and pacing

Quoting Plato, Abravanel (1999:38) maintains that 'rhythm is the ordering of movement', explaining that in traditional music, musical movement is composed of melody, harmony and rhythm, and directs itself consistently towards the cadence. In symbolist music, however, the movement in the music becomes the resonance of material sounding in time and space (Abravanel, 1999:38-40):

Musical time is punctuated by differing sonorous events that are linked naturally, if without cadences. That is why the symbolist work seems static: one hesitates forevermore to consider the sonorous moment as it appears and disappears.

Debussy fought against the traditional methods of organising music and aspired to a more flexible expression. 'Tyranny of rhyme has, even in passing, in music, its rejoinder or its

analogue in the tyranny of the bar line' (Brown, 1992:34). In order to break away from traditional rhythmic organisation where strong and weak beats are just as predetermined as the rhyming patterns in an alexandrine, Debussy used a number of methods to give his music the fluidity of motion he desired: suppression of downbeat through tied notes over the bar line or rests, accents on traditionally weak beats, use of rhythmic cells which constantly evolve into slightly new figures, polyrhythms and even polymetre⁸ (Brown, 1992:34-35).

Silence as a means of expression was employed by Mallarmé in his poetry and attracted Debussy equally as a compositional technique (Brown, 1992:70). While he was struggling with the composition of *Pelléas*, he wrote to Chausson (Lesure & Nichols, 1987:56):

I found myself using, 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...

Dayan (2005:220-221) explains that in Debussy's aesthetic logic, beauty can only become apparent when meaning is erased and therefore 'the most beautiful of sentences is the one that says nothing'. The prominent sixth measure of the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* evidently shows how emotion is enhanced through the use of silence. Debussy employed this device throughout his compositional career (Brown, 1992:70).

⁸ For examples of these, see Chapter 3 below.

Example 1: *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*, bars 4-7

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Flute (Fl.), Horn (Hb.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Cor (Fa). The score is for bars 4-7 of the 'Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune'. The Flute part has a melodic line with some rests. The Horn and Clarinet parts have sustained notes with dynamic markings 'p' and 'p<'. The Cor part has a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes marked '3.' and dynamic markings 'p' and 'p<'. The score is written in a single system with four staves.

Mallarmé employs creative spacing on the page to reflect musical pauses. He believed that words weaken the expression of deep emotion and therefore left blanks between words, lines, or even pages to highlight feeling. This technique is mainly apparent in *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (Brown, 1992:68):

Example 2: *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*

SOIT
 que
 l'Abîme
 blanchi
 étale
 furieux
 sous une inclinaison
 plane désespérément
 d'aile
 la sienne
 par. . . .

Mallarmé writes, 'It is the blanks which make me suffer the most! They have the value of silences in music. It is they, who create the dream, the ineffable' (Brown, 1992:69).

2.3.3. Line and shape

Potter (2003:142) asserts that a strong possibility exists that Debussy was familiar with the writings of the mathematician Charles Henry. Henry's theories also include notions about colour and shape, based on concepts of harmonious or inharmonious relationships, which can be defined objectively in geometrical ratios. His work influenced the thoughts of several artists, including Paul Signac, Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin and Maurice Denis – some of whom were acquainted with Debussy (Potter, 2003:142).

Henry's theory of shape is based on his conviction that an ascending line has positive connotations and a descending line generates negative associations. He writes that 'the agreeable directions from low to high, down to up and from left to right are found to coincide with the tendencies of man towards the light' (Potter, 2003:142). This phenomenon can be related to the growth of plants, which 'turn towards the source of light or grow upwards towards the sun' (Potter, 2003:142). In Western European music low sounds are often associated with darkness and depth, and high-pitched sounds with light and altitude. Debussy's music is impregnated with upward and downward motions as well as themes of darkness and light. It can be assumed that Henry's scientific explanation provided Debussy with a basis for the 'agreeable directions' that interested him (Potter, 2003:142).

Potter (2003:144) suggests that Debussy's writings on Bach support his perception of the arabesque as 'uninterrupted evolving melodic lines', and his conviction that music 'grows organically rather than being divided into periodic phrases'. In an article of 1902, entitled 'The orientation of music', Debussy discussed the music of Bach and the arabesque (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:84):

We can be sure that old Bach, the essence of all music, scorned harmonic formulae. He preferred the free play of sonorities whose curves, whether flowing in parallel or contrary motion would result in an undreamed of flowering, so that even the least of his countless manuscripts bears an indelible stamp of beauty. That was the age of the 'wonderful arabesque', when music was subject to laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself.

Jarocinski (1976:104) elaborates on this quotation, maintaining that in Bach's music it is not the character of his melody that moves us, but its 'line'. He continues that it is usually the 'parallel movement of several lines whose meeting, sometimes fortuitous, sometimes unanimous, arouses our emotions' (Jarocinski, 1976:104). Debussy believed that the line provided the composer a freedom of expression which could not otherwise be accomplished when the structure and shape of the melodies had to conform to Classical harmonic rules. Baudelaire also admired the arabesque as an expressive device, stating that 'the arabesque is the most spiritual of designs' (Brown, 1992:50-51).

Pomeroy (2003:158) suggests that harmonic inactivity in Debussy's music is subjected to the expression of the melodic arabesque in the sense that the chord progression does not distract the 'curve' or 'contour' of the ornament. Debussy was particularly attracted to the 'ornamental' melodic art he found in the music of Palestrina and Bach ('melodic arabesques, which create their effect through contour') (Pomeroy, 2003:158). Potter

(2003:144) adds that Debussy did not only admire the employment of the arabesque in Bach's music and Gregorian Chant, but also in the music of the Javanese Gamelan.

Charles Henry's theories were closely related to the ideas of artists involved with the Art Nouveau movement, a movement close to Debussy's heart. These artists valued line as a central artistic element, evident in their designs mostly based on natural forms, especially the curved shapes of vines and tendrils. Lockspeiser assumes that during the 1890s Debussy's musical and artistic sensibility 'was a reflection of the theories of the Art Nouveau movement' and that the arabesque as melodic device was the 'direct musical counterpart of these theories' (Potter, 2003:143).

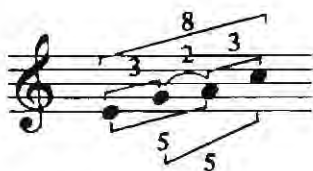
Abravanel (1999:36) discusses Debussy's treatment of vocal melody and explains that it is not characteristic of the Italian *bel canto* style and resembles the French recitative style of Lully and Rameau more closely. Motives of varying length make up the melodic content. The rhythms and rhythmic motives of the melodies are adapted directly from the spoken language and form the foundation of the melody, creating large or small melodic intervals or repeated notes. The melodies should always be sung in a natural way and without emphasis to bring across the rhythmic patterning and the subtle emotion in the text (Abravanel, 1999:36).

2.4. Debussy and the golden section

From the twentieth century analysts have claimed that the proportional function of numbers is more hidden in the music of Debussy and Bartók. In both composers' works the golden section has proved to be significant in the structural design. Howat (1983:156) maintains that the golden section first found form in Debussy's *oeuvre* in *Pelléas et Mélisande* and is also evident in 'Reflets dans l'eau', *La Mer*, 'L'isle joyeuse' and other works by the composer (1983:3). Lendvai (1971:18) discusses the golden section in Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and also explains Bartók's use of the Fibonacci series.

Bachman and Bachman (1979:74) explain interestingly that the chord built on the second degree of the tonal pentatonic scale is notably constructed on the Fibonacci numbers 2, 3, 5 and 8 and that Debussy frequently employed this scale in his compositions.

Example 3: Chord built on second degree of tonal pentatonic scale



Major second (2 steps)
Minor third (3 steps)
Perfect fourth (5 steps)
Minor sixth (8 steps)

In *Debussy in Proportion: a Musical Analysis*, Howat (1983:6-7) shows through analysis that Debussy employed the golden section as a proportional structural device and substantiates his claim by the citation of a letter of August 1903 from Debussy to his

publisher Jacques Durand. Returning the corrected proofs of *Estampes*, Debussy writes (Lesure & Nichols, 1987:137):

You'll see, on page 8 of *Jardins sous la pluie*, there's a bar missing; my fault, in fact, as it's not in the manuscript. Even so, it's necessary from the point of view of number; the divine number, as Plato and Mlle Liane de Pougy would say, though each for a different reason, admittedly.

Howat (1983:165-166) further assumes that although there is no record as evidence that Debussy ever met Charles Henry, he must have been aware of Henry's influence when he attended the gatherings of the 'Hydropathes'. Debussy must have read some of Henry's writings or reviews in the Symbolists' journals.

Many Symbolist artists were preoccupied with the occult and Debussy shared their obsession. It is documented that Debussy was associated with Joséphin Péladan's neo-Rosicrucian movement in the early 1890s and, as mentioned above, he was a frequent visitor at the bookshop and publishing house *L'Art Indépendant* of Edmond Bailly, another *ésotériste* of widely remarked erudition. Other regular callers were Mallarmé; Gustave Moreau, at that time Debussy's favourite painter; Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, whose Rosicrucian play *Axël* became one of Debussy's unfinished operatic projects; Odilon Redon; Huysmans; the engraver and sculptor Félicien Rops; Degas; Toulouse-Lautrec and Régnier. Régnier himself mentions Verlaine and Laforgue as having been visitors in earlier years (Howat, 1983:167-168).

Similar to Goethe's *Faust*, with which Debussy was also familiar, the pentagram features prominently in *Axël*. The figure does not only play a significant role in most esoteric

symbolism, but it is also the most basic geometric manifestation of the golden section, as its lines cut one another typically by this ratio. According to Pierre Mariel, symbolism in *Axël*, together with the obsession with the pentagram, is derived from Eliphas Lévi's *Dogme et ritual de la haute magie*, where the pentagram is a central theme. Lévi gives the following description of the pentagram, which geometrically can only be the golden section (Howat, 1983:169):

By the Pentagram also is measured the exact proportions of the great and unique Athanor necessary to the confection of the Philosopher's Stone and the accomplishment of the Great Work.

Similar to most occult alchemical writing the quote is allegorical and does not only apply to the making of solid gold, but also refers to the purification of the human soul. The name *section d'or* evidently implies the traditional association of the golden section with alchemy. Thus, it could be interpreted that 'in occult belief the proportion measured by the pentagram – that is, the golden section – purifies the soul and elevates the spirit' (Howat, 1983:169).

Debussy discontinued his connection with Péladan's movement in the early 1890s, since Péladan's extravagant ways did not appeal to the secretive Debussy and were directly opposed to the nature of the traditional Rosicrucian secrecy. It is not certain whether Debussy continued esoteric activities after this. However, it has been recorded that the composer was the Grand Master (the leader) of the highly secret Rosicrucian movement *Prieuré de Sion*, until his death (Howat, 1983:170).

In her study *The Rosicrucian enlightenment*, Frances Yates placed special emphasis on the Rosicrucian movement's main concern regarding the transformation and rebirth of the arts, seen as a representation of the cosmos. Debussy's general appeal to this belief is echoed in another Debussy comment that 'Music is a mysterious mathematical process whose elements are a part of Infinity' (Howat, 1983:171). Goldman (1991:131) concludes that since Debussy was identified as an 'esoteric', 'there is also no reason to expect that he would have spelled out his intentions'.

2.4. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the mystery, ambiguity, emotional expression and the importance of nature in Symbolist poetry attracted Debussy to this style. Debussy's compositional style is inspired by principles of the natural world. His employment of timbre for its subtlety, the lines and shapes, corresponding to the growth of plants, and the arabesque as ornamental device, together with the golden section, are concepts inspired by nature. Similar to the Symbolists, Debussy was interested in creating art that would establish a correspondence with nature, art that is spontaneous, free of established forms, and above all evoke the senses and the imagination. In the natural world sound alternates between emergence and disappearance; consequently silence becomes a significant element of the character of the cosmos. For this reason the Symbolist notion that in silence only the emotion of a phrase can be felt, became prominent (Lesure & Nichols, 1987:56). Debussy strove to establish 'a mysterious affinity between nature and the imagination'

(Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:74), supported by his compositional style and techniques.

Deeply involved with writers and poets, it comes as no surprise that Debussy was obsessed with the synthesis of music and words throughout his life. Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* provided the composer with a libretto that embodied his ideals for the perfect text for his opera, in which he could augment the mystery, feeling and sense of futility with his subtle and understated compositional style.

CHAPTER 3

DEBUSSY'S LIBRETTO OF *PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE*

3.1. Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Revere Frothingham (1912:251) noted almost a century ago that Maurice Maeterlinck was also known as the 'Belgian Shakespeare', the 'European Emerson' and the 'greatest mystic of the age'. He was the first playwright who applied the Symbolists' ideals to theatre and demonstrated the possibility of relating to different audiences by communicating an accessible key message together with other more concealed meanings. His drama was liberated from 'localized events and attained metaphysical dimensions' (Popkin & Popkin, 1977:48-49).

Pelléas et Mélisande was first published in Brussels in May 1892 and premièred a year later in Paris on 17 May 1893 (Grayson, 1986:13). The play is the fifth of a series of works written by Maeterlinck during the 1890s, all dealing with the difficulties encountered by lovers. Set against legendary and medieval backdrops, these plays all share common themes and concerns, often shedding light on each other. Although the characters are not necessarily attached to myth or history, they frequently hint at Arthurian legend or Celtic Symbolism (Langham Smith, 1989:2).

The play introduced a fresh approach towards aesthetics and appealed to composers all over Europe, arousing 'a new and universal musical consciousness'. Puccini considered

Pelléas et Mélisande for an operatic setting, Fauré produced incidental music for the production of the play in London, the English composer Cyrill Scott wrote an overture entitled *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and Sibelius and Schoenberg composed orchestral works inspired by the play (Lockspeiser, 1966:209). It is interesting that Strauss had originally suggested to Schoenberg that he should compose an opera based on the play (Reich, 1971:12).

As mentioned in Chapter One,⁹ Mallarmé had sensed the musicality in *Pelléas* – ‘the words used create a higher level of meaning above the literal, in which to define is to destroy’,¹⁰ the essence of Symbolist art (Langham Smith, 1989:78).

3.2. Debussy’s libretto of the opera

Even though Debussy was present at the first performance of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens in Paris on 17 May 1893, it was unmistakably his reading of the play prior to the première which inspired the composition of his opera (Grayson, 1989:30). The adaptation process from play to libretto, uninterrupted throughout the nine¹¹ years, were complicated by two revised versions (1898 and 1902) of the play, both published before the first performance of Debussy’s opera at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on 30 April 1902 (Grayson, 1985:34).

⁹ See Chapter 1, page 14 above.

¹⁰ To state something directly would be to destroy the real meaning of what is to be communicated.

¹¹ The compositional process up to the first performance of *Pelléas* took nine years. Afterwards Debussy continued to make revisions to the score for another three years (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:75).

Maeterlinck started revising the play even before the first stage performance. The revised edition of 1898 contained mainly small changes, cuts and additions, each of no more than three or four words of the text. The most important adaptation was the replacement of Mélisande's song in Act III, 'Mes longs cheveux descendent' by 'Les trios soeurs aveugles' (Grayson, 1985:35-36). At Debussy's request Maeterlinck granted him permission to adapt the text of the play for his libretto. Maeterlinck not only agreed to any cuts that Debussy needed to make, but even proposed 'extremely useful ones' (Lesure & Nichols, 1987:60). Over and above the various cuts Debussy made throughout the play, he omitted four whole scenes, two of which involved the servants rather than the principals (Grayson, 2003:74-75).

Lockspeiser (1966:213-214) argues that the excluded scenes (Act I, scene 1; Act II, scene 4; Act III, scene 1; and Act V, scene 1) are essentially of a more symbolic kind and, because of their ambiguous nature and emphasis on fate, these particular scenes slow down the action of the drama. As each of the omitted scenes is the first or last scene of an act, their exclusion does not impede the continuity within the acts. In the play the first scene of Act I presents the castle gate, whose closing (in Act IV, scene 4) denotes that defining moment when all is lost for Pelléas and Mélisande. In the static Act V, scene 1 it is recounted that Golaud had thrown Pelléas's body into the well and then tried to commit suicide. According to Grayson (1986:119), this information is not crucial in understanding the play's ending, though it may clarify Golaud's wound and why he says he is dying. By cutting this scene Debussy also managed to increase the mystery

surrounding the sudden appearance of the servants in the second scene (Grayson, 1986:119).

In the omitted scene 4 of the second act, Pelléas informs Arkel of Marcellus's death. Grayson (1986:120) further assumes that Debussy probably left out Act III, scene 1 of the play, because of its similarity to the conclusion of the last scene of Act II. The composer made further textual revisions within the included scenes of the libretto, ranging from moderate changes in Act III, scene 1 (three omitted words) to the shortening of Act III, scene 3 to one third of its original length. These emendations to the text took place as a gradual process 'with further trimming introduced in the course of each successive revision' (Grayson, 1986:120).

3.3. Synopsis

The first act of the opera is set in a forest in the fantasy kingdom of Allemonde, introducing Golaud, the widowed prince of Allemonde, gone astray after losing his hounds while pursuing a boar. He discovers the weeping Mélisande by a well in a forest, consoles her, tries to find out who she is and where she comes from. She seems bewildered, does not want to be touched and refuses to talk about her past. Golaud falls in love with her, they get married and he decides to take her home to the castle. Scene 2 is set in a room in the castle, with Geneviève, Golaud's mother, reading a letter (addressed to Pelléas¹²), to Arkel, the blind, bed-ridden King of Allemonde. In the

¹² Pelléas is Golaud's half-brother.

correspondence Golaud tells Pelléas about his discovery of, and marriage to, Mélisande and his wish to bring her to the castle. He also asks for a lamp to be lit, as a sign of their acceptance of her at the castle, on the day of their arrival by ship. The scene ends where Geneviève instructs Pelléas to light the lamp. Geneviève, Pelléas and Mélisande are the characters present in scene 3, set outside the castle. Here the discussion focuses on their observation of the lights from the sea. Act I ends with Pelléas telling Mélisande that he possibly has to leave the next day. Mélisande replies 'Oh! Pourquoi partez-vous?' (Why are you leaving?).

Mélisande and Pelléas happen to spend a lot of time together. In Act II, scene 1 Pelléas and Mélisande are together at Blindman's Well in the park, where she loses her wedding ring (at noon) after tossing it too high up in the air. Pelléas offers to retrieve it, but she refuses. Back at the castle (scene 2), Golaud reports how his horse inexplicably bolted and threw him off (at noon), while he was out hunting. Later in the scene he notices Mélisande's missing ring and, infuriated, commands her to search for it at once. In scene 3 Pelléas and Mélisande search for the ring at the cavern by the sea, where she falsely told Golaud that she had lost it.

Act III opens with Mélisande singing in her room in the tower, while combing her hair for the night. Pelléas passes her window and starts making advances at her. Their flirting is interrupted by the approaching Golaud, who, noticing what is happening, scolds them for acting like children. Golaud becomes increasingly suspicious and jealous of Pelléas's and Mélisande's relationship. In scene 2, set in the castle vaults, Golaud forces Pelléas to

smell the toxic waters of the underground lakes and in scene 3, after Pelléas delights himself in the fresh air from the sea, Golaud warns his half-brother that he must avoid Mélisande as she is pregnant and should not be disturbed, referring to what he witnessed earlier in front of the tower. In scene 3 Golaud interrogates Yniold, the young son from his previous marriage, about Pelléas's and Mélisande's relationship. The boy's innocent, unclear replies frustrate Golaud. At the end of the scene he forces the boy to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande where they are together in her room, bringing no greater insight into their relationship as Yniold only sees the two lovers staring at the light.

Act IV opens with Pelléas asking Mélisande to meet him at the well for the last time, before he leaves. Scene 1 is followed by an intimate scene between the recovered Arkel and Mélisande. The king foresees the return of joy and light to the kingdom and remarks that Mélisande will be the agency of the renewal. Golaud enters, immediately angry with Mélisande, whose physical touch he violently rejects. After ordering Mélisande to fetch his sword from the prayer stool, he inspects the blades, looks into Mélisande's eyes and remarks, with heavy irony, upon her innocence. He bursts out that her flesh disgusts him and seizing her by her hair, forces her to her knees. The scene is concluded with Arkel's remark 'Si j'étais Dieu, j'aurais pitié du coeur des hommes' (If I were God, I would have pity on the hearts of men). The following scene is entirely symbolic and focuses on Yniold trying to retrieve his golden ball, which is stuck under a large stone. Lesure (2001) explains that the golden ball is symbolic of man's hopeless struggle against destiny. The second symbol is the flock of sheep on their way to be slaughtered, possibly a forewarning of the death of Pelléas and Mélisande. Scene 4 (the Tryst scene) is the

climactic point of the opera. The scene opens with Pelléas contemplating his intricate situation and his ultimate decision to tell Mélisande everything that he has left unsaid up to that point. Mélisande enters and his declaration of love begins. Mélisande replies to his 'Je t'aime' in hushed tones 'Je t'aime aussi'. Their love duet is interrupted by the noise of the castle gates, locking up for the night. They realise that this is the point of no return. In the meantime the tension rises as the lovers become aware of the approaching Golaud. At the moment Pelléas and Mélisande embrace, Golaud appears and, after drawing his sword, kills Pelléas and wounds Mélisande, after which she flees into the forest.

In the last act Mélisande, who has just given birth to a child, is dying, with Golaud and the recovered Arkel standing by her side. She finally depart this life, after the guilt-ridden Golaud questions her and unsuccessfully attempts to force her to admit infidelity. The play ends with Arkel saying, that it is the child's chance to take her mother's place now.

Lockspeiser (1966:209) points out that at the turn of the century Maeterlinck's style was based on the repudiation of free-will and summarises the deeper meaning underlying the action of the play as follows:

The drama of *Pelléas* preaches the fatalistic philosophy that man's incapacity to escape from the hidden unconscious forces which determine the course of his life is the tragedy of his existence. In Maeterlinck's pessimistic view there is only one certainty – death. Death hovers over all his plays, liberating his creatures from their world of dreams.

Later writers who also illustrated the hopeless dilemma of humanity are James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka, whereas Alban Berg's operas *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*

represent the musical counterparts of these later explorations of the psyche. Thus *Pelléas* has been regarded as a logical extension of *Tristan und Isolde*, and as a musical and psychological predecessor of *Wozzeck* (Lockspeiser, 1963:209-210).

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CHAPTER 4

SYMBOLISM IN THE DRAMA

Maeterlinck did not only write plays, but also published essays in different *revues*. These essays were all later compiled into *Le Trésor des Humbles*, translated as *The Treasure of the Humble*. Langham Smith (1989:21) believes that these writings, together with the foreword to his collected early plays (*Théâtre*, 1901), explain the themes of the dramas of this period well and ultimately clarify the symbols in *Pelléas*.

4.1. Themes in the drama

4.1.1. Mystery

A general atmosphere of mystery and ambiguity prevails throughout the play. The action is set in both a time and a place that Maeterlinck vaguely describes as the eleventh, twelfth or possibly fifteenth century. The name of the kingdom, Allemonde, also resonates with the otherworldliness and isolation from the 'real' world, combining the Greek word *allos*, meaning 'other', with the French word *monde*, meaning 'world' (Grayson, 2003:75). It has also been suggested by Goehr (2001:56) that Allemonde has a deliberate German insinuation.¹³

¹³ The French word *allemande* means 'German'.

The action generally takes place in and around the castle and the main characters have no contact with the outside world. Langham Smith (1981:104) writes that the 'fairytale setting' is completed with the 'dungeons, portcullis, briarwood, and a well at the world's end'. Pelléas and Mélisande retreat from the quiet beggars they encounter in the cavern, the servants never speak (in the opera), and the sailors' and shepherd's voices are only heard from a distance. The main characters belong to four generations and a vague mysteriousness surrounds them and their relationships with one another (Grayson, 2003:75).

4.1.2. Circularity

Grayson (1997:29) continues that the closing lines of the play support the notion of circularity in *Pelléas*. Arkel's words suggest that a repeated pattern of conduct exists in each generation of this family – in a cycle of 'eternal return' – and that this cyclical ending evokes hopelessness and discomfort rather than the acceptance of destiny and death (Grayson, 1997:29).¹⁴

In an article entitled 'The Future' Maeterlinck explained his philosophy of time as a recurring or extended present (Grayson, 1997:32):

Time is a mystery which we have arbitrarily divided into a past and a future, in order to try and understand something of it. In itself, it is almost certain that it is but an immense, eternal, motionless Present...

¹⁴ In my opinion the notion of circularity could both symbolise futility and renewal. This interpretation also supports the ambiguous nature of Symbolist art, which can embody various meanings.

Grayson (1997:26-27) interestingly points out that *Pelléas et Mélisande* was published in the same year (1892) that Belgium adopted World Standard Time, concluding that the play portrays the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of that time. He continues that, ironically, the organisation of time according to time zones laid emphasis on exactly that which it aimed to remove from the world of commerce: 'the plurality and relativity of time(s) as well as the actuality of private or psychological time' (Grayson, 1997:26). In *Pelléas* characters are often waiting and their obsession with time borders on being aberrant (Grayson, 1997:26-27).

4.1.3. Death and love

Daniels (1953:52-53) argues that the drama in Maeterlinck's plays is created by conflict between the characters and fatal external events. Death, as the only certainty, is the 'invisible protagonist' and love represents 'the other unseen force' in the drama (Daniels, 1953:53). Pelléas and Mélisande die, while Golaud, the instrument of death, symbolising visionless, disturbed humanity, is left to grieve (Daniels, 1953:75).

Conflict in *Pelléas and Mélisande* also exists in the opposition between spiritual and earthly love, with Mélisande as the central figure trapped in this mortal struggle (Daniels, 1953:75). Maeterlinck believed that all mortal souls were essentially part of the same eternal spirit and can therefore communicate directly and wordlessly with nature and with each other. Whereas souls can be revealed to one another in spiritual love, silence is the element in which complete spiritual union is achieved. In the play Pelléas and Mélisande

have communicated their love long before their actual verbal declaration to one another; Golaud will never understand the meaning of Mélisande's dying words because his love is too 'earthly' (Daniels, 1953:80).

In addition to the above propositions, Daniels (1953:94) identifies fear and joy as the two kinds of emotion in Maeterlinck's drama: 'fear at the prospect of death or inscrutable destiny, joy at the realisation of spiritual love'. When spiritual love, which is equally as powerful as death, is attained, the mystic joy radiating from this spiritual state results from a sense of harmony with the universe: tension-free and devoid of drama. Fear, on the other hand, is rooted in human experience. It is the bare, 'instinctive weapon of self-defense implanted by nature'. Whereas mystic joy, reached through the purification of the soul by cleansing it from conflicting desires, is essentially undramatic, fear creates drama when expressed realistically, even through complete silence. In Act IV, scene 2 Mélisande's silent subjection to Golaud's fury intensifies the distress of her terror of Golaud (Daniels, 1953:95).

4.1.4. Silence

As mentioned above, Maeterlinck embraces the idea that 'one mysterious spirit flows through the universe and through the beings that people it', with the communion of souls as the mystical ideal. Daniels (1953:46-47) describes the role of silence in this communion as follows:

Silence is the element in which this mystic communion takes place. As the universal spirit is hidden deep, it can be perceived only when superficialities

of everyday life are laid aside. Human speech is regarded as one of these superficialities.

Words fail to represent the real nature of things and consequently do not succeed in revealing the essence of the truth. The real meaning of death, love and destiny gets lost at the intrusion of the spoken word, because verbal language is by nature not part of the spiritual sphere (Daniels, 1953:48-49).

Goehr (2001:56) reflects on the significance of truth in *Pelléas* and concludes that for Golaud the truth ('la vérité') remains 'unknown and unexperienced'. In the final act he asks the dying Mélisande: 'La vérité, la vérité'; she peacefully echoes his words with 'la vérité, la vérité' and says nothing more. Golaud's truth is not the same as that of Mélisande (Goehr, 2001:56).

In 1895 Maeterlinck published an essay entitled 'Le Silence' in which he clarified this premise. He stated: 'Speech is of time, silence is of eternity ... it is only when life is sluggish within us that we speak' (Langham Smith, 1989:22-23), developing from Rossetti (and from his own silent character: 'Le grand taiseur') the idea of silence as indicating a profound 'knowing' (Langham Smith, 1981:105). Arkel embodies the silent wise man – paradoxically, he is blind, yet sees more clearly than any of the other characters. His first words 'Je n'en dis rien' (I have nothing to say) and his submission to destiny underline the visionary quality of his character (Langham Smith, 1989: 24-25).

Langham Smith (1989:23) not only discusses the frequent occurrence of silence between lovers, but also passive silence ('the shadow of sleep, of death or of nothingness') and the purported 'les autres *grands silences*' ('death, grief or destiny') that exist outside of human beings and that approach us in their own time. In the last act of *Pelléas Méliande* asks for the 'great' window to be opened. In this final request the word *grand* refers to the ultimate silence of death (Langham Smith, 1989:23).

In the play silence is implied in the unanswered questions and oblique answers, especially in Méliande's role and through the references to silence by the characters. In Act II, scene I Pelléas observes the silence of the well, saying 'One hears nothing. There is always an unusual silence. You can almost hear the water sleeping...' The final act is suffused with significant silences. Serving women enter, foretelling the death of Méliande, and after the doctor has affirmed that the serving women correctly predicted Méliande's moment of death, Maeterlinck asks for *un long silence*. The stage direction in the final postlude signifies: *ils sortent en silence* (Langham Smith, 1989:23-25).

Daniels (1953:76) assumes that in the play tension in the scenes of crisis are underlined by silence. In Act III, where Golaud takes Pelléas down to the castle vaults, an atmosphere of terror and death prevails, followed by the silent exit of the characters (Daniels, 1953:76). In addition to the example above, Méliande's unspoken fear when Golaud torments her by dragging her by her tresses, forcing her on her knees, together with Golaud's silent pursuit of Pelléas and Méliande, and the eventual killing of Pelléas at the Blindman's Well in the Tryst scene, have a 'sickening effect of horror'. Here the

silences emphasise a particular psychological state, evoking a sense of painful oppression (Daniels, 1953:77).

Daniels (1953:78) concludes that Golaud could not understand the meaning of silence:

For materialistic man, silence is a baffling, impenetrable barrier. The eternal silence of Mélisande brings anguish and frustration to Golaud, who now will never know the lovers' secret. But, for the wise, silence is the element in which they enter into close communication with the great mystery of death.

4.1.5. Telepathy

In the play Maeterlinck assigns extrasensory powers to animals, like Golaud's horse (the bolting of Golaud's horse in Act II, scene 2 of the opera) and children (who are suddenly silent when they sense that Mélisande is about to die).¹⁵ Hence, the powers belong to beings that rely on, and respond to, intuition rather to reason. Arkel also correctly foretells that Pelléas does not have long to live (Act IV scene 1) (Grayson, 1997:35).

Grayson (1997:36) further suggests that Arkel, Mélisande, Pelléas and the women servants share a telepathic sense and thus belong to an ulterior world. Pelléas says in Act IV, scene 1 that his father¹⁶ is still partly in 'the other world', or the world of clairvoyance. The women servants are the first to sense that Mélisande has died and also they belong to the other world through their gender and class. Pelléas is young and naïve, and Mélisande is a woman, a foreigner and an outsider in the kingdom of Allemonde.

¹⁵ This scene was cut by Debussy. In the opera there are no children present when Mélisande dies.

¹⁶ Arkel was Pelléas's father and Golaud's grandfather. Yet the two were half-brothers sharing the same mother, Geneviève.

They both predict their own deaths. Pelléas, in Act IV, scene 1, accurately foretells that the day will end badly, and Mélisande, in Act II, scene 2 tells Golaud that she will die if she remains in Allemonde (Grayson, 1997:36).¹⁷

4.2. Symbols in the drama

Apart from symbolism on micro-level, there is a higher level of symbolism involving less tangible symbols which recur more often in the course of the play. The light-dark symbolism and the theme of circularity form the foundation of the play. There are numerous references to circles: the ring, the lost crown, the circle of the water, Yniold's golden ball. The symbolism in the circular objects develops into scenes which frequently comprise a circular journey of going there and coming back. Furthermore, the entire play follows a circular route resulting in a never-ending drama – Arkel states in his final words that it is now the little girl's turn to take her mother's place (Langham Smith, 1989:28).¹⁸

Grayson (2003:75-76) affirms that the entire third scene of Act IV is symbolic. Yniold's struggle to retrieve his golden ball that is stuck between a rock and a large stone, suggests the weakness of the human will in its quest for perfection. The sun that disappears may be interpreted as King Arkel's failure to guide his family towards wisdom, while the fateful control of destiny over our lives is symbolised by the off-stage shepherd that keeps the bleating sheep on the path. The innocent Pelléas and Mélisande surrender to

¹⁷ See Act II, bars 248-251 and Act IV, bars 37-39.

¹⁸ His words imply that the little girl will share the same destiny as her mother, Mélisande.

the forces of fate and their acceptance of their destiny is symbolically portrayed through the sheep that go silent as they realise that they are no longer on the path to the shed, but on their way to be slaughtered (Grayson, 2003:76).

The prevailing symbols frequently contrast with one another, even sharing certain characteristics at the same time. The sea and the forest are mainly in conflict with one another: the air, water and light from the sea contrast with the dark and gloomy forest. Past and future journeys away from the destiny of Allemonde are insinuated by the sea, whereas the forest reflects the inevitable present. Moreover, the forest, similar to the sea, can hide unforeseen hazards and it symbolises the inescapable force of destiny: not only do Golaud and Mélisande go astray in the forest, but while in the forest Pelléas and Mélisande are also unable to flee from Golaud's revenge, since the forest is the only place of escape (Langham Smith, 1989:12).

4.2.1. Landscape and water imagery

The landscape elements in Maeterlinck also act as foretellers of destiny, and physical objects such as stones or tree-trunks play symbolic roles when characters fight against the forces of fate (Langham Smith, 1989:11). Various types of water imagery reflect the different stages in the psychological development of the drama, depicted in the different moods of the sea in Act I, in the love scenes by the well, in the stagnant waters and the contrasting bright sea air, and also in the clouds passing over the entrance to the sea cave (Langham Smith, 1989:10).

Langham Smith (1981:105) points out that the setting of a well in a dark forest was itself a preferred Pre-Raphaelite background. The well symbolises the relationship with spiritual forces and ‘catalysing love’ and the dark forest (inherited from Romanticism) is a complex symbol, often implying being lost or separated – a perilous condition from which few emerge unhurt (Langham Smith, 1981:105-106).

4.2.2. Darkness and light

Langham Smith (1989:108) discusses the symbolic significance of darkness and light in the drama. The lamp, referred to by Golaud in his letter to Pelléas (Act I, scene 2 of the opera), introduces the dark-light symbolism, which becomes more complex as the drama unfolds (Langham Smith, 1989:108-109).¹⁹

Maeterlinck refers to man’s search for his ideal and the renewal of the self in terms of light and dark in ‘La vie profonde’ (The Deeper Life), an essay from *Le Trésor des Humbles* (Langham Smith, 1989:110-111):

We can be born more than once: and each birth brings us a little nearer to our God. But most of us are content to wait till an event, charged with almost irresistible radiance, intrudes itself violently upon our darkness and enlightens us in our despite. We await I know not what happy coincidence, when it may so come about that the eyes of our soul shall be open at the very moment that something extraordinary shall take place. But in everything that happens there is light; and the greatness of the greatest of men has but consisted in that they had trained their eyes to be open to every ray of his light.

¹⁹ For his libretto Debussy cut the fourth scene of the play, in which the light and dark symbolism was further developed in the dialogue (Langham Smith, 1989:109).

The playwright continues that deep love plays an instrumental role in this regeneration; the idea of love leading to an ideal far above itself is a prominent theme in *Pelléas* and could clarify the pursuit for light in Maeterlinck's play (Langham Smith, 1989:111).

The dark and light imagery becomes more intricate when Maeterlinck supposes that for some people enlightenment comes more in the dark (Langham Smith, 1989:111):

Which of us has not met, more than once, along the paths of life, a forsaken soul that has yet not lost the courage to cherish, in the darkness, a thought diviner and purer than all those that so many others had the power to choose in the light?

Revere Frothingham (1912:257) says the mystic is a person living within, interpreting everything from the standpoint of the soul, and guided by his 'inner light', instinct and emotion.

Grayson (2003:76) suggests that in Act II Mélisande's loss of her ring precisely at noon, when the sun is at its height, symbolises a moment of revelation. Then in Act III her song from the tower reveals that she was born at noon. The interpretation goes further that the loss of her ring at noon alludes to her metaphorical birth in the previous act and that she was reborn through love 'made possible by her symbolic renunciation of her marriage to Golaud' (Grayson, 2003:76).

In Act II, scene 1 this is apparent as Pelléas is now seeking the light in Mélisande, mistaking her hair for a gleam of light. The symbolism is further complicated by the fact

that Pelléas cannot see the light while he is obsessed with Mélisande's hair (Langham Smith, 1989:112).

In the love scenes Pelléas and Mélisande are confused and undecided whether they should seek the light and avoid the dark, or the other way around. In their scene by the well, Act II, scene 1, Mélisande follows the shining object in the depths of the well, whereas Pelléas talks about a lime-tree where the sun never enters. Their perplexity is again apparent at the beginning of the final love scene, where Pelléas displays his fear of the external world and Mélisande yearns for the light. After their declaration of love, it is Pelléas who craves the light and Mélisande who wants to remain in the darkness²⁰ (Langham Smith, 1989:112).

By the final act the quest for light has waned. However, it is important to note that the dying Mélisande recognises the sunset, and the evening sun in her eyes prevents her from identifying Golaud. Ultimately she requests that the window be left open: 'Non...jusqu'à ce que le soleil soit au fond de la mer. Il descend lentement; aloers c'est l'hiver qui commence?' (No...do not shut them till the sun's in the depths of the sea; It goes down slow; that means that the winter is coming?). She is afraid of the cold, especially the 'great cold'. With these words the dark-light symbolism comes to an end, and the drama concludes with Arkel's profound final words (Langham Smith, 1989:113).

²⁰ See Act IV, bars 568-572 and 673-681.

4.2.3. Symbolism of Mélisande

Langham Smith (1989:13) states that it is very probable that some of the character names were inspired by Arthurian literature and others created by Maeterlinck. The origin of Mélisande's name is perhaps intentionally obscure. Goehr (2001:56) emphasises the resonating of the word *melos* (Latin for 'song') in Mélisande's name. Langham Smith (1989:15) writes that her name could allude to several themes, reminiscent of much of Maeterlinck's symbolism. A number of names in the *Morte d'Arthur* start with Mel- whereas others end in -sande (Langham Smith, 1989:15).

Both Grayson (2003:76) and Langham Smith (1989:15) note the similarity of Mélisande's name with that of the siren from French mythology, Mèlusine – similarly to the sirens of Greek mythology, Mèlusine lured men to their downfall with her seductive voice. In Act III, scene 1 Mélisande's song from the tower charms Pellèas, and in the Act IV love scene he fantasises over her beautiful voice, inadvertently calling upon the sirens that fatally seduced the sailors: 'On dirait que ta voix a passé sur la mer au printemps!' (Your voice seems to have wafted across the sea in spring!) (Grayson, 2003:76).

Mélisande's reluctance to reveal anything from her past contributes to her mysteriousness and strangeness and in a way supports the symbolic quality of her character more than the human quality. As mentioned above, Grayson (2003:77) argues that Mèlusine is a symbol of love, which even while momentarily brightening up a dismal world, is stained with sadness, torment and death.

In Goehr's (2001:56) opinion the play *Pelléas et Mélisande* revolves around Mélisande's beauty in the sense that it 'draws those around her into a destiny she declares is far stronger than she is'. Despite her innocence, Mélisande's intricate character, ranging from innocent trepidation and panic to sorrow, love and flirtation, seems to determine the whole tragedy of the play. She embodies the 'legendary double nature of *la femme inconnue*; of aggressor and victim' (Goehr, 2001:56).

Langham Smith also suggested that Mélisande was one of Bluebeard's seven wives in Maeterlinck's play *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*. In this work the submissive *princesses lointaines* of the early plays re-emerge as the wives of Bluebeard – one of them bears the name Mélisande. Known as a figure from the fifteenth century, Bluebeard lived in Brittany, accompanied Joan of Arc, and not only proved to have a charitable character, but also committed the seven terrible crimes. This association with *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* could provide an explanation for Mélisande's mysterious past and her bewildered response towards Golaud when he found her in the forest. Golaud possibly resembled Bluebeard in physical appearance as well as in character (Langham Smith, 1989:15-18).²¹

Mélisande's long hair is one of the recurring symbols in *Pelléas*. It is not only a symbol of femininity, but also of spiritual force, emanating from her head. She lets her hair drop into Blindman's Well in Act II, which used to possess healing powers, but has become barren. In Act III Pelléas plays with her loose hair and entangles it in the tree branches to prevent her from leaving him. In Act IV Golaud viciously reinterprets his gesture: he

²¹ Paul Dukas composed an opera based on *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*.

jerks her hair, 'blasphemously drags her by it in the shape of a cross, and invokes the name of Absalom, the traitorous son of King David, who was killed when his hair became entangled in tree branches' (Grayson, 2003:76).

Potter (2003:141) interprets Maeterlinck's and Debussy's representation of Mélisande as an 'ethereal, blonde woman-child'. Her replies are generally unclear and she does not give any motivation either, probably true to her passive character. 'She has the status of an unthinking child of nature' (Potter, 2003:141).

Grayson (2003:76) assumes that all the male characters in the drama, from Yniold to Arkel, 'project their fantasies onto Mélisande'. Pelléas is doubtful of her sincerity; Golaud is certain that she is untruthful and the blind Arkel merely 'sees' her innocence. Although this subtle manipulation empowers Mélisande initially, it is ultimately the reason for her downfall when the 'fantasies of Pelléas and Golaud come into conflict' (Grayson, 2003:76).

Pataky Kosove (1967:783-784) assumes that *Pelléas* is not a tragedy, but could be described as anti-tragic, as the characters in the play resign themselves to universal forces and counteract responsibility. In Act V Golaud says that Mélisande's death is not of his doing, rejecting any accountability for her suffering and emphasising the notion that every event, including Mélisande's death, is predestined (Pataky Kosove, 1967:783-784).

Symons (1958:86) concludes that the drama of *Pelléas* is based on philosophical ideas, but captured emotionally. The plot revolves around the mystery of the universe and the weakness of humanity, depicted by obscure characters, 'who are little parts of the universal consciousness, their strange names being but pseudonyms of obscure passions, intimate emotions' (Symons, 1958:86).

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CHAPTER 5

BACKGROUND OF THE OPERA

5.1. The genesis of *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Debussy completed his opera *Pelléas* in 1895. The first performance only took place on 30 April 1902 in the Opéra-Comique, after numerous unsuccessful efforts to get the opera staged. Despite its initial unenthusiastic reception, the work became more popular, establishing its importance in the musical world in general (Lesure, 2001). Grayson (1986:13) also confirms that the breakthrough of *Pelléas* marks a defining moment in Debussy's career, bringing him international celebrity.

Brown (1992:72) maintains that even though Debussy only completed one opera, he spent the greatest part of his career attempting to achieve his ideal in the combination of music and text. Letters written by the composer not only reveal his dissatisfaction with the composition of an opera based on Banville's *Diane au Bois*, but also comment on his progress with *Pelléas*. Debussy also attempted two operas based on Poe's tales, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Devil in the Belfry*, but did not succeed in completing either of them (Brown, 1992:72).

As soon as Debussy was granted Maeterlinck's authorisation to use the play as libretto for his opera in August 1892/3?, he started setting the love scene at the opera's climax (Act IV, scene 4), completing the draft by early September. Even though the *Pelléas* love

scene was the first to be composed, it was also the scene that required the most revision (Grayson, 2003:74).

According to Robert Godet, Debussy started jotting down musical ideas almost straight after he had read the play. He started composing the rhythm echoing Golaud's 'ponderous walk', the five-note 'arabesque' of Mélisande, and the theme to accompany Pelléas's words, 'On dirait que ta voix a passé sur la mer au printemps' (Act IV scene 4) (Grayson, 1986:19).

In passages communicating mainly factual information, the vocal line seems to be composed first and is set in recitative-like style, with the orchestra punctuating only its inflections and cadence. On the other hand, at moments of reflection and emotional expression the orchestra plays a more prominent role. Here the orchestral music was sketched before the voice parts were superimposed over it (Grayson, 1986:144).

Debussy writes in a note entitled 'Why I wrote Pelléas' (Lesure and Langham Smith, 1977:75):

The drama of Pelléas ... despite its atmosphere of dreams contains much more humanity than those so-called documents of real life ... The characters in this opera try to sing like real people.

Kabisch (2001:601) describes *Pelléas* as literature opera, since the music supports the play, never attempting to 'do more than clarify it or make it more vivid or credible'.

5.2. Revisions to the opera

Grayson (1986:133) documents that the earliest manuscript of Debussy's *Pelléas* includes drafts of Acts II and V complete, the latter two thirds of Act IV, scene 4, the beginning of Act I, scene 1, and two portions of Act I, scene 2. These drafts constitute the Meyer MS²² and contain Debussy's 'rough, hastily written preliminary sketch draft of the music' (Grayson, 1986:133). Certain assumptions have been made on the basis of a close study of this manuscript.

The revision process of *Pelléas* did not stop in 1905,²³ when the full score was published. Debussy continued to make changes to his opera (mostly altering orchestration and tempos), modifying the music in his own copy of the full score. These revisions were made in his personal score only and never published. This manuscript remained in the composer's possession until his death in 1918 and was sold at an auction by his widow in 1933 (Grayson, 1986:180).

Ferguson (1988:387) mentions the necessity for the expanded interludes and cites André Messager, the conductor who premièred the opera:

...Meanwhile, an even more serious difficulty arose ... for Debussy had not foreseen how long the changes of scenery would take, with the result that five of the eight interludes between the scenes were far too short. Cursing and grumbling, he began to rework them while I went to him daily to collect each fresh page of score as it was written between one rehearsal and the next.

²² Coll. André Meyer, Paris (Grayson, 1986:121)

²³ The second edition of the score.

Despite the fact that the extended interludes had been a central part of the opera since 1902, they were published as a separate score entitled 'Interludes pour *Pelléas et Mélisande*' until 1939, long after they had been included into the entirely re-engraved French-English vocal score of 1907 (Grayson, 1986:175). The interludes are well incorporated within the conception of the work and serve the drama in that they 'modulate the mood from one scene to the next'; the particular scene's motif is introduced and conclusively restated at the end. This frames the scenes and supports the finality of each scene (Kabisch, 2001:606).

Kabisch (2001:607) continues that the reason why Debussy could revise the music so often (the addition of themes and especially the changes in instrumentation) was because the unity of the work was not based on the particular employment of themes and motives, but rather rooted in the continuous sense of fatality that persists throughout the work. Debussy's conception of opera as 'sung play' contrasted with Wagner's idea of opera as 'symphonic poem' (Kabisch, 2001:607).

CHAPTER 6

COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES IN SUPPORT OF THE SYMBOLISM

6.1. The musical extension of the symbolism in the text

Langham Smith (1989:102) distinguishes two kinds of symbols in the opera: ‘the local or momentary symbol’ (a ring, a crown, doves, three beggars and a window) and the ‘extended symbolism’ (darkness and light, warm and cold, and water imagery). Debussy parallels Maeterlinck’s dark-light symbolism in the play (darkness as a symbol of death and light as a symbol of love) in his use of harmony in the opera. Langham Smith (1989:103) suggests that a harmonic framework, based on the circle of fifths, with the two opposite poles C major and F-sharp (G-flat) major, is a feature of *Pelléas*: C major alluding to Mélisande’s past and themes of darkness, and F-sharp (G-flat) major, representing Mélisande’s new-found love for Pelléas and light. The Phrygian and Lydian modes (effectively contained in the octatonic scale) respectively hint at the dark-light symbolism. The Lydian mode is occasionally employed to support Mélisande’s guidance of Pelléas towards the light (Langham Smith, 1989:103).²⁴

²⁴ The Phrygian scale has a sombre quality, as it is characterised by a flattened second, whereas the Lydian’s raised fourth creates an uplifting effect.

Grout (1966:500) states that the 'mysterious, spiritual character' of *Pelléas* is enhanced by understatement and subtle suggestion,²⁵ while Langham Smith (1989:103) argues that the mysteriousness in *Pelléas* is further enhanced by the unconventional modulations through which keys are established.

The notion of circularity is suggested through the use of various compositional techniques. The whole-tone and pentatonic scales are circular in their construction, as they have no beginning or ending notes. Based on the circle of fifths, the harmonic structure in *Pelléas* also supports the circular quality of the drama. In addition to the above circular devices, most of the motifs in the opera have a circular contour. Langham Smith (1989:103-104) explains the circularity implied at the moment when Mélisande loses her ring. He argues that this scene resolves the unresolved tensions of the first act:

When the ring is finally lost all that remains is a 'circle of water'. Root-position chords fan out in a circular motion, resolving onto D major for the first time in the opera whose first scene was so strongly in d minor. A sense of resolution is felt: a reworking of the original meeting by the well, but now with more promise of fulfilment.²⁶

Langham Smith (1989:104) continues that Debussy responds to the more extended and recurring water imagery with 'pictorial motifs and orchestral contrasts', linking these to 'human themes' in the play.

Debussy's use of silence in the opera echoes Maeterlinck's view that emotion in its purest manifestation can only be sensed in silence (Brown, 1992:70). The composer said about

²⁵ The recitative style in the voice parts and the understated employment of dynamics and instrumentation support this assumption.

²⁶ See Act II, bars 95-99.

his opera that 'the special care with which one performs the silences is central to the work' (Briscoe, 1999:74). Silence not only augments moments of fury, brutality, gloominess and destruction in the play (Goehr, 2001:70), but also extends the feeling of pure love when Pelléas and Mélisande declare their love for one another in silence (without orchestral accompaniment).

Debussy manages to connect local symbols in the play with recurrent motifs, avoiding an 'obviously pictorial' representation (Langham Smith, 1989:102).²⁷ Grout (1966:501) explains that the recurrent motifs are transformed and harmonically varied, and as opposed to Wagner's employment of this device in the continuous symphonic way, they function as 'pivot themes' (D'Indy's description) in *Pelléas*.

6.2. Motifs and themes

Lesure (2001) maintains that in *Pelléas* certain motifs are associated with 'characters, or with certain symbols or ideas.' Calvocoressi (1925:695-697) concurs that despite Debussy's aversion to Wagner's use of leitmotifs, there are definitely recurring motifs in *Pelléas*, applied 'abundantly and systematically' and argues that Debussy only rejected the way in which Wagner applied leitmotifs and not the principle itself. As opposed to

²⁷ In Act I, scene 1 a short horn motif, set in the key area of C major, is heard as Golaud notices the crown at the bottom of the well. At this point the key is significantly introduced in the opera for the first time and restated when Golaud considers retrieving the crown. Then the key also recurs when Mélisande recoils from Golaud's prickly beard, 'reminding her (one is tempted to surmise) of Bluebeard, from whom she might have acquired the first crown' (Langham Smith, 1989:102-103). See Act I, bars 98 and 126.

Wagner's employment of the device as organised entities, the motifs in Debussy's opera are characterised by simplicity ('brief units, cells') and appear discreetly in the musical setting (Calvocoressi, 1925:696). The motifs often appear in a different form, shape and timbre (Lesure, 2001), and serve to resonate and enhance the 'interplay and development of literary themes' in the play (Langham Smith, 1989:81). Emmanuel (1926:135) identifies thirteen themes and motifs in his analysis of the opera, in which only the three main characters, Pelléas, Mélisande and Golaud, feature prominently in the melodic framework.²⁸

Example 4: Emmanuel's labels for the thirteen motifs

- I. (Les temps lointains...) (1).
- II. Golaud.
- III. Mélisande.
- IV. (La destinée).
- V. Pelléas.
- VI. La fontaine.
- VII. (L'anneau).
- VIII. Yniold.
- IX. (L'amour déclaré).
- X. (La mort).
- XI. (L'amour éperdu).
- XII. L'enfant.
- XIII. (Le pardon).

²⁸ Arkel and Yniold also have motifs associated with them, but their motifs only occur when they are present and remain unchanged, whereas the principal themes are varied and transformed throughout the opera.

Even though Debussy openly rejected the use of leitmotifs in his opera, he admitted that Mélisande was associated with a theme throughout *Pelléas*. This Mélisande theme was labelled around the time of the *Pelléas* première, when Debussy compiled musical excerpts of the opera to accompany photographs of the production for the journal *Le Théâtre*. Beneath the photo of the landscape for the third tableau (Act I, scene 3 – ‘Before the castle’) the first four bars of the scene were sketched, captioned by Debussy as the ‘initial theme of Mélisande’ (‘Thème initial de Mélisande’), referring to the oboe solo at the start of the scene and followed by the entrance of Mélisande (and Geneviève) (Grayson, 1986:230-231).²⁹

Further identification of motifs was documented by Louis Laloy in a 1905 article on *Pelléas*. He pointed out several recurring motifs in the opera, but interpreted them as relating to certain feelings (*sentiments*) rather than to objects, actions or characters. Golaud’s motif does not only accompany his character, but it is also heard in the interlude before Act II, scene 3, depicting the threatening sound of the sea; therefore the motif seems to communicate anxiety (*l’inquiétude*) rather than representing Golaud. Pelléas’s motif is similarly identified with melancholy and tenderness (opening of Act II, scene 1), rather than with his character. These short motifs differ from those of Wagner in their length and ‘their continuous modification successfully mirrors the instability of human feelings, which are in a state of constant flux’ (Grayson, 1986:232).³⁰

²⁹ See Act I, bars 385-389.

³⁰ Debussy’s leitmotifs have a twofold role. They do not only represent the character at a fundamental level, but also suggest some universal concept at a more symbolic level: Mélisande’s motif would not only refer to her character, but also to ‘love’. Golaud’s character suggests ‘anxiety’, ‘darkness’, ‘fear’, ‘desperation’ or ‘complexity’. Pelléas’s motif, on the other hand, could symbolise ‘freedom’, ‘simplicity’ or ‘lightness of being’.

In a letter to Chausson on 2 October 1893 Debussy writes (Lesure and Nichols, 1987:56):

I've started again and am trying to find a recipe for producing more characteristic phrases. I've been forcing myself to be Pelléas and Mélisande and I've gone looking for music behind the veils she wraps round herself, even in the presence of her most devoted admirers.

6.2.1. Principal motifs and themes

- **Mélisande's theme (love)**

Grayson (2003:77) identifies Mélisande as a symbol of love, which momentarily brings 'light to a gloomy world, however, the love is accompanied by sorrow, dismay, jealousy, murder, and unbearable torment'. Mélisande's theme is a balanced entity as it consists of a question (A) and answer (B), both circular patterns. The theme is in ABA form, reinforcing the circularity. The first five notes of the theme constitute Mélisande's motif, which recurs frequently throughout the opera.³¹ A motivic cell, consisting of the first three notes of the theme, also occurs at certain points in the opera, especially in the construction of some new motifs and themes. In the reappearances of the cell not only is the rhythm often varied, but the quality of intervals may change, for instance, from major to minor or vice versa, and presented in inverted or retrograde form. The distinctive pentatonic flavour of the motif (and consequently also the cell), resonates with Debussy's

³¹ Emmanuel (1926:135) labels the motif as Mélisande's theme and discusses it (1926:148) as such. Nichols (1989:67) sees Mélisande's theme as an extension of the motif, but in my opinion the motif is a fragment of the theme, with its appearance preceding the theme. The motif appears for the first time in Act I, bars 14-15 (Oboe I).

preoccupation with the golden section in that the notes in the tonal pentatonic scale relate to each other in Fibonacci proportions (Bachmann & Bachmann, 1979:73).³²

Example 5a: Mélisande's theme, Act I, bars 385-389



Example 5b: Mélisande motif, Act I, bars 14-15



Significantly, the full theme only occurs five times in the entire opera. In Act I, scene 3 the theme occurs for the first time in bars 385-389 (oboe solo), preceding Mélisande's entrance in this scene. The theme is heard in the same scene in bars 443-446 (Flute I and Oboe I) with doubling in cor anglais in bars 445-446, when Mélisande recognises the ship that brought her to Allemonde. It is heard for the third time in bars 471-474 (Flute I followed in Oboe I), when Pelléas leads Mélisande by the arm down the steep path to the castle. The penultimate appearance of Mélisande's theme is in the interlude between Act III, scenes 1 and 2, in bars 246-252. The A and B sections of the theme are played by oboe solo, part B reinforced by Horn I in bars 249-250 and in Flute I in bars 250-251. The recurring A section is then played by solo Violin I, solo Violin II, solo viola and solo

³² See Chapter 2, page 36. above.

cello.³³ The final statement of the theme occurs in Act V, bars 370-373, just after Mélisande has died. The theme is played by oboe solo and accompanies Arkel's description of Mélisande's character: 'C'était un petit être si tranquille, si timide et si silencieux ... C'était un pauvre petit être mystérieux comme tout le monde' (She was aye such a quiet little creature; such a timid one, and silent too ... She was a lonely little sad mysterious being, like the whole world).

- **Golaud motif (anxiety)**

The motif first occurs in Act I, bars 5-6 in oboes, cor anglais and clarinets. It is characterised melodically by an alternating interval of a second. Its rhythm is also used referentially. In the first bar a crotchet is followed by a crotchet tied to triplet quavers and two quavers. The second bar varies the first bar in that the first crotchet is modified into a dotted quaver and semiquaver. Emmanuel (1926:145) assumes that this motif also suggests anxiety and insecurity, pointing out that the first text accompanying the motif reflects the symbolic character of the motif. 'Je crois que je me suis perdu moi-même, et mes chiens ne me retrouvent plus' (I think I myself must have lost my way, and my hounds will never find me now).³⁴ Throughout the opera different cells of this motif are heard, supporting mainly moments of anxiety, fear, looming danger, forcefulness and death. The general character of the motif could also be extended to that of resistance and frustration. It is almost as if the rhythmic energy of the motif is repressed by the small melodic range that is allowed by the major second. Kabisch (2001:604) quotes Joseph

³³ The Pelléas motif is notably superimposed on the theme in Act III, bars 247-248 (solo cello) and bars 251-252 (cor anglais, Clarinet I and II, and Bassoon I).

³⁴ See Act I, bars 39-42.

Kerman's description of Golaud's motif as 'merely a rhythmic flurry, but the implied action gets nowhere; the melody cannot rear itself past the interval of a second'.

Example 6: Golaud motif, Act I, bars 5-6



Debussy's motivic treatment significantly extends the literary symbolism of the play where motifs very often manifest themselves in a more symbolic and abstract guise. By presenting Golaud's motif when he is neither present nor mentioned, the technique not only suggests Golaud spying in the background, but in Act I, scene 3 also implies a probable connection between the symbolic ship in danger and Golaud (Langham Smith, 1989:105).³⁵

- **Pelléas motif (freedom)**

Pelléas enters the first time in Act I, scene 2,³⁶ while Geneviève is still considering Golaud's future. Whereas Mélisande's theme or motif has a melodic quality and Golaud's motif is characterised rhythmically, Pelléas's motif is 'short and fragmentary,

³⁵ See Act I, bars 455-456. A ship is seen on the sea, eliciting talk of a storm and a shipwreck (Langham Smith (1989:105). Golaud's rhythm already occurs in bars 424 (Horn I), 428-429 (chorus) and 431-432 (chorus).

³⁶ See Act I, bars 317-320 (Flute I).

lacking rhythmic or melodic energy' (Nichols, 1989:66).³⁷ At the motif's first appearance the time signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4 (Emmanuel, 1926:158).

Example 7: Pelléas motif, Act I, bars 317-320



The composition of this motif's simple fourths allows it to undergo numerous harmonic transformations. Relating to Mélisande's first motif in its mutual half-diminished chord basis, the harmony develops into dominants on Arkel's welcoming words to Pelléas: 'Viens un peu plus près que je te voie dans la lumière' (Come a little closer so that I can see you in the light) in Act I, scene 2³⁸ (Langham Smith, 1989:105).

In the final love scene the motif draws complex chromatic harmony underlining Pelléas's perplexed emotions on 'Je vais fuir en criant de joie et de douleur' (I fly now with a cry of joy and of dismay...) (Langham Smith, 1989:105).³⁹

By the time Mélisande enters,⁴⁰ the motif has become condensed, and is accompanied by an intensified form of the love-language, where thirteenthths are added to the norm of ninths, and the chords are inverted so that they are founded upon a warm, close-position fourth.⁴¹ It is in this position, and at the

³⁷ In my opinion the intervals of a fourth together with the simplicity of the rhythm (successive crotchets) in Pelléas's motif evoke a feeling of lightness and freedom. Debussy's setting of the motif for the flute enhances its lightness.

³⁸ See Act I, bars 330-332. The dominants more specifically occur just before Arkel welcomes Pelléas.

³⁹ See Act IV, bars 541-542.

⁴⁰ See Act IV, bar 566.

⁴¹ See Act IV, bars 605-606.

same pitch, that the motif floats across Mélisande's mind as Golaud asks her [on her deathbed] if she had ever loved Pelléas.⁴²

6.2.2. Secondary motifs and themes

- Fate motif

Nichols (1989:62) also mentions the significance of the opening theme of the opera.⁴³ The 'slow, quasi-ecclesiastical starkness' characterising this theme in the first four bars almost serves as a forewarning of the events to follow (Nichols, 1989:62). The theme might evoke different associations for each listener. Some scholars call this theme 'The Enigma of the World' (L'énigme du monde)⁴⁴ and 'Times Past' (Les temps lointains).⁴⁵ Emmanuel (1926:145) states that this theme represents nothing and nobody; it only evokes the far-distant past. Whatever the identification, Debussy's orchestration of bassoons and muted cellos enhances the atmosphere of gloom at this point, while the gradual illumination is guided by the ascending direction of the music, reaching a climax in bar 18, before it descends.⁴⁶ The idea of 'struggle against a resistant material world' is depicted through melody and rhythm (Nichols, 1989:62-63).⁴⁷

⁴² See Act V, bars 181-182.

⁴³ See Act I, bars 1-5 (cellos).

⁴⁴ Motif identified by René Terrason (Nichols, 1989:62).

⁴⁵ See Emmanuel (1926:145).

⁴⁶ The fate motif recurs in Act I, bars 8-12 (violas and cellos, and Bassoon II in bars 10-11).

⁴⁷ The rhythmic character of Golaud's motif seems to be in conflict with the more melodious motif associated with Mélisande and the broadness of the fate motif, which consists only of minims and crotchets.

Example 8: Fate motif, Act I, bars 1-5



After the two statements of the motif in the prelude, it also appears four times in Act I, scene 1. The motif opens the scene on Golaud's words 'Je ne pourrai plus sortir cette forêt! (Am I never then to leave this forest again?), and it appears again just as Golaud approaches the crying Mélisande and touches her shoulder. When Golaud states 'Voyez, je resterai ici, contre l'arbre ... N'ayez pas peur' (For see, I will stay where I am, by this tree here...Be not afraid) and at his 'La nuit sera très noire et très froide ... Venez avec moi' (The night will be so dark and so chilly. I beg you to come) the motif is heard.⁴⁸ It appears three times in the following interlude, the second and third time notably superimposed on Golaud's motif.⁴⁹

A fleeting acknowledgement of the motif occurs in Act II, scene 2, when Mélisande tells Golaud about her unhappiness at the castle. The motif is stated just after Golaud attempts to comfort her by saying 'Mais dis-moi quelque chose; n'importe quoi, je ferai tout ce que tu voudras...(But tell me more about you; no matter what, and whatever you wish shall be done),⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See Act I, bars 24-27 (Horns I and cellos; Horns II and III in bars 24-26), 55-56 (Bassoon I, viola, cello), bars 70-72 (Horn I), and bars 172-175 (Violin I).

⁴⁹ See Act I, bars 185-187 (Bassoons I and II), 193-194 (Flute I and Oboe I), and 197-198 (Flute I and Oboe I).

⁵⁰ See Act II, bars 300-301 (Clarinet I and II). The motif is in retrograde.

The rest of the opera is free of the fate motif until its final occurrence in Act V, where the dying Mélisande asks Golaud: ‘Y a t’il longtemps que nous nous sommes vus?’ (Has it been a very long time since we met?), perhaps recalling their initial meeting at the start of the opera.⁵¹ The statement is accompanied by similar semiquaver figurations employed at the beginning of Act IV, scene 1, but here the figuration is in quavers.

- **Threat motif (Death)**

The Threat motif⁵² is associated with Golaud. It first appears in Act I, scene 1 in combination with the Arkel motif, when Golaud introduces himself to Mélisande at ‘Je suis le prince Golaud le petit fils d’Arkel le vieux roi d’Allemonde’ (I am prince Golaud, the grandson of Arkel, the old king of Allemonde).⁵³ Then it recurs in the interlude just before scene 3 of the same act in bars 380-381 (Violin I and II, Viola). Scene 3 takes place in front of the castle, when Mélisande, Genevieve and Pelléas look at and discuss the lights on the sea. The motif recurs in Act I, scene 2, Act III, scene 1, and plays a significant role in Act IV, scene 4, where Golaud takes revenge on the lovers, kills Pelléas and wounds Mélisande.

⁵¹ See Act V, bars 105-106 (Oboe I and Bassoon I).

⁵² Emmanuel (1926:198) labels this motif ‘La mort’ (Death) and assumes that its first appearance is in Act IV, bar 709, after the castle doors have been locked for the night.

⁵³ See Act I, bar 130 (Bassoon II and Horns I and III). In later versions the fourth note is omitted; there the motif consists of a broken major triad. Other variants add a falling or rising second after the triad.

Example 9: Threat motif, Act I, bar 130



When in Act II, scene 2 Golaud notices the missing ring and tells Mélisande to go and find it at once, the threat motif is heard just before Golaud's remark that he would have had her lose anything in the world but that ring, and that she does not know what its loss means. It recurs in a varied form when he says that he will not sleep until Mélisande has found the ring.⁵⁴

When Golaud's approach interrupts Pelléas and Mélisande's flirting in Act III, scene 1, the threat motif is suddenly heard, preceding Golaud's 'Que faites vous ici?' (What are you doing here?). The motif reappears on 'Vous ne savez pas qu'il est tard?' (Are you not aware it is late?), followed by Golaud's reprimand 'Quels enfants! Quels enfants!' (Children both. Children both.)⁵⁵ Then it reappears towards the end of the interlude to scene 2, but here it has lost its threatening quality and is played *piano* by muted trumpets. Golaud's scolding is possibly underlain with sadness and disappointment.⁵⁶

The threat motif becomes very powerful in Act IV, scene 4, when Golaud catches the two lovers red-handed. Golaud's approach and the premonition of tragedy are well portrayed

⁵⁴ See Act II, bars 352-353 (bassoons) marked *espressif*, and bar 369 (Violin I).

⁵⁵ See Act III, bars 217 (Horns I and II with the same rhythm and contour harmonised in Bassoon I, Horn III, cellos and double basses), bars 222-223 (violins), and bars 227-230 (Bassoons I and II).

⁵⁶ See Act III, bars 258-259.

by the occurrences of the motif in this scene. It appears initially after Pelléas and Mélisande realise that the gates have been locked for the night, following Pelléas's exclamation 'Il est trop tard! Il est trop tard!' (It is too late! It is too late!), and accompanying Mélisande's 'Tant mieux! Tant mieux!' (All the better! All the better!).⁵⁷ The motif subtly suggests Golaud's approach, when Mélisande becomes aware of someone following them and finally realises it is Golaud.⁵⁸ After Golaud has killed Pelléas and wounded Mélisande, this scene is then concluded with several statements of the threat motif escalating to the final chord of the scene.⁵⁹

- **Arkel motif (Wisdom)**

The motif associated with Arkel initially appears, combined with the threat motif, in Act I, scene 1, when Arkel's name is mentioned for the first time. Calvocoressi (1925:696) connects this motif with wisdom and thus identifies it as the wisdom motif.⁶⁰ Debussy described Arkel's character in a letter to Chausson: 'He comes from beyond the grave and has that objective, prophetic gentleness of those who are soon to die' (Lesure & Nichols, 1987:62).

⁵⁷ See Act IV, bars 709-713 (Horns I and III, and cellos).

⁵⁸ See Act IV, bar 739 (double basses), bar 743 (double basses), bars 748-749 (Oboe I and cor anglais), bars 763-764, 767-768, 771-772 (double basses).

⁵⁹ See Act IV, bars 838-841 (Bassoons I and II), and bars 842-848 (Bassoons I and II, Clarinets I and II, and Horns I and III).

⁶⁰ See Act I, bar 131 (Bassoon II with Bassoon I on the last four notes). Emmanuel (1926:154) labels this motif as 'Le destinee'.

Example 10: Arkel motif, Act I, bar 131



Introducing Arkel's entrance in the preceding scene, the motif is notably heard just before the curtain goes up for scene 2. Significantly the motif also precedes Arkel's first words in the opera 'Je n'en dis rien' (I have nothing to say), answering Geneviève's question about what he thinks of Golaud's letter about his discovery of Mélisande, their marriage and if they are welcome at the castle. The final statement of the motif in this scene accompanies Arkel's 'Il n'arrive peut-être pas d'évènements inutiles' (It may be there never occurs any event that is useless).⁶¹

Similar to the motivic treatment in the previous Arkel scene, Debussy once again states the motif before Arkel's entrance on stage in Act IV, scene 2. Here the recovered Arkel has regained his sight and in a very intimate conversation with Mélisande describes how her beauty and youth bring freshness to the gloomy castle and that her arrival marks the beginning of a new era in Allemonde. Their warm moment is interrupted by Golaud's entrance in bar 186.⁶² The final statement of the Arkel motif appears in Act V at Arkel's

⁶¹ See Act I, bars 221-224 (Trumpets I and II), 267-270 (cellos), and bars 303-305 (violins, violas, cellos).

⁶² See Act IV, bars 90-93 (Horn I), 94-97 (cellos), and 144-145 (Oboe I and Clarinets I and II). In bars 154-155 the Arkel motif (cor anglais, Clarinet II, Horns I and II) is significantly heard with Mélisande's motif (Flutes I and II, Clarinet I, and violins), Golaud motif (Flute III) and Pelléas's motif (Bassoon I), when Arkel says that Mélisande will open the door to a new era in Allemonde.

comment on Golaud's frustrated reaction to Mélisande's oblique answers 'Vous ne savez pas ce que c'est que l'âme' (You do not know what the soul is).⁶³

- **Yniold motif**

Emmanuel (1926:182) states that the motif associated with Yniold first appears at the end of Act III, scene 3, preceding his first entrance in the opera in the next scene.⁶⁴ In scene 4 the motif is heard accompanying Yniold's replies. Its final appearance in this scene accompanies Yniold's reply 'Si, si, petit père', when Golaud starts interrogating him about the nature of Pelléas's and Mélisande's friendship.⁶⁵

Example 11: Yniold motif, Act 422-426



- **Well motif⁶⁶**

The well motif is initially heard in the scene where Pelléas and Mélisande are together at the well, when Mélisande plays with her ring and loses it in the water.⁶⁷ The same motif

⁶³ See Act V, bars 320-321 (Flute I and II, Clarinet I and II; Oboe I and II and Horn III support ending of motif)

⁶⁴ See Act III, bars 422-426 (Oboe I) and 426-430 (cor anglais).

⁶⁵ See Act III, bars 478-479 (Flute I and Oboe II), 483-484 (Flute I and Oboe II), 487-490 (Clarinet I), 491-492 (Violin II), 497-499 (Horn I, violins and violas) and 534 (Flutes I and II).

⁶⁶ Emmanuel (1926:162) identifies the descending semi-quaver passage in Act II, bar 13 (Violin I), as 'La fontaine'.

ominously occurs in the scene of the castle vaults (Act III, scene 2), where Golaud takes Pelléas down to the underground lakes to smell the toxic waters. It appears throughout the scene, primarily in the woodwinds and brass.⁶⁸ The motif reappears in Act IV, scene 1 after Pelléas has told Mélisande that he needs to meet her that night, because he has to leave the next day. Mélisande answers that she will always see him, upon which he replies 'Tu auras beau regarder ... je serai si loin que tu ne pourras plus me voir' ('Twill not do much good to look ... I'll be so far off you never can see me again). Mélisande responds 'Qu'est'il arrive, Pelléas?' (What has happened now, Pelléas?)⁶⁹ Their past times spent together are probably recalled and suggested by the appearance of the well motif here. The final statement of the theme occurs in scene 4 of the same act, when Pelléas and Mélisande reminisce about the previous time they met at the well.⁷⁰

Example 12: Well motif, Act II, bars 10-13

The musical score for Example 12 shows the 'Well motif' in Act II, bars 10-13. It is arranged for Flutes (Fl.), Horns (Htb.), Clarinets (Cl.), and Cor Anglais (Cora). The score is divided into two endings. The first ending (1°) is marked 'p' and the second ending (2°) is marked 'un peu plus mouvementé'. Dynamics include 'p', 'più p', 'pp', and 'dim.'. The Cor Anglais part includes 'sourdines' markings.

⁶⁷ See Act II, bars 10-13 (Horn I, Oboes I and II, and Clarinets I and II) and 21-33 (Horns I and III, Flutes I and II, Oboes I and II, Clarinets I and II, and violins).

⁶⁸ See Act III, bar 269 (cor anglais, Clarinets I and II, Bassoon I, and Horns I and II); in bars 300 and 302 (cor anglais, and Trumpets I, II and III).

⁶⁹ See Act IV, bars 68-72 (Clarinets I and II, Flutes I and II, Oboes I and II).

⁷⁰ See Act IV, bars 602-604 (Harp I, Clarinets I and II, Flutes I and II, and Horn I).

It seems as if new motifs appear in each scene, elucidating the underlying meaning of the drama. These motifs sometimes consist of a combination of cells from the principal motifs. Only the most significant secondary motifs will be discussed, although there are probably several others.

- **Ring motif**

The motif associated with the ring appears for the first time in Act II, scene 1, where Pelléas and Mélisande are together at Blindman's Well (Emmanuel, 1926:163).⁷¹ The motif recurs in Act II, bars 73 and 120-121.

Example 13: Ring motif, Act II, bar 51



- **Ecstasy theme**

The theme first appears after the love declaration in Act IV, scene 4 on Pelléas's words 'On dirait que ta voix a passé sur la mer au printemps!' (One would think that your voice

⁷¹ See Act II, bar 51 (Clarinet I) and 53 (Flutes I and II, Clarinets I and II).

had come over the sea in the spring); according to Robert Godet, this was one of the first themes Debussy composed after he decided to set the play to music (Grayson, 1986:19).⁷²

A variant of the ecstasy theme occurs after the castle doors have shut for the night and the lovers realise that there is no possible return. The variant resembles the ecstasy theme in its contour and occurs for the first time at Pelléas's words 'Ah! Qu'il fait beau dans les ténèbres' (Ah! It is fair here in the darkness); it is restated several times up to the end of the scene.⁷³ The theme notably returns in Act V, after Mélisande said that she did love Pelléas and Golaud asks her desperately if she loved Pelléas with a love that was forbidden. Here the theme (played by Oboe I) is simultaneously heard with Pelléas's perfect fourth in Flute I.⁷⁴

Example 14a: Ecstasy theme, Act IV, bars 629-633

⁷² See Act IV, bars 630-631 (Horn I), bars 632-633 (Flute I and cello solo), 635-638 (Oboe I), 663-665 (Violin I and cellos; Violin II and Viola in bar 664), 820-826 (flutes, Horns I and III, violins, violas, cellos). Grayson (1986:234) identifies this theme as the 'ecstasy theme'.

⁷³ See Act IV, bars 734-735 (violins), 736-738 (Flute I, Clarinet I, Horn I), 751-752 (violins), 759-760 (violins and violas), 810-812 (violins and violas). Emmanuel (1926:197) labels this as 'love declared' and the variant as 'passionate love' (1926:198).

⁷⁴ See Act V, bars 190-191.

- **Theme of rebirth**

The theme seems to echo both the Mélisande and Golaud motifs in that the first four notes resemble Mélisande's 'arabesque' cell, and the syncopation together with the triplet quavers recall Golaud's motif. The variation of the theme in the next two bars is even more reminiscent of the two motifs. It first appears at Mélisande's reply 'Pourquoi demandez-vous ce la? Je n'ai jamais été mieux portante' (Why do you ask me how I feel? I have never in my life felt better) and then only recurs on Mélisande's observation of her own child: 'Elle ne rit pas. Elle est petite.' (But she does not smile. She is very little). When Arkel tells Golaud: 'Ne restez pas ici, Golaud...Il lui faut le silence, maintenant' (You should not stay here now, Golaud ... It is silence she needs from now on) the theme is stated, after which the final statement accompanies Arkel's command: 'Il ne faut pas que l'enfant reste ici dans cette chambre' (We must not allow the child to remain here in this chamber), and at the first part of Arkel's final words that conclude the opera: 'Il faut qu'il vive, maintenant à sa place ...' (It [the child] must live on now, as things are, and replace her [Mélisande]).⁷⁵ Mélisande's motif is heard on 'à sa place' in Violin I.

Example 15: Theme of rebirth, Act V, bars 64-65



⁷⁵ See Act V, bars 64-65 (Oboe I), 66-68 (cor anglais varied), 273-274 (Oboe I), 275-276 (cor anglais), 364-365 (Violin I, 4 cello solo), 377-378 (cor anglais), 379-381 (Flute I and Oboe I; cor anglais, violins and cellos in countermelody). Emmanuel (1926:202) calls this motif 'L'enfant'.

- **The thème of pardon**

A simple motif, harmonised by triads, occurs at the moment Golaud asks for Mélisande's forgiveness in Act V (Emmanuel, 1926:203).⁷⁶

Example 16: Theme of pardon, Act V, bars 99-100



- **Pentatonic motif**

It seems as if an incomplete pentatonic motif becomes prominent in Act IV, scene 4, appearing for the first time at Pelléas's 'Je ferais mieux de m'en aller sans la revoir' (It would be better if I went, and saw her not), the first bar in unison with the voice. In the progression to the declaration of love in bar 618, this motif is stated with an omitted fifth note of the pentatonic scale.⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that the occurrence of the motif in bar 617, just before Pelléas's 'Je t'aime', is completed by Mélisande's 'Je t'aime' in bar 619 on a C (the missing note of this statement). Considering Debussy's frequent use of the pentatonic scale in his work, and his obvious symbolic construction of this scene, it could be concluded that in Mélisande's declaration Pelléas's quest for love was completed.

⁷⁶ See Act V, bars 99-100 (strings, without double basses).

⁷⁷ See Act IV, bars 547-548 (Oboe I, Horn I, Violin I and violas) in unison with the voice in bars 547, 562 (Violin I), 564 (violins), bars 611-612 (cellos), 615-617 (Oboes I and II, cor anglais), 617 (Violin I).

6.2.3. Symbolic employment of motifs and themes

As stated above, Grayson (1997:35) discusses the occurrence of musical telepathy or musical prophecy in *Pelléas*. This effect is created whenever the character *leitmotifs* appear in the orchestra before the characters' actual entrances on stage, typically found in the music preceding the beginning of each scene (Grayson, 1997:35).⁷⁸

In Act I, scene 2, where Pelléas enters for the first time – as well as in the next scene – his presence is perceived by Arkel and Genèvieve before he speaks.⁷⁹ In Act I, scene 3 the motif accompanying the sailor's cries,⁸⁰ derived from Golaud's motif, could suggest that Mélisande is once again in male possession and that Golaud, similar to the sailors, is oblivious of the storm into which he is heading (Nichols, 1989:66-67).

The ring motif is heard, entering on C, in Act II, scene 1. The C acts as a major ninth, richly harmonised with a B-flat major chord with minor seventh.⁸¹ This specific harmonic employment had earlier been reserved to underline the physical attraction between Golaud and Mélisande.⁸² At the moment Mélisande loses her ring, the clock

⁷⁸ This does not apply to all scenes. Very often the motivic appearances in the interludes would have a conclusive role rather than an introductory one. Mélisande's motif is not heard before she enters in Act II, scene 1 and scene 2, while in Act III, scene 1 there is no suggestion of character motifs before bar 77.

⁷⁹ See Act I, bars 317-320.

⁸⁰ See Act I, bars 428-429. The motif already occurs in bar 424 in Horn I.

⁸¹ See Act II, bar 51 (Clarinet I). At Pelléas's exclamation 'Prenez garde, prenez garde' (Do be careful, Oh be careful). Langham Smith (1989:83-84) incorrectly states that Mélisande is playing with her wedding ring at this point. The same motif recurs on Pelléas's 'Prenez garde' in bar 73 (Oboe I), now harmonised with an augmented triad on A-flat (first inversion), alternating with a D-flat major triad. An A-flat is held (Flute I and Violin I) while lower voices (clarinets and Violin II) move in thirds as C-E and D-flat-F. This movement is reflected in the vocal line.

⁸² See Act I, bar 66. Golaud remarks 'Oh! vous êtes belle' (Oh! you are so fair!). On 'belle' an E major chord with added minor seventh and major ninth is heard.

strikes twelve.⁸³ Grayson (1997:35) identifies this motif as one of the ‘themes of foreboding’ and continues that the symbolic meaning of the motif remains unexplained until its reoccurrence in the next scene, when Golaud tells of the mysterious bolting of his horse when the clock struck noon.⁸⁴ The motif recurs on the same note C, but here it is accompanied by an ‘anxious’ half-diminished chord⁸⁵ (Langham Smith, 1989:83-84).

Debussy’s motivic treatment of the Tower scene effectively supports the symbolism within the play. Pelléas and Mélisande’s flirting reaches a turning point when Mélisande’s doves fly away; up to this point in the scene Debussy has managed to protect Pelléas and Mélisande’s secret world by ‘keeping the music free from any motifs and therefore free from the pull of established identities and relationships’ (Nichols, 1989:70).⁸⁶

The lost doves awaken the two ‘lovers’ to the adult world, underlined in the music with a varied form of Mélisande’s motif that ‘looks to the future as well as to the past’ (Nichols, 1989:70). In this new version the opening of Mélisande’s motif is inverted in the second bar, with a D-natural instead of a D-sharp.⁸⁷ The use of the D-natural creates the opportunity for whole-tone harmony, effectively used at Mélisande’s words ‘dans l’obscurité’.⁸⁸ In turn the harmonic language prepares the entry for the threat motif⁸⁹ to mark Golaud’s approach at this moment (Nichols, 1989:70).

⁸³ See Act II, bar 116.

⁸⁴ Grayson (1997:35) identifies the first occurrence of this theme in bars 120-121 in the interlude, but as stated above, it appears earlier in Act II, bars 51 and 73.

⁸⁵ See Act II, bars 180-182. If the D is included, this would be a ninth chord.

⁸⁶ See Act III, bars 1-183.

⁸⁷ See Act III, bars 184-185 and 188-189.

⁸⁸ See Act III, bar 197.

Nichols (1989:70) further describes Debussy's depiction of the triangular tensions established between the characters. The discreet mood of this scene is evoked in the motivic treatment of the music. Only once the curtain has dropped after Golaud's scolding, does his motif emerge, setting in motion the active motivic discourse in the proceeding interlude, which subtly suggests the emergence of his suspicions and jealousy. After Golaud's motif appears, Mélisande's motif first occurs alone, the second time ominously superimposed on Pelléas's motif, 'while the longed-for calm of F-sharp major is twice denied by modal sideslips to D-sharp minor' (Nichols, 1989:70).⁹⁰

In Act IV, scene 1 the tension between Golaud and Pelléas is continued between Pelléas and Mélisande, with Golaud ever-present in the musical setting. Golaud's and Pelléas's motifs, both starting on G two octaves apart, appear in the prologue, implying that 'the two brothers are now locked together in an inflexible course' (Nichols, 1989:72).⁹¹ In the prologue to this scene Debussy presents the semiquaver figuration which depicted the water of the well in the first scene of Act II; here, until the voices enter, its falling contour becomes a rising one (Nichols, 1989:72).

⁸⁹ See Act III, bar 217.

⁹⁰ See Act III, bars 230-254. Golaud's motif appears in the strings in bar 230, Mélisande's motif alone in bars 237-240 (violins) and 241-243 (Flute I). Mélisande's full theme appears in bars 246-251 (solo oboe) and 252 (solo violins, viola and cello), superimposed on Pelléas's motif in bars 247-248 (solo cello) and 251-252 (cor anglais, clarinets and Bassoon I). D-sharp minor harmony occurs in bars 250, and from bar 253-261 a D-sharp pedal persists.

⁹¹ See Act IV, bars 7-10. Fragments of the two motifs are heard in the second violins and violas (Golaud) and in Flute I and Oboe I (Pelléas).

Example 17: Act IV, bars 5-9

The image displays a musical score for Act IV, bars 5-9. It features a vocal line at the top and an orchestral accompaniment below. The vocal line is marked with *mf* *espressivo* and includes the lyrics "ma parole". The orchestral accompaniment includes parts for strings, woodwinds, and percussion, with dynamic markings such as *p* and *mf*. The score is written in a standard musical notation with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature.

In Act IV, scene 4 Pelléas enters to meet Mélisande in the gardens, contemplating his intricate situation. At his words 'Et je n'ai pas encore regardé son regard' (And never heretofore have I gazed on her gaze) the orchestra expands Mélisande's motif.⁹² The motif's circularity is broken by the addition of the C-sharp at the beginning of the statement. A variation of the motif is heard and repeated, interpreted as follows by Nichols (1989:74): 'Pelléas is caught by a larger destiny'. As Pelléas makes up his mind that he should see Mélisande one more time and declare his feelings to her, Mélisande enters (Nichols, 1989:74).

Mélisande believes that she has left the castle unnoticed, while Golaud was asleep. However, the significant dotted rhythms of Golaud's motif, played by the woodwinds,

⁹² Act IV, bars 554-556 (cello).

imply that she was probably mistaken.⁹³ Pelléas tells her that he has no choice, but has to go away forever, because he loves her. Mélisande replies 'Je t'aime aussi' (I love you too); both declarations are unaccompanied.⁹⁴

Example 18: Act IV, bars 615-619

The musical score for Act IV, bars 615-619, is presented in a standard orchestral format. It includes vocal staves for Pelléas and Mélisande, and instrumental staves for strings and woodwinds. The vocal lines are unaccompanied. The lyrics are in French: 'pas pourqu'il faut que je m'é - loie - gre... Tu ne sais pas que c'est parce que... Je t'aime Oh! qu'as-tu dit, Mélisande...'. The instrumental parts include dynamic markings such as 'cresc.', 'più cresc.', 'div.', 'pizz', and 'librement'.

Their exhilaration is suddenly suspended by the sound of the castle doors shutting for the night, with the threat motif initially heard in Act III, scene 1 appearing. Thus, 'the fuse is finally lit' (Nichols, 1989:75).⁹⁵

⁹³ Act IV bars 579-580 (Bassoon I, Horns I and II and Clarinet I).

⁹⁴ See Act IV, bars 618-619.

⁹⁵ See Act IV, bars 709-713 (Horns I and III, and cellos). Later on the same motif recurs in bars 739 and 743 (double basses), and 748-749 (Oboe I and cor anglais).

In the final act Golaud's interrogation of the dying Mélisande is musically set to reveal the stark contrast of the psychological make-up of both characters. Debussy sets Golaud's frantic, anxious questions to chromatic harmonies, as opposed to the straightforward musical material underlining Mélisande's serene acceptance of her fate. An uncomplicated motif, identified by Emmanuel (1926:203) as the 'theme of pardon', occurs three times in the act. 'Its plain harmonies seem to signify as much as anything a refusal to get involved in Golaud's chromatic self-torturings: the distance between husband and wife is as great as ever' (Nichols, 1989:75-76).⁹⁶

6.3. Line and shape

6.3.1. Melodic contour and motion

Musical line in *Pelléas* is created to develop the meaning of the text beyond the limits of the words and not only to accompany or parallel the text (Goehr, 2001:70). In Debussy's reply to the critics after the première of *Pelléas*, he mentions that the melodic lines are not found in the vocal parts, but in the orchestra (Lesure and Langham Smith, 1977:80):

My wish was that the action should never be halted, continuing uninterrupted. I wanted to dispense with parasitical musical phrases. On hearing opera the spectator is accustomed to experiencing two distinct sorts of emotion; on the one hand the *musical emotion*, and on the other the emotion of the characters – usually he experiences them in succession. I tried to ensure that the two are perfectly merged and simultaneous. Melody, if I dare say so, is anti-lyrical. It cannot express the various states of the

⁹⁶ See Act V, bars 99-100, 126-128 and 208-210. In the first two appearances the theme is played by double solo stings and in the last case only by single solo strings. According to Nichols (1989:76), the theme is derived from note 4-6 from Mélisande's complete theme. This seems rather far-fetched.

soul, and of life. Essentially it is only suited to the song that expresses simple feeling.

Goehr (2001:69) asserts that the non-melodic vocal lines in *Pelléas* mark the most obvious difference to Wagner's operatic works. Grout (1966:498) observes that only at certain points in the opera, as in Mélisande's ballad in the Tower scene, and in the 'love duet' in Act IV, scene 4, are the characters actually singing. He explains that the vocal part in *Pelléas* generally resembles the nuances of French speech reflected in the 'independence of the bar line, narrow range, small intervals, and frequent chanting on one tone' (Grout, 1966:498). Lockspeiser (1963:217) states that the vocal line reflects the nature of the French language effectively and fulfils the prophecy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideal French musician who can create a 'recitative appropriate to the simplicity and clarity of our language.'

Spieth-Weissenbacher (1982:85) discusses the way the melodic prosody in *Pelléas* echoes the intonation of the verbal prosody characteristic of the French language. When simple information is conveyed in the text, it is set to straight melodic lines (declamatory style), and at the moments where characters express their feelings, the vocal line is set to bigger intervals (Spieth-Weissenbacher, 1982:85-86). In Act I, scene 1 Golaud's wish to recover Mélisande's crown echoes the inflections of the spoken voice, whereas Mélisande's impassioned objection is spread over a whole octave⁹⁷ (Lockspeiser, 1951:219-220).

⁹⁷ See Act I, bars 114-121.

Example 19a: Act I, bars 114-115

GOLAUD

Je pourrais la re-ti - rer fa - ci - lement;
Yet I ve - ry ea - si - ly could draw it up;

Example 19b: Act I, bars 120-121

je me jette à sa pla - cel..
I shall throw my-self down there!

Suter (1999:47) points out that Debussy applies the principle of ‘one sound to one syllable’ to the vocal line, which is free of passing or neighbour tones.⁹⁸ Goehr (2001:70) affirms that the music is often static when words repeat, and more dynamic when the words ‘stand still’. This technique supports Debussy’s wish that his characters ‘sing like real people, and not’, as he put it, ‘in an arbitrary language made up of worn-out clichés’ (Goehr, 2001:69). The composer believed that ‘a character cannot always express himself melodically: the dramatic melody has to be quite different from what is called melody’ (Goehr, 2001:69).

In Act II, scene 2 Mélisande expresses her unhappiness to Golaud, but is unable to state the reason for her melancholy. Debussy accompanies the phrase, ‘Non, non, ce n’est pas Pelléas. Ce n’est personne. Vous ne pouvez pas me comprendre’ (no, no, it is not Pelléas. It is not anyone ... You cannot understand me ...) with a descending line in the

⁹⁸ The vocal parts are free of neighbour or passing notes most of the time.

solo viola.⁹⁹ Later in the scene, after the infuriated Golaud commands her to search for the ring, Mélisande expresses her unhappiness again, enhanced by a descending semi-quaver pattern for the oboe.¹⁰⁰ The music also depicts physical direction at the end of Act I, scene 1, where Pelléas's 'Descendons par ici' (We'll go down by this path) is preceded with a descending, mostly chromatic line in the double bass¹⁰¹ (Brown, 1992:82).

Example 20: Act II, bars 376-377 (oboe solo)



Nichols (1989:67-68) and Brown (1992:82) discuss the significance of descending motion at the moment when Mélisande's long hair falls as she bends over the fountain in the park in Act II, scene 1. Not only is the moment underlined with many descending figures, but it is also prepared with music of downward motion from the start of the scene.¹⁰² However, when Pelléas begins to ask her about her first meeting with Golaud, ascending motion accompanies his questions (Nichols, 1989:67-68).¹⁰³

⁹⁹ See Act II, bars 238-239.

¹⁰⁰ See Act II, bars 376-377.

¹⁰¹ See Act I, bar 467.

¹⁰² See Act II, bars 54-61. The musical setting at this moment not only supports the downward motion of Mélisande's falling hair, but could also possibly imply the tragedy that their mutual attraction could bring to the castle.

¹⁰³ Ascending patterns start from bar 64.

6.3.2. Arabesque

Brown (1992:83) argues that the arabesque figurations in *Pelléas* are inclined towards a downward direction and, similar to descending direction, underline feelings of sorrow and melancholy in the play. The arabesque projects a freedom of motion and is ornamental. Written out ornaments generally consist of a combination of duple or triple subdivisions of the beat to give the impression of metrical freedom (Brown, 1992:83).

Brown (1992:83) observes that the motifs strongly connected with both Mélisande and Pelléas are arabesque-like figures. Their shared symbolic pensiveness and ‘fin-de-siècle melancholy’ is stressed by the descending motifs and their rhythmic freedom, more specifically in the Pelléas motif (Brown, 1992:83).¹⁰⁴

Example 21: Act II, bars 1-3 (arabesque)



Other examples of arabesque figures occur in Act I, where Mélisande’s sadness is reflected in the arabesque in the solo viola,¹⁰⁵ while in Act II, scene 2 Golaud’s anger changes to sorrow after he notices the missing ring. Here something greater than material

¹⁰⁴ The essence of the Pelléas motif is not an arabesque, but the ending of its statement at the beginning of Act II, scene 1 resembles an arabesque. Some of the most important secondary motifs and themes also resemble arabesques. See Act IV, bar 630 (ecstasy theme), 734-735 (variant of ecstasy theme) and Act V, bars 64-65 (theme of rebirth).

¹⁰⁵ See Act I, bars 58-59 (solo viola).

loss is sensed in Golaud's words; his sadness is underlined by the arabesque in the bassoons, cellos and double basses¹⁰⁶ (Brown, 1992:84-85).

Example 22: Act I, bars 57-59 (viola solo)

Alt

1st Solo

mf

pizz.

mf

6.4. Timbre

6.4.1. Harmony, tonality and modes

Grout (1966:501) assumes that, similar to Maeterlinck's drama, which 'moved in a realm outside ordinary time and space', so Debussy's music 'moved in a realm outside the then known tonal system'. Rejecting any strong formal associations within the field of music itself, modal, whole-tone or pentatonic modes suggest the far-off, dreamlike character of the play, echoing the free images of the poet. Seventh and ninth chords, often in organum-like parallel movement, are frequently employed as well as the blurring of tonality by complex harmonic relationships (Grout, 1966:501). Brown (1992:113) points out that Debussy also functionally employs other ambiguous chords for their colour: chords with an omitted third, open fifths occurring at the beginning of the opera, and

¹⁰⁶ See Act II, bars 355-356.

augmented chords derived from the whole-tone scale. She continues that pedal points are often indicators of the harmonic motion in *Pelléas* and Debussy regularly obscures this motion by superimposing unrelated or non-functional chords on the pedal (Brown, 1992:113).

Grayson (1997:37) explains that in order to reflect the elements of prophecy and telepathy in the opera, 'rational' tonality is rejected in favour of more obscure modal and whole-tone chords, and 'linear, goal-oriented progressions' are avoided in favour of 'static or circular patterns.' Brown (1992:93-94) states that whereas the whole-tone scale, characterised by its static harmonic quality, enhances the darkness, atmosphere of fear and also feeling of otherworldliness in the play, moments of heightened emotion, betrayal, poignancy and anxiety are supported by chromaticism.

In Act I, scene 2 the lamp mentioned by Golaud in his letter to Pelléas, read out aloud by Geneviève, forms an important link between the narrative content of the first two scenes and that of the more symbolic third scene. The lamp develops from a sign of acceptance into a symbol by the time Geneviève highlights the lamp in the last line of the scene – 'Aie soin d'allumer la lampe dès ce soir, Pelléas' (See that the light is put up before dark, Pelléas). The drama has moved to a higher symbolic level and a symbolic structure, essentially based on the polar opposites of darkness and light, begins to emerge (Langham Smith, 1989:108).

This symbolic structure is supported by an arrangement of keys, preparations for keys, and various modal scales. F-sharp major represents, together with its dominant preparation of C-sharp major, the striving for an Ideal,¹⁰⁷ embodied in Mélisande herself. This symbolism is prominent at the beginning of the play. In the first three acts incomplete and unresolved preparations for F-sharp major (with occasional fleeting resolutions) commonly reflect the light symbolism or allude to the growing desire for the union with Mélisande.¹⁰⁸ It is only in the final love scene between Pelléas and Mélisande (Act IV, scene 4) that the dominant ultimately resolves into a new theme (ecstasy theme), in F-sharp major, reflecting the fulfilment of the desire for union¹⁰⁹ (Langham Smith, 1989:113-114).

Debussy not only achieves this aspiring for the F-sharp major 'light' by the sporadic unresolved chords of the dominant of C-sharp/D-flat major,¹¹⁰ but also grants it (F-sharp/G-flat) prominence in the harmonic structure throughout the opera. It first appears in the final cadence at the end of the first act (against D-sharp and G-sharp),¹¹¹ where the light imagery becomes a significant theme (Langham Smith, 1989:114). Langham Smith (1989:115) explains the harmonic progression in the following diagram:

¹⁰⁷ The Ideal could be defined as the acquisition of eternal light through the experience of (spiritual) love.

¹⁰⁸ See Act I, bars 70-72, 86, 130, 146-147, 262, 369 (resolves), 410 (D-flat), 438 (resolves), 439 (resolves); Act II, bars 166 (D-flat), 240; Act III, bars 38, 54 (D-flat), 163 (resolves), 164 (resolves), 190-191, 248, 251 495-496, 602-606, 635-636.

¹⁰⁹ See Act IV, bars 630-632.

¹¹⁰ See note 107 above as well as Act IV, bars 154 (seventh), 298 and 300 (C-sharp pedal), 325 (D-flat triad), 556 (ninth), 586 (ninth), 602 (ninth), 606-607 (ninth), 688 (ninth), 760 (seventh); Act V, bars 392-393.

¹¹¹ See Act I, bars 476-481.

Example 23: Harmonic progression in Act I

Within this rising structure, the key area of F-sharp (sometimes spelt as G-flat) is suggested at significant points in the text. The unresolved dominant – initially associated with Mélisande, through whom man may achieve ‘the light’ – receives prominence (Langham Smith, 1989:115).

Langham Smith (1989:115-116) assumes that the dominant seventh of C-sharp occurs initially supporting Golaud’s first attraction to Mélisande:¹¹²

Golaud has a glimpse of the light as he looks into Mélisande’s eyes, but it is passing and irresolute in that it has minor versions of its dominant and subdominant, and is immediately dispelled into whole-tone harmonies at the words ‘Pourquoi avez-vous l’air étonné?’ At his rebuffed attempt to hold Mélisande’s hand, the key area of F-sharp is again introduced, underlining the parallel to the accepted offer of a hand made by Pelléas at the end of scene 3. The frustration of Golaud’s unsuccessful attempt at physical contact with Mélisande is portrayed by F-sharp minor. These two instances are the closest to the ‘light’ that Golaud ever gets.¹¹³

¹¹² See Act I, bars 70-72.

¹¹³ See Act I, bars 142-145 (whole-tone) and bars 168-169 (F-sharp minor chord with added D-sharp).

Example 24: Act I, bars 70-72

doux et calme

Gu. - ez, je res-te-rai i-ci, contre l'ar-bre. N'ayez pas peur.
see, I will stay where I am, by this tree here. Be not a.fraid.

p expressif

The various levels of darkness are paralleled in the musical setting by recurring musical ideas. While the notion of light seems to be related to a definite tonality, chromaticism and disguised tonal centres are employed to enhance the darkness in the drama. This is evident already in the first act of the opera, where the tritone forms the framework of the harmony (Langham Smith, 1989:118-120):

In Act I, scene 3, a sudden tritonal shift, and more opaque orchestration accompany Pelléas's remark that, despite the light, the sea is none the less dark. While devices which pull upwards, scalically, or sharpwards through the circle-of-fifths, are used to portray light, falling-devices take us down into the darkness.¹¹⁴

Forte (1991:137) discusses Debussy's use of the octatonic scale in his works and argues that this scale is 'usually reserved for the most moving or unexpected textual-poetic expressions' in the songs and the dramatic works, especially in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. He sees the first statement of Mélisande's motif as belonging to the octatonic scale (as A-

¹¹⁴ See Act I, bars 419-420 (the harmony moves from a D minor root chord to a G-sharp minor root chord). However, it is not Pelléas's words, but Genevieve who remarks 'Ici il fait un peu plus clair qu'ailleurs, et cependant la mer est sombre'.

flat, B-flat and C-sharp) and explains that here whole-tone and diatonic elements are combined within the octatonic. The whole-tone component of the music is associated with Mélisande throughout the opera, while he tentatively associates the upper-voice diatonic trichord as depicting Pelléas¹¹⁵ (Forte, 1991:141). At Mélisande's initial appearance on stage, where Golaud finds her weeping at the well, Debussy employs octatonic elements in a significant manner. Forte (1991:142) points out that when Golaud speaks in bars 48-50, he sings the notes of the orchestral half-diminished chord (C-sharp-E-G-B), associated with Mélisande throughout the opera, and concludes that 'as he [Golaud] sees her [Mélisande] indistinctly he sings her music'.¹¹⁶ Forte further explains that the half-diminished chords in bar 50 are rearrangements of the *Tristan* chord, with its conventional association with fatal passion (Forte, 1991:142).

Example 25: Act I, bars 45-50

The musical score for Act I, bars 45-50, is presented in two systems. The first system features a soprano line (Sop.) and piano accompaniment. The soprano part begins with the lyrics: "nir sur mes pas. / no must re-trace." followed by "J'entends pleurer... / I hear a sob,". The piano accompaniment includes a dynamic marking of *pp* and a *p* marking. The second system features a tenor line (Ten.) and piano accompaniment. The tenor part begins with the lyrics: "Oh! oh! / Oh! oh!" followed by "qu'y a-t-il là au bord de / what have we there be-side the well?" and "U-ne / Can it". The piano accompaniment includes a dynamic marking of *p* and a *v* marking.

¹¹⁵ See Act I, bar 14. Mélisande's motif could also be pentatonic.

¹¹⁶ See Act I, bars 46-50. The half-diminished chords associated with Mélisande occur in bars 47-48.

Brown (1992:93-94) states that the whole-tone triplet motif in Act I, scene 1 possibly suggests Golaud's fear and the darkness of the forest, and accompanies Golaud's concern about finding his way out of the forest again.¹¹⁷ A similar atmosphere of mystery is evoked by whole-tone harmonies to depict the secretiveness of Mélisande's past and the otherworldliness of her character.¹¹⁸ In the interlude between scenes 1 and 2 Mélisande's motif is altered into a whole-tone version which 'intensifies her ethereal quality'¹¹⁹ (Brown, 1992:93-94).

The deeper levels of darkness are portrayed by the development and strengthening of existing ideas, rather than the introduction of new motifs. In Act II, scene 3 Debussy employs all three forms of the octatonic (Forte, 1999:143).¹²⁰ Here Debussy manages effectively to support the extended development of Maeterlinck's symbolic structure in the musical setting of the scene (Langham Smith, 1989: 122):

In Act II, scene 3,¹²¹ the triplets which had represented the darkness of the forest and later the gardens in Act I¹²² are retained, as are the tritones of what was the whole-tone scale. Now they are starker, often bare, or with a touch of half-diminished harmony. The springboard chord for the sinister oscillating chords portraying the darkness of the grotto is C major, the extreme opposite (in terms of the circle of fifths) from the 'light' key of F-sharp major. This association with the note C with darkness becomes increasingly frequent. As a whole, the chords of this scene further intensify the tritonal portrayal of darkness by extending the tritonicity of the whole-tone scale (based on three interlocking tritones) into the octatonic scale (based on four).

¹¹⁷ See Act I, bars 28-31.

¹¹⁸ See Act I, bar 101. C and E of the scale are left out.

¹¹⁹ See Act I, bar 204 to the beginning of 205.

¹²⁰ According to Forte (1991:126), the three forms of the octatonic respectively start on C-sharp, D and E-flat.

¹²¹ See Act II, bars 410-412.

¹²² See Act I, bars 28-35, 172-174, 183-206, and 391-399.

In Act I, scene 2 the first of many Phrygian devices occurs at Pelléas's remark that the ship is sailing towards the band of light.¹²³ The off-stage chorus sings a chord of G with added minor seventh accompanied by a bare tritone *tremolo* in the strings *sur la touché*.¹²⁴ As Pelléas remarks that the night falls very quickly, the chorus sings a bare tritone before the music repeats (Langham Smith, 1989:120-121).¹²⁵

In Act I, scene 3 the 'light-key' of F-sharp features once again to highlight the dark-light symbolism. Momentarily thrown into relief against a backdrop of neutral white-note harmonies and whole-tone chords, the absence of light is enhanced by contrasts of orchestration and register.¹²⁶ A couple bars later an F-sharp major triad significantly occurs on the words 'la clarté de la mer': 'Regardez de l'autre côté, vous aurez la clarté de la mer' (Look the other way, you will have the light from the sea).¹²⁷ The F-sharp major chord, shifted to a higher register with a clear change in orchestration, acts as a progression from the preceding F-sharp minor chord (F-sharp-A-natural-C-sharp) (Langham Smith, 1989:116-117).

¹²³ See Act I, bars 431-433 (also in bar 428).

¹²⁴ See Act I, bar 429. The tritone A-flat-D resolves onto G-D in bar 432.

¹²⁵ See Act I, bar 454 (F-B).

¹²⁶ See Act I, bars 391-396. The G does not belong to the whole-tone harmony.

¹²⁷ See Act I, bar 405. Langham Smith incorrectly states that the F-sharp major chord is preceded by double leading notes F and A. This is not completely true as the two bars preceding the F-sharp major chord is in F-sharp minor and thus contains an F-sharp and A, and not an F and A.

Example 26: Act I, bars 404-405

- dez de l'au-tre cō - té, vous au - rez la clar - té de la mer.
there, a-round on that side, and you will get the light from the sea.

do *f*

This basic harmonic development is altered up to the end of the act: white-note chords return at Geneviève's remark that it is time to go back to the castle.¹²⁸ Mélisande observes other guiding lights out on the sea. Pelléas wants to lead her by the hand, but her hands are filled with flowers, so he supports her by the arm. At this moment when he touches her for the first time, the harmony moves into F-sharp major.¹²⁹ Alternating chords over a tonic pedal delay the resolution, ultimately 'left hanging as Debussy delicately ends the act with unresolved, though sensuous, added sixth and ninth colouring the 'light' chord of F-sharp major' (Langham Smith, 1989:117).¹³⁰

Nichols (1989:67) ingeniously contemplates the tone of Mélisande's closing question of the act to Pelléas: 'Oh! Pourquoi partez-vous?' (Why are you leaving?). Noting that Debussy captures a variety of inflections, Nichols says that the diminuendo in the vocal line supports a sense of neutral interest, the dissonant supertonic on 'vous' underlines the

¹²⁸ See Act I, bars 457-458.

¹²⁹ See Act I, bar 471.

¹³⁰ See Act I, bars 479-481.

feeling of surprise, and the added sixth on F-sharp major in the strings emphasises the ‘warmth of interest, and hence of disappointment’ (1989:67).

Example 27: Act I, bars 475-476

MÉLISANDE

Oh!... pour-quoi par-tez-vous?
Oh! but why must you go?

Ils sortent
They go out

ppp

m. d.
pp

Brown (1992:92) and Langham Smith (1989:102) discuss Debussy’s use of G-flat major (F-sharp major) to underline Mélisande’s observation of something shining at the bottom of the well in Act II, scene 1. Her remark, ‘Oh! Oh! J’ai vu passer quelque-chose au fond de l’eau!’ (Oh! Oh! I saw something passing by there in the well!), is underlined by a hint at G-flat major with a Lydian C-natural (Langham Smith, 1989:102). Brown (1992:92) argues that the key of F-sharp major, the trills in the winds and the ascending glissando in the harp musically depict the glistening of the object she sees in the water. This employment of the Lydian device on F-sharp possibly suggests the idea of hope (Langham Smith, 1989:118).¹³¹

¹³¹ See Act II, bar 71. In the orchestral score, apart from the vocal part, this is notated in F-sharp. In the vocal score the whole passage is notated in G-flat.

The most striking development of this leaning towards the light, again in F-sharp (respelt as G-flat), is in scene 3 as the moon casts a flood of light into the entrance of the grotto. Pelléas cries out 'Oh... voici la clarté!' (Oh... here is the light!) as the moonlight brings relief after the gloomy darkness of the cavern. Debussy highlights this light-dark polarity by accompanying the momentary motif, marked *doux et espressif*, in the flutes and oboes, with crossing harp *glissandi* and shimmering strings¹³² (Langham Smith, 1989:118).

Wilson (2001) states that the octatonic scale not only combines the major and minor tonalities effectively, but also accommodates diminished triads, and dominant, minor and half-diminished sevenths. Langham Smith (1989:122) adds that the scale also allows the Lydian and Phrygian modes to be exploited in numerous ways:

In Act II, scene 3, Pelléas has forgotten his lantern and thinks that the 'clarté' will be sufficient to guide them. Darkness and light are again heavily featured in the conversation. The grotto is full of 'ténèbres bleues', but by lighting a lamp one can fill the vault with stars. There is no danger, remarks Pelléas, for they will stop, the moment they no longer can see the light from the sea. ('Nous nous arrêterons au moment où nous n'apercevrons plus la lumière de la mer...') The eerie image of the white-haired beggars sleeping in the darkness draws the Phrygian mode from Debussy, in direct contrast to the Lydian flood of light.¹³³

In Act III, scene 1 light and dark are confused as Pelléas, blinded by the luminosity of Mélisande's tresses, is unable to see the sky. Debussy employs C major and F-sharp major harmonies directly after each other to depict his perplexity.¹³⁴ Later in the scene as Pelléas and Mélisande become aware of Golaud's approach, the 'dark' note of C occurs increasingly in the music. Before Golaud enters, Mélisande remarks that her doves will

¹³² See Act II, bars 449-452. C-natural acts as the Lydian fourth of the 'light' key (Langham Smith, 1989:118).

¹³³ See Act II, bars 453-456 (Phrygian) and 449-451 (Lydian).

¹³⁴ See Act III, bars 136-137.

get lost in the darkness.¹³⁵ This could be a forewarning of the music from bars 205-217 when Golaud enters. The tonal centre falls to C, now in the form of a pedal-point, as Golaud is coming closer¹³⁶ (Langham Smith, 1989:124-125). Brown (1992:94) points out that the reference to darkness at this point is again underlined by whole-tone accompaniment.¹³⁷ The lost doves possibly symbolise Mélisande's lost innocence which could result in her probably subconscious anxiety about possible fateful events to follow (Brown 1992:94).

Example 28: Act III, bars 135-137

Je ne vois plus le ciel à tra - vers tes che - veux.
 And I can't see the heav'ns a - ny more for your locks.

The scene in the castle vaults (Act III, scene 2) represents the lowest point of the dark symbolism in the opera. Brown (1992:94) and Langham Smith (1989:125) speculate that Debussy depicts the gloomy, toxic air of the underwater lakes by employing the whole-tone scale almost entirely, with the dark-key note of C as the recurring pedal-point. The harmony becomes progressively more dissonant as the bass pedal-points on which the

¹³⁵ See Act III, bars 196-197.

¹³⁶ See Act III, bar 205.

¹³⁷ See Act III, bars 197-198. Whole-tone harmony starts on the word 'l'obscurité'.

scene is built move upward, by way of E-flat¹³⁸ and E-natural¹³⁹ through the dark-light axis of F-sharp (as G flat)-C (Langham Smith, 1989:125).¹⁴⁰ Brown (1992:78-79) points out that a repeated quaver figure enhances the stasis at this point and that mostly whole-tone harmonies are superimposed on the E-flat pedal, creating the effect of harmonic suspension. Langham Smith (1989:125) sees this as symbolic of Pelléas's realisation that Golaud, manipulating Pelléas into the dark, 'has control of the light'.

In Act III, scene 3, at the point where Golaud tells Pelléas not to continue his 'children's games' with Mélisande, a Phrygian cell consisting of three notes descending to C is heard in the cellos, double basses and bassoons (Langham Smith, 1989:127).¹⁴¹ A momentary *Tierce de Picardie* on F-sharp major¹⁴² is followed by a Phrygian passage, with its D-flat, throwing into relief the C tonality of the next scene, when Golaud forces Yniold to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande. This prominence of the tonal centre on C, together with the Phrygian device, connects the scene tonally with Golaud's earlier forcing of Pelléas to 'smell the stench of death' (Langham Smith, 1989:127).

Langham Smith (1989:127) further suggests that Golaud comprehends a level of the darkness and light that the other characters do not. In Act III, scene 4 Golaud is mostly infuriated by Yniold's response that Pelléas and Mélisande 'are continually weeping in the darkness' after Yniold has already informed Golaud that they disagree about the light. As Mélisande lights her lamp, the music moves into F-sharp major as the stage direction

¹³⁸ See Act III, bar 294.

¹³⁹ See Act III, bar 306.

¹⁴⁰ See Act III, bars 308-310 (G-flat and back to C in bar 312).

¹⁴¹ See Act III, bars 393-394. The bassoons only have an E-flat.

¹⁴² See Act III, bars 425-426.

reads ‘The window under which they are sitting lights up for a moment and its light falls on them [Golaud and Yniold]’.¹⁴³ Whereas Yniold wants to go into the light, Golaud desires the darkness. When Golaud lifts his son up to the window, Yniold reports that Pelléas and Mélisande are staring at the light. The symbolic dialogue about dark and light that initially became prominent in Act I, scene 3 is continued here (Langham Smith, 1989:127).

In Act III, scene 4 there is a descending chromatic line which enhances Yniold’s terror as he is incessantly interrogated by Golaud.¹⁴⁴ Starting in Act IV, scene 2 Golaud’s theme becomes more chromatic,¹⁴⁵ preceding his violent outburst of fury at Mélisande. Later in the same act, a chromatically ascending line underlines Pelléas’s expectation of Mélisande’s arrival in the gardens.¹⁴⁶ Finally, at the beginning of Act V, Mélisande’s rhythmically simplified motif, through the semitones of its octatonic scale, gives the impression of being highly chromatic. ‘The chromaticism could suggest the poignancy of her death’¹⁴⁷ (Brown 1992:94-95).

Langham Smith (1989:128) discusses the extended symbolism in Act IV, scene 3. In a letter to Henri Lerolle, Debussy explains his setting of this scene as follows (Lesure & Nichols, 1987:73):

¹⁴³ See Act III, bar 596.

¹⁴⁴ See Act IV, bars 624—626 (cor anglais and Clarinet I). See also bars 629 (violins and violas). The interlude between Act III and IV is also highly chromatic.

¹⁴⁵ See Act IV, bars 191-193 (cellos and double basses).

¹⁴⁶ See Act IV, bars 538-539 (violas, cellos and double basses).

¹⁴⁷ See Act V, bars 1-4 (Harp I and violas; with Violin I in bars 3-4).

Here I've tried to get across something at least of the compassion of a child who sees sheep mainly as a sort of toy he can't touch and also as the object of pity no longer felt by those who are only anxious for a comfortable life.

Yniold observes that 'The sun has gone' ... and 'the lambs ... are afraid of the darkness'. At 'Il n'y a plus de soleil' (The sun has gone), a sustained C in the horns evokes the darkness theme, returning later and doubled in the bassoon part as Yniold cries 'Oh, oh, il fait trop noir' (Oh! Oh! It is so dark!), in his penultimate line (Langham Smith, 1989:128).¹⁴⁸

The brevity of the interlude leading to the final love scene contributes to the idea of young lambs going to the slaughter still resonating in our minds. At the beginning of scene 3 Pelléas appears immediately and the first hint of 'dark-light' symbolism is accompanied by two bars of C-sharp (D-flat), here acting as a dominant of the 'light' key of F-sharp,¹⁴⁹ once again establishing the circle of the 'light' key. Recurrences of this dominant preparation occur at significant points in the text, building up to the declaration of love and consequently forming the tonal structure of the scene to a large extent (Langham Smith, 1989:128-129):

Firstly, there is Pelléas's touching Mélisande. Secondly, there is Mélisande's recalling of their past times together. Thirdly, there is Pelléas's question 'Do you know why I have asked you to come here tonight?', though there, the dominant dissolves into a half-diminished as Pelléas announces that he will be leaving imminently.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ See Act IV, bars 446-447 (Horns II and IV) and bar 515 (Bassoons I and II, and Horns I and II). Here the C is followed by a B-flat. The harmony changes between IV in C and VI in F-sharp major and minor.

¹⁴⁹ See Act IV, bar 569.

¹⁵⁰ See Act IV, bar 586, bar 602, bars 605-606 and bar 609.

After the declaration of love, Debussy's sparse orchestration of the subsequent dialogue supports his respect for Maeterlinck's 'great silences of love' until the resolution into F-sharp major, the key of light and love, is realised.¹⁵¹ The music moves to a passage over a dominant pedal, C-sharp, underlining Pelléas's elation and emphasising the Lydian fourth of C-sharp.¹⁵² The F is chromatically changed to a double-sharp at the words 'On dirait qu'il a plus sur mon cœur'. A similar Lydian phrase, now on a pedal E, occurs a few bars later, also depicting Pelléas's elation¹⁵³ (Langham Smith, 1989:130).

Whereas C-sharp dominant preparations preceded the F-sharp major beginning of the love scene, dominants of C (the 'dark' key) underline Pelléas's and Mélisande's exclamations here. Pelléas exclaims 'Il est trop tard' (It is too late) and Mélisande replies 'Tant mieux!' (So much the better!).¹⁵⁴ A few bars later the music resolves into C major as the couple move into the darkness: 'Ah! qu'il fait beau dans les ténèbres!' (Ah! It is fair here in the darkness!)¹⁵⁵ Now the darkness plays a twofold role: it not only serves as a 'safe' hiding place for the desperate lovers, but also covers the approaching Golaud, who is bringing with him the inevitable threat of revenge.¹⁵⁶ The initial ecstasy theme which was first heard in F-sharp major is now set in C major (Langham Smith, 1989:131).

¹⁵¹ See Act IV, from bar 630.

¹⁵² See Act IV, bars 635-638.

¹⁵³ See Act IV, bars 663-665.

¹⁵⁴ See Act IV, bars 707-712.

¹⁵⁵ See Act IV, bars 734-738.

¹⁵⁶ See Act IV, bar 739 (four-note motif in the double basses)

As Golaud attacks Pelléas with his sword, a significant and as yet unrepeated, key from the initial 'light and dark' scene (Act 1 scene 3) is heard. In Act I, at the first discussion of the darkness of the sea, a sustained G-sharp minor chord played by the woodwinds had been heard, contrasting with the brilliant *tremolandi* of the 'clarté', for which everyone was searching.¹⁵⁷ Two bars later the same harmony accompanied the threat of the storm. It could be assumed that the employment of the same G-sharp minor harmony here suggests that the 'symbolic tempest of that scene erupts in reality in the same key at this point in the opera'¹⁵⁸ (Langham Smith, 1989:131).

The gloominess of the last act is intensified by the Phrygian and octatonic elements which have been developing throughout the opera. At Pelléas's apprehension at the beginning of the final love scene, Mélisande's theme is entirely infused with the octatonic mode. At the opening of Act V the first five notes are drawn from the same mode. Only the A in the vocal part does not belong to an octatonic scale, the starting notes being G-sharp and B-flat. Thus Mélisande's theme and its harmonic field is totally octatonic, absorbing the quadruple tritonic tension of that scale¹⁵⁹ (Langham Smith, 1989:131-132).

Example 29a: Act V, bars 1-4

¹⁵⁷ See Act I, bars 420-424.

¹⁵⁸ See Act IV, bars 826-837.

¹⁵⁹ See Act IV, bars 554-556 (C-sharp-D-E-G-E) and Act V, bars 1-2.

Example 29b: Act V, bars 554-557

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the voice, marked 'Retenu' and 'Modéré'. The bottom staff is for the piano, marked 'p', 'dim.', and 'più p'. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

Arkel's observations about Mélisande's sleep are underlined by dominants of the 'dark' key of C,¹⁶⁰ while unresolved dominant ninths of the 'light' key are employed at Mélisande's question on the setting of the sun.¹⁶¹ When Arkel says 'Ta petite fille' ('tis your little daughter), a C major chord is used on the word 'fille'.¹⁶² The Lydian scale of E-flat is hinted at when, later, Mélisande is blinded by the evening sun.¹⁶³ The 'great window' has been opened and she does not wish it to be closed until the sun has gone down to the depths of the sea. Her last mention of the light is still shaded by the C-sharp dominant of the 'light' key, but here it is varied with a Lombardic rhythm buried within, possibly pointing to the arrival of winter to which she refers¹⁶⁴ (Langham Smith, 1989:132).

¹⁶⁰ See Act V, bars 29 and 31.

¹⁶¹ See Act V, bars 58-59 (D-flat).

¹⁶² See Act V, bar 265.

¹⁶³ See Act V, bars 101-102.

¹⁶⁴ See Act V, bar 254. A similar rhythm is later used not only for Debussy's winter *Prélude* 'Des pas sur la neige' (Footsteps in the snow), but the rhythm also features in *La Mer*, and 'Sirènes' from the *Nocturnes* for orchestra. All these compositions are associated with winter and the sea.

Although this is the final reference to the light-dark symbolism in the play, suggestions of this theme still resonate within Debussy's musical structure. As Arkel shows Mélisande that he can look after the child, there is a hint at the 'light' key, possibly suggesting a degree of hope.¹⁶⁵ The scene is continually infused with chromatically descending motifs, Phrygian devices, whole-tone passages and octatonic fragments in combination with preparations for the final resolution into C-sharp major, the key which, in its own right (as a tonic), has barely featured in the entire opera (Langham Smith, 1989:132-133):

The overall tonal progression of the opera is thus of a progression sharpward (through the circle of fifths) towards this, the sharpest key, highlighting the sharp key of F-sharp (one sharp less) and finally pushing one key further.

The resolution into this key is prepared in mainly three different ways in Act V. Firstly, the notes constituting the opening cell of the act recur numerous times at its original pitch.¹⁶⁶ In the second instance, the dominant on G-sharp major features at certain points in the final act.¹⁶⁷ These preparations underline particular significant moments in Mélisande's declarations. Her response to Golaud's plea for forgiveness ends on a G-sharp major chord. The same preparation recurs as Mélisande asks whether she is going to die (Langham Smith, 1989:133-134).

Towards the end of the opera Arkel's words are increasingly highlighted with G-sharps in the bass. At his remark, 'C'était petit être si tranquille' (She was aye such a quiet little creature), the dominant of C-sharp supports Mélisande's motif,¹⁶⁸ and the preparation for

¹⁶⁵ See Act V, bars 270-271. Arkel is just holding up the child for Mélisande to see.

¹⁶⁶ See Act V, bars 1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 25-26. After that the motif occurs transposed in bars 69-72 (starting on C), and 73-74 (four-note cell repeated, starting on F-sharp).

¹⁶⁷ See Act V, bars 127-128, 196, 210, and 321.

¹⁶⁸ See Act V, bars 370-371.

the final chord of C-sharp also begins with a G-sharp chord¹⁶⁹ (Langham Smith, 1989:134).

The third means by which the final chord of C-sharp is prepared is through the note C, already established as the note associated with the 'dark'. Not only does the note C act as the enharmonic leading note to C-sharp, but several motifs also centre on this note in the final act: Mélisande's own motif;¹⁷⁰ the section where the servants silently enter the room;¹⁷¹ and the last motif, based on C and resolving into C-sharp¹⁷² (Langham Smith, 1989:134).

In the postlude to the opera the final C-sharp passage is characterised by a descending Phrygian¹⁷³ and an ascending Lydian figure¹⁷⁴ upon the C-sharp pedal note (Langham Smith, 1989:134). The descent from and ascent towards C-sharp supports the theme of circularity in the play. The last bars possibly 'summarise the failure of Golaud, who (still?) sees life as a straight-forward progress from one point to another' (Nichols, 1989:77).

Kabisch (2001:607) argues that the final act is harmonically constructed backwards from the final C-sharp major cadence. 'What the preliminary draft suggests is that Debussy linked certain elements with the appearance of several metaphorical tonalities, and then

¹⁶⁹ See Act V, bars 381-382 (without B-sharp).

¹⁷⁰ See Act V, bars 229-230.

¹⁷¹ See Act V, bars 277-284. The scene ends on a C-D dyad, the upper and lower leading notes of the final C-sharp.

¹⁷² See Act V, bars 379-383. Previously stated on F and harmonised with a G, its own dominant, the progress to C is prepared.

¹⁷³ See Act V, bars 384-387 (C-sharp, B-natural, A-natural, G-sharp).

¹⁷⁴ See Act V, bars 390-391 (C-sharp, E-sharp, F-double sharp).

constructed the scene by ordering these appearances into a skeletal pattern' (Kabisch, 2001:607).

Langham Smith (1989:139) assumes that Debussy had a clear key scheme in mind in the conception of the opera. The structure is characterised by two distinct features: the sharpward forward progression towards the 'goal' key of C-sharp, resisted by the employment of keys from the opposite side of the circle of fifths. The forces portrayed by this tonal opposition could be interpreted as life and death, love and vengeance, or hope and failure. 'Whatever links a large-scale harmonic analysis may reveal, the overall resolution is into a key-area that has hardly been asserted as a tonic at any point in the opera' (Langham Smith, 1989:139).

MacDonald (1988:222) discusses the significance of G-flat major in nineteenth century music and argues that 'G-flat is truly the ultimate point in the tonal scheme, and its special polarity undisputed'. Schubart, a contemporary of Haydn, give in the final pages of his *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* a summary of key character for each note of the scale, major and minor. He describes G-flat major as 'Triumph over difficulty, breathing freely having climbed a hill' and the 'echo of a soul that has struggled valiantly and conquered' (MacDonald, 1988:222-223). Robert Schumann believed that although any feeling can be expressed in any key, complicated feelings suit those keys that are not often heard. One of Schumann's most triumphant songs, 'Frühlingsnacht', from the *Liederkreis* op. 39, is set in F-sharp major (MacDonald, 1988:226-227).

MacDonald (1988: 228-230) states that for a mid-nineteenth century composer to employ C or G-flat, especially in opera, 'was to make a statement about the nature of music: C is plain, straightforward, and honest; G-flat is profound and ecstatic, its profundity symbolised by the furthest depth reachable by downward modulation through the circle of fifths'. Apart from *Pelléas*, other important operatic works where G-flat major is significant are the love scene in Act IV in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, the quintet in Act III of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, and Dvořák's 'Song to the Moon' from *Rusalka* (MacDonald, 1988: 227-230). The presentation of the rose in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* is in F-sharp major, as is 'Va pensiero' in Verdi's *Nabucco* (MacDonald, 1988:230-231).

Other significant harmonic associations

Brown (1992:90) associates several chords with particular emotions and suggests that the key of C-sharp minor could be associated with feelings of uncertainty and even fear.¹⁷⁵ She incorrectly states that the opera ends in C-sharp minor, interpreting it as symbolic of the uncertainty of the future of the kingdom. The opera ends in C-sharp major and in my opinion suggests more an idea of hope than of uncertainty, as Brown assumes. C-sharp major is the dominant of the 'light' key of F-sharp major. She continues that the

¹⁷⁵ See Act II, bars 15-16 (Pelléas did not assume that Mélisande was lost; more correctly, he asked if she did not know where he had brought her), as well as Act III, bars 509-515 (this is not C-sharp minor, but the note C-sharp is prominent).

atmosphere of darkness and gloom is underlined by the use of D minor¹⁷⁶ (Brown, 1992:90).

The key of E major is generally associated with water and plays a prominent role in the harmonic organisation of Act II, scene 1. Here, the water of the well is depicted by E major, establishing the symbolic sense of this particular key for the rest of the opera. At a more symbolic level this key also represents the concept of fate: the fate motif is harmonised with E-major chords.¹⁷⁷ In Act III, scene 1 Pelléas hurts Mélisande by accident, which causes her doves, probably symbolic of innocence, to fly away¹⁷⁸ (Brown, 1992:90-91).

Debussy portrays feelings of gentleness and care with the key of F major. In Act I, scene 2 Pelléas's pleading with Arkel to permit him to visit his dying friend refers sporadically to F major.¹⁷⁹ In Act II, scene 1 Pelléas's care for Mélisande resounds in the F major harmony accompanying his question whether Golaud came close to her when they met at the well¹⁸⁰ (Brown, 1992:91). At the beginning of Act V, as Mélisande is lying on her deathbed, when the physician comforts Golaud by telling him that Mélisande is not dying as a result of the wound he gave her, the music is also set in F major.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ The opera starts and remains in D minor or D Dorian mode up to bar 4 and again in bars 8-11. Brown (1990:90) argues that the D tonality lasts until bar 54. See also Act II, bars 281-284. The D minor chords are on the word 'sombre'. On 'Il est très froid et très profond' a significant C major chord accompanies the word 'profond'.

¹⁷⁷ See Act I, bars 303-305. Bars 304-305 only have an E pedal.

¹⁷⁸ See Act III, bars 182-183.

¹⁷⁹ See Act I, bars 333-341. Brown also sees the preceding passage of Geneviève's reading of Golaud's letter as F major (Act I, bars 229-265). I see this as mostly Lydian on C (there is no B-flat).

¹⁸⁰ See Act II, bars 66-68. Brown also incorrectly sees Act III, bars 438-439 and Act IV, bar 44 as F major.

¹⁸¹ See Act V, bars 15-24.

Brown (1992:92) also interprets the employment of F-sharp minor as the underlining of dangerous moments or as forewarnings of perilous events. Although F-sharp minor appears at certain points in the opera, I disagree about the association of this chord with danger. As previously stated, the dark-key of C and whole-tone harmonies allude to darkness, danger and death. F-sharp minor could be seen as related to F-sharp major (the light key), since F-sharp minor often accompanies moments when references to light are made. It could be said that F-sharp minor supports moments when the light that is aspired to has almost been reached, but not fully. In Act I, scene 3¹⁸² F-sharp minor accompanies Geneviève's suggestion that Pelléas and Mélisande should look to the other side of the sea to see the lights from the ocean.

Brown (1992:92) incorrectly states that Pelléas's theme at the beginning of Act II is in F-sharp minor (in my opinion this is Lydian on C-sharp); she makes the same point about the loss of Mélisande's wedding ring in Act II, bar 82 (this is a half-diminished chord on A-sharp) and about bars 88-90 after Mélisande has lost her ring she utters 'my ring...oh, oh' (there is an F, and no F-sharp).

6.4.2 Timbre of the voice

Abbate (1998:88-89) discusses the otherworldly quality of Mélisande's voice more specifically as portrayed in Act III, scene 1. This hyper-realistic quality of Mélisande's singing is enhanced by the orchestral silence during her grooming song – a 'real

¹⁸² See Act I, bars 403-404.

Mélisande in a real tower would have to sing unaccompanied¹⁸³ (Abbate, 1998:88-89). Pelléas describes Mélisande's singing as 'like a bird who is not from here',¹⁸⁴ thus implying that the 'sound-object cannot be represented' (Abbate, 1998:88-89).

In Act V Debussy depicts the two incompatible worlds of Golaud and Mélisande effectively in the music: Golaud's recitative, mostly unaccompanied, is played off against Mélisande's initial triple-metre responses, 'whose very formality constructs a final musical reliquary for a now untouchable vocal object' (Abbate, 1998:93-94).¹⁸⁵

In Act III scene 1, the orchestra acted as a displacement for alien singing attributed to Mélisande, a phantom form of what could not be realized. Mélisande sang, as she had when we first heard her in Act I, without the orchestra. In these instances from Act V, Mélisande's voice has moved into alignment with its phantom orchestral form. The two merge, as the parallel string chords assume the timbre and register of the soprano, and the soprano intones synchronously with the hieratic, six-stroke pulse of the strings. As this happens, we have the sense that her voice becomes, to our ears, an object that recedes to far distances, away from human discourse, becoming one with the instruments.¹⁸⁶

6.4.3. Orchestration

Debussy's orchestra consists of 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 1 cor anglais, 2 clarinets, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, timpani, cymbal, triangle, 2 harps and strings.

¹⁸³ See Act III, bars 18-31.

¹⁸⁴ See Act III, bars 37-38.

¹⁸⁵ See Act V, bars 96-199. Abbate (1998:93-94) mentions three instances, but does not provide any examples. The responses in triple metre are in bars 99-100, 126-128 and 197-199.

¹⁸⁶ See Act I, bars 63 and 66-67, and Act III, bars 18-30 (unaccompanied). In Act V, bars 126-128 Mélisande's voice merges with the orchestral sound.

The intensity and development of the drama in *Pelléas* are enhanced by the subtle orchestration of the work. The orchestra is rarely used at full dynamic strength and serves to reflect the atmosphere of the drama throughout the opera. Brown (1992:96) points out that the orchestration in *Pelléas* is occasionally so thin that the voice is sometimes accompanied by one or two instruments only.¹⁸⁷ After the first published edition had been released, Debussy made a few revisions to the score in order to ‘improve the balance of winds and strings and to refine the timbres and sonorities’ (Lesure, 2001). Brown (1992:88-89) points out that the flute and the horn – the two instruments most frequently mentioned in Symbolist poetry – together with the oboe, are the most prominent instruments employed in the opera.

Grout (1966:499) argues that Debussy effectively reflects the French operatic style in his treatment of the orchestra in relation to the voice in *Pelléas*:

The musical interest is not in the continuous orchestra or in the solo aria but in the *divertissements*, that is, interludes in the action where music may be enjoyed without the attention being divided by the necessity of following the drama at the same time.

Debussy employs various types of timbre to underline emotional expression or to convey particular ideas. Brown (1992:85) argues that in *Pelléas* specific instruments are associated with the three principal characters and their allusive, emotional connections.¹⁸⁸ Brown (1992:86) states that Mélisande’s melancholic motif is often played by the oboe; Langham Smith (1989:84) also believes that Melisande’s motif tends to be associated

¹⁸⁷ Brown (1992:96) classifies textural restraint as a subset of silence, but in my opinion the technique serves the timbre.

¹⁸⁸ Only the most prominent instruments will be discussed in this section.

with the oboe and flute.¹⁸⁹ Debussy frequently associates Pelléas's character with the transparent timbre of the flute (Brown, 1992:86).¹⁹⁰

Brown (1992:86-87) continues that the cor anglais is generally employed to convey sorrow or concern, often involving Mélisande.¹⁹¹ Her child's motif (the rebirth motif), which occurs only five times, is also twice played by the cor anglais. In Act V Arkel's observation that Mélisande suffers so timidly is accompanied by the cor anglais, playing a variant of her motif.¹⁹² In the scene where Yniold struggles to retrieve his golden ball (Act IV, scene III), the cor anglais also features prominently. The employment of the cor anglais possibly reflects Yniold's distress because of the difficulty he encounters to recover his ball, and on a more extended level possibly symbolises his sorrow for the sheep on their way to be slaughtered, foreshadowing the tragedy which will befall Pelléas and Mélisande in the next scene.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Brown (1992:86) also suggests that Debussy not only depicts the naïveté shared by Mélisande, Yniold and her child, by setting their motifs mostly for the oboe, but the instrument also represents innocence within dramatic scenes. I believe that the timbre of the oboe evokes an idea of vulnerability rather than innocence. See Act I, bars 14-15 (Oboe I), 102-103 (Flute I and Oboe I), 386-389 (Oboe I), 471-473 (Flute I), 473-474 (Oboe I), Act V, bars 64-65 (Oboe I: rebirth motif), 105-106 (Oboe I and Bassoon I: fate motif), 190-191 (Oboe I: ecstasy theme variant), 260-261 (Oboe I on 'grande froid'), 273-274 (Oboe I then cor anglais in bars 275-276: rebirth motif at 'she doesn't smile, she is very little'), 344-345 (Oboe I after 'the sadness you see'), and 370-373 (Oboe I).

¹⁹⁰ Brown (1992:86) states that Pelléas's character in Maeterlinck's play is more childlike than masculine and that the frequent setting of his motif for the flute suggests lightness, fragility and naïveté. In my opinion Pelléas's character more specifically represents a freedom of spirit and lightness of being. 'Childlike' could be interpreted negatively. The flute's timbre elicits this lightness and freedom effectively. See Act I, bars 317-320 and 416-417, Act II, bars 1-3 and Act V, bars 181-182, where the motif associated with Pelléas is played by the flute. See text as well.

¹⁹¹ See Act I, bars 78-83, 338-345, and 408-409 (Pelléas), Act II, bars 146-148 (after Mélisande has lost her ring: Golaud motif variant), 276-280, Act III, bars 70-71, Act IV, bars 335-337, Act V, bars 9-10 (octatonic motif with flutes), 66-68 (rebirth motif), 275-276, 322-324, 377-378. See text as well.

¹⁹² See Act V, bars 337-339.

¹⁹³ See Act IV, bars 421-424 and 426-428. See text as well.

Debussy employs the horn to represent the varied emotional range of Golaud's character throughout the opera. The more violent scenes are supported by the brassiness of the horn, whereas the horn's subdued and muted sound generally underlines Golaud's repentance in the final act.¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, the horn not only accompanies Golaud's hunting and horse riding (in its traditional symbolic role), but it is also heard when specific times of the day are mentioned by the characters (Brown, 1992:87).¹⁹⁵

The harp's lightness and transparency usually portrays brightness and water in the opera. In Act III, scene 3 Pelléas's enjoyment of the fresh air from the sea, as well as the movement of the water, are portrayed by ascending and descending arpeggios played by the harp. Later in the scene a figure in the harp depicts water drops as Pelléas marvels about the moisture on the flowers on the terrace.¹⁹⁶ In Act II, scene 1 the harp is frequently employed in semiquaver figurations to echo the brightness of the well, and on Pelléas's exclamation that Mélisande's wedding ring is glittering in the sun, the harp plays ascending C-sharp major scales.¹⁹⁷ The moment when Mélisande's ring falls into the water is also underlined by a harp figure.¹⁹⁸

When Golaud attempts to frighten Pelléas by taking him down to the castle vaults (Act II, scene 2), asking him whether he can smell 'l'odeur de la mort qui monte' and forcing him to look down into the abyss, the use of low-pitched instruments, particularly the lower

¹⁹⁴ See Act I, bars 18-20, 70-72 (fate motif), 148-149; Act II, bars 81-82; Act III, bar 217 (threat motif); Act IV, bars 75-76; Act V, bars 32-34 (muted horns: Golaud and Mélisande motifs).

¹⁹⁵ See Act II, scene 2, bars 183-184 (after 'midi'); Act III, scene 1, bars 30-32 (after 'midi'), 223-224 ('demi nuit'), 357-383 (in bars 367-368 'midi'); Act IV, scene 4, bars 579-580 ('heure').

¹⁹⁶ See Act III, bars 345-356 and 357-364.

¹⁹⁷ See Act II, bars 79-80. Brown is not entirely correct. Since there is a B-natural, the scale would be Mixolydian.

¹⁹⁸ See Act II, bar 82.

strings, depicts the gloomy stagnant waters with abrupt *crescendi* underlining the element of danger. Their descent into the castle vaults, led by the frightened Pelléas, is accompanied by low sounds, and the steady registral shift to high pitches musically illustrates their ascent towards the light. Debussy's musical depiction of the dark-light polarities enhances the symbolism in Maeterlinck's text, and the shimmering and pulsating orchestration portraying the light effectively evokes the voices of nature (Potter, 2003:142-143).

Act IV, scene 2 ends with Arkel's statement: "Si j'étais Dieu, j'aurais pitié du coeur des homes' (If I were God, on hearts of men I should have pity), contextually meaning that the crumbling of the love and trust between Golaud and Mélisande resembles 'a larger tragedy embracing the whole human race' (Nichols, 1989:73). Arkel's words serve as a sporadic expansion of perspective, not only elevating the drama to a level of universal meaning for the audience, but also underlining the closed, restricted setting in which the opera is set. Debussy echoes the breadth of Arkel's declaration effectively by orchestrating it with sustained horns, trombones and strings, moving into the 'penultimate and longest interlude in the opera' (Nichols, 1989:73).¹⁹⁹

The final Act of the opera is in effect the second scene of the last act of Maeterlinck's play. Debussy omitted a conversation between the castle servants from which the audience discovers that after killing Pelléas and wounding Mélisande, Golaud tries to kill himself. Golaud's allusions to his own death in Act V of the opera are then better understood. The final act's setting is in a room in the castle and the orchestration of flute,

¹⁹⁹ See Act IV, bars 338-341.

clarinet, harp and strings brings to mind the benevolent atmosphere of Act II; however, here the music is tentative, possibly suggesting that all is no longer well (Nichols, 1989:75).

Golaud interrogates Mélisande in search of 'la verité'. Although Mélisande promises that she is telling the truth, but even if she is, her confession to Pelléas, '... je ne mens qu'à ton frère' (I only lie to your brother),²⁰⁰ still resounds clearly in our memories. At each occurrence of the words 'la verité', the musical setting is different, implying that for each person the 'truth' is constantly changing (Nichols, 1989:76).²⁰¹

After Golaud's outrage at the castle servants entering the room unbidden, he asked to be left alone with Mélisande. Arkel will not leave Golaud with Mélisande alone again, saying forthrightly: 'Vous ne savez pas ce que c'est que l'âme' (You don't know what the soul is). At this point woodwinds and horns play Arkel's motive for the final time, augmenting the weight of this statement.²⁰² Nichols (1989:76-77) interprets Arkel's words as summarising the essence of the drama:

Some are born with spiritual insight; others achieve it; some, like Golaud, search for it all their lives without even the death of those they love being able to teach them 'what the soul is', because love for them is less important than truth.

²⁰⁰ See Act IV, bars 645-646.

²⁰¹ See Act V, bars 167-168 (Golaud: unaccompanied pentatonic cell); bar 172 (Golaud: with sustained strings and Horns II and IV); bar 177 (Golaud: unaccompanied D major triad); bars 205-206 (Mélisande: echoing Pelléas motif in solo violin, with Oboe II, clarinets and Horn II); bars 214-215 (Golaud: with Oboe I, clarinets, Bassoon I and tremolo violins, and violas); bars 216 (Golaud: with oboes, clarinets, bassoons, Violin II and violas; whole-tone harmony); bars 224-225 (Golaud: oboes, cor anglais, clarinets, Bassoon I and II, Horns I and II, strings; all horns play Golaud cell in bar 225); bars 226-227 (Mélisande: with string *pizzicato*).

²⁰² See Act V, bars 320-321. Nichols does not mention the partial entry in Horn III.

6.5. Rhythm and pacing

Silence plays an integral role in the symbolic musical rendering of Maeterlinck's play. Suter (1999:47) explains that the type and duration of silences are not only closely related to the rhythm of the drama, as in the libretto, but also ultimately to the musical setting of the text. Brown (1992:103) suggests that silence underlines the emotional level in *Pelléas* and parallels this employment with the Symbolist aesthetic of Mallarmé, who 'sought to evoke the *Ideal*²⁰³ in its purest form, through the use of silence' in his poetry.

6.5.1. Silence

Silence is employed in various contexts within the opera. It appears in a single character's solo part, between those of two characters, between a vocal and orchestral passage, as an exact duration within the instrumental discourse or as an inexact silence between two orchestral passages.

The silences and pacing within the voice part echo the verbal silences and pacing within the spoken language. Naturally there are longer silences between sentences (after a full stop, question or exclamation marks) than within sentences (after a comma, a semi-colon).²⁰⁴ In Act I, scene 1, when Golaud finds Mélisande at the fountain, her nervousness and fear are underlined by her agitated and rushed replies to Golaud's questions. There are mostly only one- to two-crotchet beat rests between the vocal parts.

²⁰³ Debussy once stated that 'the naïve candour of childhood' was his ideal (Potter, 2003:141).

Maeterlinck's ideal was spiritual love, or a feeling of interconnection with the cosmos.

²⁰⁴ See Act I, bars 28-54.

The pacing of Genevieve's reading of Golaud's letter in scene 2 effectively parallels the even pace with 'the real reading of a letter'.²⁰⁵

The silence of the orchestra supports the hyper-realism of Mélisande's singing in Act III, scene 1.²⁰⁶ Mélisande's singing, together with the orchestral silence, diverge so clearly from conventional opera's orchestral continuum that there is 'a sense of deflated mystery when the song ends and the voices join the orchestra, a sense of operatic business as usual' (Abbate, 1998:87-90).

In Act II, scene 1 Mélisande and Pelléas are together beside the well in the park. While touching the water with her hand Mélisande's long tresses drop into the water, whereupon Pelléas calls out her name and she remarks that her hair is longer than her arm, and longer than she is tall.²⁰⁷ At this point there are four crotchets of total silence, where Pelléas' love for Mélisande possibly becomes apparent.²⁰⁸ Before the rests their conversation was impersonal and straight after the silence Pelléas asks Mélisande about Golaud. The use of silence intensifies the change in Pelléas's emotional state (Brown, 1992:96).

Later in Act II, scene 2 Mélisande puts her hands in Golaud's after having lost her wedding ring. A slight pause follows in which Golaud notices that she is not wearing the

²⁰⁵ See Act I, bars 229-265.

²⁰⁶ See Act III, bars 18-30. Abbate is not entirely correct; two bars of instrumental writing in bars 24-25 interrupt her singing.

²⁰⁷ Brown (1990:96) incorrectly states that Mélisande is in the castle tower and that Pelléas exclaimed that her hair is longer than he is tall.

²⁰⁸ See Act II, bar 61.

ring. A longer silence is then followed by Golaud's reaction to the missing ring. Debussy effectively employs the pauses to intensify Golaud's alarm at first and then his disappointment in Mélisande for losing the wedding ring²⁰⁹ (Brown, 1992:98).

Example 31: Act II, bars 321-322

Gu.

Animé et inquiet

fleurs... / flowers... / Tiens, / Why, / où est l'an-neau que je t'a-vais don- / Where is the ring that I gave un - to

sf

Nichols (1989:74) claims that the orchestral silence at the point of love declaration in Act IV, scene 4 is 'from the psychological point of view, completely convincing':²¹⁰

The orchestra acts, among other things, as a link between past, present and future; and the nearer the orchestra comes to silence (as in Mélisande's song at the beginning of Act III) the more self-contained the atmosphere.

Over and above the silence of the orchestra at these declarations, a significant complete silence underlines the moment when Pelléas and Mélisande embrace each other for the

²⁰⁹ See Act II, bars 321-322. A two-crotchet beat silence in the voice is followed by Golaud's exclamation 'Tiens', after which the fermata over the double bar follows. (In the orchestral score the fermata occurs before the double bar.)

²¹⁰ See Act IV, bars 618-619.

first time. The orchestra's crescendo builds up to a bar of total silence at the point when Pelléas takes Mélisande in his arms, followed by the entrance of the orchestra at *pianissimo*. The use of silence here intensifies the emotional level at their embrace, ruling out the possibility of musical or verbal interference in the purity of the feeling²¹¹ (Brown, 1992:98).

Silence is also significantly employed in Act I, scene 1, when Golaud finds Mélisande in the forest. She does not want Golaud to touch her and says that she will throw herself into the water if he comes closer. Golaud replies that he will just stand there under a tree and says 'N'ayez pas peur' (Don't be afraid). A general pause links the phrase with Golaud's question: 'Quelqu'un vous a t'il fait du mal?' (Has anyone done you a wrong?).²¹²

Just before Mélisande enters in Act IV, scene 4, Pelléas says: 'Il faut que je lui dise tout ce que je n'ai pas dit' (I know that I must tell her that I never have told before), followed by a crotchet rest with fermata in his part and another crotchet rest in Mélisande's part before she speaks.²¹³ When Mélisande confesses that she has loved Pelléas since the first time they met, a general pause follows after which the music moves into F-sharp major and the ecstasy theme is introduced.²¹⁴ Straight after the castle doors lock for the night, Pelléas utters the words: 'Quel est ce bruit?' (What is that noise?) and a general pause

²¹¹ See Act IV, bar 726. A similar approach to orchestral silence appears in bars 618-620, where their declaration of love is preceded by an orchestral *crescendo* and followed by *ppp* in the orchestra.

²¹² See Act I, bars 72-73.

²¹³ See Act IV, bar 565. There is a fermata in Pelléas's part and the orchestra is silent.

²¹⁴ See Act IV, bars 629-630.

suggested that regularly composed rhythms – based on conventional strong and weak beat patterns – should be avoided and more freely-composed rhythms should take preference (Brown, 1992:117-118).

Debussy obscures the clarity of the bar line to achieve fluidity of motion. Tied notes over the bar line and rests reduce the stress of the downbeat, accents on conventionally weak beats, and the employment of polymetre and polyrhythms effectively disguises the bar line.²²⁰ Debussy frequently combines duple and triple subdivisions of the beat simultaneously to obscure the emphasis on the traditionally strong beats²²¹ (Brown, 1992:118).

The combination of triplet and duplet figures with accents on weak beats weakens the bar line in Act II.²²² The employment of rests or tied notes over the bar line effectively obscures the rhythmic clarity. In Act III, scene 2 a syncopated rhythmic pattern,²²³ comprised of a quaver rest on the first pulse, crotchets, a tied note to the next bar and duplet and triplet quavers, occurs (Brown, 1992:121-122).²²⁴

²²⁰ See Act II, bars 1-2 (Pelléas theme: tied note, alternating duplet and triplet figures). See also Act I, bars 14-20, 286-290 (voice and strings), 364-367, 386-389 (polymetre), 436-438, 462-481 (polymetre); Act II, bars 317-380 (polymetre), and Act III, bars 39, 147-149, 274-278, and 410.

²²¹ See Act I, bars 172-174. Triplet quavers in the flutes and oboe are used against two quavers in the second violins in 4/4 metre.

²²² See Act I, bars 141-146 (violas), 153-156 (Flutes I and II), 306-308 (horns), 328-333 (strings), 391-399, 457; Act II, bars 186-187 (cellos and double basses), 227-228, and Act III, bars 274-278, 353-356, and 473-474.

²²³ See Act III, bars 275-276. The pattern occurs in the cellos and double basses. The pattern first occurs four bars earlier (bars 272-274) in the double bass, but this time it starts on the beat and is therefore not syncopated.

²²⁴ A syncopated two-bar phrase, characterised by crotchets quavers and a tied note to the second bar, occurs three times in cellos, double basses and then bassoons up to bar 300. See bars 286-290 (cellos and double basses), bars 294-296 and bars 298-300 (bassoons, cellos and double basses).

At the beginning of Act I, scene III the solo oboe plays in common time, while the rest of the orchestra plays in 12/8 metre ²²⁵ and in Act II from bar 317 the metre changes six times within eleven bars.²²⁶

Through these techniques Debussy manages to disguise the rhythmic ‘reality’ in music and succeeds in preserving the ‘mystery’ of his musical ideas (Brown, 1992:122).

6.6. Proportional structure

Lesure (2001) states that in Debussy’s music thematic and other climactic points form complicated proportional structures derived from symmetry and the golden section. Although this subject may still be debatable, this proportional division occurs fairly precisely in the climactic Act IV, scene 4 of *Pelléas*. The dramatic intensity builds up in two consecutive crescendos (Lesure, 2001).

Roy Howat (1983:156) asserts that the typical dramatic shape of the golden section was first employed in Debussy’s *oeuvre* in *Pelléas et Mélisande*:

In this case the shape was, of course, implicit in Maeterlinck’s drama[...] The climax of the opera, Act IV, scene 4 (the first scene Debussy set), accumulates its tension in a clear sequence of events[...] Its main dramatic pivot, after Pelléas and Mélisande’s declaration of love, is the point of literally no return, as Pelléas and Mélisande, in the garden, hear the castle doors lock for the night²²⁷[...] This divides the scene’s total of 1316 crotchet beats in exact GS of 813:503 – as accurate as anything yet traced in this book. Pelléas’s and

²²⁵ See Act I, bars 386-389.

²²⁶ See Act II, bars 317-327. The metre changes from 4/4 to 6/8 to 12/8 to 3/4 and back to 4/4 again.

²²⁷ See Act IV, bar 692.

Mélisande's declaration of love[...] is placed over the exact halfway point of these first 813 beats.²²⁸

According to my calculation, the total crotchet beats in the scene is 1343, the climactic point falls after beat 833 (on beat 834) and the declaration of love after beat 424 (on 425). The different ratios would then result in 833:510 (0,6122448) and 1343:833 (0,6202531). The declaration of love would be at exactly 424:833 (0,5090036) – therefore halfway to the climactic point.

However, if the bars of the scene were counted from where Pelléas starts singing and not where he enters, five bars prior to the singing, the calculations would work out closer to Howat's results. The total crotchet beats will then be 1323, the ratios 813:510 (0,6273062) and 1323:813 (0,6145124) and the declaration of love would fall on 0,4969249 (halfway point) to the climactic point. 0,618034... is the exact ratio of the golden section.

Howat's assumption could be supported by the fact that most of the extant drafts of the opera are those for Act IV, scene 4. Grayson (1986:121) lists nine different sources and discusses the revisions in detail. He adds that speculative attempts have been made to elucidate the numerous textual modifications in Act IV, scene 4. Although musical motivations most probably underlie some of these decisions, they can only be verified through a detailed musical analysis of each draft of the scene. Additionally, apart from Debussy's obvious intention to shorten the play to more operatic proportions, he was

²²⁸ See Act IV, bar 618.

possibly reluctant to share openly his musical reasons for changing the text (Grayson, 1986:125-126).

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The Symbolist movement prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century shared the same fundamental quality that defined the Greek word 'symbol': the notion of a shared experience by two people and the connection of the two parties through the experience. The idea of correspondence featured significantly in the aesthetics of the French Symbolist movement.

As discussed in this study, Debussy was well acquainted with the Symbolist poets and artists at the end of the nineteenth century and was influenced by their aesthetics that focused on a correspondence with nature, underlain with mystery, ambiguity and emotional expression. Symbolist art aims to activate the imagination through the stimulation of the senses and the evocation of an emotion in the spectator or listener. Although colour (timbre) plays an important role in both Symbolist poetry and art, and particularly in Impressionist art, Debussy could rather be seen as a Symbolist as he aspired to evoke an emotional response in the listener through the use of timbre, silence and rhythmic freedom in his music. Impressionist artists aspired to represent of an image at a specific moment.

Debussy's aesthetics were based on the notion of creating a connection between music, nature and the soul. As mentioned above, the composer once said that nothing is more musical than a sunset and that one can learn the greatest lessons in

development from the experience.²²⁹ He also discussed the problem of the compatibility of the rhythm of the soul and the rhythm of music.²³⁰ Supporting this notion that music and nature are connected, Debussy made use of the arabesque, and ascending and descending patterns to either depict positive inclinations or negative associations respectively.

Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande* provided Debussy with a text and plot which incorporated the significance of nature, destiny and the spiritual sphere with a prevailing atmosphere of mystery. In his opera Debussy parallels the mystery, futility and circularity with the employment of whole-tone, pentatonic and modal scales. The dark and light symbolism is effectively supported by a harmonic structure based on the circle of fifths. C major supports moments of darkness and F-sharp major (G-flat major) evokes the light. Certain instruments are associated with particular characters in the opera. Mélisande's motif is mostly played by oboe, Golaud's motif more often than not by the horn, and Pelléas's motif by the flute. In this way Debussy supports the more abstract representation of their characters by the timbre of the instruments associated with that specific character.

Metric freedom and silence also sustain the mysteriousness of the drama. The use of silence not only enhances moments of torment and fear, but also extends the pure emotion felt in Pelléas's and Mélisande's love declarations. Debussy placed the

²²⁹ See Chapter 2, page 14 (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:199).

²³⁰ See Chapter 2, page 15 (Lesure & Langham Smith, 1977:36).

melodies in the orchestra and created a recitative-like vocal line which could imitate the subtle inflections of the French language.

Debussy's musical rendering of Maeterlinck's play helped to convey the inner conflict and emotions within the characters. Daniels (1953:97) argues that in Maeterlinck's *Théâtre de l'Inexprime* human will is played down, while their resignation to the merciless forces of fate and death takes precedence. The depiction of the conflict between the forces of the will and of fate and death in the playwright's drama poses a problem in that 'the exercise of the will implies an element of logical reasoning which is inconsistent with Maeterlinck's intuitive and emotional methods'. When a character attempts to process an emotion (e.g. to conquer fear), the analysis of the situation is done silently from within and not expressed verbally. Private reasoning in a play cannot be communicated to an audience, except by 'direct verbal expression' (Daniels, 1953:97). It could then be assumed that Debussy's musical rendering of the play not only supports the symbolism within the text, but also assists in depicting private emotional moments in instances of verbal silence. Thus the composer's wish was fulfilled to find a libretto where the text would allow him to occasionally 'complete what [the playwright] had begun' through the music.

It is interesting to note that the polar opposites of darkness and light and the balance of the polarities feature prominently in the belief system of the Kabbala and the cabbalists' understanding of the cosmos.

Because of the limited scope of the study, all aspects of an analysis could not be covered. For this reason the following suggestions for further research might be appropriate. Debussy's motivic use seems to be more complex than discussed in this study. As mentioned above, the three-note cell of Mélisande's motif seems to recur in various transformations throughout the opera, while some motifs partly resemble this cell.

In my study I have not discussed pentatonicism in depth. It is mentioned that a recurring pentatonic motif receives prominence in the climactic scene. Since Debussy employed the proportions of the golden section in his work, it could be assumed that the pentatonic scale, with its inherent Fibonacci proportions in its chordal formation, is employed symbolically.

Regarding the discussion of the proportional structure in *Pelléas*, only the manifestation of the golden section in Act IV, scene 4 is discussed. It is probable that Debussy might have employed the proportion throughout the opera as a larger structural device as well as possibly in the creation of motifs and themes.

Furthermore, a comparative study between various renderings of the opera and their symbolic success could also be investigated. Louis-Marc Suter's article '*Pelléas et Mélisande* in Performance' (1999) focuses on the importance of precision in the length of silences and the execution of rhythm in the opera.

This study was structured in such a way as to deal with certain aspects and elements of the music in separate sections, but in reality the symbolic treatments of the different music elements are interwoven in such a complex way that it is an artificial task to separate them and discuss each element independently. *Pelléas* is a masterpiece incorporating not only Debussy's aesthetics, but also in reflecting his being. It represents an amalgamation and interconnection of most Symbolist elements, such as mysticism, cabbalistic concepts such as darkness and light, the golden section and the importance of nature, represented through music.

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