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Author(s): Jann Pasler

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Pelléas and Power: Forces Behind the Reception of Debussy's Opera

JANN PASLER

The premiere of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Paris Opéra-Comique in 1902 provoked a reaction comparable in historical importance to those produced by Hugo's *Hernani* in 1830, Wagner's *Lohengrin* in 1887

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This essay is based, in part, on a paper presented to the Eleventh Annual Conference, "Social Theory, Politics, and the Arts," at Adelphi University on 27 October 1985. All citations from the reviews of *Pelléas* derive from the articles listed in table 2, and all translations from the French are by the author unless stated otherwise.

Allegorical postcards of Parisian newspapers from the Belle Époque, reproduced in René de Livois, *Histoire de la presse française*, vol. II (Lausanne, 1965), betw. pp. 360–61. Caricatures of the audience from Albert Millaud, *Physiologies parisiennes* (Paris, 1887).

and 1891, and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913. At the open dress rehearsal on 28 April, much of the public at large responded with surprise, laughter, and hostility. Ill-disposed to the work by a parodying pamphlet circulated before the performance, they entered the theater resistant to the simplicity of the story, laughed heartily at Mary Garden's English accent when she sang "Je ne suis pas heureuse," shouted "petit guignol" ("little clown") at Yniold, and left indignant because the opera was so different from those to which they were accustomed. Others in the audience, largely Debussysts, clapped excessively—even during the orchestral preludes—and argued vehemently during intermissions with anyone who refused to regard the work as a total triumph. For the premiere on 30 April, Debussy agreed to some prudent cuts, but both sides con-

tinued to respond to the opera with an equal lack of dignity and discrimination.

Even though these conflicts did not result in any riots or arrests—as there had been for *Lo-hengrin* a decade earlier—nor any interruption of the production, the work clearly inspired intense controversy. Every major newspaper and journal carried a review of *Pelléas* (sometimes more than one), whether the critics were seduced by the opera's charm or felt their values threatened by its scorn of traditions. Moreover, the heated discussions continued well past the first two weeks of performances; they extended over ten years, through the hundredth performance of the opera on 28 January 1913. Despite (or because of) the controversy, the work made more money than such established repertoire items as *Carmen* and *Manon* and for most of its performances, significantly more than the monthly average of all operas (see table 1).

The reasons *Pelléas* triggered such a response have not been examined. Many of those who subsequently wrote about the first performances of the opera, such as Vuillermoz, Laloy, Koechlin, Peter, and Inghelbrecht,¹ were among the original group who worked arduously to have it accepted, both through their faithful attendance at every performance and with their pens. Because they felt that the music critics of the time were "almost unanimous in their condemnation" of the work,² any discussion by such Debussysts is tinged with the propaganda they first used to defend the work. Two more objective reviews of the *Pelléas* criticism—by Léon Vallas in his classic monograph on Debussy, and, more recently, by Christian Goubault in his study of music criticism in the French press, 1870–1914—reveal that there were proponents as well as adversaries of the opera among the established critics.³ These studies, however, do not analyze which critics had

the most influence with the public, nor what motivated the various critics to take the positions they did. They also fail to take account of some of the most interesting reviews in non-musical journals.

By examining and categorizing some four dozen reviews *Pelléas* received during its first season together with selected memoirs and novels of the period, this article will show that the controversy associated with Debussy's opera extended far beyond that caused by the first performances, and that it was fueled more by the clash of values held by the various groups in the opera's first audiences than by the intrinsic nature of the work itself. The rich ladies who enjoyed the air of aristocracy surrounding the opera house, the professional musicians who cherished the traditions of the beloved genre, and the Wagnerian fanatics who sought quasi-religious experiences through music—each of these groups had preconceived notions of what would or could please them and came to the opera with positions fixed in advance. Debussy's friends and supporters, who had been waiting "with curiosity and sympathy" for nine years since the composer began the work and had heard excerpts in salon performances, knew the work would be important⁴ and came prepared to defend it, as their red-vested predecessors had defended *Hernani*. Up in the top gallery, the *amateurs de toute condition*—young musicians, composers, poets, and students who had never had the least contact with Debussy, but who had grown to love his orchestral music—listened for what new avenues the work might suggest for the future of French music and music theater. "Licensed" critics came representing every musical persuasion as well as much of the theatrical and literary worlds, which were intrigued by the idea of setting Maeterlinck's play to music.

In effect, the *scandale* of *Pelléas*—the shock, indignation, and outrage caused by the opera—resulted from all these writers using the work to argue for a number of opposing, even contradictory, views on the use, purpose, and nature of opera, music theater, and music in general throughout the first ten years of the century.

¹Émile Vuillermoz, *Claude Debussy* (Geneva, 1957); Louis Laloy, *La Musique retrouvée* (Paris, 1974); Charles Koechlin, *Debussy* (Paris, 1927); René Peter, *Claude Debussy* (Paris, 1944); Germaine and D. E. Inghelbrecht, *Claude Debussy* (Paris, 1953).

²Laloy, p. 106. In his 20 May review, Pierre Lalo also argues that the work had few supporters.

³Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Marie and Grace O'Brien (New York, 1973); Christian Goubault, *La Critique musicale dans la presse française de 1870 à 1914* (Geneva, 1984).

⁴Henri de Regnier, "Page sur Debussy," in *Vues* (Paris, 1926), p. 87.

Table 1: Receipts for Opera Performances in 1902.¹JANN
PASLER
*Pelléas and
Power*

DATE		OTHER OPERAS		PELLÉAS:	
		Opéra			
February	17,865 ^a	<i>Siegfried</i>	18,424 ^b		
		<i>Faust</i>	16,276		
March	14,803	<i>Lohengrin</i>	15,825		
		<i>Faust</i>	18,927		
May	16,997	<i>Lohengrin</i>	21,284		
		<i>Faust</i>	20,010		
June	15,677	<i>Valkyrie</i>	18,985		
		<i>Faust</i>	13,445		
September	18,401	<i>Lohengrin</i>	17,815		
		<i>Faust</i>	20,005		
		<i>Samson et Dalila</i>	18,796		
October	17,883	<i>Tannhäuser</i>	19,637		
		<i>Faust</i>	17,781		
		<i>Don Juan</i>	17,192		
November	15,806	<i>Valkyrie</i>	18,168		
		<i>Lohengrin</i>	19,451		
		<i>Faust</i>	17,781		
		Opéra-Comique			
February	6,004	<i>Manon</i>	5,801		
		<i>Carmen</i>	5,916		
		<i>Louise</i>	5,513		
		<i>Grisélidis</i>	6,933		
April				premiere 30	1,131 ^c
May	6,930	<i>Manon</i>	6,332	2	3,938
		<i>Carmen</i>	6,014	3	5,981
		<i>Louise</i>	6,602	8	7,364
		<i>Mignon</i>	8,455	10	6,819
		<i>La Troupe Jolicœur</i>	774	15	6,517
		premiere			
				20	6,221
				25	6,138
				28	5,807
June	5,632	<i>Manon</i>	6,965	1	3,815
		<i>Carmen</i>	5,671	6	7,395
		<i>Louise</i>	3,600	11	5,322
		<i>Mignon</i>	3,761	20	7,798
		<i>Lakmé</i>	7,583	26	6,699
October	6,726	<i>Manon</i>	8,813	30	7,007
		<i>Carmen</i>	9,796		
		<i>Louise</i>	6,138		
		<i>Mignon</i>	6,100		
November	6,254	<i>Manon</i>	7,264	6	6,759
		<i>Carmen</i>	5,909	14	6,331
		<i>Louise</i>	5,698	21	4,939
		<i>Mignon</i>	6,991	29	7,646

¹From *Le Monde musical*, April through December 1902.^aAverage receipts for all performances, in francs.^bAverage receipts per performance.^cDate; receipts.

Unlike today, artistic *scandales* occurred relatively often in Paris at the turn of the century. For one thing, theater, and particularly music, served as arenas in which the society could work out its political and social differences. In his 1902 essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," the eminent sociologist Georg Simmel analyzes this polemical spirit and suggests that a "latent antipathy" and "practical antagonism" were a necessary part of life in growing urban centers.⁵ By effecting distances and aversions, such devaluating responses protect a person from becoming indifferent or indiscriminate in a world of unending sensual stimuli. Any new art work automatically received some hostility. Building support and understanding for a work—i.e., creating a public—was a process that took time and strategy. Audiences were members of a variety of social, political, and cultural groups which could be threatened or appealed to in a number of ways.

Table 2 lists the reviews of *Pelléas* from May to July 1902. About half were drawn from Claude Abravanel's bibliography on Debussy;⁶ the other half were turned up by a lengthy search through the numerous journals of the time. I have devised the categories in this table in order to identify the order in which the reviews appeared, the publics to whom they were addressed, and the biases that the critics brought to the opera. In its construction, then, the table aims to suggest in capsule form a number of forces that may have informed the critics' judgements and influenced the way they shaped public opinion.

The political orientation of the newspapers and the social class of their readers readily present two sets of potential forces that the critics must have taken into account. From the table, it is clear that in general the newspapers' re-

jection of or receptivity to *Pelléas* aligns directly with their politics. Monarchist papers—*Le Gaulois* and the *Gazette de France*—attacked the opera viciously, while republican ones—*Le Petit Parisien*, *Le Temps*, the *Journal des Débats*, *La République*, *La Petite République*, and the *Revue de Paris*—supported it. There were exceptions, however, depending in part on the degree of the paper's appeal to its readers' social class. The most important critical journal, the *Revue des deux mondes*, took a stance which would satisfy the *haute bourgeoisie* rather than other republicans among its readership; consequently, in both tone and argument, its review sounds remarkably like those published in the quasi-official papers of the aristocracy, *Le Gaulois* and the *Gazette de France*. These attacks were dangerous to the work because they addressed the very public whose subscriptions and taxes supported the Opéra. By contrast, one monarchist paper, *Le Soleil*, reviewed the opera favorably, perhaps because it had slightly different readers than the other two. Like *La Liberté* and *Le Matin*, which praised *Pelléas*, *Le Soleil* was read by businessmen rather than the nobility, many of whom lived in the provinces.

There also appears to be a correlation between the various papers' stand in the Dreyfus affair (which began in 1894 and reached its peak in 1898–99) and their disposition toward *Pelléas*. Anti-Dreyfus papers (*Le Petit Journal*, *L'Éclair*, and *Le Gaulois*) took a negative view of the opera (except for D'Indy who, in *L'Occident*, surprisingly reversed his earlier opposition to the opera), while the pro-Dreyfus *Le Soleil*, *Revue de Paris*, and *Revue blanche*, were perhaps more inclined to urge their readers to give Debussy's opera a chance. The papers' views on nationalism, however, seem not to have carried much weight, for the nationalists split over the opera, depending on whether the paper or its critic was socialist (*La Presse* and *Bauër* came out for *Pelléas*) or anti-socialist (*L'Echo de Paris*'s review was somewhat negative) and to the extent some nationalists were also anti-Dreyfus (*Le Petit Journal* and *L'Éclair*).

The type of interest held by the readers suggests a third force to which the critics responded. To the degree that the paper addressed bourgeois socialites (*L'Echo de Paris*, *Gil Blas*, and the *Magasin pittoresque*), its critics were reluctant to give much praise; but when writing

⁵*The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York, 1950), p. 409–17. I am indebted to Chandra Mukerji for directing me to this article and to Pierre Bourdieu, Bennett Berger, Gaye Tuchman, Yaffa Schlesinger, and Tia DeNora for valuable discussions with them concerning the sociology of the arts. I also wish to thank Ann Feldman, Joseph Kerman, and William Weber for their helpful comments.

⁶Claude Abravanel, *Claude Debussy: A Bibliography* (Detroit, 1974), p. 111.

Table 2: Critical Reviews of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, May–July 1902.¹JANN
PASLER
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Power

PAPER ^a	EMPHASIS (READERS)	CRITIC	CRITIC'S STATUS, TASTES	DATE, EVALUATION ^b
Large Circulation Daily Newspapers				
* <i>Le Matin</i> (200,000) ↑	news, rep. all political views, not clerical (politicians)	André Corneau	critic at the <i>Revue blanche</i>	1 May ⁺
<i>Le Petit Parisien</i> (1,000,000) ↑	republican (mass mar- ket esp. in provinces)	Montcornet		1 May ⁺
<i>Le Petit Journal</i> (900,000) ↓	nationalist, anti- Dreyfus (mass market esp. in provinces)	Léon Kerst	"intellect moyen"	1 May ⁻
<i>Le Journal</i> (600,000) ↑	literary, pro-Dreyfus (writers, intellectuals, mass market)	*Catulle Mendès	writer, librettist, Wag- nerian	1 May ^o
Other Daily Newspapers				
* <i>L'Echo de Paris</i> (80,000) ↑	nationalist, catholic, fearing socialism (bourgeois socialites)	*Henry Gauthier- Villars (Willy)	novelist, Wagnerian	1 May ^o
<i>L'Eclair</i> (60,000) ↓	political, nationalist, anti-Dreyfus	Samuel Rosseau	composer	1 May ⁻
<i>Le Soleil</i> (35,000)	defends big business, pro-Dreyfus (moderate monarchists)	O'Divy		1 May ⁺
* <i>Le Figaro</i> (20,000) ↑	attempts to be a- political [low sales, but respected reviews] (bourgeois, republi- cans)	Eugène d'Harcourt	composer	1 May ⁻
<i>Le Figaro</i> (20,000) ↑	<i>see above</i>	<i>Un monsieur d'orchestre</i>	concert-goer	1 May ^o
* <i>Le Gaulois</i> (25,000)	monarchist, bonapart- ist, anti-Dreyfus (aris- tocracy, some <i>haute bourgeoisie</i>)	Louis de Fourcaud	Wagnerian, art histo- rian, professor	1 May ⁻
<i>Gil Blas</i>	short stories, gossip (socialites)	Gaston Serpette	composer	1 May ⁻
<i>La Liberté</i> (50,000) ↑	financial business (bourgeois)	Gaston Carraud	composer, pro-Schola Cantorum	2 May ⁺
<i>La République</i> (3,500) ↓	(educated republicans)	Litte (<i>alias</i> André Suarès)	writer, prefers Beethoven, Wagner	2 May ^o
<i>La Petite République</i> (100,000) ↓	open to all types of socialism (less- educated republicans)	Camille de Saint- Croix	literary critic	+
<i>La Presse</i> (50,000) ↑	socialist, nationalist, Boulangist	Gustave Bret	conductor	+
<i>Gazette de France</i> (5,000)	monarchist [one of oldest] (upper class, esp. in provinces)	Henri de Curzon	musicologist, archivist	3 May ⁻
<i>Le Figaro</i> (20,000) ↑	<i>see above</i>	Henry Bauër	socialist, politically <i>engagé</i>	5 May ⁺
<i>Gazette des Beaux-Arts</i> supplement	(art lovers)	*Paul Dukas	composer	10 May ⁺

(continued)

Table 2 (*continued*)

PAPER ^a	EMPHASIS (READERS)	CRITIC	CRITIC'S STATUS, TASTES	DATE, EVALUATION ^b
<i>Journal des Débats</i> (15,000) ↑	[old, established] (moderate republicans, academic elite)	Adolphe Jullien	pro-Wagner and Germans, musicologist, pro-Maeterlinck	11 May ⁺
<i>Le Figaro</i> (20,000) ↑	<i>see above</i>	Robert Flers	Interview of Debussy on his critics	16 May
* <i>Le Temps</i> (35,000) ↑	politically moderate [most respected] (republican bourgeoisie)	*Pierre Lalo	anti-Wagner, critic, son of the composer E. Lalo	20 May ⁺
Journals				
* <i>Le Ménestrel</i>	conservative, anti-Wagner (musical public)	Arthur Pougin	editor, arch-conservative musicologist	4 May ⁻
<i>La Revue Musicale</i>	music history, analysis (musicologists)	Louis Schneider	music gossip columnist like Willy, musicologist	May ⁺
<i>Revue d'Art dramatique et musical</i>	(writers, theater-goers)	Robert Brussel	drama critic	May ⁺
<i>La Revue dorée</i>	(young writers)	Emile Vuillermoz	young critic, Debussyste	May ⁺
<i>Revue bleue</i> (30,000)	(politicians, writers)	Paul Flat	theater critic, Wagnerian	10 May ^o
* <i>Revue des deux mondes</i> (32,000)	ideas, Catholic (<i>haute bourgeoisie</i> , conservative republicans)	*Camille Bellaigue	Catholic, <i>haut bourgeois</i> , music critic, prize-winning pianist	15 May ⁻
* <i>Revue de Paris</i> (20,000)	ideas, pro-Dreyfus (<i>haute bourgeoisie</i> , conservative republicans)	André Hallays	ex-editor of the <i>Journal des Débats</i> , music critic	15 May ⁺
<i>La Revue</i> (15,000)	ideas (writers)	Paul Souday	literary critic	15 May ^o
<i>Le Courrier musical</i>	(progressive musical public)	Victor Debay	writer, opera reviewer	15 May ⁺
<i>Le Guide musical</i> [Brussels]	anti-Wagner (musical public)	Hugues Imbert	journal editor, critic, prefers chamber music (born 1842)	15 May ^{?-}
<i>Le Monde musical</i>	making of instruments (musical public)	Auguste Mangeot	journal publisher	15 May ^o
<i>L'Art moderne</i> [Brussels]	(writers, artists)	M. D. Calvocoressi	young critic	15 May ^o
<i>Magasin pittoresque</i> , supplement	(bourgeois)	Emile Fouquet		15 May ⁻
<i>L'Art moderne</i> [Brussels]	<i>see above</i>	Octave Maus	journal editor	25 May ⁺
<i>Mercure de France</i> (10,000)	ideas, some symbolist (independent writers)	Jean Marnold	young critic, Debussyste	June ⁺
<i>Le Courrier musical</i>	<i>see above</i>	Paul Locard	orchestra concert reviewer	1 June ⁺

Table 2 (continued)

PAPER ^a	EMPHASIS (READERS)	CRITIC	CRITIC'S STATUS, TASTES	DATE, EVALUATION ^b
<i>Revue d'Art dramatique et musical</i>	<i>see above</i>	*Paul Dukas	composer	June: rpt. of above
<i>L'Occident</i>	anti-Dreyfus [founded 1902] (artists)	*Vincent D'Indy	composer, professor	June ⁺
<i>Le Théâtre</i>	(theater-goers)	Adolphe Jullien	musicologist, <i>see above</i>	June ⁺
<i>Le Théâtre</i>	<i>see above</i>	Louis Lastret	theater critic	June ⁺
<i>La Renaissance latine</i>	interest in provincial culture	Florencio Otero	prefers Charpentier	June ^o
<i>L'Ermitage</i>	symbolist (writers)	Henri Ghéon	poet, critic	July ⁺
<i>Revue universelle</i>	ideas (writers, intellec- tuals)	Camille Mauclair	poet, novelist, aesthe- tician	July ⁺
<i>Le Grande France</i>	(libertarian politicians)	Amédée Rouques	poet	July ⁺
<i>La Grande Revue</i>	ideas (writers)	Alfred Bruneau	composer, pro-Dreyfus	July ⁺
<i>Revue blanche</i>	ideas, pro-Dreyfus (writers)	Julien Benda	philosopher, writer	July ⁺

¹Information on political orientation of the French press and its readership from Claude Bellander, et al., *Histoire Générale de la presse française*, vol. III (Paris, 1972); René de Livois, *Histoire de la presse française*, vol. II (Lausanne, 1965); Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848–1945*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1977); and Christian Goubault, *La Critique musicale dans la presse française de 1870 à 1914* (Geneva, 1984). Information on the critics, their status, and their tastes gleaned from their own writings and from Vallas and Goubault.

^aApproximate circulation; rising or falling in 1902.

^bPositive, negative, mixed.

for writers and art-lovers (*Le Journal*, the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, *L'Art moderne*, the *Mercur de France*, *L'Ermitage*, etc.), the reviews were mixed at worse and full of acclamation for the most part. The musical public received perhaps the most diverse response from its critics, depending, predictably, on whether it was perceived as interested in progressive new trends or conservative traditions.

A fourth consideration underlying the critics' evaluation of the opera derives from their own principal occupation and its perspectives. Most of those who wrote criticism, poetry, and/or novels as their main form of employment (the greatest percentage of the critics on this list) found it easy to appreciate the opera whether they understood it or not, and none panned it outright. But the composer-critics swung both ways. It may be suspected that the three who attacked the opera—D'Harcourt, Serpette, and Rousseau—may have felt that the lit-

tle attention their music had received was called into jeopardy by the new opera, whereas those who defended *Pelléas*—Dukas, Bruneau, and even D'Indy, all well-known composers—felt secure enough to admire something that actually challenged their own compositional approaches. The greatest resistance to the opera came from professional musicologists and historically-minded music critics, most of whom remained committed to an earlier form of opera. Four of the six critics falling into this category were deeply disturbed by *Pelléas* and wrote scathing reviews.

The particular way these political, social, and cultural forces were brought into play during the first two weeks of the opera's life explains why Debussy's supporters had reason for concern about its survival, let alone its success. For the first week, 30 April–5 May, the criticism was largely divided. Each of the four large-circulation daily newspapers printed reviews. The



most powerful paper in town was *Le Matin*; its critic, André Corneau, who had known Debussy from the *Revue blanche*, wrote favorably, but had little influence, having worked at the paper for only a year. The two papers addressed to the working classes, *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Petit Journal*, disagreed. Montcornet, writing for the former, found that the music served its atmospheric function in the theater well, while Léon Kerst, writing for the latter, simply told people not to go hear *Pelléas*, since they would not understand it.

Catulle Mendès, a much more respected writer at the fourth major paper, *Le Journal*, insisted that the collaboration had not been a fruitful one. Mendès left the theater, he said, wanting to see the music and the play performed separately. This attack posed a real threat to the work, for even though Mendès liked the play, he found that, in the opera, the text loses its most valuable qualities—its “mys-

tery” and the “indecisiveness of its emotions, thoughts, and language”—and even though Debussy “never used his wonderful talents with more skill,” he regretted the composer’s “systematic exaggeration of monotony” in the vocal parts and his “stubborn determination to ‘musicalize’ even the least musical phrases.” Surely some of Debussy’s writer friends knew that Mendès might have harbored a lingering resentment over Debussy’s refusal to finish their mutual project *Rodrigue et Chimène* when he began *Pelléas*; nonetheless René Peter considered Mendès “the most qualified [*designé*] of them all to penetrate this surprising work.”⁷ When the critic addressed the very issues most dear to

⁷Peter, p. 191.



Debussy's symbolist supporters, such as the relationship between the music and the text, and concluded that the musico-poetic analogies were entirely superficial and that "we have been deceived" in placing our hopes in Debussy, his review had the potential of scaring away Debussy's base of support.

On the next level, the twelve critics from the other daily newspapers who reviewed the work also disagreed with one another. Five who admired the work (O'Divy, Carraud, Saint-Croix, Bret, Bauër) did not pretend to understand it, but praised its novelty; some of them said that if people went without any expectations, it would delight them. Suarès was also mystified, but while he applauded Debussy's skill and originality, he also registered a few reservations concerning the excessive importance given to the text. As noted earlier, these relatively favorable



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reviews came in papers read by businessmen, republicans, and socialists. Four critics who condemned the work (D'Harcourt, Fourcaud, Serpette, Curzon) attacked the composer and his alleged contempt for conventions more than the opera itself. They directed their words primarily to socialites and the high society. Among those who rejected the opera, only Rousseau appears to have examined the music in detail.

But probably the most important critic of the daily press, Willy (Henry Gauthier-Villars), refused to cast his vote definitively either for or against the opera. This was another serious impediment to the opera's success. Not only were Willy's *Lettres de l'ouvreuse* very popular with all kinds of concert-goers and salon people, but, like Mendès, he knew the composer, he had heard excerpts of the work as it was being composed, and he was well aware of how his comments would be read by the public. Remarks

tinged with disapproval interrupt his otherwise sympathetic review. For example, although he scolded readers who had laughed during the opera (wondering if many of them, like Golaud, had also been cuckolded by their wives!), he made light of the story himself with a humorous plot summary. And while he called Debussy a poet and succinctly identified the opera's innovative declamation, unusual orchestration, and harmonies built of fourths, fifths, and ninth chords, he also expressed some reservation as to their aesthetic effect. Debussy's unresolved dissonances evoked his strongest objection: "My God, yes! How harsh they are! What can I say? I am without a doubt becoming a *pompier* [academic]; it's my turn, I confess that these scraping noises annoy me a little." From such a writer, these criticisms were taken to heart. (Perhaps Willy was the "impenitent Wagnerian" that Laloy dubbed him, after all.⁸)

These equivocal, highly favorable, and downright dismissive early reviews fueled the controversy surrounding the work. Some of the criticism that came out the next week began to examine the resistance to the work and defend it against specific criticisms. Paul Dukas, who wrote perhaps the most important of these, said that the opera was just too different for anyone to think it could be understood right away. Given his position at one of the oldest papers in Paris, the *Journal des Débats*, and his long-time devotion to Wagner, Adolphe Jullien surprised his readers by placing Debussy's originality on a

par with Wagner's and by suggesting that if the listener allowed himself, he would find the impression often agreeable, and even sometimes a bit profound.

Before this defense of *Pelléas* could win many sympathizers, however, the journal critics, who had not yet voiced their opinions, initiated a new series of attacks and counterattacks in the 15 May and 1 June issues of the important monthly and semimonthly journals. In the *Revue des deux mondes* and *Revue de Paris*, the most respected periodicals of Parisian high society, and in *Le Temps*, their daily equivalent, the success or failure of Debussy's opera became an issue involving some of the society's most pressing questions.

AESTHETIC ISSUES

What kept *Pelléas et Mélisande* such a controversial topic of discussion throughout the spring and summer of 1902? From the musical perspective, the debate revolved around Debussy's approach to form, development, orchestration, and the "holy trinity"—that is, the three musical elements: harmony, melody, and rhythm. For some, the work lacked any nuance, any real "melody, motive, phrase, accent, form, and contour" (Kerst, Corneau, Pougin, Serpette, D'Harcourt, Curzon, Bellaigue); yet others heard in it an "infinity of nuances" and not a moment without all of the elements of music, only in new forms and guises (Dukas, Locard, Debay, Mauclair). Many objected to a total absence of development in the work, though Marnold claimed that Debussy used all the resources of leitmotifs, including the developmental, but in his own unusual way. As far as harmonies were concerned, those like Willy and Imbert, who found them ugly, harsh, and irritating, or like Rousseau, for whom they were too numerous, argued with Hallays, who heard not a grating sound in the opera, and Locard, who claimed that the work's "tonal uncertainty was more apparent than real." For Mauclair, Debussy was "the most original harmonist of the times."

In addition to examining the opera's music, discussions sometimes extended to Debussy's other compositions and to his musical background. Depending on how they viewed his orchestral music, the critics of music journals

⁸Laloy, p. 129. In his memoirs, *Souvenirs littéraires . . . et autres* (Paris, 1925), Willy mentions that he got nasty letters during the war "for having confessed to remaining an 'unchanged' partisan of Wagnerian music" (p. 94). Even though he had moved in the same circles as Debussy, in these same memoirs he writes, "And Debussy himself could not cure me completely of what he considered a mortal sickness. Certainly, an invincible charm emanates from the tenderness with which Pelléas showers Mélisande with her long hair; I felt it, but it does not make one forget one's old loves . . . the memory of Siegfried's horn" (p. 95).

By the turn of the century, neither for Willy, Mendès, or the other Wagnerians could it be said that they "were committed to furthering the cause of forward-looking trends in French culture," as Gerald D. Turbow mistakenly concludes in his essay, "Art and Politics: Wagnerism in France" in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. David C. Large and William Weber (Ithaca, 1984), p. 166, even though this may have been true in the mid-nineteenth century.

sought either to attract more concert-goers by comparing *Pelléas* favorably with this other music (Debay, Schneider), or to put them off by making this same comparison (Imbert). To bolster his argument, Pougin went so far as to undermine Debussy's credibility with the conservative musical public of *Le Ménestrel* by noting how few works the composer had written and how, at forty years old, it was really too late to try to establish a reputation. (Perhaps in response to this manipulation of public opinion, Locard wrote in his 1 June review, "Let fearful souls be reassured, [Debussy] is an excellent musician: his musical training is solid, he cherishes Renaissance music, defends Bach, and works on his scores for many years.")

But whether the work's opponents found the music of *Pelléas* threatening or just monotonous, their criticisms were certainly not graced with much originality. After reading the first three weeks of criticisms heaved at Debussy's opera, Pierre Lalo writes on 20 May:

Listen to the adversaries of *Pelléas*: you would think you were reading an article by Scudo or Oscar Comettant on *Tannhäuser*.⁹ And what about this? 'He abolishes melody; it's the vocal or instrumental discourse that preoccupies him, not the song.' Is this Debussy? No, Bizet. It's the critic of *Le Figaro* judging *Carmen* this way. And who, other than Debussy, can one reproach for his 'obscure harmonies' and the 'murky depths' of his inspiration? Why Mozart, in 1805.

Yet even with this defense of Debussy's musical choices, the debate continued.

Beyond the music, broader aesthetic issues and particularly the problem of music theater also created controversy. Most critics devoted the first one-third to one-half of their review to discussing the play. Symbolist writers applauded the work for its use of a drama based on sentiment and sensation, rather than on metaphysics or romance. Henri Ghéon called the opera "a dramatic event" and, in the July issue of the symbolist journal *L'Ermitage*, he devoted the fifth of his series on a renaissance in contemporary theater to an analysis of the work.

⁹In his *Le Goût musical en France* (Geneva, 1905), p. 327, Lionel de la Laurencie quotes these critics as blaming *Tannhäuser* for having a "formless melody, colorless and deafening, that condemns you to deadly boredom."

But those devoted to Wagner or Massenet complained bitterly. Paul Souday pointed out in *La Revue* that literary decadence was dead and buried, having been killed by boredom, and that in consequence Debussy's symbolist opera—also *mortellement ennuyeux*—was behind the times rather than ahead of them.

Perhaps the greatest divergence of opinion came in discussing the relationship between Maeterlinck's play and Debussy's music. Hallays defended the few cuts Debussy made in the original text, in an attempt to reassure and attract Maeterlinck fans, and considered the text responsible for inspiring many qualities of the music. Ghéon, Maclair, Mangeot, Imbert, and Bruneau, however, regretted Debussy's choice of libretto and would have wished for more cuts in the original play. The play was "too obscure, naive, and complicated," said Maclair, "too fragile and internal"; it is better read than staged. In general, the critics agreed that Debussy's music faithfully translated the poet's thought, but there was also considerable dissension about whether the text dominates or should dominate the music. The composer Dukas saw a perfect union between its music and words, whereas, ironically, it was such writers as Suarès and Maclair who thought Debussy had gone too far in following the text.

One could say a great deal more about the musical and aesthetic issues at stake in this opera. Vallas and other Debussy biographers have already explained various ways the music was heard and understood. But the manner in which the opera was perceived as music theater calls for more than a study of the reception of *Pelléas*, and indeed a discussion of the relationship of the opera to other symbolist theater at the time. In this paper, these matters will be taken up only as they play roles in the larger social-political context.

SOCIAL, MORAL, AND POLITICAL ISSUES

Behind the words used by the critics, particularly those writing for *ancien régime* or high society publications, lurk a number of social, moral, and political presuppositions. In the following, I shall examine four such issues raised by *Pelléas et Mélisande*: first, the use and purpose of opera, including the function of opera-going; second, the ability of text, music, and a

composer's lifestyle to affect the morality of the audience; third, the notion of opera as a place for confronting political differences and a political tool for lauding French music over German music; and fourth, the idea of artistic innovation as a model of either individual freedom or anarchy.

Social Issues. For many, the Opéra was of course first and foremost a meeting place, a place to see and be seen, as it had been for many years. For a certain social class, indeed—the wealthy opera subscribers—such an “institution of luxury, that luxury upholds, and that is made only for it”¹⁰ served as an important if nostalgic reminder of the days when the aristocracy flourished. By donning the right clothes and attending the opera, anyone, especially the *nouveaux riches*, could give the impression that they belonged to the upper classes. Octave Mirbeau, a writer who frequented the same circles as Debussy, wrote in 1885 that

The Opéra is an elegant meeting place for a certain social class that can pay 34,000 francs per year for the right to show up in tuxedos and strapless gowns three times a week, from ten to midnight, in one of the boxes. It is sort of a grand banal salon, divided into an infinity of small individual salons. . . . Consequently what one asks from it is not art but elegance, and luxury, and all the conveniences for holding fashionable receptions.¹¹

From this standpoint *Pelléas* was no different from any other opera. Three of the more enlightened wealthy ladies known to have attended its premiere were the Princesse de Polignac, the daughter of Isaac Singer who returned from Venice especially for the opening, Mme de Saint-Marceaux, and the Comtesse Greffulhe, Robert de Montesquiou's cousin and a great arts patroness who had supported the only performance of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1893. Such listeners occupied the main floor and the principal boxes. Attending *Pelléas* on 10 May, the writer Jules Renard perceived this public as “consisting of rich ladies who go only there or to the Opéra,” and he arrived at the same conclusion as Mirbeau: “It's a kind of

huge café where strapless gowns and diamonds and the deaf (who want to give the impression that they can hear) hold their *rendez-vous*.”¹²

At the turn of the century, the opera began to attract another type of elite, the snobs. In his *Chez les snobs* (1896), the novelist Pierre Veber derided snobs as those “who follow the latest fashion,” “who want to understand everything or at least seem to,” “*bourgeois-gentilhommes de l'esthétique*,” “who only esteem the rare and the precious.”¹³ Their attraction to a personality or an artist depended not on personal taste or critical sense, but on the prestige surrounding his work. For them, performances were meeting places where they hoped to be seen associated with the avant-garde.¹⁴

The notorious writer Jean Lorrain called the particular snobs who attended Debussy's opera *Pelléastres*, and he described them with considerable malice in a novel with that name. According to him and the critic Florencio Odero, many had been devotees of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre where Maeterlinck's play was given its premiere. Most were quite young and dressed very elegantly. These aesthetes—dandies who “loved their mothers,” “composed Greek verses,” and “were good musicians” together with their mistresses—“beautiful,” “useless,” “concerned about intellectuality,” and “scornful of the masses”—mixed with the socialites in the best seats in the house.¹⁵ Vuillermoz notes that Lorrain painted these musical snobs with his own vices, and that their fervor exasperated Debussy.¹⁶ Fernand Gregh says in his memoirs,

¹²Jules Renard, *Journal 1887–1910* (Paris, 1965), pp. 751, 760. Renard found *Pelléas* to be “un sombre ennui” (“a dismal bore”) (p. 751).

¹³Pierre Veber, *Chez les snobs* (Paris, 1896), pp. 9, 41. In her autobiography, *Earthly Paradise* (New York, 1966; trans. from various French sources), Colette names Veber as one of several ghost writers for her husband Willy.

¹⁴Emilien Carassus, *Le Snobisme et les lettres françaises de Paul Bourget à Marcel Proust 1884–1914* (Paris, 1966), pp. 38, 170.

¹⁵Jean Lorrain, *Pelléastres* (Paris, 1910; excerpts first published in *Le Journal*, 22 January 1904), pp. 24, 26, 28; Willy, *Maîtresses d'esthètes* (Paris, 1897), pp. 50–54.

¹⁶Vuillermoz, *Debussy*, p. 100. After reading the first installment of Lorrain's essay in *Le Journal*, Pierre Louÿs wrote Debussy that he could sue, but it would be preferable simply to ignore the writer (*Correspondence de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs*, ed. Henri Borgeaud [Paris, 1945], pp. 176–77).

¹⁰Octave Mirbeau, *Des Artistes*, 2nd series (Paris, 1924), p. 253.

¹¹Mirbeau, pp. 259–60.

however, that he and his literary friends were proud to be *Pelleâstres*.¹⁷

In reality, *Pelléas* did attract many writers, some of whom were snobs and others who were serious intellectuals, for ever since he had begun working on the opera in 1893, Debussy had built substantial support and interest in his opera among writers by frequently playing excerpts of it in various salons and literary circles—especially those of Pierre Louÿs, Mme de Saint-Marceaux, and the *Revue blanche*. When *Pelléas* finally opened, Debussy put pressure on these friends to come. “It is necessary for our friendship that you be there,” he wrote to Pierre Louÿs, and he urged Louÿs to bring along Lebey and Valéry. Louÿs agreed to bring five friends so that the group would “fill the ground floor box with applause.”¹⁸ Such writers as Paul Valéry, Henri de Regnier, André Lebey, Octave Mirbeau, Curnonsky, Jean-Paul Toulet, and Léon Blum were among this group.¹⁹

For both groups—the social and the intellectual elite, including their feigned members—the self-definition they sought in going to the opera depended on a certain kind of art. Only that which upheld tradition could reinforce the class identification the social snobs sought. Only the new and unknown, however, could fulfill the desires of the *chercheurs de l'inédit* (“seekers of the novel”), who rapidly became the “zealots of new aesthetic enterprises.”²⁰ And to the extent that some zealots (like the Wagnerians) became convinced of one aesthetic direction, they became intolerant of any other one. The critics were clearly aware of these underlying motivations in their readers and appealed to them directly in their reviews. To discourage their readers from attending, many of those who addressed the high society (such as Fourcaud and Bellaigue) placed emphasis on De-

bussy's rejection of traditions, while to lure their readers to the opera, those who wrote for libertarians and intellectuals (such as Bauër, Brussel, Corneau, Dukas, and Mauclair) stressed the composer's profound originality.

The kind of opera they defended also depended on what opera-goers considered the purpose of opera to be. Mirbeau writes that opera subscribers were satisfied and charmed with whatever was sung for them, that is, as long as they could see the latest fashions and admire beautiful women.²¹ In the Goncourts' journal, one gets this perspective from both the male and female points of view. Returning from a gala at the Opéra in 1893, Edmond de Goncourt shares his desire to see beautiful women there, but regrets that it was not sated:

A deception. Really this hall is not favorable for the exhibition of a woman's beauty. Those old lights at the back of the boxes kill everything, wipe everything out, especially the soft glow of the light-colored outfits and strapless gowns.²²

He also reports that the Comtesse Greffulhe, “who was quite charming in white,” was upset that evening that the large number of military uniforms attracted too much attention away from the women. Writing of her own experience at the opera in an essay she asks Goncourt to help her publish, the countess describes how the “great anonymous caress” of all the eyes that admire her there totally transforms her each night. “What a blood transfusion this communication with the eyes of the crowd gives me. How to live without it. . . .”²³

Of course, many opera-goers had more precise demands of the art form. One group sought entertainment through the music—romance, “melodic emotions,” as Debussy called them, and charm for the ear. With their beautiful melodies, Mozart, and more recently Massenet, pleased them the most, Wagner the least. Some critics who stressed the sensual qualities of Debussy's music thought that *Pelléas* should satisfy these listeners. Carraud ranked the composer with Mozart; Vincent D'Indy found the

¹⁷Fernand Gregh, *L'Âge d'or: Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* (Paris, 1947), p. 313.

¹⁸*Correspondance de Debussy et Louÿs*, ed. Borgeaud, p. 170.

¹⁹The building of this audience was discussed in a paper presented to the joint meeting of the Northern California and Pacific Southwest chapters of the American Musicological Society at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 27 April 1985 (forthcoming under the title, “Debussy and the Making of a Reputation”).

²⁰André Hallays, “De la mode en art et en littérature,” *Revue de Paris*, 1 May 1896, pp. 205–24.

²¹Mirbeau, p. 258.

²²Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire, 1891–1896*, vol. 4, ed. Robert Ricatte (Paris, 1956), p. 473.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 611.



The Snob

music comparable with Rossini's, though he also primly judged it inferior for seeking the "damnable pleasures" of sensualism.²⁴ The majority of those, however, who advocated this kind of opera—conservative musicians and many who favored the *ancien régime*—were quick to denounce *Pelléas* when it did not fulfill their fixed expectations. Corneau addressed them immediately in his review on 1 May:

You will look in vain in the 283 pages of this score for a piece to detach, a melody to extract. Well-loved romance flourishes nowhere. Characters do not declaim, and avoid singing. . . . It is uniquely the orchestra that has the task of expressing everything, or better, of making one feel everything.

In *Le Ménestrel*—a journal which, according to Goubault, was read by those who liked only Ambroise Thomas and Massenet and which was owned by the music publisher Heugel, a firm anti-Wagnerian—the reactionary critic Ar-

thur Pougin told his readers that *Pelléas* would leave them cold with boredom and, at most, would give them only "mediocre pleasure."

A second group argued that entertaining, often anecdotal music like Massenet's only existed for the purposes of the theater for which it was written, and that, like the stage itself, the seductions of this kind of music were momentary and incapable of penetrating the depths of one's soul.²⁵ This faction of the public came to the opera for a quasi-religious experience. In what some called "this century without faith," music became the new religion and the opera house, the temple of high art. The eminent Wagnerian Louis de Fourcaud explains, "What we aspire to is a really deep, human art, not continual effects of titillation which are fundamentally morbid."²⁶ After calling *Pelléas* "nihilist art," unable "to rouse any deep emotion in our hearts," he continues, "one cannot serve ideals without ideas, one cannot quench the thirst of

²⁴Émile Vuillermoz, *Gabriel Fauré*, trans. Kenneth Schapin (Philadelphia, 1969), pp. 34–35.

²⁵Robert Burnand, *Paris 1900* (Paris, 1951) p. 181.

²⁶Vallas, pp. 126–27.

souls with questionable pharmaceutical beverages."

In spite of this criticism, many *Pelléas* enthusiasts sought the same experience from listening to Debussy's opera as the Wagnerians sought from Wagner's. Lorrain, a staunch anti-Wagnerian, makes fun of how the snobs turned Debussy into the head of another religion. According to him, at each performance of *Pelléas* the Salle Favart took on the atmosphere of a sanctuary:

One only went there with solemn expressions on one's face. . . . After the preludes were listened to in a religious silence, in the corridors there were the initiates' greetings, the finger on their lips, the strange handshakes hastily exchanged in the dim light of the boxes, the faces of the crucified, and the eyes lost in another world.²⁷

Lorrain goes on to point out that while the Wagnerians came from all social classes and thus occupied seats throughout the theater, the *Pelléastres* were more elegant and sat principally in seats on the main floor and in the lower boxes.

A third group of opera-goers looked to Debussy's opera as a means of escaping their daily routines and of being transported into an enchanted world—the young. For them, the opera was a stimulus for dreaming. More than orchestral music which, for the symbolist poets, offered a similar experience—opening them to inner experiences they had heretofore never known and inspiring in them a sense of communion, a oneness in feeling—*Pelléas* captivated many young writers. As the twenty-five-year-old Jacques Rivière put it in 1911:

Pelléas was for us a certain forest and a certain region and a terrace overlooking a certain sea. There we escaped, knowing the secret door, and the world no longer meant anything to us.²⁸

The young musicians Vuillermoz and Koechlin

also considered the opera "an enchanted garden";²⁹ but, as their contemporary, the critic Marnold, clarified, they did not feel that the opera transported them "into an unreal sphere, into an external invented world, but rather into [their] own most profound depths." By attracting the young as well as the middle class, the opera expanded its appeal beyond the elite to new audiences during this period.

Moral Issues. Underlying these social issues, there are also a number of moral questions, raised particularly by the critics who wrote for the *haute bourgeoisie*, those who still believed in the *ancien régime*, and the conservative musicians. These critics included Bellaigue, Fourcaud, Imbert, Curzon, D'Harcourt, and Pougin.

At the dress rehearsal, the story and text itself presented problems, even though the story was a classic; many compared it to the love affair of Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini in Dante. The play *Francesca da Rimini* had been done just recently at the Sarah Bernhardt Theater.³⁰ Nonetheless, some were unwilling to drop the scurrilous title, *Péderaste et Médisante* ("Pederast and Slanderer"), that had been coined at the dress rehearsal,³¹ and others were so upset by the Yniold scene that the Undersecretary of State for Fine Arts forced Debussy to cut four measures before the opera opened, so as to expunge any reference to *Pelléas*'s and Mélisande's proximity to the bed. Given the period, this cut must have seemed pretty silly, yet the producer Albert Carré himself blamed the poor initial reception of the work on the text and he too advised modifying several scenes.³²

More important were the critics' attacks on Debussy himself and on his way of life. He was classed with the "decadents," a name once invented by journalists to describe adherents of a

²⁷Lorrain, *Pelléastres*, p. 25. In his second, pre-season review of the opera in the *Revue dorée* (August 1902), Vuillermoz directly contradicts Lorrain's description of audience response to *Pelléas*: "Debussy's music does not encourage foolish swooning, empty looks of ecstasy, and plaintive mutterings as easily as Wagner's. . . . The musical thought is too simple, too pure."

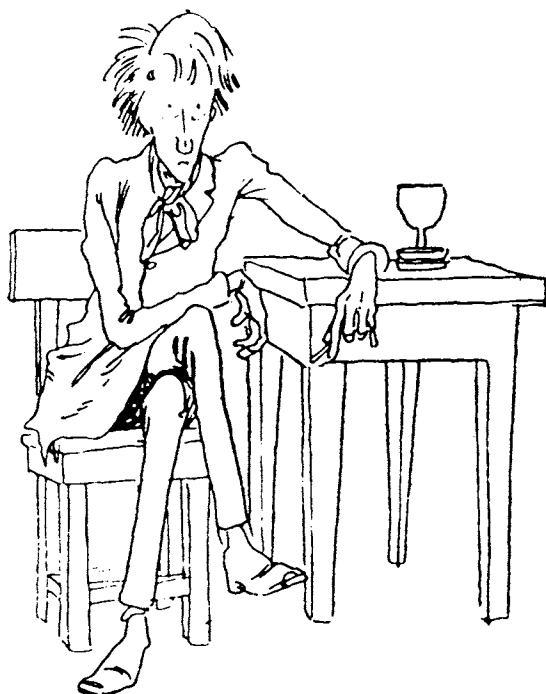
²⁸Jacques Rivière, *Études* (Paris, 1944), p. 127.

²⁹Vuillermoz, *Debussy*, p. 105; Koechlin, p. 86.

³⁰This story clearly was quite popular that year, for in the 15 April 1902 issue of the *Revue des deux mondes*, Téodor de Wyzewa reviews two other plays on the same subject: Stephen Phillip's *Paolo and Francesca*, which was playing in London at the time, and Gabriel d'Annunzio's *Francesca da Rimini*, which was playing in Milan.

³¹Pierre Lalo, *De Rameau à Ravel: Portraits et souvenirs* (Paris, 1947), p. 368.

³²Henri Busser, *De Pelléas aux Indes galantes* (Paris, 1955), p. 114.



The Decadent

literary movement—precursor to the symbolists—that flourished in the mid-1880s and is best represented by J. K. Huysmans's *A Rebours* ("Against the Grain"). Known for their invented words and concentration on ornamental detail at the expense of the shape of a whole work, the group was criticized for its extravagant writing style as well as for its life-style—dressing in the latest fashions, always lost in the clouds (or seemingly drugged), and smelling of perfumes. The press loved to caricature them. In his *Physiologies parisiennes*, Albert Millaud gives an amusing portrait of the decadent:

Son of the modernist, grandson of the idealist, nephew of the impassible, great-nephew of the Parnassian, . . . the decadent is a young man, very pale, skinny, and respected in certain literary *brasseries*. . . . He doesn't have any ideas; he doesn't want any. He likes words better. . . . When a word does not come to him, he invents it. It's up to the reader to understand and to put ideas under his words. The reader refuses to do so generally. From that comes the decadent's scorn for the reader.³³

³³Albert Millaud, *Physiologies parisiennes* (Paris, 1887), pp. 201–03.

In his review of *Pelléas* in one of the oldest newspapers in Paris, the *Gazette de France*, the archivist and musicologist Henri de Curzon cites Imbert's recent description of Debussy as "enigmatic and sensual, indolent and living his life as if in a kind of dream, attracted only by poets and prose writers of the avant-garde whose troubled and trembling works he uses for his musical creations." Curzon implies a connection between the apparent formlessness of Debussy's music and a life filled with smoke, if not drugs, when he compares it with the formlessness of contemporary painting and blames that on painters who "see through a fog, a smoke, and who ignore precise lines and colors." Brueneau, too, links Debussy's music with the decadent movement and finds the play's "fatality," "disinterested approach to life," and other decadent notions as "suited [Debussy's] temperament in the most exact way." Perhaps, as Lalo points out in a later review, this "suspicion of defects" in the composer's character developed from the displeasure that "people of taste" experienced at having to sit beside "certain degenerate aesthetes" during performances of *Pelléas*.³⁴ Not everyone, however, felt this way.³⁵

The ultimate attack on *Pelléas* was that the music, if listened to, would ruin one's character. Although he avoids almost all discussion of the music, Curzon reaches this conclusion first by noting that the characters in *Pelléas*, like Debussy, also "act as if in a vague stupor" and then by suggesting a connection between the listener's experience and that of the characters on stage. "As if moved by some external and supernatural forces, they live, and we live with them, in the unconscious and the mysterious depths," he remarks, bemoaning the repulsive "nihilism and negation of all faith, of all guide" which informs their actions. For Curzon, as well as D'Harcourt, Fourcaud, and Bellaigue, *Pelléas* was essentially *maladive* or unhealthy music, music "without life." Bellaigue claims that "after listening to it, one feels sick" and not unlike

³⁴Cited in Vuillermoz, *Debussy*, p. 104. According to Vuillermoz, Debussy took offense at this statement because he thought it implied that *Pelléas* was "music for riffraff."

³⁵In his review of *Pelléas*, addressed to the theatrical world, Robert Brussel leapt to Debussy's defense. To him, Debussy appeared to live a "modest life"—that of an "upright artist"—"far from newspapers and salons."

Pelléas himself, who sighs, "Nothing is left for me, if I continue in this way."

The powerful music critic Camille Bellaigue went the furthest in condemning the work on moral grounds. Writing for the *Revue des deux mondes*, perhaps the most important journal of the *haute bourgeoisie* and one which was known for having a moral authority, Bellaigue was himself from a family of the *haute bourgeoisie* and wielded considerable influence, having won a first prize in piano at the Conservatoire in 1878. In reviewing *Pelléas*, he builds credibility with the reader by referring to an episode from his youth when he knew Debussy as a fellow student in the piano class of Marmontel. The story is quite a nasty one: he says that the class laughed at Debussy while he played piano because he breathed heavily on every strong beat, but that now he clearly has been cured of this bad habit—all the beats in this music are weak ones. Then, after attacking the work on every possible musical ground and accusing Debussy of presiding over the "decomposition of our art," he addresses his readers, "distinguished, even superior men," and concludes:

We are dissolved by this music because it is in itself a form of dissolution. Existing as it does with the minimum of vitality, it tends to impair and destroy our existence. The germs it contains are not those of life and progress, but of decadence and death.³⁶

In a November 1901 article in the same journal, Bellaigue reveals what he would prefer to have in its place—"melodic opera," especially that of Mozart, for his operas "express or realize an ideal of life itself." He gives the characteristics of this ideal as simplicity, even familiarity, then peace, joy, and love, without violence or excess.³⁷ Sure enough, a light-hearted comic opera first performed only weeks after *Pelléas*, Arthur Coquard's *La Troupe Jolicœur*, met with Bellaigue's approval, even though he admitted it could have been "a little more profound and original."³⁸

³⁶ "Pelléas et Mélisande," *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 May 1902, p. 455; trans. in Vallas, p. 128.

³⁷ Camille Bellaigue, "Les Époques de la musique: l'opéra mélodique, Mozart," *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 November 1901, p. 904.

³⁸ In reviewing the opera for the *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 June 1902, pp. 920–21, Bellaigue praises *La Troupe Joli-*

One of *Pelléas*'s staunchest supporters, Louis Laloy, also raises the issue of morals. In his memoirs, he recalls a conversation he had with Jean Lorrain concerning the opera. Lorrain's first words were "I don't like the subject," to which Laloy responded, "Protestant!" According to Laloy, Lorrain's biting parody of *Pelléas* supporters in his novel *Pelléastres* was due to a protestant education that prevented him from understanding the moral import of the story:

I don't want to imply that a protestant is incapable of appreciating *Pelléas*. But all moral codes that treat human nature harshly and that, considering it evil by nature or since original sin, correct it only to constrict it to the commandments and to make it do penance, will necessarily be leery about an artwork so completely emancipated from any constraint and repentance. [He continues, reminding the reader that catholics, by contrary,] do not believe in predestination and, through the help of grace, can always hope for forgiveness for any sin.³⁹

Laloy goes on to explain that the moral message he finds in *Pelléas* is not that men and women should abandon themselves to their instincts, but rather try to preserve the state of innocence into which they were born. For him, "*Pelléas* teaches pardon."⁴⁰

Political Issues. In addition to these social and moral issues, many critics upheld or opposed the work for political reasons, some almost entirely so. Since the Opéra was considered by some to be an extension of the state—a meeting place for government officials and a salon for entertaining visiting dignitaries⁴¹—this intermingling of music and politics was to be expected.

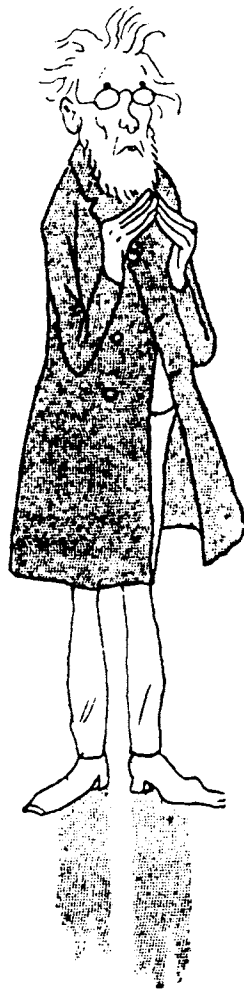
The most obvious and clear-cut of the political issues touching opera at the turn of the century was the question of nationalism—French

cœur's lack of excess together with the sincerity and delicacy of its expression, finds many "excellent things" in it, and considers it "worthy of esteem and sympathy." Bruneau, by contrast (in the same article as his review of *Pelléas*), found the Coquard comedy flawed by "inconsistent and insufficiently drawn characters, predictable *péripéties*, and easy sentimentality." The public seems to have concurred with the latter, for the work was performed only once.

³⁹ Laloy, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 112–13.

⁴¹ Mirbeau, pp. 259–61. In his *Paris 1900* (Paris, 1931), Paul Morand also calls the Opéra "a combination of government office, brothel, and political club" (p. 223).



The Man Who Listens to Wagner

music vs. German music (i.e., Wagner). Nationalism was a wild card that cut across other basic issues and caused unexpected realignments. The conflict began in the 1880s as the French concert halls, and eventually the opera houses, opened their doors to the German master, despite the fact that the Germans had recently taken Alsace and the French public increasingly resented the support of foreign music in their state-supported theaters. Violent riots protesting the performances of *Lohengrin* in Paris at the Eden Theater on 3 May 1887 and in front of the Opéra throughout the month of September 1891 were followed by numerous anti-Wagne-

rian manifestos and parodies in the press.⁴² The caricatures in such books as *Physiologies parisiennes* depicts "the man who listens to Wagner" as not only serious but also stark. Albert Millaud calls him generally "preoccupied and unhappy. One knows he is prey to a continual overexcitement. . . . He both delights and suffers at the same time—a blessing normally given to morphinism."⁴³

But these efforts to do away with Wagner had little long-lasting effect in face of the Wagnerians' campaigns. Catulle Mendès, for example, lectured on *Lohengrin* in all the provincial cities where the opera was performed—together with Raoul Pugno, Debussy even accompanied a lecture he gave at the Opéra in 1893 by playing excerpts from *Das Rheingold* (see the list below), and Louis de Fourcaud busily translated as many of the operas as possible into French.⁴⁴ The number of concert performances of Wagner's music in Paris grew steadily throughout the 1880s and 1890s, climaxing in the period 1897 to 1900. A decrease in their number in 1900 and 1901 only reflects the fact that entire Wagnerian operas began to be produced regularly in the opera houses. The following table gives the frequency that Wagnerian operas were performed at the Opéra in Paris from the last years of the century through 1902 (compare table 1):⁴⁵

<i>Lohengrin</i>	1891–1902	201 times
<i>Die Meistersinger</i>	1897–1902	65 times
<i>Tannhäuser</i>	1861; 1895–1902	116 times
<i>Die Walküre</i>	1893–96; 1898–1902	132 times
<i>Das Rheingold</i>	1893 (two pianos)	1 time
<i>Siegfried</i>	1901–02	20 times

Table 3

Even Edmond de Goncourt, who rarely concerned himself about music, objected to the Opéra playing Wagner four times a week in 1895.

⁴²See especially the exposition catalogue, *Wagner et la France*, ed. Martine Kahane and Nicole Wild (Paris, 1983).

⁴³Millaud, *Physiologies parisiennes*, pp. 267–68.

⁴⁴*Wagner et la France*, p. 165. The intellectual journal *L'Ermitage*, however, harshly criticized Fourcaud's translations of Wagner's libretti in its May 1902 issue (p. 190).

⁴⁵The information in this table has been culled from *Wagner et la France*, pp. 158–73.

"And there are sixty-five operas that await performances and will perhaps never be put on!" he points out in his journal.⁴⁶ On 31 December 1901, the heated confrontation between those advocating Wagner's music and those crying for more French music became lively again at the dress rehearsal for the first production of *Siegfried* and remained an undercurrent in critical writing throughout the spring of 1902, in preparation for the French premiere of *Götterdämmerung* on 17 May 1902.

To exacerbate the political situation, Wagnerism at the turn of the century became linked with the Dreyfus Affair and with anti-Semitism. Although Debussy claimed neutrality in the Affair, Debussy's supporters and friends were mostly pro-Dreyfus, which did not help the conflict with the Wagnerians; only Pierre Louÿs was passionately anti-Dreyfusard, according to René Peter.⁴⁷ Lorrain recognized many in the audience for *Pelléas* from productions at the Théâtre L'Œuvre which, according to its director Lugné-Poë, was a favored *rendez-vous* for the Dreyfusards.⁴⁸ The *Revue blanche*, for which Debussy and many of his friends wrote articles, including Regnier, Mirbeau, and Valéry, was another important center for Dreyfusard activity and in 1898 published an article protesting Dreyfus's imprisonment.⁴⁹

Critics who embraced *Pelléas* as an alternative to Wagner did not hide their motivation. Henri Bauër, a politically committed writer who was forced to leave the newspaper *L'Echo de Paris* for supporting the First International, backed Debussy in *Le Figaro*, a newspaper whose principal critic, D'Harcourt, had panned the work only four days earlier. Even though at the time of *Lohengrin*, Bauër had defended Wagner from the "absurd chauvinism" of his compatriots, in 1902 he objected to Wagnerians gaining control of the Opéra and impinging on other composers' freedom to have their works performed. "Finally someone who will liberate French music from Wagnerian oppression!" he

exclaimed. In a letter of 8 May 1902, Debussy thanked him for his strong words of support.⁵⁰

Pierre Lalo, the respected son of the composer Édouard Lalo and the critic for the most important paper in town, *Le Temps*, also saw *Pelléas* as strong encouragement for young composers "to emancipate themselves from the tyranny of the Wagnerian formula and to conceive and create with more freedom." Lalo goes so far as to say, "There is nothing or almost nothing of Wagner in *Pelléas*," and backs up this statement with a long list of elements that the work does not share with Wagner's music.⁵¹ Lalo's blatantly polemical essay reflects, in part, his personal feelings of gratitude for Debussy and Carré—Debussy had expressed so much enthusiasm for Édouard Lalo's ballet *Namouna*, which flopped in 1882, that he was almost thrown out of the Conservatoire; and in 1902 Carré put on a totally new production of his father's opera *Le Roi d'Ys* that Lalo and his mother found enchanting⁵²—but it also stems from the strongly nationalist feeling which pervaded his life. Throughout his memoirs, Lalo boasts of his French heritage, the fact that five generations of Lalos were military officers and that the family still possessed a commission appointing one of them captain, signed in 1709 by Louis XIV. The only music he praises, such as that of Fauré and Charpentier, is music that is "entirely our own." With *Pelléas*, Lalo felt Debussy "was serving in his own way the cause of France in the world."⁵³ The French composers Dukas and Koechlin also voiced nationalist cries at the time, complaining that little French music was being played in Paris,⁵⁴ and, together with Bruneau, hoped that Debussy's opera would "push the official Wagner imitators into the tomb."

⁵⁰Claude Debussy: *Lettres 1864–1981*, ed. François Lesure (Paris, 1980), p. 114.

⁵¹Scholars now know, of course, though few of Debussy's contemporaries would admit it, that the opera borrows many things from Wagner, and not just the music of the interludes. See Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London, 1979); and Carolyn Abbate, "Tristan in the Composition of *Pelléas*," this journal 5 (1981), 117–41.

⁵²Busser, p. 108.

⁵³References in this paragraph to Lalo's memoirs come from his *De Rameau à Ravel*, pp. 73, 365, and 371.

⁵⁴Koechlin, p. 58.

⁴⁶Goncourt, *Journal* 4, p. 837.

⁴⁷*Correspondance de Debussy et Louÿs*, ed. Borgeaud, p. 108.

⁴⁸Lugné-Poë, *La Parade; Le Sot du tremplin; Souvenirs et impressions de théâtre* (Paris, 1930), p. 18.

⁴⁹See A. B. Jackson, *La Revue blanche, 1889–1903* (Paris, 1960).

The boldness of Debussy's innovations likewise provoked a more general, but also latently political discussion between those who advocated following rules and those who valued freedom and individuality—in extreme terms, between conservatives and anarchists. Critics of the first persuasion included not only the traditionalists but also the Wagnerians, for whom Wagner had by now become *the* formula for music drama. D'Harcourt, Fourcaud, Bellaigue, and Pougin were convinced that Debussy followed no logic or reason and ignored the laws of the "holy trinity" (the musical elements). While harmony, by definition, involves both "order" and "hierarchy," Bellaigue found it in Debussy's music to be synonymous with "anarchy," "disorder," and "confusion": "chance seems to direct all movement"; "the notes merely repel and detest each other." Odero referred to the opera as "musical anarchy" and Pougin deemed Debussy the "head of the anarchists in music." To such accusations, Vuillermoz had a direct response:

So it is anarchy, is it? Maybe, but how beneficial, since [the music] attains a beauty right off the bat that the thick web of rules had never allowed it to achieve.

In calling Debussy's music anarchy, these critics were not far from wrong, given the broad definition of the term during this period. The anarchist movement preached not only political but also artistic freedom for the individual, it questioned accepted institutions of all kinds, and it criticized bourgeois hypocrisy. Its followers hoped that, through a series of cataclysmic changes, life would evolve to a more perfect state, and believed that art should show the possibility for change and create new ideals. Debussy was certainly receptive to these ideas. In the late 1890s, he even formalized such thoughts in a collaborative project with René Peter; their play, *Les Frères en art*, concerned a group of artists who sought to educate the public about the necessity of overthrowing bourgeois standards. In aesthetic terms, this meant rejecting rules and insisting on the sole authority of the creative mind—ideas remarkably close to those of the anarchists.

In imputing an association of Debussy with the anarchists, the critics were correct, but only

before the turn of the century when he frequented certain literary circles, not later when, as Michel Faure points out, Debussy's political orientation turned markedly to the right.⁵⁵ In the 1890s, many of Debussy's friends and supporters were active in the anarchist movement, mostly the same group who defended Dreyfus, and whom we have already named above in this connection. Regnier collaborated on the anarchist literary magazine, *L'Endehors*, and was considered one of its editors. He also edited *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, a symbolist review that was open to anarchist ideas. Maclair, although he was more concerned with the unhampered freedom of the artistic elite than the welfare of the masses, chose to end his novel about Mallarmé's circle, *Le Soleil des morts*, with an anarchist revolution that included the participation of the poets. Mirbeau's involvement with the anarchists is the topic of an entire book by Reg Carr.⁵⁶ Three of the journals most supportive of *Pelléas*—the *Revue blanche*, *Mercure de France*, and *L'Ermitage*—also sympathized with the anarchists and often reviewed articles from the anarchist and socialist press.⁵⁷ Bauër's defense of *Pelléas* for the sake of freedom of expression, and Brussel's point that Debussy represented no school and was the perfect example of a "personal composer," certainly must have attracted anarchist support to the opera.

Audience response to criticism of the opera also took on a political air. Debussy's supporters up in the top gallery called themselves a "sacred battalion."⁵⁸ Some of these included the composers Maurice Ravel, Paul Ladmirault, and Charles Koechlin; the future conductor D. E. Inghelbrecht; the poet Léon-Paul Fargue; the pianist Ricardo Viñes; the music critics Louis Laloy, Emile Vuillermoz, and M. D. Calvo-coressi; and the Abbé Léonce Petit. According to Vuillermoz, their principal organizer, these

⁵⁵Michel Faure, *Musique et société du second empire au années vingt* (Paris, 1985), pp. 75–82.

⁵⁶*Anarchism in France: The Case of Octave Mirbeau* (Montreal, 1977).

⁵⁷Eugenia W. Herbert, *The Artist and Social Reform: France and Belgium 1895–1898* (New York, 1961), pp. 96–100, 128.

⁵⁸The development of this audience is the subject of another paper, "A Sociology of the Apaches, 'Sacred Battalion' for *Pelléas*," first presented to the American Musicological Society in Philadelphia, 27 October 1984.

"mobilized troops" were needed "to assure the presence of police in the hall." But long after their demonstrations were said to have "frozen the opposition,"⁵⁹ this group continued to attend the opera for every one of the first thirty performances almost as a political act, as each of them attests in his memoirs. A young musician and friend of Vuillermoz, Édmond Maurat, went only three times, and was snubbed thereafter.⁶⁰ Political vocabulary permeates the supporters' descriptions of the resistance given to this *œuvre de combat*.⁶¹

The massive attention from the press that we have traced in this essay eventually succeeded in elevating Debussy to the status of a new god of music, a "French" music. But the continued controversy also turned *Debussysme* into music's Dreyfus Affair, as Vuillermoz attests in a later article that somewhat fatuously points to the similar initials of their names (Achille Debussy, Alfred Dreyfus).⁶² Different factions developed even among the Debussystes (Laloy, Maclair, Vuillermoz). As one of them admitted, "the struggle became so bitter that the object was forgotten."⁶³

In turn-of-the-century Paris, a scandal inevitably awaited any new masterpiece that demanded extensive public attention. "Toute vibration inconnue scandalise," as O'Divy wrote in his review of *Pelléas*. The complexity of values at the time made confrontation certain, and the number of critics on hand to represent each possible combination of social class, political preference, musical and aesthetic taste resulted in fierce competition. Because the critics for the most part either attacked *Pelléas* or embraced it depending on what they and their subscribers valued, Debussy's opera was seen to fulfill mutually exclusive purposes. It attracted both the snobs who came to be seen and the artists who

came to escape the world; it was held up as an example of the lowest morality, leading to humanity's dissolution, and the highest, teaching humanity grace; it was praised by both nationalists, who aimed to preserve tradition, and anarchists, who sought renewal. Likewise, the opera was panned for the same contradictory set of reasons, argued by members of the same groups. Even reviews addressed to similar readers, such as those by Bellaigue and Hallays, sometimes reached diametrically opposed conclusions.

What made the critics and their public sway one way or the other was often a complex issue. As discussed earlier and shown in table 2, the political orientation of the paper or journal, the social status of their readers, the perspective guiding the reader's interest in opera, and the critics' own principal profession, all played important roles in predisposing both the critic and the public toward either categorical opposition to the work or an openness toward it. Monarchists, aristocrats, *haute bourgeoisie*, anti-Dreyfusards, socialites, and the conservative musical public tended to feel threatened or antagonistic towards the opera, whereas republicans, businessmen, socialists, Dreyfusards, professional writers, art-lovers, and the progressive musical public tended to give the work a chance.

Any paper, reader, or critic, however, could belong to both one group resistant to the opera as well as a second group more receptive to it. This explains why a republican journal such as the *Revue des deux mondes*—otherwise sympathetic to new ideas—could publish a bitter attack of the opera, since its critic Bellaigue came from a high social class and had very conservative musical taste. Fervent devotion to another composer also kept some avant-garde enthusiasts, who otherwise should have needed no convincing, from fully embracing Debussy's opera. Whether they were Wagnerians or ferocious anti-Wagnerians—and the discussions invariably involved Wagner—a critic's attitude toward Wagner did not automatically imply either support or rejection of Debussy. Even though he was among the inner circle who helped introduce Wagner to the French public, Jullien had to admit that *Pelléas* pleased him. Others, such as Mendès and Willy, allowed their love for Wagner to color what they otherwise admired in Debussy's opera. Of the anti-

⁵⁹Paul Locard, "La Quinzaine," *Courrier musical*, 1 June 1902, p. 167.

⁶⁰Édmond Maurat, *Souvenirs musicaux et littéraires*, ed. Louis Roux (Saint-Étienne, 1977), p. 21.

⁶¹Critics and writers who used this expression include Paul Flat, Florencio Otero, René Peter, D. E. Inghelbrecht (in his *Mouvement contraire* [Paris, 1947], p. 275), Jacques Rivière, and Louis Laloy.

⁶²Émile Vuillermoz, "Une Tasse de thé," *Mercure musical*, 15 November 1905, p. 505.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 509.

Wagnerians, only Lalo embraced *Pelléas* as a work which might lead French musicians out of Wagner's grasp, while Pougin, Imbert and their public placed Debussy and Wagner in the same camp—neither satisfied their passion for traditional form and virtuoso singing.

One should not exaggerate the role that social and political issues played, for some critics

were clearly charmed or put off by the work for inherently musical reasons. But the number of extra-musical issues capable of affecting how a critic formulated his message was enormous; and that formulation, then as now, might well determine whether a work failed or succeeded. It is no wonder that Debussy's supporters felt they had to organize.

