

## PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE

Claude Debussy

**Act I.** Legendary times in the mythical land of Allemonde. In a forest, Golaud, a widower and grandson of King Arkel, has lost his way while hunting. By a fountain he discovers a frightened girl, Mélisande. She too is lost and cannot explain who she is. Since night is falling, she reluctantly consents to follow him.

In Arkel's castle, Geneviève reads the blind old monarch a letter Pelléas has received from Golaud, his half brother. Golaud has wed Mélisande and fears to return home, since Arkel wished to choose his bride. The old man, however, accepts the union. When Pelléas enters, asking leave to visit a dying friend, Arkel reminds him that his own father is seriously ill and persuades him to remain to greet Golaud's bride.

From a castle garden Geneviève shows Mélisande the lofty forests of Allemonde and the sea beyond. Pelléas joins them as distant sailors' cries signal the departure of Mélisande's ship. Geneviève entrusts the girl to his care.

Deep in the park, Pelléas leads Mélisande to a well. Fascinated by her reflection, she allows her long hair to get wet. Then, childishly playing with her wedding ring, she drops it into the water. Tremulously she wonders what to tell Golaud. "The truth," counsels Pelléas as they leave. Golaud lies in bed, tended by Mélisande. In the forest his horse bolted and threw him, he tells her, and for a moment he had the sensation of a great loss. As they talk, Mélisande suddenly begins to weep, saying she longs to leave the gloomy castle. Golaud, taking her hands to comfort her, notices the ring is missing. When she says she lost it in a grotto, he sends her after it, though she is afraid.

At the grotto entrance, Pelléas and Mélisande grope through the darkness so she will be able to describe the place to Golaud. As the moon appears, Mélisande is frightened by sleeping beggars and pleads to be taken away.

**Act II.** Mélisande, looking from her tower window, sings as she combs her hair. Pelléas approaches, and as she leans forward, her tresses fall over him. Pressing them to his face, he kisses them. Golaud breaks in upon the scene and chides them for playing like children. In the dim vault below the castle, Golaud leads Pelléas to a yawning abyss, where the youth gasps for air.

As they emerge, Pelléas cries out in relief. Golaud warns him that Mélisande is expecting a child. Beneath his wife's window, Golaud suspiciously questions Yniold, his little son by his first marriage, about Pelléas' attentions to Mélisande, but the boy can tell him nothing. When the window lights up, Golaud lifts the child to watch the couple, but Yniold sees nothing incriminating.

**Act III.** Pelléas finds Mélisande in one of the castle rooms and tells her he intends to leave the next day; agreeing to a final tryst at the fountain, they part. Mélisande returns with Arkel, who assures her that since Pelléas' father is recovering, the castle soon will be more cheerful. The old man is horrified when Golaud stalks in and, accusing Mélisande of infidelity, throws her to the ground. As Golaud rushes off, she sobs that he no longer loves her. Arkel says if he were God he would pity the hearts of men.

By the well, Yniold tries to lift a stone covering a ball he has lost. Distracted by sheep being led to slaughter, he leaves as night falls. Pelléas arrives, soon followed by Mélisande. Though afraid of being seen, they quietly declare their love. Mélisande spies someone in the shadows; the lovers desperately kiss. The enraged husband storms in, kills Pelléas with his sword and then pursues the fleeing Mélisande.

Arkel, the now remorseful Golaud and a Physician wait in the bedchamber where Mélisande, who has given birth prematurely, lies dying. She awakens with no recollection of violence and acknowledges no guilt in her love for Pelléas. Arkel and the Physician return with the baby, followed by serving women. Murmuring that she finds only sadness in her daughter's face, Mélisande quietly dies. Arkel leads the grieving Golaud from the room, observing that now it is the child's turn.