

Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* - A discographical survey
by Ralph Moore

Pelléas et Mélisande is a strange, haunting work, typical of the Symbolist movement in that it hints at truths, desires and aspirations just out of reach, yet allied to a longing for transcendence is a tragic, self-destructive element whereby everybody suffers and comes to grief or, as in the case of the lovers, even dies - yet frequent references to fate and Arkel's ascribing that doleful outcome to ineluctable destiny, rather than human weakness or failing, suggest that they are drawn, powerless, to destruction like moths to the flame. The central enigma of Mélisande's origin and identity is never revealed; that riddle is reflected in the wispy, amorphous property of the music itself, just as the text, adapted from Maeterlinck's play, is vague and allusive, rarely open or direct in its expression of the characters' velleities.

The opera was highly innovative and controversial, a gateway to a new style of modern music which discarded and re-invented operatic conventions in a manner which is still arresting and, for some, still unapproachable. It is a work full of light and shade, sunlit clearings in gloomy forest, foetid dungeons and sea-breezes skimming the battlements, sparkling fountains, sunsets and brooding storms - all vividly depicted in the score. Any francophone Francophile will delight in the nuances of the parlando text. There is no ensemble or choral element beyond the brief sailors' "Hoé! Hisse hoé!" offstage and only once do voices briefly intertwine, at the climax of the lovers' final duet. The atmosphere of the opera is dream-like, yet also deeply tender and human - and sometimes even raw and disturbing in its depiction of extreme emotional states, such as Golaud's brutal interrogation of his little son and crazed abuse of his wife. In one sense, the lovers are innocent and childlike; indeed, while their exchanges are deeply erotic, it is surely a mistake to overplay the sexual element as there is every indication that their mutual passion is never physically consummated beyond a kiss or two. Both Pelléas and Mélisande are naïve and otherworldly; indeed, Golaud frequently alludes to their childishness: "Vous êtes des enfants...Quels enfants!" and after he has killed his half-brother, he observes that, "Ils s'étaient embrassés comme des petits enfants...ils étaient frère et sœur..." (They kissed each other like little children...they were brother and sister). Like "brother and sister" perhaps, but they do not imitate Siegfried and Sieglinde by surrendering to carnal embrace, unless Golaud is in denial and we don't believe Mélisande when she says, "Nous n'avons pas été coupables" (We weren't guilty). I note that in some performances, when Golaud's forces Yniold to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande through the castle window, his question whether the lovers are "near the bed", is cut out - presumably once censored as too risqué? While it is possible to play Mélisande as a *femme fatale*, coquettish and even seductive, I think that interpretative choice is questionable; any hint of the vamp compromises her allure which is surely based on her unconscious charm and vulnerability. A preference for portraying her as a "sex-kitten" strikes me as a projection telling us more about the observer than what Debussy had in mind. On the other hand, Mélisande is arguably manipulative and decidedly deceitful, in the manner of a child who is too afraid to confess to any wrongdoing; amid other instances of being consciously or unconsciously, economical with the truth, she lies to Golaud about the loss of her wedding ring and to Pelléas in claiming that Golaud tried to kiss her on their first meeting. Is she perhaps a *rusalka*, a water-nymph, a succubus of legend, or a flesh-and-blood waif? She seems human, dying apparently as a consequence of child-birth, but her origins remain obscure and the air of the supernatural hangs about her.

Of particular interest to the modern listener, is the manner in which Maeterlinck depicts Mélisande as possibly fleeing one abusive relationship to become a victim of another, yet the penitent and uncomprehending Golaud begs and receives her forgiveness, and there is some implication that she herself is not without fault - which is not to suggest that she in any sense "deserves" her treatment. To return to the fatalistic theme, all three principal characters seem to some extent to become victims of fate - the final irony being that the tryst between the lovers precipitating Golaud's slaying of Pelléas is meant to be their final meeting, Pelléas having acknowledged that their relationship is illicit and declared his intention of avoiding further adulterous temptation by leaving for ever.

The ambiguity of the opera extends even to its voice-types; there is considerable flexibility of scope for casting, as Pelléas can be a tenor, a light, high baritone or indeed a baryton-Martin. Mélisande, too, may straddle two voice categories, requiring a peculiar combination of depth of tone with a silvery, childlike quality, hence a mezzo or a soprano may successfully sing it but only if they can bring that marriage of qualities to the role. Golaud can be sung by either a baritone or a bass-baritone and the child Yniold can be allocated to a boy treble or a soubrette-type of female soprano. What matters most – apart, obviously from their vocal quality – is the singers' ability to handle the French text; the first Mélisande in 1902, Mary Garden, was beautiful woman with a lovely voice, but she was mocked for her discernible Scottish accent. Either Francophone casts or linguistically very gifted and adept soloists are required – although I suppose Mélisande's singularity might be enhanced by a slight accent. The prose text was innovative and challenging, requiring the singers to reproduce natural speech rhythms, as Debussy allocates one note per syllable and employs no melismata, so the end product is something between recitative and cantilena; as such, he is a harbinger of Sprechstimme.

It is a surprisingly long opera – not far off three hours – but longueurs are avoided if it is adequately sung and acted, and appreciation of it is certainly enhanced if the listener has some acquaintance with the French, especially as the language of the text is relatively simple. Otherwise, surtitles in performance, or subtitles or a libretto for home listening, are essential. It is one of those works in which verbal and musical rhythms are so tightly entwined that it cannot possibly work well in translation. When he conducted a staging at La Scala in 1954, Karajan annoyed Toscanini by insisting that it be sung in French, but of course he was right and although I am normally at least try to be receptive to the idea of making an opera more accessible by translating it into the vernacular of any given audience, I refuse to countenance versions of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Italian, German or, God forbid, English – which rules out several including the 1981 ENO version conducted by Mark Elder on Chandos, well sung and played though it might be. For example, Mélisande's opening words – “Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas!” – simply cannot be adequately rendered in any form of English known to man; “Don't touch me!” doesn't work at all rhythmically and every alternative – from the archaic “Touch me not”, to the syllabically apt but risibly tin-eared and prosaic “Keep your hands off me” – instantly descends into bathos worse than “Your tiny hand is frozen”. (I would suggest “No! Leave me alone!” to maintain syllabic rigour, but it's a hopeless task.) Although the opera is undeniably “talky”, it is hardly devoid of action or incident: the scene in which Golaud hoists Yniold up to the window to spy on his wife and half-brother, his jealous assault on Mélisande and the rapturous love duet culminating in Golaud's slaying of Pelléas, all provide great drama and impact.

The emphasis upon verbal verisimilitude is emphasised by the through-composed nature of the music, innocent of set-pieces and arias. The paradox of *Pelléas et Mélisande* is that is endlessly melodic without any discrete melodies, apart from the one verse of a traditional ballad Mélisande sings as she combs her hair. The famous orchestral interludes were apparently hastily composed by Debussy to cover the time required for scene changes in the first production, but they do much to reinforce the opera's special ambience. Wagner's influence is musically apparent in Debussy's use of leitmotifs, daring chords, dense harmonisation and the continuous presence of the orchestra almost as another character – I hear such a lot of *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, the latter especially in the steady pace of the first orchestral transitional passage between Acts 1 and 2 – but the diaphanous orchestration of *Pelléas et Mélisande* is generally much lighter and, above all, more economical, than a typical Wagner opera, and while the medieval setting and love-triangle plot featuring two young lovers and an aging, authority-figure husband parallel *Tristan*, Debussy's characters seem wholly unable to articulate their *Angst*; apart from the occasional shocking outburst such as Golaud's brutal humiliation of Mélisande and the momentary ecstasy of the scene where she lets down her hair, they whisper their feelings, whereas *Tristan*, Isolde and Mark never stop telling us about it. There are no prolonged, grandiose, “operatic” gestures; for instance, the lovers only once declare their love in a brief, naturalistic exchange, yet those statements occur either side of a typically Symbolist metaphor:

Mélisande [à voix basse]: Je t'aime aussi...
Pelleas: Oh! qu'as-tu dit, Mélisande!
 Je ne l'ai presque pas entendu!
 On a brisé la glace avec des fers rougis!...
 ...Tu m'aime? tu m'aimes aussi?

Mélisande [in a low voice]: I love you too...
Pelleas: Oh! What did you say, Mélisande!
 I almost didn't hear it!
 The ice has been broken with red-hot irons!...
 ...You love me? You love me too?

(my translation)

I consider twenty-six recordings below. By and large they are remarkably successful, with scarcely a dud among them and too many fine versions to make one, definitive choice; almost all do honour to this most intimate and recording-friendly of operas. Events, settings and emotions are so vividly conjured up in the mind's eye by Debussy's diaphanous orchestration that almost nothing is lost to the armchair listener. The first ten recordings are mono and, regardless of their inferior sound, include some of the best versions ever made, being more authentically French than many more recent, "international" accounts. However, a first-class stereo account is obviously desirable, so I suggest that lovers of this opera supplement a modern recording with a vintage version. I have included the first two recordings of excerpts for both their historical interest and intrinsic aesthetic quality. As is my habit, for reasons of personal taste and limiting the survey to practicable length, I consider only audio recordings; like *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, if ever an opera lent itself to home listening it is *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

I also refer readers to [the extensive survey posted on MusicWeb by Jeffrey Sarver](#) back in 2007, which serves to complement my own.

The Recordings

Piero Coppola – 1927 (studio; mono - excerpts) Pearl; VAI
 Grand Orchestre Symphonique du Gramophone
 Pelléas: Charles Panzéra
 Mélisande: Yvonne Brothier
 Golaud: Jean-Émil Vanni-Marcoux
 Arkel: Willy Tubiana

Background hiss apart, the sound of this earliest recording is remarkably fine for something set down so long ago; the orchestra is surprisingly present and the three voices here are absolutely beautiful: as clean, clear and fresh as the water of the well into which Mélisande drops her ring. The ease, delicacy and naturalness of the singing and playing here set standards to which every subsequent recording must aspire. Coppola conducts with more drive and thrust than Truc; he is perhaps marginally more "Italianate" approach but that is not in the least stylistically inappropriate. This is the Ur-text of recordings, made less than a decade after Debussy's death, and as such we may trust its authenticity; every devotee of this masterwork should at least hear it.

Georges Truc – 1928 (studio; mono - excerpts) VAI; Pearl
 Orchestra of l'Opéra
 Pelléas: Alfred Maguenat
 Mélisande: Marthe Nespoulous
 Golaud: Hector Dufranne
 Arkel: Armand Narçon
 Yniold: unknown
 Geneviève: Claire Croiza

This consists of five scenes totalling 41 minutes without much overlap of content with the Coppola recordings, so if you have both you will have nearly half the opera, giving a fairly extensive idea of how

artists who were coached by the composer - or were at least very close to those who were - performed the music. Truc sustains a shimmering intensity to his delivery of the score but nothing is forced or underlined. Armand Narçon gives us a grave, steady Arkel, Belgian bass-baritone Hector Dufranne, who had created the role of Golaud and went on to sing it 120 times, demonstrates that his resonant, unforced voice has retained its quality over the quarter century since the premiere and Nespoulous recreates a Mélisande very similar in timbre to that of Brothier: light, girlish and plangent. Claire Croiza's diction alone is a thing of wonder but she also brings a fine voice to her Geneviève. Alfred Maguenat's Pelléas is very direct and boyish, more tenorial than Panzéra even though he sang true baritone roles, and wonderfully passionate in the scene where he caresses Mélisande's tresses. If you love this opera you will want to hear both this and the Coppola recordings – and you can sample them on YouTube, too.

Roger Désormière – 1941 (studio; mono) EMI; Pristine; Membran; Opera d'Oro
 Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire Paris
 Pelléas: Jacques Jansen
 Mélisande: Irène Joachim
 Golaud: Henry Etchéverry
 Arkel: Paul Cabanel
 Yniold: Leila Ben Sedira
 Geneviève: Germaine Cernay
 A shepherd: Émile Rousseau
 A doctor: Armand Narçon

The XR Audio re-mastering by Pristine Audio of this first complete recording offers the best possible sound of a recording which was already extraordinarily good for 78's pressed in 1941. It was transferred to LPs using original metal masters, so any subsequent CD issues sound excellent, but Pristine has also corrected swish, reduced hiss and enhanced frequencies in the orchestral playing which was always necessarily quite recessed compared with the very forward voices. Note, too, that, like Pristine, Opera d'Oro offers it on two discs whereas with Membran it is on three - but both are still at a bargain price.

The best and most obvious competition to this classic set is the BBC radio broadcast conducted by Inghelbrecht from ten years later. Both recordings are utterly compelling and authentic, with largely francophone casts led by conductors utterly immersed the requisite idiom, and I am hard pushed to choose between them so my remarks must be prefaced by an acknowledgement that that both are as near perfect as we expect any vintage recording to be. Obviously the electronic mono sound from 1951 has the edge but the listener is hardly aware of any deficiency in this recording made in Nazi-occupied Paris for 'La voix de son maître'.

Both field typically old-fashioned-French sounding bands with grainy sound, bringing a flickering sensibility to sketching in Debussy's filigree melodic lines and fleeting harmonic structures. Both lead sopranos are convincingly waif-like, though there is just a touch more acidity in Irène Joachim's soprano than with Danco. Both "barytons-Martin" are superb: Jacques Jansen, a student of Charles Panzéra, has extra ease at the top of his voice but does not quite convey the naïveté that Camille Maurane suggests is Pelléas' downfall. Nor is the sweet, fluttery-voiced Yniold of Leila Ben Sedira quite as successful at depicting a convincing child; she sounds too lady-like compared with the extraordinarily successful assumption of Marjorie Westbury for Inghelbrecht. On the other hand, Henri Etchéverry's intense Golaud benefits from his being ten years younger; he has more sap in his voice. Finally, I do not think that conductor Roger Désormière quite matches Inghelbrecht in generating chilling tension at climactic moments such as the dungeon scene, or when the lovers are being spied on by Golaud via Yniold, or the murder of Pelléas, but that may be because the sound here is less atmospheric than the broadcast.

At all events, the differences between these two classic recordings are very slight and every lover of this unique opera will want to own one or even both.

Emil Cooper – 1945 (live; mono) Naxos
Metropolitan Opera orchestra and chorus
Pelléas: Martial Singher
Mélisande: Bidu Sayao
Golaud: Lawrence Tibbett
Arkel: Alexander Kipnis
Yniold: Lillian Raimondi
Geneviève: Margaret Harshaw
A shepherd/A doctor: Lorenzo Alvary

The first voice we hear are the inimitable tones of the great Lawrence Tibbett – and indeed this a splendid cast, although he is audibly no longer quite in his absolute prime, nor is he completely at home in French. This performance as a whole is conducted in rather brisk, no-nonsense fashion by a conductor with whom I am not familiar. This Golaud sounds as if he is sternly cross-examining Mélisande and she is denying the charges. Despite having a beautiful, suitably pure and child-like voice, Bidu Sayao, too, sometimes seems rather overt and assertive as Mélisande; the whole thing strikes me as rather brash New World, without that essentially diaphanous, Gallic quality the music demands. Working to combat that impression is the very French and refined Pelléas of Martial Singher, whose light, aristocratic baritone is ideal. Margaret Harshaw makes a lovely, sympathetic Geneviève and sings good French; Kipnis is in many ways vocally ideally equipped for portraying the aged Arkel but his tone and French are Slavonic. The Yniold is not convincing and her French is poor. The sound -scratchy, hissy and plagued by swishes, clicks and coughs - will be appreciated only by those hardened to vintage sonics; there is little point in recommending this when the competition is so strong.

Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht – 1951 (live radio broadcast; mono) Testament
Philharmonia Orchestra; BBC Singers
Pelléas: Camille Maurane
Mélisande: Suzanne Danco
Golaud: Henry Etchéverry
Arkel: André Vessières
Yniold: Marjorie Westbury
Geneviève: Oda Slobodskaya
A shepherd/A doctor: Ernest Frank

Debussy's friend and champion Inghelbrecht was piqued that he was not invited to conduct the 1941 studio recording made in Occupied France; that was instead conducted by Roger Désormière and has since become an established classic.

However, Inghelbrecht, too, has the full measure of the work and he is served by a matchless cast. I say "matchless" but almost every recording is blessed by a peerless roster of singers: sopranos who are the direct heirs of Mary Garden, the original Mélisande, with voices which are delicate, vulnerable and crystalline. Suzanne Danco is ideal as the fey, hapless heroine. No less admirable is the perfect baryton-Martin Camille Maurane, whose light, flexible voice is effortlessly suggestive of youthful passion and the element of immaturity which is part of Pelléas' psychomachia, as he struggles weakly against his illicit amour.

At 51 years old, elegant bass-baritone Henri-Bertrand Etchéverry - the same Golaud as in Désormière's recording but ten years on - is something of a veteran but the occasional relative weakness in his high notes is by no means inapt as it conveys the age gap between him, his teenage bride and younger brother. André Vessières is a beautiful, but too youthful Arkel; he certainly doesn't sound like the half-

brothers' grandfather. Special praise must go the really touching and convincing Yniold by soprano Marjorie Westbury - especially as she was British; the rest of the cast is equally fine.

This does not displace the Désormière but we are lucky to have it in such excellent sound, being a broadcast on the BBC Third Programme from 1951. Another bonus is the presence of Walter Legge's own Philharmonia, stuffed with virtuosi instrumentalists and playing like a dream. There is the odd cough but it is hardly distinguishable from a studio recording and serves as a fitting tribute to a great Debussy conductor. His live, stereo, 1962 performance is also very good, but there the audience coughing is obtrusive, the cast not quite as enchanting and the atmosphere somewhat less ethereal than we have here. There is some slight hiss here but the sound is eminently enjoyable; good as it is, however, some might prefer Pristine Audio's issue of the Désormière recording.

Ernest Ansermet – 1951 (studio; mono) Decca

Chœurs et Orchestre de la Suisse Romande

Pelléas: Pierre Mollet

Mélisande: Suzanne Danco

Golaud: Heinz Rehfuß

Arkel: André Vessières

Yniold: Flore Wend

Geneviève: Hélène Bouvier

A shepherd/A doctor: Derrik Olsen

This is the first of two studio recordings made by Ansermet; there is no doubt that he had an affinity with the score and the francophone cast and astringent woodwind of the OSR add to the impression of authenticity. The combination of elegant Swiss baritone Heinz Rehfuß and the equally cool, clear tones of the Belgian soprano Suzanne Danco in the opening scene is ideal; their delivery of the text is intense but unexaggerated, surely as Debussy intended. Danco in many ways has the ideal voice, too, and I really do think that Rehfuß has the most attractive voice of all the singers I have heard undertake Golaud. He sings a more sympathetic, vulnerable Golaud than some, which intensifies the pathos of his penitence. Mezzo Hélène Bouvier, today remembered mostly today for her superb recording of *Samson et Dalila* with José Luccioni, makes a lovely Geneviève and André Vessières is a smooth, resonant bass falls so gratefully on the ear but is far too youthful-sounding Arkel. Canadian Pierre Mollet has a rather plaintive timbre, at first not really suggestive of youthful vigour and usually I prefer a marginally more virile-sounding Pelléas, but he is clearly master of the style and is especially fine in the hair-caressing scene, where he finds more body in his tone and wins me over. It's a pity that such a fine cast is compromised by, once again, too feminine a voice as Yniold; Flore Wend does not sound the least like a little boy. In the two bass comprimario roles, Derrik Olsen is not a singer known to me, but he has a beautiful, sonorous voice very reminiscent of George London. Time and again, I relish the subtleties of Ansermet's conducting; nothing is forced or over-stated and he has complete command of the ebb and flow of the score and the orchestral interludes become highlights.

Despite the incidental flaws in the casting of two of the secondary roles, this is highly recommendable.

Jean Fournet – 1953 (studio; mono) Cantus Classics

Orchestre Lamoureux

Chorale Élisabeth Brasseur

Pelléas: Camille Maurane

Mélisande: Janine Micheau

Golaud: Michel Roux

Arkel: Xavier Depraz

Yniold: Annick Simon

Geneviève: Rita Gorr

A shepherd/A doctor: Marcel Vigneron

Here is another entirely French recording in first-class studio mono - so good that one hardly notices the slight sonic restriction. Fournet is a wonderful conductor, urging his very French orchestra, with their nasal woodwind timbre, to play passionately and expressively, especially in the orchestral interludes, which swell, sigh, surge and fade to depict the swift succession of emotions and the endless interplay of light and shade which characterise this opera. The scene in which Golaud forces his little son Yniold to spy on his wife and brother is riveting and terrifying, and the pacing of this swiftly moving work is faultless.

The cast consists of wholly of French-speaking artists, so all the singers have crystalline diction and anyone with a little French will be able to follow virtually everything without a libretto; furthermore, they sing wonderfully, even if the velvet-voiced bass Xavier Depraz who sings Arkel, really sounds too young and virile to portray the elderly king. Similarly, some might find Janine Micheau too sophisticated to impersonate the fey and innocent Mélisande, but she sings beautifully. Michel Roux has the perfect voice for Golaud and Camille Maurane reprises a famous and favourite role, his light, flexible baryton-Martin sounding passionate yet naive. Annik Simon is touching as Yniold and to cap a great line-up, we have the young Belgian Rita Gorr - whose mother-tongue was Flemish but she was bilingual - successfully lightening her big, vibrant mezzo to play the brothers' mother, Geneviève. If it were not for the fact that one or two other mono, studio recordings are even more aptly and seductively cast, this would be the prime recommendation in its bracket.

Herbert von Karajan – 1954 (studio; mono) Walhall; Hunt; Arkadia; Urania

RAI Orchestra Sinfonica and Coro di Roma

Pelléas: Ernst Haefliger

Mélisande: Elisabeth Schwarzkopf

Golaud: Michel Roux

Arkel: Mario Petri

Yniold: Graziella Sciutti

Geneviève: Christiane Gayraud

A shepherd/A doctor: Franco Calabrese

A German conductor, with two German-speaking principals, and an Italian orchestra and three Italian supporting singers doesn't sound like the ideal recipe for this most Gallic of operas but Karajan's affinity with French music was already established and despite the relatively shallow mono sound, right from the start you can clearly hear his ability to mould and shade the music so expressively, vividly bringing out its colours and textures. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf was intensively coached in the language for her performances of *Mélisande* at La Scala under de Sabata, such that her encounters with the very authentically French Michel Roux unfold naturalistically, but about her performance, I am in two minds. There is perhaps too knowing and sophisticated a quality in her shimmering, occasionally tremulous, soprano to capture that essential otherworldly quality we hear in the assumptions of the most affecting *Mélisandes* but her verbal acuity and nuance are admirable. Christiane Gayraud contributes a gentle, compassionate Geneviève and Mario Petri a grave, rather dull, low-key Arkel. Ernst Haefliger has a lovely, light lyric tenor but he doesn't sound especially French and the brightness of his sound means that I miss some of the heft and variety of timbre brought to the role by singers whose tessitura straddles two vocal categories. Graziella Sciutti sings sweetly and prettily in excellent French but, as is so often the case in the tricky casting of this role, is not especially convincing as a little boy. Nonetheless, she is at her best in the big scene with the increasingly frantic Golaud, so intensely and biting sung by Roux, which is gripping, as it should be.

Ultimately, you would not mistake it for "the real thing", and in the last analysis I default to truly French versions, rather than an expertly and cunningly contrived facsimile such as this, good as it is.

André Cluytens – 1956 (studio; mono) EMI; Testament

Chœur et Orchestre National de France

Pelléas: Jacques Jansen

Mélisande: Victoria de los Ángeles

Golaud: Gérard Souzay

Arkel: Pierre Froumenty

Yniold: Françoise Ogéas

Geneviève: Jeannine Collard

A shepherd/A doctor: Jean Vieuille

I know of nothing conducted by Cluytens that isn't superlative. A Belgian francophone who was Music Director at the Opéra Comique, he was fully immersed in the requisite performing traditions and he has a wonderful cast here, recorded in mono sound so good that you could almost mistake it for early, narrow stereo. I wish, however, that the offstage sailors' chorus were more atmospherically distanced and that the echo-chamber effect in the dungeon scene in Act 3 were subtler; it obscures the voices. Mélisande was one of de los Angeles' favourite roles as it suited her warm, sweet, somewhat "short" soprano (top notes never came easily to her). She lacks something of the fey, waif-like quality I prefer but she undoubtedly presents a consistent, credible character. Souzay was of course a *mélodie* and *Lied* specialist, so brings great verbal acuity to his delivery of the text as well as a beautiful voice – he is yet another of so many excellent, idiomatic singers of Golaud that you cannot choose one amongst them as best. Jansen was for many years the most admired interpreter of the role of Pelléas, hence we have three recording here spanning two decades, this being the one in the middle.

The big difference and perhaps most controversial feature of Cluytens' reading compared with say, Désormière's, is that he is considerably more red-blooded and overtly dramatic, which for some might diminish the airy, delicate sound usually associated with this opera. The same is true of Jansens, whose voice is now darker and grainier than for Désormière, mitigating Pelléas' somewhat androgynous vulnerability and making him rather too assertive. Neither the Arkel nor the Geneviève is quite as smooth or impressive as the very best, and as usual, the soprano Yniold completely fails to convince as a child, sounding too sophisticated. As much as I esteem this recording, Souzay's Golaud apart, I do not think it rivals the very finest in any department.

Jean Morel – 1960 (live radio broadcast; mono) Walhall

Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Pelléas: Theodor Uppman

Mélisande: Victoria de los Ángeles

Golaud: George London

Arkel: Giorgio Tozzi

Yniold: Mildred Allen

Geneviève: Regina Resnik

A shepherd/A doctor: Clifford Harvuot

Whatever the merits of this live performance, the crumbly, over-reverberant mono sound with some radio interference is no recommendation, and you may hear two of the three principals in considerably better sound in studio recordings four years before (de los Ángeles) and after (London). Jean Morel's conducting lacks tension and momentum to my ears. Just as George London has a strong bass timbre which makes him seem brutal in comparison with the more pained and sensitive exponents of the role such as Roux or Souzay, Theodor Uppman as Pelléas has a much darker, very baritone sound which doesn't really complement the airiness of his music or the boyishness of his personality. All the voices here are very fine, but nobody here is French, so that special, Gallic refinement in the declamation is absent. The whole thing is a bit earthbound, in fact; it is not a first choice by any measure.

Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht – 1962 (live; stereo) Montaigne Auvidis

Chorale Lyrique de la RTF; Orchestre National de la RTF

Pelléas: Jacques Jansen

Mélisande: Micheline Grancher

Golaud: Michel Roux

Arkel: André Vessières

Yniold: Françoise Ogéas

Geneviève: Solange Michel

A shepherd/A doctor: Marcel Vigneron

In surprisingly good stereo sound, despite a bit of coughing throughout, with a top, all-French cast this has much to recommend it. Inghelbrecht weaves magic and the Parisian radio orchestra plays beautifully. Jansen and Roux repeat their familiar, wholly attractive and reliable depictions of Pelléas and Golaud respectively, but neither is immune from some vocal deterioration: both are decidedly throatier and less resonant than in recordings made when they were younger – Jansen was the Pelléas in Désormière's classic studio recording over twenty years earlier - and there are signs of strain at volume. Micheline Grancher has rather too heavy a sound without the purity of tone to be entirely convincing as my idea of Mélisande; she is for me the comparative weakness here. Solange Michel is a warm, vibrant, full-voiced Geneviève with pellucid diction and André Vessières, who sang Arkel over a decade earlier for both Inghelbrecht and Ansermet (see above), once again brings his lovely bass to the role and still sounds too sprightly but gives great pleasure by dint of his even tone and fine legato. Françoise Ogéas is no more successful as Yniold here than she was for Cluytens six years earlier. However, it is the orchestral playing and conducting above all which marks this out for me as special, even if, for reasons of the singing, I could not make it a first-choice recording.

Ernest Ansermet – 1964 (studio; stereo) Decca

Gran Théâtre Chor Genf; Orchestre de la Suisse Romande

Pelléas: Camille Maurane

Mélisande: Erna Spoorenberg

Golaud: George London

Arkel: Guus Hoekman

Yniold: Rosine Brédy

Geneviève: Josephine Veasey

A shepherd: Gregore Kubrack

A doctor: John Shirley-Quirk

Ansermet's second studio recording has the advantage of stereo sound and very characterful singers, starting with George London's big, beautiful resonant bass-baritone – but whether you want a Wotan voice, no matter how sensitively deployed, as Golaud, is a matter of taste. London makes Golaud sound very assertive and potentially dangerous but he sings in good French - he was an excellent linguist - and his approach suits Ansermet's pacy, direct interpretation of the score – and contrasts vividly with Spoorenberg's shimmering, tremulous Mélisande; her vocal quality frequently reminds me of Ileana Cotrubas, with whom she shares the ability to suggest pathos and vulnerability, combined with the purity of the soprano of compatriot Elly Ameling. Ansermet has a wonderfully direct way of imparting a crystalline clarity to Debussy's orchestration and his own orchestra, too, is not in the least reticent: the woodwind are grainy and astringent, there is some rasp and rawness in the strings and nothing is wispy or floaty.

What lovely voices Ansermet assembled here. Gus Hoekman makes a perfect Arkel, sounding elderly and hieratic without compromising his rich, velvety bass tone and I always revel in the peculiarly plaintive, individual timbre of Josephine Veasey's dusky mezzo-soprano. Camille Maurane is as apt and fine here as he was for Inghelbrecht and Fournet previously, in many ways the ideal incarnation of Pelléas. Casting the role of Yniold is always tricky; credible portrayals are less common than

unconvincing approximations and frankly, I find Rosine Brédy's squeaky effort here faintly ridiculous and irritating – a pity.

The sound is full and detailed, typical of Decca's Sonicstage productions of the era, incorporating stage effects such as some atmospheric reverberation for the castle dungeon scene.

Good as this is, the controversial casting of Golaud and Yniold leads me to express great admiration for it but not recommend it as first choice.

Lorin Maazel – 1969 (live; stereo) GOP

Coro e Orchestra Sinfonica di Roma della RAI

Pelléas: Henri Gui

Mélisande: Jeannette Pilou

Golaud: Gabriel Bacquier

Arkel: Nicola Zaccaria

Yniold: Adriana Martino

Geneviève: Anna Reynolds

A shepherd/A doctor: Teodoro Rovetta

The main problem here is that Maazel does not seem to be able to conjure up from his Italian orchestra that gossamer texture which is so prevalent in truly authentic French versions; often the playing is slack and ponderous. Indeed, this begins in a heavy-handed manner, with little sense of mystery and the lack of nuance or delicacy in the orchestral playing militates against the subtlety of the three principal French artists' singing. Bacquier in particular is in lovely voice; he will successfully repeat his Golaud for Baudo in the 1979 studio recording but he is fresher here. I had not previously heard Jeanette Pilou although I was aware that she had considerable success at the Met partnering Corelli in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*; she seems vocally perfect as a lighter, soprano Mélisande. Henri Gui has a light, nasal, rather anonymous baryton-Martin with a thin top but nonetheless suited to portraying a shy, but ardent Pelléas; he also sang the role in Vienna for Karajan. The casting of a mature soprano as Yniold results in the usual failure in the attempt to persuade us to suspend disbelief. Anna Reynolds is competent but rather bland as Geneviève and that most versatile of basses, Nicola Zaccaria sings beautifully without making much impact dramatically; in fact, everyone here except Bacquier provides rather under-stated characterisation.

The stereo sound here is a bit crumbly but acceptable for a live recording, and at times the voices recede. I would be happier with it if Maazel had more feeling for the idiom.

Jean-Marie Auberson – 1969 (live; stereo) Claves

Orchestre de la Suisse Romande; Chor du Grand Théâtre de Genève

Pelléas: Éric Tappy

Mélisande: Erna Spoorenberg

Golaud: Gérard Souzay

Arkel: Victor de Narké

Yniold: Anne-Marie Blanzat

Geneviève: Arlette Chédel

A shepherd/A doctor: Gregor Koubrak

This enjoys extraordinarily clear, full and immediate sound for a fifty-year-old recording and has the advantage of a francophone cast, including three leading exponents of the principal roles. Souzay contributed an excellent Golaud to Cluytens' studio recording and Spoorenberg likewise recorded a lovely Mélisande for Ansermet in his in 1964; they repeat their excellent assumptions here. I like Éric Tappy's vivid, virile Pelléas; he makes a change from the pallid, effete young men we usually hear, although his youthful tenor can turn hard-toned under pressure. Anne-Marie Blanzat makes a pleasing,

fruity-voiced Geneviève, reminiscent of Huguette Tourangeau, and Victor de Narké is similarly dark and grave, not sounding too young. Unfortunately, as is so often the case, the soprano singing Yniold does not sound the least like a child, but she sings well enough. Everyone involved has pellucid diction and sings to the Gallic manner born. Auberson conducts very much in the direct Ansermet manner, which is hardly surprising as he is conducting the then recently departed Ansermet's orchestra - but he avoids the prosaic quality which infects Maazel's direction; this is a fresh, light reading, rippling with instrumental colour. Audience noise is minimal and although the voices are nearly always well forward, the balance between them and the orchestra is fine.

This was an unexpected bonus to emerge as a result of my doing this survey; there is always at least one unforeseen hit. (Incidentally, this received an unaccountably withering and mean-spirited review in 'Gramophone' by critic Roger Nichols, entitled, "A workaday live recording of Debussy's masterpiece sadly lacking throughout". He damned virtually every aspect of it, complaining of stage noise, poor singing, inaudible woodwind and "many a late entry and missing nuance." OK; there is the occasional slip but the singing is lovely and the extraneous noise negligible; it is, after all, a live recording and it is hard to believe that Ansermet's own orchestra simply fell apart a mere month after his demise, having been trained and rehearsed by him for fifty years. Evidently somebody needed a hug...)

Pierre Boulez – 1970 (studio; stereo) EMI

Royal Opera House orchestra and chorus

Pelléas: George Shirley

Mélisande: Elisabeth Söderström

Golaud: Donald McIntyre

Arkel: David Ward

Yniold: Anthony Britten

Geneviève: Yvonne Minton

A shepherd/A doctor: Dennis Wicks

Although the cast here does not include one native French speaker, Boulez himself was both francophone and immersed in the French style, which helped to ensure that his singers were a great deal more than passably competent in the language and idiom. This recording stresses the quality of translucence but his clean lines and flowing direction do not preclude his embracing the voluptuousness of the key emotive moments; instead of being cold and brusque, as he is sometimes accused of being, he treats the score like Richard Strauss then returns to forensic clarity.

His cast is inevitably not wholly idiomatic but all are excellent: Söderström has the right pure, ethereal, tremulous quality; the dark, smoky timbre of Shirley's tenor is very attractive and his French is first class; McIntyre is in superb voice even if he is rather too sonorous and heroic in the Wotan mode to rival, say José van Dam, but he is suitably anguished and confused; Yvonne Minton's firm, rounded mezzo is ideal as Geneviève and David Ward's grave, noble bass embodies the gentle personality of the blind old king Arkel. I have no idea why the treble, Anthony Britten, who makes a really touching Yniold and sings in unimpeachable French, is credited as a countertenor but he's perfect in the role.

The Royal Opera House choir and orchestra sing and play respectively really beautifully. The sound is first rate. This one may be heartily recommended even if there are more "Gallic" versions (Baudo, Désormière, Inghelbrecht) and even more sumptuous singing and playing from such as Karajan, if that is your taste (it is mine).

Rafael Kubelík – 1971 (live; stereo) Orfeo

Chor und Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Pelléas: Nicolai Gedda

Mélisande: Helen Donath

Golaud: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Arkel: Peter Meven
 Yniold: Walter Gampert
 Geneviève: Marga Schiml
 A shepherd/A doctor: Raimund Gumbach

This live performance provides yet further proof of Kubelik's versatility, if it were required, and the Bavarian Radio Orchestra plays with a richer, fuller sound than we are accustomed to hear in reedier French orchestras. The cast is unexpected: Helen Donath's bright, shimmering soprano is well suited to *Mélisande* but neither her nor Fischer-Dieskau's correct French has the forward crispness of the native speaker. However, both inflect the text with sensitivity and understanding; I like, for instance how tentatively Donath replies to Golaud asking her name, although DFD light, grainy tone is surely too refined and satiny for the ham-fisted Golaud and his sudden growling and gruffness in the scene when he makes Yniold spy on the lovers are too abrupt. This is one of his many over-reaching miscalculations: there is no gradual disintegration, just alternating lulls and explosions. Marga Schiml is rich-toned but a tad unsteady as Geneviève and again, does not have the command of the language that a francophone possesses. Exactly the same could be said of Peter Meven's nasal bass. Nicolai Gedda was a renowned linguist but even he does not have the nuances of the best exponents of the role of *Pelléas*, missing its delicacy and naivety and his performance remains generalised. I applaud the sensible employment of a boy treble as Yniold – I cannot understand doing otherwise – but otherwise I don't so much hear the characters as the singers themselves when I listen to this and for me the whole lacks lightness and naturalness, well performed though it is.

Herbert von Karajan – 1978 (studio; stereo) EMI
 Chor der Deutschen Oper Berlin; Berliner Philharmoniker
Pelléas: Richard Stilwell
Mélisande: Frederica von Stade
 Golaud: José van Dam
 Arkel: Ruggero Raimondi
 Yniold: Christine Barbaux
 Geneviève: Nadine Denize
 A shepherd/A doctor: Pascal Thomas

This recording remains one of Karajan's greatest; it always was in superb sound but the re-mastering simply enhances the depth, clarity and perfect balance the engineers achieved. Some have resorted to the default position complaint that Karajan makes Debussy sound like Wagner, which is nonsense; while it true that the BPO in peak form contribute a sumptuousness that emphasises the repressed eroticism of this work, it is also true that Karajan insists upon the most delicate and finessed grading of dynamics to ensure that the orchestra never overwhelms the singers.

And what singers they are! The truly peerless performance here is from José van Dam, singing with exquisite subtlety and seamless legato but also rising to the moments of tortured jealousy Golaud experiences as his rage and suspicions mount. The scene where he forces his little boy Yniold to spy on the chaste lovers - they never consummate their love physically - is truly chilling. Von Stade is perfect as *Mélisande*: fragile, waif-like, dreamy and vulnerable, her oboe tones suggestive of other-worldliness and detachment. Stilwell is excellent as *Pelléas*, his baryton-martin with its tenor upper extension conveying both sensitivity and ecstasy; he is more virile than some characterisations. Both Americans sing in excellent French and the supporting cast is first-rate, with that gifted linguist Raimondi as a grave, troubled Arkel. The only comparative weakness is the miscasting of Yniold, who does not sound like a small child.

Karajan captures the rapture of this music and is unafraid to crank up the intensity in the orchestral preludes, conversely, he never swamps the conversational tone of a piece so dependent upon the maintenance of the natural speech-rhythms of the French language and the text is always crystal clear.

To talk about "the atmospheric passages" in this opera is meaningless as the whole thing relies upon a succession of atmospheric tone-poems, from the dark forest, to the sunless castle, to the subterranean scenes, to the claustrophobic mania of Golaud's mounting obsession; Karajan conveys them all with playing of great beauty and intensity.

There have been plenty of very successful recordings of this masterpiece; indeed, I do not know of any I actively dislike and most are highly desirable, starting with Désormière's celebrated 1942 set, now miraculously rejuvenated by Pristine, to Inghelbrecht's radio broadcast and studio recordings, to Boulez and Ansermet. While this might not be as wholly Gallic an account as Baudo's version (reviewed next), I would not be without it; it is exquisite.

Serge Baudo – 1978 (studio; stereo) RCA
 Ensemble Vocal de Bourgogne; Orchestre de Lyon
 Pelléas: Claude Dormoy
 Mélisande: Michèle Command
 Golaud: Gabriel Bacquier
 Arkel: Roger Soyer
 Yniold: Monique Pouradier-Duteil
 Geneviève: Jocelyne Taillon
 A shepherd/A doctor: Xavier Tamalet

A great advantage to this 1978 recording is that it is entirely by French performers, so we have none of that somewhat artificial Berlitz-French-by-an international-cast feel to the proceedings; everything from the accents, inflections, pungent woodwind and the very timbre of the voices and instruments themselves sounds wholly authentic - because it is. Sadly, this was probably the last epoch in which such a thing could have occurred as the French operatic tradition and style seems to be a thing of the past. Of course the principal roles require specific voice types which were always rare: the principals here could not, in my judgement, be more apt for their parts. I especially like Claude Dormoy's grainy, masculine yet sensitive sound and Michèle Command's faintly hooty, dark yet delicate timbre is wholly suited to the vulnerable, strangely other-worldly Mélisande. Bacquier's experienced Golaud, in his only commercial recording of the role, sounds just right precisely because his slightly worn sound is perfect for depicting an older brother who has none of Pelléas' youthful charm; Roger Soyer is perfect as Arkel, blind, aged and worn out but with the remains of real dignity in his rich tone and another seasoned trooper, Jocelyne Taillon, knows just what to do with Geneviève.

The Lyon orchestra play beautifully for Baudo who conducts a nuanced and often surprisingly impassioned account of this shimmering score. The echoes of *Tristan* and *Parsifal* emerge constantly and I often hear traces of Mussorgsky's sound world - yet I have no idea whether Debussy knew his work.

I admire the swooning beauty and animated drama of Karajan's version but for a really French recording of the score in good, full, clear analogue sound set in a warm acoustic this bargain set, this is something of an overlooked sleeper.

Armin Jordan – 1979 (studio; stereo) Erato
 Chœurs et Orchestre National de L'Opéra Monte Carlo
 Pelléas: Éric Tappy
 Mélisande: Rachel Yakar
 Golaud: Philippe Huttenlocher
 Arkel: François Loup
 Yniold: Colette Alliot-Lugaz
 Geneviève: Jocelyne Taillon
 A shepherd/A doctor: Michel Brodard

Armin Jordan adopts a slow, dark, dreamy approach to this score which I like and he assembles an impressive, entirely francophone cast for this studio recording, including Éric Tappy as Pelléas, ten years after the recording of his live, stage performance for Auberson. He is in fine, lean voice, again more assertive than some of the more fey and yielding characterisations of Pelléas, powerful in his protestations of love for Mélisande just before he is killed – but as for Auberson, inclined to turn hard of tone when pushed. Rachel Yakar has a lovely, warm, fluty soprano and I find that she finds the juste milieu between flirtatiousness and vulnerability. She drains her voice of vibrancy for her death-bed scene very effectively. I have always enjoyed Philippe Huttenlocher's elegant, even baritone, too; he is especially attentive to expressive nuance in his delivery of the text and strikes the right balance amongst his successive and conflicting emotions of confusion, tenderness and rage; he is suitably distraught and touching when wracked with guilt over his treatment of Mélisande. Jocelyne Taillon is perfect as Geneviève; honeyed and motherly without sounding too mature. On the demerit side, Colette Alliot-Lugaz - Mélisande for Dutoit in 1990 - makes a fair but not especially convincing soprano Yniold, just slightly less incongruous than blowsier assumptions and perhaps the least effective singer here is François Loup as Arkel; he is by no means bad but his tone lacks resonance and is covered by the rich orchestral accompaniment to his discourse.

Jordan's languor does not preclude his realising the moments of high drama such as the orchestral climax following Golaud's striking down of his brother at the end of Act 4. I love the sound of the Monte Carlo orchestra: warm, yet light on its feet, with slightly resinous woodwind and swirling strings complemented and enhanced by first-rate recorded sound.

This was yet again another surprise waiting to be uncovered in this survey; after some research, I found that it was initially warmly received and held in high critical regard but sank out of sight when it dropped out of the catalogue and became unavailable. Owing to my minor reservations regarding the casting of secondary roles, I would not make it a top recommendation but it is still very fine.

Claudio Abbado – 1986 (live; stereo) Opera d'Oro

Teatro alla Scala orchestra and chorus

Pelléas: Kurt Ollmann

Mélisande: Frederica von Stade

Golaud: John Bröcheler

Arkel: Nicolai Ghiaurov

Yniold: Patrizia Pace

Geneviève: Glenys Linos

A shepherd: Alfredo Giacomotti

A doctor: Silvestro Sammaritano

It's interesting; the moment John Bröcheler begins to sing, the listener registers that he is neither a francophone nor the possessor of a voice really suited to the character of Golaud, it being grey and undistinguished. Frederica von Stade is another prospect altogether, but she is considerably more hysterical live here than she was in Karajan's dreamy studio recording, exploiting the resonance of her lower register and thereby making Mélisande more earthy and assertive than is perhaps ideal. The sound is stereo but a bit harsh and crumbly, with a lot of ambient noise. None of the other singers is especially appealing: Glenys Linos is rather coarse, Kurt Ollmann sings good French but lacks vocal charisma, and the great Nicolai Ghiaurov sounds miscast as Arkel, being not the least bit French in timbre. We know from Abbado's later studio recording that he knows his way around this score but to my ears he is not as in command of the ebb and flow here and I find his direction a bit choppy. In short, while there is nothing especially wrong with this, nor is there any reason to prefer it to one of the many better cast and recorded options available.

Charles Dutoit – 1990 (studio; digital) Decca

Chœurs et Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal
 Pelléas: Didier Henry
 Mélisande: Colette Alliot-Lugaz
 Golaud: Gilles Cachemaille
 Arkel: Pierre Thau
 Yniold: Françoise Golfier
 Geneviève: Claudine Carlson
 A shepherd/A doctor: Phillip Ens

Another all-French-speaking cast is always a good sign and on paper they look like a good fit. Gilles Cachemaille's bass-baritone has just the right weight and gravity for Golaud but I find the edge in Colette Alliot-Lugaz' mature soprano less apt to portray Mélisande. Claudine Carlson's similarly mature sound as Geneviève is of course a better fit, and her lower register and clear diction are further assets – but she is rather assertive and Wagnerian in her delivery; I get little sense of the melancholy which pervades Geneviève's life and a more restrained, reflective approach is surely preferable. Furthermore, she and Alliot-Lugaz have such similar timbres that all contrast in their exchanges and in their characters is lost. Didier Henry has a strange voice for the role of Pelléas; again, he is far too similar in weight and timbre to Cachemaille's Golaud that the distinction between them is vitiated. Veteran Pierre Thau is a bit gruff and rocky and he is often approximate in his pitching but his rich bass is appropriate for Arkel. Françoise Golfier's Yniold is very good; she drains her voice of vibrato and sings in a piping manner which very successfully suggests a little boy – but nobody buys this opera for Yniold.

The recorded digital sound here is as good as you would expect from Decca but the supposedly offstage sailors' chorus at first sounds far too close; in fact, just about everything here is too "in yer face", yet paradoxically dull. Dutoit's direction strikes me as heavy-handed, coaxing a lush sound from the Montreal orchestra without much finesse or variety of pacing. In this, I am as one with my MWI colleague in his survey cited at the end of my introduction above: "I have noticed that some conductors of this work shy away from over-emoting of the climaxes. Dutoit is especially guilty of surgically removing these opportunities for frisson that I think Debussy intended to provide for the listener."

As you will by now have gathered, for me, the essential elements of charm, subtlety and passion are missing in this bluff, straightforward account; other recordings are far superior. (As usual, I find myself completely at odds with 'Gramophone', where, in his 1991 review of the original issue, Lionel Salter states that this "is certainly the best modern recorded performance of this elusive masterpiece". I beg to differ.)

Claudio Abbado – 1991 (studio; digital) DG
 Vienna State Opera; Vienna Philharmonic
 Vienna State Opera Choir
 Pelléas: François Le Roux
 Mélisande: Maria Ewing
 Golaud: José van Dam
 Arkel: Jean-Philippe Courtis
 Yniold: Patricia Pace
 Geneviève: Christa Ludwig
 A shepherd/A doctor: Rudolf Mazzola

This immediately has the right, dreamy atmosphere and van Dam's entry confirms the "rightness" of Abbado's approach and casting. Van Dam's assumption of Golaud repeats the success he had for Karajan; there is a little more wear in his tone but that is hardly inappropriate for a character who, as Mélisande remarks, already has greying hair. His bass-baritone is blessed with a high degree of vocal beauty and great sensitivity, but there is also an underlying threat of violence in the strength of his projection. Maria Ewing's breathy, sensuous tone is captivating; hers is not the pure, blanched type of

Mélisande - she is smoky and sexy but there is always an element of bewildered panic and vulnerability in her voice, similar to Frederica von Stade's singing. Christa Ludwig contributes a predictably vivid, rich-voiced Geneviève singing in good French and sounding suitably matriarchal without being worn. Jean-Philippe Courtis' smooth, sombre bass makes an ideal Arkel, sounding wise and elderly without being creaky or unsteady. Even the Yniold – despite being sung by a soprano – is credibly piping and child-like. François Le Roux's light, elegant, slightly grainy Pelléas provides an excellent contrast with van Dam's darker sound; his voice is an authentic baryton-Martin and completes as good a cast as may be found in any modern recording.

Abbado's conducting is less sensual than Karajan's with the BPO; he is more propulsive and elicits greater clarity from an equally magnificent orchestra in the VPO, which is perhaps closer to Debussy's intent.

As you can tell, I love this recording and find little to fault in it from either a technical or artistic point of view, yet it achieves that without any of the blandness which sometimes crept into Abbado's later recordings. Stylistically, this is no more authentically Gallic than Karajan's voluptuous version, but both are aesthetically coherent and thus deeply satisfying. (Oddly, the same 'Gramophone' critic who extolled the virtues of the preceding, very different and terminally dull Dutoit recording loved this too...)

Jean-Claude Casadesus – 1996 (live; digital) Naxos

Opéra de Lille; Orchestre National de Lille-Région; Nord-Pas-de-Calais Chorus

Pelléas: Gérard Thérue

Mélisande: Mireille Delunsch

Golaud: Armand Arapian

Arkel: Gabriel Bacquier

Yniold: Françoise Golfier

Geneviève: Hélène Jossoud

A shepherd/A doctor: Jean-Jacques Doumène

Good live sound, despite some stage noises and residual background ambient hiss, a bargain price, an all-French cast and an experienced French conductor all immediately make this an attractive proposition. Delunsch has a warm, smoky, mezzo-ish tint to her soprano and a flickering vibrato which makes her sound suitably *distracte*. If "other-worldliness" is perhaps not her strongest suit, she is nonetheless touching in her death scene and combines allure with vulnerability. Arapian (French-born, but of Greek-Armenian ethnic heritage) has a slightly tight, grainy but very authentically French-sounding baritone and it is a pleasure to hear the text enunciated so cleanly. His gradual surrender to jealous fury is expertly charted, intense and chilling without exaggeration. Veteran Gabriel Bacquier was previously a fine Golaud for Baudo almost twenty years before; here, at 72 years old, he sings Arkel (as I write, happily he is still with us at the grand age of 94). By this stage of his career, his voice is rocky and unsteady but he was always a great vocal actor and he now has a bass depth; besides the evident wear in his tone lends great pathos to his utterances. Gérard Thérue has a most attractive, light baritone; he can sound boyish and impetuous but the voice is not without weight when necessary; the passion of his singing in the lovers' final meeting is magnificent, just bordering hysteria without loss of vocal control. Françoise Golfier is perfect as le petit Yniold – the most uncannily convincing on record.

The orchestral interludes are beautifully played, conducted with great tenderness and flexibility; Casadesus frequently employs rubato without sentimentality and rises to the few moments of high drama and violence such as Golaud's physical abuse of his wife but also the soaring ecstasy of the lovers' nocturnal tryst just before Pelleas is struck down.

This was a surprise hit for me; it does not have quite the sheen and sophistication of Karajan or the pedigree of Désormière and Inghelbrecht but everything about it is authentically Gallic and it all works.

Bernard Haitink – 2000 (live concert performance; digital) Naïve
Orchestre National d' Ile de France; Chœur de Radio France
Pelléas: Wolfgang Holzmair
Mélisande: Anne Sofie von Otter
Golaud: Laurent Naouri
Arkel: Alain Vernhes
Yniold: Florence Couderc
Geneviève: Hanna Schaer
A shepherd/A doctor: Jérôme Varnier

Extravagantly laid out on three CDs, this set has attracted some favourable responses since its appearance, including its nomination as first choice by BBC Radio 3's Building a Library in April 2013, and favourable reviews in 'Gramophone' and here on MusicWeb by Christopher Fifield back in 2002: http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2002/May02/Debussy_Pelleas.htm

I am considerably less enthusiastic for two main reasons: first, Haitink is typically restrained and non-interventionist in his direction; everything is refined and understated to the point of blandness. In truth, I find that his treatment of the score borders on the faceless and even lethargic, an impression reinforced by his slow speeds. Secondly, and more significantly for me, none of the three principal voices quite matches my conception of the characters they portray. Laurent Naouri sings smoothly anonymously, more in the manner of some depictions of Pelléas, without much suggestion of the edge or danger which is surely part of his mental make-up; he never summons up the kind of vehemence we hear from Finley, van Dam, Bacquier or, especially London. Anne Sofie von Otter is rather bold and mature-sounding, strong on hinting at the nervy hysteria which lies just beneath the surface of Mélisande's demeanour but without the fey fragility of that femme fatale. She simply sounds all wrong and ultimately makes little impression as a personality. I emphatically do not like Wolfgang Holzmair's Pelléas: his voice has that peculiarly constricted quality which is too often specific to German baritones, and his timbre is insufficiently differentiated from his brother's; nor does he sound young.

The supporting roles are not especially distinguished; I find Hanna Schaer's Geneviève to be weak and quavery: Alain Vernhes' bass is too light to convey adequately Arkel's age and authority and his delivery of the text is matter-of-fact. Yniold is sung by yet another adult, female soprano with the usual result that he/she doesn't sound credible. The orchestral playing is evidently fine and the French very good but the sound here is oddly two-dimensional for a recent live, digital recording: everything seems to be somewhat at a remove – rather like Haitink's cool interpretation; other, recent studio versions are much better. There is a bit of coughing, but it's not irksome.

In truth, I am baffled by the encomia awarded this set and must ascribe that to the vagaries of personal taste. For me, this recording is simply boring and underperforms in comparison with the best in almost every department, vocally, sonically and interpretatively. Haitink's next recorded outing in this opera, reviewed next, is far superior.

Bernard Haitink – 2003 (live concert radio broadcast; digital) Boston
Boston Symphony Orchestra; Tanglewood Festival Chorus
Pelléas: Simon Keenlyside
Mélisande: Lorraine Hunt Lieberson
Golaud: Gerald Finley
Arkel: John Tomlinson
Yniold: James Danner
Geneviève: Nathalie Stutzmann

I should perhaps not include this recording as I am unclear whether it is available on CD or anywhere else as a download and having otherwise been unable to trace it, I confess to having heard it only [via the Internet](#).

It is, however, of rare interest and exceptional merit, with such artists as Lorraine Hunt Lieberson being only one in a very distinguished cast. It is a live concert, so there is a bit of ambient noise, rustling and coughing. The close recording militates against the requisite aery, rarefied ambience, but it complements Haitink's style; he surely joins Abbado in finding a balance between Boulez' forensic clarity and Karajan's sumptuousness and he has an orchestra of sufficient virtuosity and versatility to do his bidding.

What an array of voices here – and they sing in impeccable French. Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's dusky, faintly tremulous mezzo is in the same category as von Stade and Ewing, velvety, seductive yet fragile. Gerald Finley's Golaud prefigures his equally splendid live performance for Rattle fourteen years later but he is in even more youthful, resonant and flexible voice here – which is perhaps not ideal in that Golaud is meant to be considerably older, but what lovely singing. Simon Keenlyside is in finest voice too, before the strain of ill-advisedly undertaking the big bow-wow Verdian roles like Macbeth began to loosen and hollow out his baritone; the tessitura of the role of Pelléas, which rises as the opera progresses, gives him no difficulty at all – he is ardent, passionate and lyrical by turns. Perhaps his voice-type is too akin to that of Golaud, but both voices are surely among the most sheerly beautiful ever to have sung their roles, and if Keenlyside's baritone is considerably lighter, their similarity emphasises their kinship. It is a bonus to have an artist of the calibre of Natalie Stutzmann in the relatively small role of Geneviève; her true contralto and crystalline diction are splendid. Even John Tomlinson's bass, long since rocky and blaring, is well suited to portraying Arkel, despite some weak, poorly tuned top notes; he has great gravitas and sounds suitably sagacious. Finally – joy of joys – a boy treble is employed for Yniold, eschewing the usual awkwardness of a soprano sounding too arch or feminine. The scene between Golaud and his son is chilling, as the father's rage increases while Yniold remains fearfully uncomprehending, culminating in his shrieked, "J'ai terriblement peur!".

Its unavailability (see below) and live sound preclude this from being a top choice but given that it is accessible online I recommend that any devotee of this unique opera listen to this performance. It is greatly superior to Haitink's live recording from three years earlier.

Note: I am indebted to Paul Candy for providing the following information regarding this recording: That live radio broadcast of Haitink's Boston Pelleas you praised in your survey is indeed available on CD via [Norbeck, Peters & Ford](#), a treasure trove of vintage and unreleased live recordings.

I can personally vouch for the fine sounding transfer as I recently received my copy. Yes, I miss the ambiance and atmosphere of a studio recording but the voices, oh my. What's not to like?

Simon Rattle – 2017 (live composite; digital) LSO Live
 London Symphony Orchestra; London Symphony Chorus
 Pelléas: Christian Gerhaher
 Mélisande: Magdalena Kožená
 Golaud: Gerald Finley
 Arkel: Franz-Josef Selig
 Yniold: Elias Mäder
 Geneviève: Bernarda Fink
 A shepherd/A doctor: Joshua Bloom

This is the most recent recording considered here, and is derived from two semi-staged performances. It was very favourably reviewed on its release by two MWI colleagues here ([review](#) ~ [review](#)).

I concur that the best things about it are the LSO's silken playing and Gerald Finley's absolutely lovely Golaud. The reviews above adumbrate exhaustively the reasons for the excellence of his portrayal: his baritone is intrinsically beautiful and even throughout its range, his French impeccable and his characterisation subtle and sympathetic; he manages the transformation from concerned protector to agonised, jealous husband with great aplomb.

I have by no means been an unquestioning admirer of Rattle's tenure in Berlin; it seems to me that he has little empathy for the core 19C German repertoire, but he has long demonstrated more affinity with French music and he certainly has a genuine feeling for the score, demonstrating a gift for bringing out the gossamer textures of Debussy's orchestration and the shifting pulse of his rhythms. This is surely the best conducting he has given us in years.

Gerhaher's *Pelléas* is very attractive: his French is excellent and I have in any case always thought that his light, plaintive voice was more tenorial than baritonal - which has precedent and works here. Not everything here is ideal or flawless, however; Franz-Josef Selig is not especially adept with the French text and the slow beat in his grave, sonorous Hunding-bass is irritating. Two pairs of singers are rather too similar in timbre: we have two baritones as *Pelléas* and Golaud - although at least Finley's sound is inkier and deeper - and there is little to distinguish Bernarda Fink's mezzo from Magdalena Kožená dusky, husky soprano. She sounds rather more mature and heartier than the waif some picture *Mélisande* as, and her French is sometimes a little occluded and unidiomatic; native French singers always have the edge in this work. I for one do not hear in the famous "letting her hair down" scene quite the erotic charge generated by other performers, as neither Gerhaher's grainy baritone nor Kožená's mezzo has much of a passionate ring in it, although their vocal acting is good. Yniold may be sung by boy treble but his fruity sound is not especially apt for a little boy; sometimes a younger child or even a soprano works better, as Yniold is supposed to be a little boy and he sounds like a an older, just pre-pubescent boy - which is presumably what the singer was.

The sound and balance are first-rate, especially for a live performance, although it's a pity that the sailors' chorus at the end of Act 1 is not more atmospherically distanced. Audience and production noises are minimal.

Recommendations

This opera surely enjoys once of the most consistently successful discographies in the catalogue, yet once again, I am dismayed to find myself making my prime recommendations for recordings anywhere between over forty and nearly seventy years old. However, as I say above, the aficionado will want at least one in decent stereo sound and another vintage, mono performance as a supplement and I am also acutely conscious that there are at least half a dozen more recordings above which I find - and many will also find, too - equally recommendable, so the list below is almost arbitrary, simply because there are so many excellent accounts to choose from. I strongly advise sampling before purchasing - and virtually all of these are available on YouTube. I have mostly opted for those which are the most authentically French in origin and execution, the exceptions being Karajan, who always excelled in French music and has a wonderful cast, too, and Abbado, who seems to adopt the French manner effortlessly and has three French-speaking principal singers. I suggest no fewer than three modern studio versions as I cannot separate them and leave it to the reader to sample and select according to taste.

Live mono: Inghelbrecht 1951

Studio mono: Désormière 1941; Ansermet 1951

Live stereo/digital: Casadesus 1996

Studio stereo/digital: Serge Baudo 1978*; Karajan 1978; Abbado 1991

*First choice

Ralph Moore