The singers and actors of the Belle Epoque are the focus of this chapter, which investigates the French art of diction in theatrical and musical performances circa 1900. The survey of performance practice includes not only sound recordings but also written records — treatises, memoirs, self-help manuals, and musical scores — that reveal how performers thought about the act of speaking French. Evidence from celebrities such as Sarah Berhardt and Marcel Proust, as well as lesser-known personalities such as Léon Brémont and Reynaldo Hahn, provide unique insight into pronunciation habits that defined both the French character and the character of French. The chapter ends with a close reading of the end of Debussy's opera Pelléas et Mélisande.

The premiere of Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande in late April 1902 occasioned a maelstrom of critical responses in the Parisian press—more than a hundred reviews over the course of a few months and eighty-eight in the month of May alone. A flashpoint of French modernism, the Pelléas premiere catalyzed a rethinking of the nature of music in this critical discourse, as prominent critics, such as Pierre Lalo and Robert Godet, shifted their account of music away from the Revue wagnérienne’s exclusive focus on sentiment and interiority and toward
an aesthetics of noise, materiality, and outer sensation. While it was not uncommon for critics to compare the music of Pelléas to Impressionist painting or Symbolist poetry, such comparisons only served to highlight an overriding preoccupation with a specifically musical problem: how to negotiate the demands of musical convention and historicity against the nature of music as material sound.

Debussy's Ideal Pelléas and the Limits of Authorial Intent
David Grayson

in Rethinking Debussy

The role of Pelléas in Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande is problematic, both vocally and dramatically. André Messager, the conductor at the première, described the challenge of its tessitura: “The part is too high for a baritone and too low for a tenor.” At the première the role was sung by a high baritone (a baryton Martin) who, under the composer's supervision, lowered the tessitura and documented the changes in his personal score. Debussy considered making Pelléas a trouser role and also prepared a tenor version of the part (involving more than six hundred pitch changes), which remained unpublished, although his publisher made it available to singers upon request. Some of these changes are unrelated to tessitura adjustments and thus may represent “lost” revisions. The dramatic significance of these different versions of the role and the voice types that they represent (baritone, tenor, and soprano) form the focus of this chapter.

Mélisande's Charm and the Truth of Her Music
Jann Pasler

in Rethinking Debussy

Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande is often considered radically new. But whereas scholars have shown how this work should be understood in relation to Wagner or Symbolist theater, this chapter situates it in the context of French musical tradition. Learning to express seduction and enchantment was both a critical aspect of composers' Conservatory
training and an important theme in nineteenth-century French opera. Mélisande's antecedents include Ambroise Thomas's Mignon, Delibes's Lakmé, and even Massenet's Thais. However, it is not just the beauty of Mélisande's voice that interested Debussy, but her voice as a medium of truth. The opera suggests that truth can disappear and die before we grasp it. Mélisande and her charms thus were not a metaphor for the social order or French identity, but a conduit to a new kind of beauty, or what Charles Morice called "the dream of the truth."

Music as Encoder of the Unconscious in Pelléas et Mélisande
Elliott Antokoletz
in Rethinking Debussy
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type: chapter

This chapter shows how Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande transforms the harmonic structures of the traditional major/minor scale system into a new musical language, and how this language reflects the psychodramatic symbolism of the poet Maurice Maeterlinck. In reaction to the realism of nineteenth-century theater, many authors began to develop a new interest in psychological motivation. In his plays Maeterlinck was to transform internal subconscious motivation into external behaviors, demonstrating that human emotions and actions are controlled by fate. The Debussy-Maeterlinck opera represents the first significant attempt to establish more profound correspondences between the Symbolist dramatic conception and the new musical language. This language is based almost exclusively on interactions between pentatonic and diatonic folk modalities and their more abstract whole-tone and other symmetrical transformations, the opposition of these two harmonic extremes serving as the basis for dramatic polarity between the characters as real-life beings and as symbols of fate.

Reinscribing, framing, and subverting an operatic icon: Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande
Jane F. Fulcher
in Renegotiating French Identity: Musical Culture and Creativity in France during Vichy and the German Occupation
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DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190681500.003.0003
type: chapter
This chapter reveals the way in which French cultural officials gradually came to employ an iconic operatic work, selected initially by Rouché for pragmatic reasons, and how they slowly sought to adapt its ideological significance. It would eventually serve (to employ the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu) as a rite of consecration, or of legitimization, as the regime and collaboration slowly hardened. But Pelléas was not a monolithic emblem of French cultural pride, nor was its message or its physical instantiation immutable or unequivocal. Through its successive performances the chapter traces the evolution of the regime as well as its vision, conception, and uses of French culture. It also discerns the way in which the Resistance appropriated and used the work in its clandestine publications.

“Aimer ainsi”
Richard Langham Smith
in Rethinking Debussy

Recent productions of Pelléas et Mélisande have often used current strategies in interventionist “subsequent” or “afterlife” interpretations, terms emanating from Jonathan Miller's book Subsequent Performances. Two approaches are popular: first, to use current psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic concepts to interpret the play and opera; second, to set the opera in its own age, the turn of the nineteenth century. Instead of such graftings of meaning, this chapter returns to the worth of original significances, as reflected in Maeterlinck's early writings, to determine his views of destiny, fate, and theology and their effect on the central cameo of the opera: the idealized, incomparable love between Pelléas and Mélisande. The chapter is motivated by two beliefs: that Miller's “subsequent performances” are preceded by a primary concept of particular worth, and that we must test whether this concept of worth is reflected in the musical projection.

Epilogue by Way of Pelléas et Mélisande
Steven Huebner
in French Opera at the Fin de Siecle
This concluding chapter begins with a discussion of Stéphane Mallarmé's essay/prose poem, ‘Richard Wagner: RÊverie d'un poète français’. Mallarmé's essay resonates with his own thinking as well as with Pelléas et Mélisande: following validation of the Wagnerian heritage came questioning and repudiation, Wagner as merely an ‘intermediate’ phase.

“Destiny Should Allow Me to Finish It”
Robert Orledge
in Rethinking Debussy
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Item type: chapter

Although destiny was a concept more usually associated with Maeterlinck and Pelléas et Mélisande, it was still very much in Debussy's mind as he struggled to finish La chute de la Maison Usher in 1916. Hardly any music emerged from the first two versions of the libretto that Debussy made in 1908–10, and it was not until 1915–16 that he was able to make any real progress with his music. This chapter traces the gestation and chronology of Usher, suggesting reasons why it remained only half-finished, as well as outlining the problems involved in preparing the complete performing version. It also examines Debussy's motivic and harmonic planning for Usher, which suggests that its major difference from Pelléas lies in its unique blend of linear total chromaticism with an underlying tonal structure.

The First Modernist
Richard Taruskin
in The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays
Published in print: 2008 Published Online: May 2012
california/9780520249776.003.0030
Item type: chapter

This chapter discusses the first twentieth-century composer Claude Debussy, the man with whom modern music begins. This chapter includes roughly a quarter of Debussy's surviving correspondence. Prior to the appearance in 1980 of the original French edition, his published letters were scattered among a dozen or so small assemblages, each limited to one or two epistolary partners, some of them in back issues of rather obscure French periodicals. Access was cumbersome. François Lesure, head of the music division of the Bibliothèque Nationale, who has
already put us in his debt for a comprehensive collection of Debussy's critical prose, has made a very judicious selection. Debussy's epistolary style, like his music, is ironic, nuanced, allusive, ambiguous. Everything means more than it says. Like the characters in Pelléas et Mélisande—whom, in his later correspondence, he actually fell into the habit of quoting—Debussy intones his little sentences deadpan, depending on a vast reservoir of subtext to complete the meaning.

Debussy's Critics
Alexandra Kieffer

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Item type: book

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the work of Claude Debussy spurred a reimagining of music and musical listening in which Parisian musicians and intellectuals, informed by recent scientific discourse on affect, perception, and cognition, attempted to articulate a music aesthetics appropriate to the fully embodied, material self of psychological modernism. Important themes in debussyste music criticism are prefigured in the Symbolist wagnérisme of the late 1880s, which elaborated a model of affect and cognition drawn from the empirical psychology of Théodule Ribot. Following the premiere of Debussy's opera Pelléas et Mélisande in 1902, Debussy's supporters, attempting to explain the opera's novelty, turned away from a music aesthetics that gave primacy to inner emotion and toward an aesthetics oriented instead toward listening, sensation, and the materiality of sound. Over the following decade, critics Jean Marnold and Louis Laloy, drawing from a wide swath of early-twentieth-century intellectual culture that included empirical psychology and post-Helmholtzian acoustics, were particularly influential as defenders of the ostensibly scientifically valid nature of Debussy’s innovations as well as his historical importance. After 1910, however, the cultural relevance of debussysme quickly declined as standards of aesthetic value shifted toward the abstract and universal (as opposed to the fleeting ephemerality of sensation) and as the deepening divide between scientific methods and humanistic ones made the intellectual culture of debussysme untenable.

French Opera
Vincent Giroud

Published in print: 2010 Published Online: October 2013
French opera is second only to Italian opera in the length, breadth, and diversity of its history. Yet most people, if asked to come up with titles, could mention only a handful—Carmen, Faust, Pelleas et Melisande, Samson et Dalila—a small list for an operatic tradition that began in the seventeenth century and is still very much alive. This book provides a full, single-volume account of opera in France from its origins to the present day. It looks at the leading composers, from Lully to Messiaen and beyond; at the development of French operatic form and style; at performance, performers, and audience; and at the impact of French opera beyond France's borders.