

# Pelléas et Mélisande

## Sibelius's incidental music and Maeterlinck's play

Eija Kurki

Sibelius composed his incidental music for *Pelléas et Mélisande* by the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) in 1905 in response to a commission from the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki.

Maeterlinck's play, which had been premièred in Paris in 1893, is widely regarded as one of the major works of Symbolist theatre. It inhabits a medieval world of dream and fantasy, and its prose dialogue is disjointed, repetitive and rich in allusions. The prose dialogue is inseparable from the work's musicality, as Ernest Newman pointed out in 1905 when he remarked that 'Maeterlinck's verbal cloudiness needed to be set to music before it could convey its full meaning'.<sup>1</sup>

The musicality of *Pelléas et Mélisande* inspired Claude Debussy to compose his famous opera, Arnold Schoenberg his symphonic poem and Gabriel Fauré his incidental music. The first of these to be written was Fauré's, which was commissioned for a performance in London in 1898. Debussy's opera was premièred in Paris in 1902; Schoenberg's symphonic poem of 1903, too, was originally planned as an opera.

In Finland, Debussy's opera was not performed until 1958. On that occasion it was sung in Finnish, and conducted by Sibelius's son-in-law Jussi Jalas. It was performed again in 2002, this time in the original French.

### The origins of Sibelius's music

It was apparently in the summer of 1904 that Sibelius received the commission from the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki to write music for *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Later in the summer he seems to have given up the project, but in the autumn he started to write music for the play after all. For this theatre he had already composed music for Adolf Paul's play *Kung Kristian II* (*King Christian II*), and a few years later, for the Finnish National Theatre, he had written the music for his brother-in-law Arvid Järnefelt's *Kuolema* (*Death*; 1903). In a letter to his friend and confidant Axel Carpelan dated 21 September 1904 Sibelius wrote: 'Naturally I haven't been able to resist writing for the theatre. Up to my old tricks! "*Pelléas et Mélisande*!"'<sup>2</sup>

By the autumn of 1904, however, neither the Third Symphony (on which Sibelius had also started work) nor the music for *Pelléas et Mélisande* had made much progress. In early 1905 he travelled to Berlin, where he stayed from the beginning of January until the beginning of March. He started to revise his Violin Concerto, but put it aside to finish off *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Styan, 'Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 2, Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd', p. 32

<sup>2</sup> "Naturligtvis har jag ej kunnat låta bli att komponera för teatern. Min gamla ovana! '*Pelléas et Mélisande*!'"

*Pelléas et Mélisande* was then very topical. Directed by Max Reinhardt (1873–1943) it had been performed 57 times, with great success, at the Neues Theater in Berlin in 1903–04, and the production had visited Vienna. The music for those performances had been written by Friedrich Bermann, who composed scores for a number of plays that Reinhardt directed. Presumably Sibelius, a regular visitor to Berlin, was aware of the popularity of these performances, although he did not mention them in his correspondence.

On 31 January 1905 he wrote to his wife Aino: 'Now it's the middle of the night. I've been working on *Pelléas* all day long. I'm thinking of making a decent piano reduction as I go along, and that takes time. It's been hard to teach myself to work objectively again, in such a way that it turns out well. But I shall succeed.'<sup>3</sup>

This was when Konni Wetzer, newly appointed manager of the Swedish Theatre, began to worry that the music might not be ready in time. In late February Sibelius sent him a card: 'My dear friend, don't worry about the music for P[elléas] and M[élisande]... You can get Röllig<sup>4</sup> (from Kajus's [Kajanus's] orchestra) to copy out the parts. I shall probably be there for the first night, and shall conduct. Remember not to show the music to a soul.'<sup>5</sup>



***Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki, 1905**

Gabrielle Tavaststjerna as Mélisande and Gunnar Wingård as Pelléas.

Photo: The Society of Swedish Literature in Finland (SLS)

<sup>3</sup> "Det är nu midt på natten. Jag har hela dagen arbetat på Pelleas. Tänker samtidigt göra ett passabelt klaverutdrag och det tar tid. Svårt har det varit att lära sig arbeta igen med hufvudet och så att det blir någonting. Men jag ska lyckas."

<sup>4</sup> Born in Germany, Ernst Röllig (1858–1928) was a violinist (1882–84) and later violist (1884–1906) in the Helsinki Philharmonic Society Orchestra. He was the principal copyists of Sibelius's music in the years 1891–1906 and also undertook some copying in the 1920s.

<sup>5</sup> Card from Sibelius to Konni Wetzer, postmarked Charlottenburg, 21 February 1905: "Broder. Var lugn för musiken till P et M... Du ville genast taga Röllig (Kajus orkester) att skriva ut stämmorna. Jag kommer antagl. till premiären och anför då. Musiken får ej visas för nån fan."

The score was ready in time, and the first night took place at the Swedish Theatre on 17 March 1905. The music was played by an ensemble drawn from the Philharmonic Society Orchestra conducted by Sibelius himself. Both Maeterlinck's play and Sibelius's music were well received. To judge by the number of performances, *Pelléas et Mélisande* was the most popular production in the theatre's season, and a major event in the year's theatre calendar.

The play was scheduled again in the theatre's programme the following spring, 1906, and the theatre company also visited Turku late that year. Sibelius's music was used at these performances.

## Sibelius's incidental music

In the play *Mélisande*, a young girl, is crying by a spring in the woods. Golaud arrives and takes her to his castle, to become his wife. After seeing *Mélisande* combing her hair, Golaud's younger brother Pelléas falls in love with her. Golaud finds Pelléas and *Mélisande* kissing and, consumed by jealousy, kills Pelléas; then, unsuccessfully, Golaud tries to kill himself. At the end of the play *Mélisande* dies while giving birth to a daughter.

Sibelius's incidental music to *Pelléas et Mélisande*, JS 147, contains ten musical numbers and is scored for flute (piccolo), oboe (cor anglais), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, timpani, triangle and strings.

Seven of the movements are preludes, two have the combined function of melodrama and postlude, and one is a song. In Maeterlinck's play two songs are called for, but Sibelius only provided music for the second of them, *The Three Blind Sisters*. Sung by *Mélisande*, this is an integral part of the drama in that Pelléas hears it and remarks upon it. Otherwise, Sibelius assigned his music to scenes in which the text of Maeterlinck's play calls either for special moods or for natural elements (the sea), objects (the spinning wheel) or events (harvesting).

In 1905 Sibelius's publisher Lienau issued the theatre score almost in its entirety as an orchestral suite for concert use (Op. 46): only the ninth movement was omitted. In the orchestral suite, *Mélisande's* song, *The Three Blind Sisters*, is heard in an instrumental version. In addition there was one change in the order of movements: the number depicting *Mélisande at the Spinning Wheel* (originally No. 5) was placed later in the suite, after the *Pastorale* (originally No. 7). Other changes are very few in number and of a very minor nature, such as moving the final horn chords of the first movement (*At the Castle Gate*) up an octave, to aid their audibility and achieve greater transparency of texture.

Sibelius also made a version of *Mélisande's* song for voice and piano, and this was published by Lienau in the same year, 1905, as too was the piano transcription of the orchestral suite.



## Harriet Bosse as Mélisande

The Norwegian actress Harriet Bosse (1878–1961) was engaged by the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki in the autumn of 1904. She had been looking forward to this engagement because she was expecting *Mélisande* to be among the roles she would play, and she asked the theatre manager to send her the play translation in advance so that she could study it during the summer of 1904. She wrote: 'I am very excited about the music, especially since Sibelius is doing it. I love music as dearly as my own art, and think the ideal is a combination of the two.'<sup>6</sup> At this time Maeterlinck's play had not yet been staged in Finland, and nor had it been performed in Swedish in any of the Nordic countries, so no Swedish translation existed. She enquired whether her then husband, the Swedish writer August Strindberg, would be willing to supply a translation but in May 1904 he replied (to the theatre's manager Victor Castegren) that he would have to refuse the Maeterlinck translation owing to a lack of time.



**Harriet Bosse, 1907** Photo: Public Domain

<sup>6</sup> "Musiken är jag mycket spänd på, så mycket mer som Sibelius gör den. Jag älskar musik lika högt som min egen konst, och tycker idealet är en kombination af dessa båda."

By the time the play – in a Swedish translation by Bertel Gripenberg – was scheduled in the theatre's programme for the spring of 1905, Harriet Bosse's time there had already come to an end, and the role of Mélisande was played by the Swedish actress Gabrielle Tavaststjerna. Pelléas was played by Gunnar Wingård, Golaud by Konrad Tallroth, and the production was directed by Konni Wetzter.

The play had its Swedish première in Gothenburg in the autumn of 1905, with Harriet Bosse as Mélisande. In these Gothenburg performances, too, Sibelius's music was used.

The collaboration between Harriet Bosse and the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki continued; she returned for a new engagement in Helsinki in the spring season of 1906. She still expressed a desire to play the role of Mélisande, and so the Theatre reprised *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Sibelius's music. Harriet Bosse played Mélisande at the first night of the new production run, 16 March 1906, and in the next four performances, earning the approbation of the Helsinki critics. In 1908 she married Gunnar Wingård, who played Pelléas.

Also in March 1906, the play was performed – again with Sibelius's music – at the Norwegian National Theatre in Kristiania (Oslo); the first night was on 7 March. It was directed by another well-known female Norwegian actress, Johanne Dybwad (1867–1950), who also played the role of Mélisande. Dybwad had met Sibelius in the spring of 1903 when she was appearing as a guest star at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki. This was the first time she worked as a theatre director; she was later to direct more than forty plays.

Harriet Bosse played Mélisande again at Svenska Teatern in Stockholm in 1906. The director was Victor Castegren, who had also directed the Gothenburg performances the previous year. Here, too, Sibelius's music was used. Victor Castegren had been in charge of the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki in the spring of 1904, when Harriet Bosse first enquired about playing Mélisande at her guest appearance there.

Harriet Bosse and Sibelius met in connection with the Helsinki performances of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. She was enthusiastic about Sibelius's music and wrote to recommend him to Strindberg as the composer of a score for the latter's *Svanevit* (*Swanwhite*), which had not yet been performed on stage. Strindberg answered in a letter to Bosse dated 18 March 1906: 'Happy for Sibelius to do *Swanwhite*'<sup>7</sup> – and the score was completed in 1908.

Bosse later recalled her performances as Mélisande: 'As I was lying on my death-bed in the last act, the orchestra played *The Death of Mélisande*. I was so moved that I cried in every performance.'

<sup>7</sup> "Sibelius får gerna göra Svanevit"

## The first performance in Finnish

After the above-mentioned performances in the early years of the twentieth century, *Pelléas et Mélisande* was absent from the Finnish stage for decades – in fact until 1955, when it was performed for the first time in Finnish (translated by Anja Samooja), at the Joensuu City Theatre. The first night was on 13 January 1955 and the production was directed by Sakari Puurunen (1921–2000).

Puurunen had been invited to Joensuu as a guest director, and he was allowed to choose what to perform. At these performances a recording of Sibelius's orchestral suite was used – played by the Helsinki Theatre Orchestra conducted by Heikki Aaltoila. Presenting the play at a small provincial theatre was an innovation in the Finnish theatre world that attracted critics not just from Joensuu but also from other parts of the country.

In an interview I conducted in the summer of 2017 with Anja Pohjola (b. 1931), who played the role of Mélisande, she recalled how at rehearsal the director Sakari Puurunen withheld the music for as long as possible in order to maximize its impact. This tactic was successful, and all the actors were powerfully affected by the music. Like Harriet Bosse before her, Anja Pohjola remembers crying during the play every time when Sibelius's *Death of Mélisande* was heard. In this production Anja Pohjola also sang the song *The Three Blind Sisters*.



**Anja Pohjola as Mélisande and  
Veikko Manninen as Pelléas**

in the 1955 performance in Joensuu –  
the tower scene where she sings  
*The Three Blind Sisters*.

Photo: Joensuu City Theatre.  
Photo published in *Helsingin Sanomat*,  
18 January 1955.

That spring, the Joensuu production was invited to the National Theatre Days in Kuopio – a gathering of professionals from the Finnish theatre world. Only two external productions were asked to participate: the other was the Finnish National Theatre's production of T. S. Eliot's new play *The Confidential Clerk*. As that play too was directed by Puurunen, the event was jokingly referred to as 'Puurunen's Theatre Days'.

The Joensuu performances were also the only ones where Maeterlinck's play was performed complete. The total duration was three and a half hours, and in Kuopio it did not finish until midnight. In the production at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki, some scenes had been omitted. Axel Carpelan mentioned this in a letter to Aino Sibelius on 26 April 1905, in which he writes indignantly that as a result Sibelius's music for the pastoral scene was in completely the wrong place: 'People take such liberties without the critics uttering a word of reproach'.<sup>8</sup>

In Debussy's opera, too, scenes from the original play were omitted, such as the first scene of Act I, the prologue at the castle gate. Sibelius composed a prelude for this scene.

In connection with the Joensuu performances of *Pelléas et Mélisande* we can make an important observation concerning the role of the music. Two histories of the Joensuu theatre have been published, in 1962 and 2012. Both refer to the production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but neither mentions the music. This says a lot about the status of theatre music in general: it is regarded as a matter of secondary importance. Nonetheless, it is surprising that in Finland even the music of Sibelius has been subjected to such trivialization.

## Sibelius's music as the starting point

Sakari Puurunen, director of the Joensuu production, was familiar with Sibelius's output. He had already directed Arvid Järnefelt's play *Kuolema*, also with music by Sibelius (in 1948 at Ylioppilasteatteri [the Student Theatre] in Helsinki).

Regarding the Joensuu performances, Puurunen revealed that Sibelius's music was the starting point of the production. Not only was he familiar with the incidental music, but he had become interested in the play because of it. He had become acquainted with the play in the early 1950s, when he was a teacher at drama school and rehearsed it with his students.

Maeterlinck's play and Sibelius's music are also linked by an anecdote related by Eino Kalima, manager of the Finnish National Theatre, in his memoirs.

As a student in Moscow in the early twentieth century, before the Russian Revolution, Kalima played the piano arrangement of Sibelius's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Someone came into the room and asked him what he was playing; upon being informed that it was a new composition by Sibelius, the newcomer – unaware of what the piece was – remarked that 'it has such a Maeterlinckian atmosphere'.

<sup>8</sup> "Sådana friheter tar man sig utan att kritiken har ett ord af klander!"



This is perfectly believable, as plays by Maeterlinck were at the time being performed by the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by Konstantin Stanislavski.

Kalima's memoirs continue: '[Sibelius] seemed to be amused by this reminiscence of Moscow, but he certainly didn't see it as in any way surprising. What a remarkable man, out of the ordinary, I would be tempted to say superhuman! A perfect gentleman, a watchful companion, and yet and yet surrounded by an atmosphere of inexplicable loneliness.'<sup>9</sup>

After Joensuu, Puurunen next directed the play in Tallinn, Estonia, in 1975, where he was working as a guest director. The first night was on 21 December at the Estonian Drama Theatre, and Sibelius's music was used in an arrangement by Viive Ernesaks. Before that, the play had been produced just once at the Estonia Theatre – in 1919, but without Sibelius's music.

In the 1980s Puurunen gave lectures about *Pelléas et Mélisande* to drama students at Helsinki University – and in a television interview from as late as 1992 it became apparent that this play was clearly of great importance to him. In the last active decades of his career as a director, Puurunen concentrated on opera, his most famous production being Joonas Kokkonen's *Last Temptations*.

## A radio play to celebrate Sibelius's birthday

*Pelléas et Mélisande* has also been heard as a radio play with Sibelius's music. The Finnish Broadcasting Company produced this programme to mark the composer's 90th birthday, and it was broadcast on 5 December 1955. The actors were from the Finnish Radio Theatre, and the music was performed by the Finnish Radio Orchestra conducted by Nils-Eric Fougstedt. The play was performed in an abbreviated form, omitting some of the characters; and the music too was not heard in its entirety. This performance had the potential to reach a large audience, as there were a million licensed radio sets in Finland by 1955.

## Sibelius and Maeterlinck

Did Sibelius meet Maeterlinck? Or did they correspond? Maeterlinck was born three years before Sibelius, and died eight years earlier – in 1949 at the age of 87. According to Santeri Levas, who for many years worked as Sibelius's private secretary, the composer never met Maeterlinck. Maeterlinck was aware that Sibelius had written music for his play, however, as – Levas informs us – he invited Sibelius to visit him. Sibelius, who was in Paris at the time, received an invitation to go and see Maeterlinck at the former monastery of Saint-Wandrille in Normandy, but did not manage to make the trip, explaining that 'I always had something more important to do'.<sup>10</sup> Maeterlinck's various memoirs contain no mention of Sibelius. Might Sibelius later have regretted that he did not accept the invitation?

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<sup>9</sup> Kalima, Eino 1968: Kansallisteatterin ohjissa. Muistelmia 2. WSOY. p. 253.

<sup>10</sup> Levas, Santeri 1992 (1957/1960): Jean Sibelius. WSOY. p. 450.





**Eija Kurki** D. Phil. published her dissertation *Satua, kuolemaa ja eksotiikkaa. Jean Sibeliuksen vuosisadan alun näyttämömusiikkiteokset* (*Fairy-tale, Death and Exoticism. Jean Sibelius's Theatre Music from the Beginning of the 20th Century*) in 1997. She has written numerous articles in various specialist publications both in Finland and internationally (e.g. *Sibelius Studies*, Cambridge University Press 2001). This article is based on the author's doctoral thesis and on other related articles (e.g. the sleeve notes for BIS-918). As the relationship between the play text and the musical numbers is covered in those articles, it is not discussed here.

In her thesis she has examined the origins of Sibelius's music for *Pélleas et Mélisande*, the relationship between the music and the play text, the orchestral suite and the performance history of the première. This article contains new research about later performances, in the 1950s and thereafter.

English version published in *Sibelius One Magazine*, July 2018. Translation: Sibelius One.

I would like to thank the following archives:

*In Austria:*

The Salzburg Festival – The Max Reinhardt Archives.

*In Estonia:*

Estonian National Opera.

*In Finland:*

The Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle), the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, Joensuu City Theatre, the Theatre Museum (and Sakari Puurunen's private archive) and the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland (SLS).

*In Sweden:*

The Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten).

In addition I would like to express my thanks to the actress Anja Pohjola for the interviews I conducted with her during the summer of 2017.

– E. K.