

PELLÉAS AND MÉLISANDE
Music and Libretto by Claude Debussy
Adapted from the play by Maurice Maeterlink

Broadcast Date: August 14, 2023

SYNOPSIS

Act I

The forest.

Golaud, the grandson of King Arkel, is following a wild boar when he comes upon an unfamiliar clearing. He finds a young woman, weeping. She can't explain who she is, or what has happened to her. She remembers only her name: Mélisande. Reluctantly, she follows him out of the dark woods.

The castle. Six months later.

King Arkel is aging and nearly blind. He had planned to marry his grandson Golaud to a princess to settle a long war. But Golaud's mother Geneviève reads him a letter which Golaud wrote to his brother Pelléas. In the letter, Golaud confesses that he has married Mélisande. He fears that the king will not accept his marriage, and asks Pelléas to light the castle lantern if the King is ready to honor the stranger as his daughter. If not, he writes, he will never return. The King reluctantly agrees to accept the marriage.

Pelléas tells King Arkel that he wants to visit a dying friend. The King reminds Pelléas that his own father is just as ill, and advises him to wait for his brother's return with his wife.

Outside the Castle.

Golaud and his bride have returned. Geneviève is showing Mélisande the gardens, but Mélisande is distressed by the darkness of the world she now inhabits.

Pelléas joins them, and they watch a ship set out to a dark, stormy sea. When the Queen leaves them alone, Pelléas tells Mélisande he may be leaving soon on a long journey.

Act II

A fountain in the park called Blind Man's Well.

Pelléas and Mélisande are at the fountain in a thickly wooded spot. She stares at her reflection in the water. Leaning over, her hair falls in. Then her wedding ring slips from her fingers and sinks in the water... just as the clock strikes twelve. Mélisande wonders aloud what she should tell her husband. Pelléas replies: "The truth."

The Castle.

Golaud lies injured: At the stroke of twelve... the same moment the ring fell from Mélisande's hand into the water... Golaud fell from his horse. Mélisande tends to him. But she tells him she is unhappy here, and wants to leave. When he takes her hand, he sees that the ring is missing. He is furious. She claims she lost it by a sea cave. Telling her to take Pelléas with her, he sends her out into the night to look for the ring.

The seashore.

Pelléas brings Mélisande to a grotto on the shoreline, pretending to look for the ring. They see three bearded beggars sleeping in the cave. The place is stalked by the shadow of death. Mélisande is frightened, and they hurry away.

Act III

The castle.

Pelléas comes to say farewell, as Mélisande combs her long, long hair.. Mélisande puts her hand out the window for him to kiss... but as she leans over, her hair falls down. Pelléas caresses it. Golaud appears and scolds them for behaving like children.

Golaud leads Pelléas through the castle's underground vault. A breeze of death blows through the rooms, making both men shudder. Outside again, Golaud demands Pelléas stay away from Mélisande. Now that she is expecting a child, Golaud fears any emotion could unsettle her.

Outside a castle window.

Golaud is questioning Yniold, his young son from a previous marriage. The boy innocently says he has seen Pelléas and Mélisande together, but he has only seen them kiss once.

A light comes on, and Golaud holds the child up to the window to spy on them. Yniold says they are doing nothing, not even talking.

Act IV

A room in the castle.

Pelléas tells Mélisande his father has recovered, so he is finally going away. He asks her to meet him once more... at the Blind Man's Well in the park... and she agrees.

King Arkel tells Mélisande he knows she has been unhappy, but he hopes her youth and beauty will bring a new era of cheerfulness to the castle.

Golaud storms in, angrily. He grabs her hair and throws her to the ground. King Arkel is horrified... Mélisande cries that Golaud must not love her anymore.

Outside the castle gates.

Although they intended to say farewell, Mélisande and Pelléas confess their love for each other.

Golaud watches them. When they kiss, he kills Pelléas, who does not defend himself. Mélisande flees into the night and Golaud follows her.

Act V

A room in the castle.

After giving birth, Mélisande lies in bed. Golaud is inconsolable in his remorse... he wonders aloud if he killed his brother for no reason.

Mélisande awakens as if from a dream, and Golaud rushes to her. He begs her forgiveness, but he also demands to know whether she betrayed him with Pelléas. She replies simply that she loved Pelléas and denies that they were guilty.

Arkel brings Mélisande's new daughter, but she is too weak to hold the baby. She sees only sadness in the infant's face. Then she quietly dies, and King Arkel leads Golaud away.