DEPARTURES from the established conventions in art, as in life, are ordinarily regarded with a suspicion which, one must admit, most often proves to be only too well founded. For while all epoch-making art creations have been more or less revolutionary and have seemed to discard accepted forms, and while it is a tragic fact that the man of genius almost invariably is, in the common phrase, ahead of his time and is more frequently met with ridicule than with tribute, yet the converse is not always true; not all things that seem iconoclastic or ridiculous at the time prove to be works of genius. There is at present in the art world a wave of revulsion against existing art forms that in France amounts to positive hysteria, as evidenced in a certain movement, fortunately not widespread, that crystallizes each year in the exhibit of the Autumn Salon,—a preposterous collection of art abortions in which the subjects portrayed resemble “goops” rather than human beings,—productions such as one might expect from untalented children rioting with paint box and pencil. Needless to state, these degenerate products have no more relation to the impressionism of Manet and Monet than the compositions of the most exaggerated and imitative of the so-called moderns in French, German and Russian music have to the genius of Berlioz, of Wagner and of Tchaikowsky.

This movement of ill-regulated protest exists also in Germany and Austria, and its results,—considerably more within the bounds of art and sanity,—may be studied at the annual international exhibition in the Glaspalast in Munich. Such manifestations of course signify nothing but the degeneracy of the art perceptions of the perpetrator. Yet to reckon the music of Claude Debussy as degenerate art,—as some stern classicists who maintain that the art of music has not progressed beyond Brahms and Beethoven would have us believe,—seems an unjust and narrow severity. To rank “Pelléas et Mélisande” with the great operatic compositions of the world would be an equal error in the other direction. But to deny its beauty seems
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rather to convey the lack of a certain perception of beauty in the critic. Indeed, the objection to this opera seems to be of that nature so common in criticism,—the objection to a thing that is of one class for not being of another. In the field of music it is ordinarily voiced by the exponent of absolute music who is antagonized by the idea of that union of the arts known in the days of Greece as the Art of the Muses. These people commonly characterize opera as a hybrid form of entertainment,—which indeed it often is, but not inevitably.

It is true that these borderland arts do not always exhibit the strongest qualities of either of the arts combined, but if the result is beautiful why not let it exist for the pleasure of those who enjoy it? As Lili Lehmann has said: The test to be applied to an art work is merely—is it beautiful?

The opera "Pelléas et Mélisande," which was first produced at the Opera Comique in Paris, April thirtieth, nineteen hundred and two, is literally Maeterlinck's poetic drama translated into music. It has been described as a departure from all established musical forms and an entirely new development in the field of opera. In a certain sense this is true, and it is undoubtedly the effect the music would produce upon the lay mind at first hearing; yet, like the majority of ultra-modern art works, it is largely reactionary and bears more resemblance to the earliest operatic compositions than to the contemporary forms of the art. The music of Richard Strauss, for example, although wrought out of the composer's mastery of the most complex phases of modern orchestration, will frequently be found to contain the intervals and chord combinations of primitive music. In Debussy's opera, Maeterlinck's text—only slightly altered and adjusted—is delivered in a melodious recitative subtly interwoven with the pattern of the orchestral music; and in this use of recitative it is similar to the first opera written,—Peri's "Daphne," produced in Florence in fifteen hundred and ninety-four. The new art form was first known as dramma per musica. It was not until some fifty years later that it was called opera in musica, and eventually abridged to opera. Two Italian composers,—Monteverde (born in fifteen hundred and sixty-eight) and Lulli (sixteen hundred and thirty-three), —and the French Rameau (born sixteen hundred and eighty-three) developed opera further along this line, introducing the element of melodic beauty. Subsequently it degenerated into a mere florid vocal ornamentation until it passed quite outside the realm of music. From this decadence it was rescued by the noble art of Gluck, who, although a German, found at that time his best opportunity in France. Gluck, returning to the original simpler forms of the first operatic
composers, raised the art to a higher musical plane than it had yet occupied. Wagner, the great operatic reformer, admits that he was strongly influenced by Gluck’s ideals.

The great difference between these early recitativo operas and “Pelléas et Mélisande” lies in the harmonic construction of the modern French opera. The tonal scheme which Debussy has used differs from the established musical forms in not being founded upon what is known as the diatonic scale. It is only at times that Debussy reverts to the usual minor and major modes. But the whole-tone scale, which he employs almost throughout, is evolved from the old Greek and Ecclesiastic modes. The actual scientific effect of this musical construction is to destroy all the ordinary tonal relations, and dispense with the usual modulations or transitional chords by which melody moves from one key to another. The aesthetic effect produced upon the listener—also heightened by the apparent absence of rhythm—is of a restless, wandering, dream-like, apparently formless music which nevertheless, in this association with Maeterlinck’s text, seems so a part of it that afterward the two are inseparable in the mind. The music exists like the background of a sky of changing clouds and lights behind the figures of the shadowy drama. Or, to make a more adequate analogy, it is like a veil of haze or mist between the players and the audience, giving a dreamy sense of the remoteness and unreality of Maeterlinck’s poetic creation. But the music, it must be admitted, is not separable as is the play. It undoubtedly requires the explanation of the text, yet it gives to the play the atmosphere of dream that is probably impossible to a theatrical performance. For these Maeterlinck dramas are delicately and sensitively poised upon the edge of the inexpressible. In the explicit performance it is fatally easy to provoke the unintended smile. Even so intelligent an actress as Mrs. Patrick Campbell has too heavy a touch, too prosaic a presence for Mélisande. Compared with the illusive poetry of Mary Garden’s operatic version, Mrs. Campbell’s Mélisande was hard and unsuggestive. And this would probably be the case with the majority of actors. But in this beautiful production at the Manhattan Opera House the exquisite half-real story moves in its dream atmosphere of mists and shadows, withal so touching that it seems incredible that such a thing could be in a theater. While the creation of this effect is necessarily dependent upon the art of the interpreters, this opera differs from others in that it makes comparatively slight demands upon the voice, for, save for the curious little fragment of a ballad sung by Mélisande at her tower window, practically no singing in the operatic sense is required of her. If this were not the case Mary Garden could scarcely
have created her exquisite *Mélisande*, for her voice is the least of her 
equipment. Nor could Périer—the *Pelléas*—whose voice is far from 
agreeable, have taken his place as he does in the picture. The effect 
of the whole is something outside the realm of opera, yet it remains 
one of the most beautiful of modern contributions to the stage.

IT SEEMS quite incredible that this complete oneness of music 
and text should be the work of two minds. Mr. Walter Dam- 
rosch, who has been lecturing most interestingly upon the opera, 
has characterized Maeterlinck and Debussy in French opera as 
standing opposed to the single figure of Wagner in German opera. 
Wagner conceived the music of his operas as he wrote the text. It 
is small wonder, that being the case, that they should exist as a single 
creation. Debussy, with a slighter and more derivative art, was 
attracted by artistic affinity to the mystic poetic dramas of Maeter-
linck when he came to write an opera, as in his earlier orchestral 
compositions and songs he was drawn to the poems of Verlaine and 
Baudelaire. It is also interesting in tracing his artistic genealogy 
to note that although Debussy himself is entirely French—having 
been born on the very outskirts of Paris—his inspiration is indirectly 
Teutonic, for Maeterlinck is a Flemish Belgian and musically De-
bussy is the descendant of Cæsar Franck the Belgian. Yet in spite 
of the intangible, spiritual Maeterlinck quality embodied in Debussy’s 
etheereal harmonies, they contain also an unmistakably French strain. 
The very incongruity of the daring color combinations is allied to 
the characteristic French use of pigments. And anyone who has 
listened to the street cries of Paris or has noted the musical character 
of the *café chantant* singing must have observed the curious Parisian 
habit of singing a little flat, the trick of slipping below the tone, espe-
cially at the end of the phrase, which seems to be an intentional man-
nnerism. This manner of singing is used by Yvette Guilbert, whose 
interesting work is well known in America; it is definitely suggested 
by Debussy’s intervals and it is deliberately employed by Mary 
Garden. Very much of this effect would become distressing to the 
musician’s ear; but used as it is in “*Pelléas et Mélisande*” it seems 
an harmonious part of the emotional impression. It seems more than 
likely that this musical peculiarity, which is now a definite taste 
with Parisians, had its origin in the fact that the French, who are not 
natural singers, and who disseminate at present a most destructive 
method of voice training, became accustomed to hearing untrue 
singing, just as their taste for sour cream on fruit probably originated 
in the fact that their cream became sour because,—before the intro-
duction of ice by Americans—they had no facilities for keeping it.
CLAUDE DEBUSSY: FROM A PAINTING BY JACQUE BLANCHE.
MARY GARDEN AS "MÉLISANDE" IN DEBUSSY'S OPERA OF PELLÉAS AND MÉLISANDE.
THE three artists who interpreted the principal roles here,—Mary Garden, Dufranne, an excellent actor with a fine voice, and the tenor Pérrier—were in the original Parisian cast. Some trouble arose at the time of that first performance because of Maeterlinck’s desire to have the role of Mélisande given to his wife, Georgette Le Blanc. But after seeing Mary Garden’s performance it is not difficult to understand Debussy’s enthusiasm for her interpretation,—which he has recorded in his dedication to her of a group of Verlaine songs “To the unforgettable Mélisande.”

And Mary Garden indeed seems the very tangible embodiment of Maeterlinck’s mysterious little princess, moving in her world of shadows, pursued by love, haunted by fear,—so often the dominant note in the Maeterlinck dramas. Yet Mary Garden’s voice must have been slight in the beginning and Conservatoire training has not improved it. Neither is it naturally what is known as sympathetic. Nevertheless, as she uses it, it is highly expressive. At the most human moments, expressed in a few broken words as in the final scene with Pelléas—the only real love scene in the opera—she resorts to speech. In one of the basic elements of music,—rhythmic movement,—she has evolved something that is almost a new development of art, a thing not even remotely related either to the Jarley waxwork effect of certain admired Wagner singers, nor to the melodramatic flourish of the Italian singers. She does not naturally possess the spontaneous musical quality of movement that is inborn in Lina Abarbanell, yet each motion is a calculated emotional expression, having diminuendo and crescendo, and the result is an individual art creation. Even in the death of Mélisande,—a thing so in the realm of that which we reckon as too sacred for presentation in the theater—she accomplishes an effect of spiritual beauty without a jarring note. And when one takes into consideration the fact that Miss Garden’s own natural personality is one of tremendous vitality and energetic expressiveness, this seems an almost incredible achievement. The whole rôle of Mélisande, indeed, lies in a temperamental key, one would say, as remote as possible from Miss Garden’s own temperament. Yet she has made of it one of the creations of the modern lyric stage.

Undoubtedly the great success made here by the opera is due to its dramatic and poetic appeal, which enables it to reach a much larger audience than a purely musical work. And much of the credit of this success belongs to Signor Campanari, for in the hands of a lesser artist the delicate values of the score would have been lost and the result would have been monotony. Also a great deal of the credit is due to the excellent stage management at the Manhattan, a thing not
easily achieved in this land of irresponsible workmen and aggressive trade unions.

It IS not easy to foresee how music could develop further along the lines of Debussy’s method. His compositions seem, in spite of their intangible half disturbing beauty, to be more of a manner,—a mood,—than an enduring expression of art. It is impressionism in music, and the pictures are of strangely contrasting colors, principally at the cool end of the spectrum,—abounding in greens, blues and violets, incongruously assorted, yet with consummate art. There is scarcely a warm note in the whole score of "Pelléas et Mélisande." A defect of music constructed upon the tonal basis used by Debussy is its effect of continued restlessness. It never has for a moment the grandeur, repose, nobility, of Schubert, Beethoven or Wagner. And, of course, the fact that Debussy’s music would convey little if separated from the text removes it from the field of absolute music. Grieg wrote his famous Peer Gynt Suite to accompany Ibsen’s play, but the music does not require the play to explain it. Music that requires action and words to convey its meaning is no more in the class with absolute music than the literary picture that requires an accompanying story of explanation,—like the work of Burne-Jones or of Rossetti,—is in the precise class of the art of painting. And ordinarily, as has been said before,—and the work of the painters quoted is a case in point,—this meeting of two arts is a weaker form of expression. The Debussy opera perhaps belongs more by analogy to that borderland of painting and architecture,—mural decoration. It stands upon the boundary between the play and the opera, the music acting as the combining medium that creates the dream and the illusion, the thing too intangible for the explicitness of the spoken word. Whether or not it is a finger post indicating the lines along which French opera will now move is problematic. The French interest in opera seems to lie in its theatrical aspect. Few beautiful voices come out of France and the ear of the majority of the people would seem to be either defective or perverted. Such singers as Plançon, Dufranne and the Calvé that was, are the exception. The interest manifested in Debussy’s opera in Paris seems to have been largely among the foreign residents and the French devotees of the extremely modern music. The picturesque realism of an opera like Charpentier’s “Louise” seems to make a more universal appeal to French taste than the strange colored tapestry of Flemish pattern woven by Maeterlinck and Debussy.