

The Proms Listening Service

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom



DEBUSSY

Pelléas et Mélisande

Where does Debussy's *Pelléas* resonate in later musical history? It's a piece that, as Debussy said, ought to 'stir up catastrophes' and it's music in which the influence of **Wagner** is transmuted and transcended: ghosts of *Parsifal* and *Tristan and Isolde* are liquefied by Debussy's score as he creates a new harmonic language of suspension, ambiguity and half-suppressed horrors in the castle, the cistern and the tower. *Pelléas* also defines a new relationship between music and text, so that the characters seem to speak their words as much as sing them; an illusion borne of the gossamer filaments that bind each syllable of the text to the orchestral sonorities.

The opera's orchestral music is the psychic and emotional revelation of what the characters are going through. In that sense, *Pelléas* marks a crucial stage in the ever-more symbiotic relationship between drama and music in the languages of opera. That's something you hear in recent operas by **George Benjamin** (*Written on Skin* and *Lessons in Love and Violence*, recently premiered at Covent Garden), which both have Debussy as a ghost in their musical machines, just as Wagner was for Debussy.

Pelléas is also a subcutaneous influence on the stage works of Finnish colourist **Kaija Saariaho**, from the monodrama *Émilie*, composed for the soprano Karita Mattila, to *Adriana Mater* and *L'amour de loin*. And every French composer who has composed operas and music theatre after *Pelléas* has had to deal with its influence, either by continuation or conscious difference, from Pascal Dusapin to Betsy Jolas and even **Olivier Messiaen**, whose *Saint François d'Assise*, his only opera, creates a new form of ritualistic music theatre.

Yet *Pelléas*'s influence extends well beyond the opera house to music such as **Pierre Boulez**'s languages of word-setting – or word-liquefaction, dissolution and recomposition. In works such as *Le marteau sans maître* or *Pli selon pli*, his explosively lyrical sets of pieces on the poetry respectively of René Char and Stéphane Mallarmé, Boulez takes Debussy's innovations into new territory. In Boulez's music, the words themselves become reservoirs of heightened drama and surreal signification, so that he can find a world of myth and mystery in the syllables of a single word. *Pelléas*'s forest of Symbolist strangeness continues to be explored through composers' innovations and our listening imaginations.