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## Pelleas and Melisande, op. 5



Title Pelleas and Melisande. Symphonic Poem for Orchestra, op. 5

Time of origin 1902/03

Premiere 25 January 1905, Wien, Großer Musikvereinssaal

Duration ca. 40 min.

"I composed the symphonic poem 'PELLEAS AND MELISANDE' IN 1902. It is, in every respect, inspired by Maurice Maeterlinck's wonderful drama. I tried, with the exception of just a few omissions and minor changes in the order of the scenes, to reflect every single detail. I did perhaps, as it often happens in music, give the love scenes a bit more space." (Arnold Schönberg, liner notes to a recording of "Pelleas and Melisande", 1949).

Schönberg's (post)romantic affinity for programmatic music coincides with the zenith of a compositional genre that had been defined in all its significant aspects by Richard Strauss in the late nineteenth century. The performances of the symphonic poems "Ein Heldenleben", "Also sprach Zarathustra", "Tod und Verklärung" and "Don Juan" (conducted by Gustav Mahler, Hans Richter and Strauss himself) had been objects of public interest and controversial discussion in Viennese concert life since 1892. In the inner circle around Alexander Zemlinsky, who – like his student Arnold Schoenberg – was a declared Brahmsian, these musical encounters led to an artistic reorientation and compositional reaction to subject-related program music: "Mahler and Strauss had burst onto the musical scene, and their appearances were so fascinating, that every musician was immediately forced to take sides, for or against. As I was only 23 years old at the time, I quickly got fired up and set about composing one-movement, uninterrupted symphonic poems on the scale of the models provided by Mahler and Strauss."

The string sextet "Transfigured Night", composed in 1899, had been preceded by the fragmentary studies "Toter Winkel" (also a string sextet, after a text of Gustav Falke), "Frühlingstod" (a symphonic poem after Nikolaus Lenau) and "Hans im Glück" (the brothers Grimm).

Schönberg's first sketches based on Maeterlinck's drama "Pelléas et Mélisande" date back to 1902. At the time he composed this work, which was finished in February of 1903, Schönberg had no knowledge of Gabriel Fauré's "Pelléas" theater music or Claude Debussy's opera, "Pelléas et Mélisande," which was premiered in Paris on 30 April 1902. "I had originally considered composing 'Pelleas and Melisande' as an opera, but later abandoned this plan – although I did not know that Debussy was working on his opera at the same time. I still regret not having realized my original intention. The wonderful aura of that drama might not have been caught to quite the same extent, but I would certainly have brought the characters to life more lyrically." Before the premiere, conducted by the composer, on 25 January 1905 in the Großer Musikvereinssaal – "one of the critics

recommended sticking me in an insane asylum, and storing all music paper well out of my reach" (1949) – Schönberg discussed his score with Gustav Mahler, for whom it "seemed enormously complicated".

Maeterlinck's five-act "Pelleas" drama describes a sequence of situations which string together artificial encounters in associative fashion as heavily symbolic depictions of mood and space. In his interpretation, which takes on the form of a one-movement symphonic poem with an inner, latent multi-movement structure (thus intertwining the sonata form of a single movement with the structure of a sonata with several movements), Schönberg places his focus upon the characters Golo, Melisande and Pelleas and their fateful relationship in an indefinite, placeless and timeless world, in which physical contact is only implied and never comes to pass. The post-romantic tonal expressivity of the grandly dimensioned orchestra is, as Alban Berg ascertains in an analysis, never "purely descriptive," but rather orients itself on the aesthetic concept of understanding the subject not as content, but as a prerequisite for the music. The thematic ideas that distinguish individual scenes and characters – comparable to dramatic leitmotifs – form the building blocks of the symphonic development. It begins with the forest scene that introduces the first movement (Golo meets Melisande and they marry) and leads to the internal sections Scherzo (a scene at the fountain, Melisande loses her wedding ring, she encounters Golo's half-brother Pelleas), Adagio (the farewell and love scene between Pelleas and Melisande, the murder of Pelleas by Golo), and the Finale (the death of Melisande), in which the thematic material is recapitulated. In a letter to his brother-in-law Alexander Zemlinsky, who wanted to shorten "Pelleas" for a Prague performance he was to conduct in 1918, Schönberg summarized the fundamental anchoring points of his Opus 5: "the opening motif (12/8) is linked to Melisande" and is followed by the "fate motif", the Scherzo contains "the game with the ring," the Adagio the "scene with Melisande's hair," and the Finale the "love scene; [...] the dying Melisande" and the "entrance of the ladies-in-waiting, Melisande's death."

Under the impression of the Antony Tudor's ballet version of his "Transfigured Night," which premiered in 1942 in New York as "Pillar of Fire," Schönberg, in American exile, decided for commercial reasons to modify and arrange the "Pelleas" score for ballet as well, by expanding (and simultaneously reducing) the one-movement symphonic poem into a multi-movement suite. Schönberg first spoke of this "bloodstained operation" in early 1947, in a letter to his son-in-law Felix Greissle: "What was decisive for me was that this music, which I consider to be far more progressive than the Gurrelieder and Transfigured Night, which is at least as beautiful [...], will, above all because of its length and the gigantic orchestra required, never be performed. I've planned, therefore, to substantially re-orchestrate it (while preserving the original form), but partition it into a suite of 4–5 movements lasting around 7–10 minutes each." The project failed because Associated Music Publishers, the U.S. representative of the Viennese Universal-Edition, brought bureaucratic hurdles into play to prevent an authorization of the project.

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