

University of Nevada, Reno

Timelessness in French Music: Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

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by

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Abstract

Musicologists have long commented on an absence of progression in much of French music at the end of the nineteenth century, or *fin de siècle*. Throughout this thesis, I will be referring to this as “timelessness” or “stasis.” During the *fin de siècle*, France, as well as much of Europe, was going through a period of rapid change due in part to the international standardization of time and the fallout from the Franco-Prussian war. Artists were grappling with these changes through their art, from literature to music. This thesis will explore the concept of timelessness in French music during this period by looking at two works by Claude Debussy, one of the most well-known composers of the time as well as a lover of symbolist literature. His opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* and his ballet *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* will be analyzed within the contexts of two particular story-telling modes, and can be understood as a reaction against German music where teleological, or goal-oriented, musical processes like tonal harmony dominated music. These collaborative works with Maurice Maeterlinck and Stéphane Mallarmé can be seen as reactions to the various disruptions of French culture, which can give scholars a deeper look into the relationship between art and society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

France at the Turn of the Century: History, Terms, and Concepts

Artists have long commented on the world around them by expressing their opinions through art. During the final years of the nineteenth-century and beginning of the twentieth-century in France, a time period known as the *fin de siècle* by scholars, huge cultural changes were taking place, which sparked inspiration in many French artists. This time was a rough period in French history due to the devastating result of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 (Nichols, Langham Smith, and Grayson 8) and the recent international standardization of time in 1884 (Barrows 22). The cultural changes were happening rapidly and French citizens were yearning for a simpler time, before industrialization and cultural changes.

During the *fin de siècle* in France, an influential literary movement known as symbolism generated a plethora of literature, including poetry and theatrical pieces, that have the potential to be interpreted as critiques on society. The idea behind the symbolist movement was to create literature that could be interpreted in a multitude of ways through the use of symbols. Symbolist writers sought to create symbols out of ideas, characters, objects, and much more by reaching into “a higher reality of the *au-delà*, the world ‘beyond’ the senses” (Taruskin and Gibbs 832). The name symbolism came from the word symbol, a word that has its roots in Greek, and it focuses on one concrete notion that relates to an abstract notion (J. Brown 16-17). Symbolism allowed characters, objects, places, or ideas to take many forms and mean several things at the same time. The meanings behind these symbols could be completely unique to the observer;

symbolists wanted to provide a piece of art that could be interpreted or understood by those who observed the literature. Symbolist writings an interesting genre to analyze and interpret because there are so many opinions and interpretations that can be made by scholars or casual observers.

Some famous writers of this movement include Maurice Maeterlinck and Stéphane Mallarmé, both of whom were known as leaders in the Symbolist movement at different points in time (Taruskin and Gibbs 833, Wenk, *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 35, and Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 148). Maeterlinck wrote the play *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Mallarmé wrote the poem *L'après-midi d'un faune*, both of which are well-known symbolist pieces on their own. Both knew Debussy and both were familiar with Debussy's musical settings of symbolist literature.

Although symbolism was known as a literary movement, there was one particular composer who found a special connection with the literature—Claude Debussy. Debussy was an influential and atypical composer and music critic who inspired a new way of looking at music due, in part, to his personal connections to the Symbolist movement (Trezise 46). Many observers mistook Debussy for a part of the impressionist movement because of his iconic minimalist style and focus on nature, but this notion is far from correct because he associated himself strongly with the ideals of the symbolist movement. Impressionism was an artistic movement that took place at the same time as the symbolist movement, but impressionism dealt with painting rather than literature or music (Taruskin and Gibbs 830). It was one of the many “-isms” present in French culture at the time, and many times artists rejected being defined by one of these terms. The term “impressionism” was insulting when it was first used to describe the art of the

period because it implied very little effort going into the work of the paintings, but the artists who created impressionist paintings, such as Monet and Degas, soon came to embrace the word (Taruskin and Gibbs 830). Some features of impressionist paintings included a focus on nature, quick brush strokes that showed the artist's haste while he painted a fleeting scene, and less attention to detail and more of an emphasis on the general mood of the artwork. Observers mistakenly assume that Debussy's music was connected to the impressionist movement, but in reality he did not identify with the term (Lesure and Langham Smith 17). In 1874, Debussy considered the term "impressionism" to be a word of abuse and "despised the use of the word as an umbrella: '*de symbolists ou d'impressionistes*'" (Lesure and Langham Smith 17). Debussy's personal relationships with Maeterlinck and Mallarmé gained him access to their works, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, which he set to music in his own style (Grayson 16; Code 504). Debussy made Maeterlinck's play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, into his first and only full opera, and he used Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* as the inspiration for his composition, and later ballet, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (Grayson 13; Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 148). Debussy's settings of *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* can be viewed as another layer of societal critique to the art that already existed. Debussy used his unique skills to create two new masterpieces that served as an example of the reaction to philosophies and cultural events of the period.

In his works, Debussy exuded a sense of stasis by using the anti-teleological settings which worked with the music. Philosophically, teleology is a concept that conveys an active advancement toward a goal that would be complete if nothing was to interfere with it (Kroll 2931). This idea is often associated with a religious connotation,

meaning that the goal of life is ultimately to go to heaven. Aristotle even wrote about this term, stating that biological teleology reflects the idea that organisms grow and mature (Cameron 1099). Teleology in French music, however, has had a long history of operating without this concept in action, starting all the way back in the seventeenth-century or earlier (McClary 243), and during the *fin de siècle* this was more pronounced because of the international standardization of time (Barrows 22). The standardization of time put the entire world on a clock, and very few Europeans agreed that it was a good idea to extend the regulation of time to civil life (Barrows 45). The artistic reaction against this was to seek timelessness in the art that artists of the *fin de siècle* created. The anti-teleological nature of music from the seventeenth century shows that the French have explored an anti-teleological approach to music in the past and that it has somewhat lingered in their culture. Debussy was a one-of-a-kind during the *fin de siècle* because of his approach to music and the meaning behind what he did. French philosophers have discussed the idea of time and memory within the context of French culture, both during the *fin de siècle* and after. Two well-known French philosophers who discussed these topics were Pierre Nora, author of the 1996 observation of France's history *Realms of Memory*, and Henri Bergson, author of the 1911 philosophical classic *Matter and Memory*. Bergson was a philosopher during the *fin de siècle* while Nora observed the time period as a point of history. The works of these philosophers are well-known and their concepts of cultural memory are found within French culture. Just as teleology can be applied to life, biology, and culture, teleology can be understood musically, especially in a time when composers like Debussy were experimenting with new ways of portraying stasis in music. In his book *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in*

Twentieth-Century Culture, Leonard Meyer wrote that “the music of the avant-garde directs us toward no points of culmination—[it] establishes no goals toward which to move. It arouses no expectations, except presumably that it will stop” (Meyer 72). This idea about how “avant-garde” or symbolist-inspired music can be directly applied to Debussy’s compositions because they are musically static and directionless. In this context, the term static means that there is a lack of forward progression.

A contributing factor to the timelessness evoked in *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* is how the stories are told. *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* use the storytelling modes of fairy tales and pastoral literature, respectively, both of which have the potential to use anti-teleological techniques. In France, the fairy tale, also known as a *conte de fée*, had a long history that dated back to the Medieval Era (Zipes 34). Throughout its history, fairy tales were recounted orally to all classes of people, such as “wet nurses, governesses, servants, peasants, merchants, priests, and court performers,” but were not deemed worthy of being written down until the 1690s (Zipes 33-34). The reason that these stories were not written down for centuries came about for two reasons: fairy tales were viewed as pagan and unrelated to Christianity, and “until the late eighteenth century, folklore, or local oral culture was associated chiefly with the peasantry and, therefore, had been assigned little prestige,” but after this point, folklore became an important part of a culture’s sense of community (Taruskin and Gibbs 536). After the 1690s, fairy tales and folk stories that were previously associated with peasantry were seen “as embodying the essential authentic wisdom of a . . . nation” (Taruskin and Gibbs 536), and from there, nationalist projects like collecting and writing the folk stories became an important way of defining European countries and the cultures within them (Taruskin and Gibbs 854, 862).

Modernism, a term that was associated with the revolutionary attitude that modern composers in the early twentieth century approach music (Taruskin and Gibbs 786), contributed to the practices of collecting folk tales and setting them to music. Fairy tales were especially intriguing to artists during the *fin de siècle* because of the stories and settings, shown by Maeterlinck's vaguely fairy-tale-like setting of *Pelléas et Mélisande* or Debussy's fairy tale inspired works, "La fille aux cheveux de lin" and "La Belle au bois dormant" (Higgins, Siefert, and Zipes 122). Fairy tales were popular settings for opera because of their timelessness and mysteriousness that provided a dream-like space that composers could play with, which is why Debussy was likely drawn to *Pelléas* in the first place (Higgins, Siefert, and Zipes 122).

The storytelling mode that is present in the narrative of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is pastoral literature. The pastoral mode diverges from that of fairy tales because pastoral stories approached storytelling differently. Fairy tales are known to be about royalty, castles, kings, queens, princes and princesses while pastoral literature focused on peasants and their lives in the countryside (Huth 44). Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* is reminiscent of pastoral literature because of the topic and response to the faun's world. The world was changing at the end of the nineteenth century, and the peasant culture was disappearing (Nora 1). Peasant culture's, or pastoral culture's, response to things happening in the peasant's lives could be "characterized mainly by the tensions between the court and the country" (Huth 44), which is why pastoral literature may have reappeared during the *fin de siècle*, a time of great change in France where people needed to deal with varying cultural events that were outside of the control of those citizens. The years leading up to the Franco-Prussian War and *fin de siècle* were

characterized by “pronounced public and private anxieties” (Forth and Accampo 90), so French culture was calling upon a simpler time. These tensions were attributed to the reaction to a culture that conflicted with their own—German culture.

Tensions were rising between French and German culture after the Franco-Prussian war, causing the two cultures to become more and more different. The aesthetics between the two cultures aimed to achieve very different goals: the French sought beauty while the Germans sought the sublime. The French were interested in creating pleasurable and beautiful music that “restore[d] decorative values and pleasure to a place of honor” while German music was interested in using “maximal extremes” and sublime music that transcended the music itself (Taruskin and Gibbs 822). The fundamental differences between pleasure and sublime diverged French and German music even further apart. A huge part of Debussy’s musical life was in reaction to one of Germany’s most famous composers: Richard Wagner. The two were seemingly opposite of each other in style, yet somehow their differences made them close enough to be compared by several scholars over the years (Holloway 60, 96; Goehr 162). “Debussy often distinguished himself from Wagner by speaking of an aesthetic ‘purified’ of German metaphysics, a purely French return of simplicity of feelings” (Goehr 162). Debussy rejected the notion of one of Wagner’s well-known techniques, known as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that sought to synthesize and unite all art in order to create a unified piece of art known as a music drama (Taruskin and Gibbs 671). Both *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* exude a sense of rejection of German culture by denying tonal progression, the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and focus of sublime in music.

The cultural changes, use of fairy tales and pastoral literature, and rejection of German music ideals all came together to showcase the sense of timelessness evoked in French music as a result of an anti-teleological world, or a world with no forward progression.

Timelessness in French Music

This project explores how timelessness functioned in French music during the *fin de siècle* by looking at Claude Debussy's opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and ballet, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. These topics will be examined within the contexts of modes of storytelling and their reaction to German culture in order to fully understand the meaning behind the anti-teleological techniques that contribute to the feelings of timelessness.

Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, as well as Debussy's compositions, were well known for their timelessness and anti-teleological approaches, which make the stories and music seem as though they are static. The relationship between the philosophical and French approaches to teleology and Debussy's large works are an integral part of understanding this thesis question. It is also important to recognize how opera reacts with musical understanding of teleology. For example, Beethoven and Wagner's compositions were "perceived as having a purposeful direction and goal. As [one] listen[ed], [one could] make predictions...about where the music [was] going and how it [would] get there" (Meyer 71), but Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* did not give listeners the chance to make predictions since those predictions were never satisfied. Though observers may listen for a teleological tonal progression as hard as they can, it is nearly impossible to approach Debussy's music within the context

of tonal harmony. The exploration of the different modes of storytelling along with the differences between French and German culture during the *fin de siècle* come together to understand how the lack of teleology was relevant to French music of the time.

Methodology

The research question is answered by analyzing and synthesizing the secondary literature of varying parts of this thesis topic, from teleology to modes of storytelling. There is a world of critical literature available for every aspect of the topic, yet very few articles or books show how modes of storytelling and the French reaction to German culture can explain a reason behind the sense of timelessness created by the lack of teleological progression present in French music during the *fin de siècle*. This project will serve as a meeting place for select scholars who have discussed teleology, Debussy, *Pelléas*, the *Prélude*, modes of storytelling, or Debussy's relationship with Wagner to come and synthesize their books and articles and gain a greater understanding of French music and culture during this period. The synthesis of the diverse works of these scholars will allow me to analyze Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* as well as Debussy's musical interpretation of these symbolist works within their contexts, which will create a larger understanding of the time period and music.

The purpose of an analysis of works that were written and performed over a hundred years ago comes down to the importance between art and culture. Artists are susceptible to cultural influences from the cultures that they are a part of. Both *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* can be interpreted as reactions to the world around Debussy, Mallarmé,

and Maeterlinck. It is important to understand how important the relationship between art and culture is because art can provide the most revealing, intriguing, and raw depictions of life during any given time. This thesis briefly glimpses into the *fin de siècle* through Debussy's opera and ballet. These collaborative works encompass several layers of interpretation of the society that the artists and theatregoers lived in during the turn of the century.

The Purpose of Musical Excerpts

Musical excerpts are a necessary part of understanding music-based arguments such as those that are found in this project because they can reveal a deeper interpretation that goes further than the words of the literary genre. In order to understand the musical excerpts used in this project, one must understand the semiotic analysis of music, which means the study of the signs and symbols within the music. Several aspects of music can be analyzed to add depth to an argument, such as the tempo, key, instrumentation, rhythm, mode, and use of accidentals. The excerpts throughout the following chapters are specifically chosen to further argue the points of view stated.

Some crucial terms that should be understood before continuing are tonal harmony and chromaticism. Tonal harmony is made up of two components: tones and harmonies. Tones are pitches while harmony is the sound of two or more pitches playing at the same time (Kostka, Payne, Almén xi). Tonal harmony is a term that defines an entire way of approaching music that focuses on a tonal center and features other chords that relate to that tonal center in some way (Kostka, Payne, Almén xiv). The resulting sounds from the chords created with tonal harmony in mind can be either consonant,

meaning pleasing to the ears, or dissonant, meaning displeasing to the ears. The concept of tonal harmony, consonance, and dissonance are important to understand because Debussy's music intentionally avoids this system of organizing sound in an effort to connect to raw emotions rather than established rules of sound. Through this, Debussy will sometimes employ chromaticism, or pitches that are not a part of a key (Kostka, Payne, Almén 244). Debussy's unconventional use of chromaticism made it so that listeners have no idea of the key they are in and therefore do not know what to expect. Debussy did not want listeners focusing on keys and harmonic progressions, but rather the emotions he was creating by avoiding the rules of tonal harmony.

These important musical terms and concepts are essential in understanding how Debussy created a sense of timelessness in his interpretations of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This project is based off of the amount of literature that is available about every aspect of this project—Debussy’s musical settings of *L’Après-midi d’un faune* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the philosophical and musical understandings of teleology, the storytelling modes, and Debussy’s relationship with German culture. This research aids in understanding the relationship between art and culture, which is applicable to many cultures and times. Art and culture are intertwined, and observing the past by looking at one of the most influential composers of the *fin de siècle* can help in understanding the importance between art and how artists interpret the world around them.

The most important aspects of this project lie in the knowledge behind the major concepts. The focus of this project is to observe the sense of timelessness that Debussy used in his music during the *fin de siècle* in France by breaking the concept of timelessness down. The sense of timelessness in Debussy’s music is brought about in the modes of storytelling that were used in the literature that Debussy chose and the differences and reactions to German culture during the turn of the century. The other crucial concept to understand in this project is how timelessness was evoked in the music, and for that, the philosophical concept of teleology will be explored. These concepts can be unified to fully understand the static approach to music during the *fin de siècle*.

The literature for this project was gathered from several different sources, including primary source documents, original scores and libretti, and secondary reactions to the literature and music from well-known scholars in the area. The time period that this project observes took place over a century ago, and since that time, several scholars became experts on the music, literature, and philosophies of the *fin de siècle* because of

its experimental and unique qualities. The historical nature of this project provides the advantage of retrospect since the *fin de siècle* is observed from a time that is completely disconnected from the early twentieth century. The historical advantage allows the recent research as well as the ideas of the time to come together and create something unique. The aim of this project is to take the primary literature, such as the original poem, opera, music, and Debussy's critical writings, as well as the secondary literature, which includes the scholarly sources, and create a meeting place for them to be analyzed and understood from several different points of view.

Though there were not many books or articles that covered every aspect of this project, there was one that provided a historical background for most aspects of the project. Taruskin and Gibbs's book, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, provided definitions, historical contexts, and information on nearly every part of this thesis as a result of its all-encompassing nature. Taruskin and Gibbs's book did not provide many opinions or syntheses, but rather a reliable source of information and facts that make this project stronger.

Thanks to the work of the scholars who studied the time period and the philosophical nature of the *fin de siècle*, their findings can help more people understand the relationship between art and culture, specifically that of French culture in this instance.

Teleology

Teleology is discussed philosophically and musically. It is also important to observe how French philosophers interpreted time. When discussed philosophically,

teleology aims to create an understanding of the world as if there was a goal and purpose to life. Certain scholars throughout time interpreted teleology religiously while others viewed teleology biologically. In France, ideas of teleology came through in how philosophers spoke about time and cultural memory. The French approach to teleology within music and philosophy creates a new understanding for the concept of goal-orientedness. This part of the review aims to address the two different approaches to teleology.

Teleology has been discussed philosophically for thousands of years, and it is still relevant and discussed today. In ancient times, Aristotle discussed teleology biologically and independently of human thought (Cameron 1097). He made the case that teleology was inherent in nature because life was always progressing and that, “it is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe an agent deliberating” (Cameron 1097). The idea of teleology existing in nature is not difficult to grasp, and is related to a religious way of approaching life, but it does not set apart clear goals. If nature is intrinsically goal-oriented, what is the goal? This thought of continuous growth or change introduces the idea of progressive teleology, or an event that would finish itself if the event was not interrupted (Kroll 2943). As Nicky Kroll wrote about in his article on progressive teleology, it is impossible to think of teleology without thinking of interruptions because there is always the potential for internal or external interruptions (Kroll 2943). These are the philosophical approaches to teleology, which discuss the natural progression of nature. The French approach to teleology deals with a social understanding of time and the importance of the past.

Two French philosophers who discussed time and memory in their works are Pierre Nora and Henri Bergson. Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory* discusses the concepts of memory and history from a societal standpoint. An example of the concept of memory is the vanishing of peasant culture, which was a "collective memory whose vogue as an object of historical study coincided with the heyday of industrial expansion" (Nora 1). Peasant culture, despite its historical and societal significance, disappeared with the spread of industrialism, and along with peasant culture, the societal memory of those people (Nora 1). Nora was against globalization because it stripped histories and memories with its "rape of colonization" (Nora 1-2). According to Nora, the only people who can somewhat revive those lost cultures are historians, who bear "the burden of responsibility on behalf of the nation" (Nora 3). Henri Bergson lived through the *fin de siècle* in France, so his philosophical approach makes for an interesting layer of interpretation of the time period. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson clearly distinguishes the concepts of matter and memory, making them two different topics that are related to one another: "The brain is part of the material world; the material world is not part of the brain" (Bergson 4). He also discussed the two kinds of memory, or ways that the past can survive: through "motor mechanisms" or "independent recollections" (Bergson 87). The philosophical understandings of memory that Nora and Bergson discussed provide an important French interpretation of how people viewed the culture in France.

Musical approaches to teleology discuss tonal progression, or logical progression based on feelings of tension and release. Leonard Meyer and Susan McClary both discussed how teleology was used in music and how it can create feelings of timelessness. In Leonard Meyer's book *Music, the Arts, and Ideas* has certain sections

that specifically focus on how music can be static. He mainly focuses on tonal harmony and how its use creates expectations within the music (72). These expectations are something that Western cultures are used to as a result of the music that has been performed and written throughout the lives of those in Western cultures. Meyer labels music that denies audiences of the sense of moving forward as avant-garde because “the music has a static character...[that] goes in no particular direction” (72). Susan McClary goes one step further by directly applying this sense of stasis to French music of the seventeenth century in her book, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music*. She stated that

Today’s musicians encountering French seventeenth-century music often experience it chiefly in terms of lack: they listen in vain for teleological tonal progressions (‘its harmony aimless’) [or] patterns of motivic reiteration (‘its texture without unity’)... the very ingredients we have learned through our theoretical training to notice. Instead, this music arrests the attention with an ornament here, a sudden flurry and cessation of activity there, making it difficult or impossible to play the games of speculation and anticipation we usually bring to music of this and subsequent periods (McClary 243).

Though McClary was speaking about seventeenth-century French music, her explanation on how to observe French music is still applicable to the *fin de siècle* because of the music’s uniquely French character that has been present in French music for several centuries. This project will show the way that Debussy used these static strategies during the *fin de siècle* and how it was an innovative because of the cultural contexts surrounding the time period. Meyer and McClary’s writings on the absence of teleology in music give a larger context to discuss how Debussy used these strategies in his own music.

Teleology and its absence are powerful in music, and Debussy chose two works that were able to provide him with static stories and characters. Both of the genres that *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* come from were equally important in creating the timeless nature of Debussy's music.

Modes of Storytelling

Modes of storytelling explain the way in which a story is told. There are two main modes of storytelling that will be discussed within the context of this project: fairy tales and pastoral literature. Both of these genres/modes are crucial to the understanding of the larger works, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The works of the authors who wrote about these two modes will be evaluated and discussed in this section.

Fairy Tales

One of the most important scholars who discusses fairy tales is Jack Zipes. He has written several works on fairy tales and two of them are used in sections that discuss *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*, Zipes provides backgrounds of both French and German fairy tales, from the times that they were just oral traditions all the way to the way that they affected the cultures that they came from (Zipes 34). The history of fairy tales provides a difference between French and German traditions. Zipes's *When Dreams Came True* and *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* contextualize *Pelléas* as both a play and an opera because of the amount of information that is covered between the two. Zipes started

historically, describing how France's relationships with fairy tales and the fantastic started orally in the Middle Ages until they were deemed respectable enough to be inducted into the culture as written works (Zipes 34). Maria Tatar's *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* provided annotated interpretations of well-known fairy tales that contextualized *Pelléas et Mélisande* through other stories. Zipes's and Tatar's historical and contextual works serve to contextualize Debussy's and Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, bringing the magic and timelessness to life within the large work.

Pastoral Literature

Pastoral literature provides an important way of understanding the peasant culture in France, as well as the rest of Europe, during and before the *fin de siècle*. Pastoral literature was used in Mallarmé's storytelling in *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. Books, responses, and articles from some of the experts of pastoral literature are also used in order to remain accurate when discussing the *Prélude*. Some of these authors include Kimberly Huth, William Empson, Andrew Ettin, and Paul Alpers. This project uses examples of stories from the most well-known pastoral author—Virgil, who wrote the celebrated Eclogues.

Kimberly Huth described pastoral literature as a form of art that provided a sense of “fellowship and belonging” to the peasants of France and other pastoral communities like England during the heyday of pastoral literature (Huth 44-45). Pastoral storytelling was a social act that the community shared in, making this mode of storytelling an important part of pastoral history (Huth 45). In her article, *Come Live With Me and Feed My Sheep: Invitation, Ownership and Belonging in Early Modern Pastoral Literature*, when speaking about the importance of genres, Huth stated that “genres not only depict

community but also comment on it, for genres codify and institutionalize the most important and valued speech acts in the discourse of any given society” (45). The pastoral genre was an important part of peasant culture, which can be linked to Pierre Nora’s ideas about the importance of memory within a culture. Pastoral literature tells scholars about the time period and how literature was used amongst peasants. In relation to Mallarmé’s *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, William Empson wrote in his book *Some Versions of Pastoral* that when discussing “The Garden” by Andrew Marvell, the difference between conscious and unconscious states depends upon the intelligence of the observer (Empson 119). In *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, it is difficult to decipher what the faun is experiencing and whether or not it is all a dream or reality, so a high level of attention is required to interpret the poem.

Andrew Ettin’s book *Literature and the Pastoral* and Paul Alpers’s book *What is Pastoral?* provide theories as to how scholars discuss the pastoral mode/genre all together. Both argue that pastoral literature should be interpreted as a mode instead of a genre depending on the definitions scholars used for either word (Alpers 44 and Ettin, 58). The difference between mode and genre is important to distinguish the way that pastoral literature is discussed, which is an important part of this project because the way Mallarmé used pastoral literature in his poem, *L’Après-midi d’un faune*.

The significance of pastoral literature is that it is very telling of the past. The French were striving for a connection to the past that they could grasp during a time of change. The culture that can be interpreted as immediately threatening to French culture during the *fin de siècle* was German culture.

Relationship Between French and German Culture

The relationship between France and Germany was tense after the Franco-Prussian war ended in 1871, and the tension was carried out in the culture. Musically, French musicians like Debussy commenting on the time were particularly drawn to Wagner because he symbolized German ideals. Debussy, at one point, was a believer in the Wagnerian formula of tension and release, but he soon realized that he no longer agreed with the Wagnerian approach to music (Lesure and Langham Smith 74). Germans are credited with having many canonized musicians, like Beethoven, Bach, Handel, and many others, who helped define musical art (Taruskin and Gibbs 476). This strong musical background was, and still is, a prized piece of German culture.

The differences between French and German music around the time of the *fin de siècle* is found in the goals of the music. In German music, composers sought to reach for the sublime, which was a concept that reached higher than human intellect, a dark and rugged approach to music that favored those who led difficult lives (Taruskin and Gibbs 466). French composers and musicians were more interested in creating music that was beautiful and naturalistic (Taruskin and Gibbs 466). The natural world was a huge source of inspiration for Debussy because there was so much to interpret (J. Brown 9). This inherent cultural difference between countries that are so close to one another affected their cultures.

Because of Debussy's denial of Wagnerian approaches to music, Debussy and Wagner are often compared. Scholars like Robin Holloway and Lydia Goehr use Debussy's and Wagner's similarities as a source of inspiration in their writings. Robin Holloway's book *Debussy and Wagner* explored the difference between Debussy's and

Wagner's operatic formulations, storytelling techniques, and musical techniques (Holloway 50, 60). Lydia Goehr's *Radical Modernism and the Failure of Style: Philosophical Reflections on Maeterlinck-Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande* is an article that discusses the differences between the two artists, arguing that Debussy was a Wagnerian commentator because of his deliberate use of Wagnerian musical forms (60). Wagner is a part of Debussy's works because of Debussy's denial of German ideals, which makes for a deep connection between the two cultures.

Pelléas et Mélisande

The opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* serves as the subject for numerous books, articles, and analyses by scholars studying Debussy or French culture because *Pelléas* was Debussy's lone opera. Its genesis and development has been studied and analyzed because of its unique Belgian origins and unique approach to the operatic world. Some of the most well-known scholars in the area include Arthur Wenk, Lydia Goehr, and Katherine Bergeron. These authors have contributed knowledge and analysis to discovering more about Debussy and his effect on the *fin de siècle*.

In his book *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music*, Arthur Wenk analyzes the different parts of *Pelléas*, from its orchestration to its use of modes and scales (35, 43). In regards to Debussy's connection to Wagner, Wenk wrote that *Pelléas* can be interpreted "as a fulfillment of Wagner's aesthetic theories more faithful than any of his own music dramas, or as an anti-Wagnerian treatise" (*Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 37). His theories, observations, and musical analysis made this book an integral part of this project.

Lydia Goehr's *Radical Modernism and the Failure of Style: Philosophical Reflections on Maeterlinck-Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande* goes beyond Wenk's observations and came up with a theory as to why *Pelléas* was a "necessary failure of style" because the opera's purpose was different from normal, modernist art that commented on culture (59). Her analysis of the works contributes to this project because of its approach to Debussy and Wagner.

Katherine Bergeron's approach to *Pelléas et Mélisande* provides a unique analysis of the characters in her essay, "Mélisande's Hair, or the Trouble in Allemonde: A Postmodern Allegory at the Opéra-Comique." In her opinion, Golaud, Mélisande's husband and prince of the static Allemonde, as "the only character who acts because he is in fact the drama's only *character*" because the entire play/opera can be viewed as a psychological trip in Golaud's mind (Bergeron 163). She goes as far as to say "Allemonde begins to look like the silent, interior kingdom we call the mind" (Bergeron 164) and that *Pelléas et Mélisande* has little to do with the title characters and focuses on "the suffering—one might even say the neurosis—of Golaud" (Bergeron 166). She even blamed Golaud's troubles on Mélisande (Bergeron 166). Because of symbolist goals in music that encouraged individual understandings of their art, Bergeron's interpretation of the drama is valid and contributes to the symbolist ideal. Her interpretation gives a reason for the timelessness within the music.

Maeterlinck's and Debussy's *Pelléas* has the ability to be interpreted in so many different ways, making the opera a diverse piece of art that continues to fascinate scholars and theater-lovers like. Another influential piece comes from Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, interpreted by Debussy into the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

The *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is an inspirational collaborative piece among Mallarmé, Debussy, and Nijinsky, giving it several ways to be interpreted.

This work has been interpreted, analyzed, and observed so many times in the last century, and a plethora of scholars have written work about this piece. Some literature that is used in this project comes from Arthur Wenk and David Code.

One particular poem that is compared to *L'Après-midi d'un faune* is Jonathan Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The *Prélude* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* are anti-teleological because the main characters cannot reach goals that do not exist. Klaus Hofmann commented on the *Ode*'s static nature by saying:

The notion of stillness and silence will return as a leitmotif throughout the poem... The stasis, which keeps those figures 'for ever' in their position and from achieving what they aspire to, is brought about by their being frozen into an image, while the urn's stillness is qualified by the ambiguity of the word 'still' which... suggests the temporality of 'not yet.' The urn is, after all, subject to the ravages of time (275)

Hoffmann's opinion is directly related to the faun's experience of time which connects to the teleological approach.

Arthur Wenk's work extends beyond Debussy's *Pelléas*. He wrote and interpreted Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* within the context of Debussy's composition, making him a scholar to be consulted for most of Debussy's works. Wenk's book *Claude Debussy and the Poets* sought to explore Debussy's relationships with different symbolist poets, which perfectly describes the relationship between Mallarmé and Debussy (*Claude Debussy and the Poets* 148).

David Code's contribution to the interpretation of Mallarmé's and Debussy's collaborative work focuses on how the faun's body is viewed. He made an argument about the faun's body in his article *Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé: Music après Wagner in the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The faun's lower body is "a symbol of his sexual desire" and his upper body is a symbol of the faun's humanness, or "mental processes that intervene between desire and its complete, animal satisfaction" (Code 499-500). This view of the faun's body correlates to Debussy's use of orchestration (Code 509).

The various interpretations and analyses that these authors provide give scholars and readers a deeper look into the time period of the *fin de siècle*, poetry, and artistic analysis, making every opinion necessary in coming to conclusions within this project.

Conclusion

All of these works are puzzle pieces that are put together to view how timelessness was evoked in French music during the *fin de siècle* culturally, historically, philosophically, and artistically. It can be concluded that this time period's rapid cultural change and history of static music can truly show why Debussy's music made sense during the time and how he was able to find the inspiration for the music for *Pelléas* and the *Prélude*.

As one can see from the literature available on this topic, there is no one piece that combines modes of storytelling and the French reaction to German culture and cultural events in order to prove the anti-teleological world that French music of the *fin de siècle* creates. This is where the research question comes in: how is the sense of

timelessness evoked in French music by looking at Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*? All of the literature in this review and so much more is absolutely necessary in understanding how timelessness is evoked in Debussy's music during the *fin de siècle*, and the works of these scholars come together to create a diverse understanding of the music in France during that point in its history. The beginning of the twentieth century was such an innovative time, filled with change, reactions, and art, and the effects of these cultural changes can still be found in France, and the rest of the world, today. This project focuses on the research of literature from the areas of teleology, reaction to German literature, and literature on the opera and ballet themselves, combining them with each other and analyzing within the contexts of existing literature. This project will simply add another voice to the wealth of knowledge about Debussy, the *fin de siècle*, and French music at the turn of the twentieth-century.

Chapter 3: Analysis of *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Symbolism and the Stage: The Development of *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Debussy's only operatic work *Pelléas et Mélisande* was a personal feat that became "a major turning point in [his] career" (Grayson 13). Debussy's musical interpretation of Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande* blended a combination of fairy tale influence with the rejection of German ideals to represent the absence of progressive teleology throughout the entire opera from the storyline to the music.

Pelléas et Mélisande was written by Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian playwright who was deemed the leader of the symbolist literary genre after Stéphane Mallarmé died (Taruskin and Gibbs 833). He was a man with "a distinct attraction for fantasy, dreams, and the imaginary throughout his oeuvre" (Higgins, Siefert, and Zipes 310). His play was published in May of 1892, and the first performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande* was held in Paris on May 17, 1893 (Grayson 13). *Pelléas et Mélisande* was one of the first five plays that Maeterlinck wrote in the 1890s, all of which "are loosely legendary and medieval in setting" (Nichols, Langham Smith, and Grayson 2). During the years leading up to the *fin de siècle*, Maeterlinck's plays replaced action with "passivity, inertia, uncertainty, and waiting" (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 36), all of which are anti-teleological in nature. Debussy attended a viewing of the play in 1893 and was inspired to set it to music near the end of that year (Grayson 16 and Lesure and Langham Smith 75). Unfortunately, Debussy's progress of the piece was disjointed due to his other projects. The process of finding a stage for his production once it was written proved to be difficult and took several years (Grayson 26-36, 39). There was also a dramatic

conflict between Debussy and Maeterlinck because they did not agree with the casting of the heroine (Grayson 61). Though Maeterlinck promised Debussy full artistic freedom with his libretto (Grayson 56), the role of Mélisande served as the object of dispute between the two men. Maeterlinck was set on having his mistress, Georgette Leblanc, playing the role of Mélisande, but Debussy cast another woman, Mary Garden, who Grayson argued captured the essence of the fated heroine, Mélisande, because of her origin in northern Scotland (Grayson 55, 60-61). During her audition for the part of Mélisande, Garden was abruptly abandoned in the room by Debussy, who demanded his casting partner to tell him where she was from (Grayson 61). Upon learning that Garden was born in northern Scotland, Debussy exclaimed, “She’s the one!... She is my Mélisande!” and then he promptly returned to the audition room and told Garden, “To think that you had to come from far North to create my Mélisande—because that’s what you’re going to do, Mademoiselle” (Grayson 61). Her Scottish origins are significant because Scotland closely resembled Debussy’s idea of Allemonde, meaning that Mary Garden embodied the character of Mélisande down to her roots. Maeterlinck may have been upset at the time, but several years later he admitted that everything about Debussy’s setting of his play, including the casting of Mary Garden, was perfect, even if he could not bring himself to admit it at the time (Goehr 58). The opera premiered on April 30, 1902, nearly a decade after the idea for its musical interpretation was born in Debussy’s mind.

Debussy’s lone opera is often compared to *Tristan und Isolde*, the famed opera by Germany’s Richard Wagner (Holloway 60). Their stories have many parallels, including the tropes about forbidden love and jealousy (Taruskin and Gibbs 833). Although there

are many similarities, scholars have noted significant differences between Debussy and Wagner. Lydia Goehr noted in her work *Radical Modernism and the Failure of Style* that *Pelléas* is known as the anti-opera of Wagner's *Tristan*, or a "modernist and symbolist musical drama" that serves as the anti-thesis of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (58), the all-encompassing artistic work that Wagner was known for (Taruskin and Gibbs 671). Both the similarities and differences between Wagner and Debussy create an unbreakable link between the two that so many scholars have observed (Holloway 60, Goehr 64, Taruskin and Gibbs 833, Abbate 141), so much so that "Debussy may be considered a Wagnerian commentator" (Abbate 141). Debussy's opinion of Wagner was complicated, but regardless of his peers' attraction to Wagner's music, Debussy's opinion of Wagner's nineteenth-century style was: "Wagner, if I may be permitted to express myself with the pomposity befitting him, was a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn. There will always be periods of imitation and influence, but one can never foresee how long they will last, still less their nationality" (Trezise 46 and Lesure and Langham Smith 83). Debussy viewed Wagner as an influential composer who marked the end of an era rather than the beginning of it. He believed that his approach to music, the anti-teleological, nature-based approach, would mark the transformation of music out of Wagner's old-fashioned era. However, the differences and similarities between Debussy's *Pelléas* and Wagner's *Tristan* represent the tension between French and German culture. Sometimes, Debussy's rejection of Wagner's ideals brought them closer together, which is why *Pelléas* and *Tristan* can easily be compared to one another (Goehr 64).

Frenchmen and Germans were fascinated with fairy tale stories. *Pelléas* undeniably exhibits a fairy tale quality in the story and setting, or at least an atypical fairy

tale. The land of Allemonde (whose name sounds peculiarly similar to Allemagne, the French word for “Germany”) is a dark and static kingdom that is vaguely related to the fairy tale genre. This play was a particularly interesting choice for Debussy because of its sterile setting and static character development along with the fairy tale-ness of the work. Fairy tales and opera have a long history, going back at least 200 years, “Fairy tales have provided a rich source of inspiration for composers when selecting objects for their works” (Higgins, Siefert, and Zipes 360). The works that came as a result of these fairy tale-inspired stories reflected “contemporary tastes in music and drama, styles in singing, and scale of production. Opera has seldom been free from controversy” (Higgins, Siefert, and Zipes 360). Debussy’s *Pelléas* embodies all of these ideas about fairy tales: the symbolist-inspired nature of the piece decided the contemporary taste in the story and music, the style of singing matched the dream-like, teleologically-absent orchestration, and the production was fairly small compared to the Wagnerian sets. The opera is full of controversy because of its strangely anti-teleological nature, which was a reaction to the controversial changes in society at the time. The choice to use such a setting was precisely what Debussy, as well as society, needed at the time.

Both the reaction to German culture and the use of a fairy tale setting come together to showcase Debussy and Maeterlinck’s lack of teleological progression in the music and the story. In Susan McClary’s *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music*, McClary writes about how French music and stories are simply “a series of events connected...only on a moment-by-moment basis” (243). McClary’s idea can be applied to *Pelléas* because her observation about how French music seemed to encompass a series of moments following one another, with no direct goal in sight. In the opera, the

only unifying thread that moves the story of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in any way is Golaud. Golaud initiates all actions throughout the opera, creating a string of events like when he marries Mélisande or threatens and kills Pelléas in the final scene, but even Golaud does not seem to be going towards a feasible goal. He seems to be surrounded by events that occur for no meaning.

Pelléas is one of Debussy's most well-known works because it embodies his ideals during this period in history. He never composed another opera, which makes *Pelléas* his longest and most meticulous work. Every part of this piece can be analyzed within the philosophical context of teleology, from the characters to the setting, because *Pelléas et Mélisande* captures Debussy's iconic style that was inspired by the Symbolist movement.

Timelessness in Fairy Tales: An Analysis of Maeterlinck's Libretto

Maeterlinck's original play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, is similar to the one that Debussy set to music—the only difference is that Debussy cut a few scenes. The original story focuses on Mélisande and Golaud, who first meet in the middle of a forest where they both appear to be lost. Mélisande is a mysterious woman from far away, and her origin is all that is known about her throughout the opera. Golaud is the prince of the war-crippled Allemonde who invites Mélisande to find their way through the forest together. The two end up marrying and returning to Allemonde, where Mélisande meets Golaud's half-brother, Pelléas. As the title of the story suggests, the two fall in love, but their relationship does not encompass an overwhelmingly passionate love like one would see in a normal play or opera; it is almost child-like and innocent. Golaud has a sneaking

suspicion that the two are falling in love. Eventually, Mélisande becomes pregnant with Golaud's child and gives birth to a baby boy, Yniold. Later in the play, Yniold is recruited by his father, Golaud, to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande through the window to see if Mélisande is being unfaithful. Pelléas and Mélisande's interaction in Mélisande's room seems innocent and Yniold decides that he does not want to spy anymore. Eventually, Golaud's rage overtakes him, and at the end of the play, he kills Pelléas while Mélisande slips away silently (Maeterlinck).

Two scenes are significant in showing Maeterlinck's link to symbolism, fairy tales, teleology, and rejection of German culture. The first scene introduces the audience to the world of static Allemonde and the scene where Yniold spies through the window exemplifies the connection to childhood and fairy tales. The first is the opening scene of the play when Golaud finds Mélisande in the middle of the forest. In this scene, she was very serious and did not give any indication of who she really was, where she came from or why she was in the middle of the forest alone. Every time she was posed with a question, she would reply with a vague answer or phrase that did not respond to the question, and she would repeat it multiple times. An example of this dialogue between the two is when Golaud asked why she was alone.

Golaud: Pourquoi pleurez-vous ici toute seule?

Mélisande: Ne me touchez pas ! ne me touchez pas!

Golaud: N'ayez pas peur...Je ne vous ferai pas...Oh! Vous êtes belle!

Mélisande: Ne me touchez pas! ne me touchez pas! ou je me jette à l'eau...

(Maeterlinck 7)

Golaud: Tell me what has made you cry all alone here ?

Mélisande: No, no, touch me not ! No, no, touch me not !

Golaud: Be not afraid...I will do you no harm...Oh! You are so fair!

Mélisande: No, no, touch me not, or I shall throw me in [the water]! (Chapman 7)

Another example includes:

Golaud : Qui est-ce qui vous a fait du mal?
 Mélisande : Tous! tous!
 Golaud : Quel mal vous a-t-on fait ?
 Mélisande : Je ne veux pas le dire! Je ne veux pas le dire!... (Maeterlinck 7-8)

Golaud: Who is it that has done you a wrong?
 Mélisande: All! all!
 Golaud: And what wrong have they done?
 Mélisande: No, no, I will not tell you! No, no, I cannot tell you! (Chapman 7-8)

Mélisande repeats the words “enfui,” or “away,” “loin,” or “far,” “oui,” or “yes,” and “non,” or “no” (Maeterlinck and Chapman 8-10) several times, further showing her childish nature. Arthur Wenk mentions in his book, *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music*, that “Maeterlinck invented a new language of short, childlike sentences, exclamations, frequent questions, endless repetitions, implications between the lines, silences, *non sequiturs*, in a formed dialogue” (36), all of which we can see in these examples. Mélisande’s vagueness in her origins also show how closed off and empty she is compared to Golaud.

Mélisande: Je suis perdue! ...perdue ici...Je ne suis pas d’ici...Je ne suis pas née là...
 Golaud: D’où êtes-vous ? Où êtes-vous née ?
 Mélisande: Oh ! oh ! loin d’ici...loin...loin... (Maeterlinck 8)

Mélisande: And I am lost here!... am lost here!... oh! oh! Here I am lost... I do not belong here... ’Tis not where I was born...
 Golaud: Whence did you come? Where were you born?
 Mélisande: Oh! oh! far from here...far...far... (Chapman 8)

Golaud easily and openly shares his background, showing the stark difference between the two characters from the very beginning. Golaud states, “Je suis le prince Golaud—le petit-fils d’Arkël, le vieux roi d’Allemonde...” (Maeterlinck 9), or “Golaud, Prince Golaud am I—and of Arkël, old king of Allemonde, I’m the grandson” (Chapman 9).

The interaction between Mélisande and Golaud does not accomplish much because Mélisande refuses to participate in sharing any information about herself. She remains mysterious and static throughout the entire play; the audience is never enlightened about any part of her life. She is simply empty and lacks character development.

The opening scene of the play follows a fairy tale formula where a prince finds a young woman in distress who decides to marry the beautiful stranger. For example, in the story of Snow White, when the prince first laid eyes on her, she begged the dwarves to give him the coffin with the beautiful girl. When they refused to sell it to him, he replied, “Make me a present of it, for I can’t live without seeing Snow White. I will honor and cherish her as if she were my beloved” (Tatar 93). Just like Golaud, Snow White’s prince is overtaken with her beauty, even though neither of them knew anything about the other. It seems like Mélisande and Snow White are only desired for their beauty since the prince, in both fairy tales, knew nothing about the woman that they desired. In *Pelléas*, however, the story started with the marriage between the prince and his maiden rather than using the marriage as a happy ending. Unfortunately, for all of the characters involved, there is not happy ending in sight.

This first scene never moves forward, but rather sounds like a broken record. Golaud continuously asks questions that Mélisande hardly answers, leading them around in circles until Mélisande grudgingly accepts Golaud’s invitation to follow him through the forest. This storyline is a stark contrast to Wagner’s *Tristan*, which was full of emotion while *Pelléas* meanders around any serious topics. Her character, just like the setting in the forest and the staleness in the plot, all prove to be anti-teleological. In the

following scene, which gives an example of the relationship between Pelléas and Mélisande, the connection between *Tristan* and *Pelléas* is seen more clearly.

The second scene displays the connection between symbolism, fairy tales, and the denial of German culture. In the dialogue between Golaud and Yniold, Golaud tells his son, to spy on Pelléas and Mélisande when he suspects an affair between the two. Golaud asks Yniold several questions, like, “De quoi parlent-ils quand ils sont ensemble?” (Maeterlinck 32), or, “About what do they speak of when they are together?” (Chapman 32), “Pelléas et petit-mère ne parlent-ils jamais de moi quand je ne suis pas là?...” (Maeterlinck 32), or, “Pelléas and your little mother—don’t they sometimes talk of me when I am not with them?” (Chapman 32), and “Ah!...Et que disent-ils de moi?” (Maeterlinck 32), or, “Ah! And what do they say of me?” (Chapman 32). Golaud continues to prod Yniold with questions that the young boy hardly has the attention span to understand. Finally, Golaud gets an answer that he was waiting for: Yniold confirmed that Mélisande and Pelléas have kissed. He feverishly presses his young son to give a detailed description of the kiss, and Yniold responds with:

“Comme ça, petit-père, comme ça!...*Il lui donne un baiser sur la bouche; riant.* Ah! Ah! votre barbe, petit-père...*Elle pique! elle pique! Elle devient tout grise [...]* *La fenêtre sous laquelle ils sont assis, s’éclaire en ce moment, et sa clarté vient tomber sur eux.* Ah! ah! petit-mère a allumé sa lampe. Il fait clair, petit père; il fait clair.” (Maeterlinck 33-34)

“Why just like this, dearest father, just like this... (*Laughing he gives him a kiss on the mouth*) Oh, oh, it’s your beard, dearest father! How it pricks me, how it pricks me! Oh, and how gray it is growing[...] (*The window under which they are sitting is lighted up and the light falls upon them.*) Oh! look! My little mother has lighted her lamp now. There’s a light, dearest father, there’s a light” (Chapman 33-34)

Golaud proceeded to lift Yniold to peek in the window to spy on the lovers. Yniold confirms that Pelléas was in the chamber with his mother, but they are not touching, speaking, or even going near one another. Yniold reports, “Ils regardent la lumière” (Maeterlinck 35), or “They are looking at the lamplight” (Chapman 35). Golaud becomes so infuriated that he starts to hurt and frighten his son. Yniold demands that he be released, so Golaud puts him down and the scene ends.

Just like in the scene from Act I, Yniold resembles his mother by avoiding the questions that his father asks him. The difference between Yniold and Mélisande, however, is that Yniold is a child and is expected to answer innocently while Mélisande is a grown woman who cannot seem to connect properly with an adult. This behavior contributes to her static nature, locking her into the fairy tale realm. Golaud is surrounded by people who cannot seem to give him direct answers and it seems like he is trapped in current that will not allow him to move forward without resistance.

Yniold’s action of peeking through the window serves as another layer of innocence that Golaud cannot get through on his own. Golaud is not tall enough to see through the window himself, so when Golaud lifts his son, the jealous husband has no choice but to interpret the scene through the eyes of a child. This story somewhat resembles Jack and the Beanstalk where the child, Jack, is the only one who believes that the magic beans will turn into a tall stalk by morning and he is the only person who could peer into the world of the ogres (Tatar 136). Children are known to have a sense of wonder and belief in magic. Yniold is the only child present in *Pelléas*, serving as the only truly innocent character in the story. He does not see what Golaud wants him to see. When Golaud asked Yniold if his mother and Pelléas ever ask him to leave and play

while they are together, he says that they have never sent him away while he was with them (Maeterlinck 33). Yniold observes the world as a child while Golaud interprets the interactions between his wife and half-brother through a layer of innocence.

Pelléas and Mélisande's relationship in this scene is very different than the relationship between Tristan and Isolde in Wagner's *Tristan*. Though the audience cannot see Pelléas or Mélisande in this scene, it is clear that their relationship is the opposite of the longing, sensual romance that Tristan and Isolde are known for. Tristan's relationship with Isolde is fueled by desire, while the only person in *Pelléas* with a powerful desire for another person is Golaud's lust for Mélisande. He loves Mélisande, yet she never evokes a sense of passion toward Golaud or even Pelléas. Wagner was a huge part of German culture, so doing the complete opposite in such a relatable manner certainly served as another reason Debussy found inspiration this particular play.

These scenes give insight into how Maeterlinck's play in itself calls upon fairy tale techniques and denies the teleological progression that is seen in German storytelling.

Symbolist and Non-Symbolist Personalities: Analysis of Characters

Pelléas et Mélisande does not feature a large array of characters like many operas. There is no chorus, there are no large crowds of people, and there is not a large number of lead characters, which gives a considerable amount of weight to the characters that do exist. All of the characters in *Pelléas* play crucial roles in the story both narratively and symbolically. Three characters that clearly embody the symbolist aesthetic from the *fin de siècle* include the opera's lead heroin, Mélisande, her husband, Golaud, and her son,

Yniold. All of these characters are worlds apart from each other, both in age and in disposition, yet they all come together to capture the symbolist appeal.

Mélisande is the beautiful, fated heroine of Debussy's opera. She is known for her childlikeness, beauty, and mysteriousness. From the very beginning, Mélisande hardly speaks full sentences and reacts to her surrounding in a childlike manner—with fear or awe. Her physical appearance and disposition are reminiscent of a fairy tale setting since she seems to be a lost princess or maiden in distress. Her beauty serves as the reason she continues to get in trouble in Allemonde. Other than her outward appearances, she has no personality and serves as a blank slate for whatever the men in her life wish for her to be. An example of her manipulability is when Golaud whisks her out of the forest and marries her or when Pelléas takes hold of her hair and refuses to let go because he is so in love with her. Her beauty is a symbol of “unsayability, indescribability, [and] ineffability” (Goehr 57). Being a blank slate leads to a life where Mélisande “is imprisoned in a world (Allemonde) where only men have power and are free to love or brutalize” (Parks 169). Mélisande is known as “one of opera's supremely unfulfilling heroines” (Bergeron 160). In the scene where she dies, she “is wounded, although not completely snuffed out. Indeed, if desire has neither beginning nor end it can never completely die” (Bergeron 185). This displays Mélisande and her anti-teleological life. If she did not desire to succeed or progress, live or die, she was anti-teleological in nature, which means that her death lacked any teleology. She “simply slips away” (Bergeron 185) and dies just like how she lived. Her death is a stark contrast from Isolde, who is extraordinarily teleological in nature along with the rest of her story. *Tristan* is all about tension and release, moving towards a goal and not achieving it for quite some time

(Taruskin and Gibbs 678) while *Pelléas* has nothing to do with any teleological progression—there is never a set goal or purpose to the story or the main character, Mélisande.

Golaud, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of Mélisande and has more of a grasp on reality. He is set up as “*l’homme matériel*, the practical man” (Bergeron 163). He is clear and precise in what he wants and who he is, “the one character who can always be counted on to have his feet planted firmly on the ground, he appears genuinely out of place in the dreamland of Allemonde” (Bergeron 162). In the opera itself, Arthur Wenk argues that Golaud is represented by the horn, which indirectly represents darkness and death (*Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 44). On the other hand, Mélisande is said to represent life (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 36). Golaud looks past the beauty and timelessness in Allemonde, both qualities France is known for. He tries to wade through the molasses to get somewhere, and yet he somehow becomes more and more stuck.

Finally, an important character that represents childhood innocence and youth is Mélisande and Golaud’s son, Yniold. This young boy is too lively to live in the dark, static world of Allemonde. In the significant scene where he peers into his mother’s window for his father, he is the only one who observes Pelléas and Mélisande. He is filtering what he sees through his youthful mind, which Golaud cannot be satisfied with. Golaud is the only one in his family that experiences the world realistically, while Mélisande and Pelléas approach life innocently. Much like Jack from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Yniold has the ability to see into the static, child-like world of Pelléas and Mélisande. Maeterlinck takes the concept of childhood innocence and uses the fairy tale

mode to create a beautifully unique scene that only makes sense in a story. Golaud, as the practical man, sees through this stasis and tries to move forward, but he ends up stuck since everyone around him submits to the trance-like world.

These characters all represent different aspects of symbolism and teleology, coming together to suggest that Debussy's symbolist opera is anti-teleological.

Timelessness in Music: An Analysis of Excerpts from Debussy's Opera

Debussy's musical interpretation of Maeterlinck's story and characters serve as one of his greatest achievements because he captures the symbolist aesthetic in his music. His use of anti-teleological techniques along with the denial of tonal harmony comes together to portray the characters accurately.

Starting from the very beginning of the opera, Debussy denies the use of teleology. In the overture of the opera, Debussy's composition demands a quiet entrance that wanders from place to place. The opera begins with gentle cellos and bassoons in mm. 1-4, like a whisper or melancholy lullaby. The scene takes place in a forest where Golaud finds himself lost and the orchestration and composition match that calm confusion and wandering. In m. 5, when the oboes, English horns, and clarinets enter, their timbres clash against the mild, flowing melody of the cellos and bassoons. The introduction of the oboes does not seem to match the key or mood of the piece. The tremolo of the timpani builds tension from mm. 5 to 7, yet it does not resolve but goes back to the cellos and bassoons in m.8. This can be observed in Figure 1.1 pictured below.

Très Modéré

The image shows a page of an orchestral score for Act I Scene I of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The tempo is marked "Très Modéré". The score includes parts for Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets in Bb, Bassoons, Horns in F, Trumpets in Bb, Timpani, Violins I, Violins II, Violas, Violoncellos, and Contrabasses. The music is in 3/4 time and begins with a very quiet (*pp*) dynamic. The bassoon part features a melodic line with triplets and a fermata. The strings play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The woodwinds enter with a triplet figure. The timpani has a roll starting in measure 5.

Figure 1.1: mm. 1-6 of Act I Scene I from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, orchestral score

Surprisingly, *Pelléas* and *Tristan* begin in a similar manner—quiet, as if to gain the attention of the audience (Taruskin and Gibbs 670). The entrance differs from Wagner's. Instead of leading into a dramatic composition full of tension, release, and leitmotifs like Wagner would have used, Debussy remains in a wandering, whisper-like state throughout the entirety of his opera. It makes sense that Debussy started this way for two reasons: one being that the quiet entrance was an effective way to draw the audience's attention,

and the other because this entrance made sense within the context of the opera. *Pelléas* stays in a static, wandering state for the entire opera, so the entrance introduces the audience to the world right away. There was a point, however, when Debussy was fascinated with Wagner's artistic decisions. Debussy wrote the following in a 1902, shortly after the premier of *Pelléas*:

After some years of passionate pilgrimages to Bayreuth, I began to have doubts about the Wagnerian formula, or, rather, it seemed to me that it was of use only in the particular case of Wagner's own genius...and without denying his genius, one could say that he had put the final period after the music of his time (Lesure and Langham Smith 74).

Despite Debussy's past respect and knowledge of German ideals, Debussy paved his own way and found meaning in the symbolist movement of France.

In Act I Scene I, Mélisande is frightened and mysterious. Debussy brings out her fear in the music by using the key of C# minor throughout the scene. According to Arthur Wenk in *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music*, the key of C# minor in *Pelléas* is used to suggest fear. The key of C# minor can be seen in mm. 85-86, pictured below in Figure 1.2, when Mélisande sings, "Je me suis enfuie!...enfue...enfue..." (Maeterlinck 8), or "Oh! I ran away!...away...away..." (Chapman 8).

Pressez

Je me suis en-fui - e!... en - fui - e... en - fui - e...

Figure 1.2: mm. 85-86 of Act I Scene I from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mélisande's vocal line and piano reduction

When looking at the music, one can see that there is a lot of space between the notes, which creates an open sound. The sparseness between the notes can be observed in most of the orchestration of the opera. Throughout this scene and the entire opera, "listeners often complained... [of the] music being too sparse" (Goehr 58), which gives it the feeling of not progressing forward. As it has been observed above, the scene hardly progresses because of Mélisande's secretiveness, so the open, static music matches the action in the scene as well as Mélisande's personality. The composition "sustains its expressivity not by achieving romantic synthesis of style and idea, but in leaving this relation fractured" (Goehr 60), effectively removing the teleological influences.

German music around the period that *Pelléas* was composed was seen as being completely different. Edmund Burke made a commentary about the opposing French and German approaches to music which gives an insight into the way that the French and Germans sought to achieve in their music. Edmund Burke states:

Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small, beauty should be smooth and polished, the great is rugged and negligent... beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and even gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid and even massive. They are

indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure (Taruskin and Gibbs 466).

Pelléas, as well as the Symbolist movement, is viewed as “French” because artists like Maeterlinck and Mallarmé who were heavily involved in the movement sought beauty rather than achieve the German sublime. Much of the inspiration for the music of Debussy came from nature and its beauty and simplicity, all of which can be observed in *Pelléas*. The naturistic, simple way that the French approached music completely differs from the deepness that Wagner presented in *Tristan*. Wagner’s romantic goals throughout *Tristan* show the height of German music at the time, “exploiting the fundamental analogy between the harmonic language of his time and listener expectations. The music, by forecasting closure and then delaying it, calls attention to its own need for harmonic resolution” (Taruskin and Gibbs 678). Debussy employed a similar technique in *Pelléas* with a goal that accomplished the exact opposite of Wagner’s desire for resolution. Debussy acknowledged the need for resolution as defined by tonal harmony and denied the audience of any resolution. Rather than prolonging resolution like Wagner, Debussy erased the need for resolution in the first place through his music. The differences between the French and German approach to music can be seen in Act III Scene I, the infamous hair scene.

In *Pelléas et Mélisande*’s hair scene, there are several examples of the denial of forward progression. The scene begins with Mélisande’s beautiful, acapella solo pictured below in Figure 1.3.

Mes longs che - veux des - cen - dent jusqu' au seuil de la tour; Mes che-veux

vous at - tend - ent tout le long de la tour, - Et tout le long du jour, Et tout le long du

jour. Saint Dan iel et Saint Michel,

Saint Mi chel et Saint Raph a ël, Je suis née un di - man che, Un dimanche à mi -

Figure 1.3: mm. 18-31 of Act III Scene I from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mélisande's vocal line

When Mélisande sings, she has no accompaniment, giving the performer the freedom to truly let the piece exist with no time signature or measure markings. The use of triplets, dotted rhythms, and occasional chromaticism also confuse how one may hear the piece,

which allows the audience to get lost in the beautiful voice of Princess Mélisande, which has been used as a way to attract many lovers in numerous fairy tales. Katherine Bergeron describes this lovely entrance by saying that “for just a moment, the song seems to be free from the entrapment we call opera, coming from some other place and time like Mélisande herself” (Bergeron 174). When Pelléas enters the scene, the demeanor of the piece changes and the accompaniment does not leave. It is as if Pelléas disrupted the stillness of that sweet moment with Mélisande and the audience for his own childish, selfish reasons. Pelléas becomes mesmerized by Mélisande’s long hair and refuses to let it go. The scene becomes erotic between Pelléas and Mélisande, though Mélisande is not interested in playing that game with Pelléas. Katherine Bergeron observed that Pelléas’s sense of time was warped as soon as he took hold of Mélisande’s hair (178). He continued to play with her long hair and ponder out loud even though Mélisande was begging for him to let go. After a long time pleading, Pelléas releases her tresses when Mélisande hears someone approaching. When she realizes that it is Golaud, she begins to panic and demands that Pelléas let her go because she fears that Golaud may have heard them. It is at this time that Debussy’ employs the whole tone scale. The whole tone scale is an eerie scale that is composed of “entirely adjacent major 2nds” (Kostka, Payne, and Almén 656) and contains no half tones. The whole tone scale is one of Debussy’s signature scales because it sounds very distant and unusual for those who are used to tonal harmony and its progressions. An example of Debussy’s use of the whole tone scale starts below in Figure 1.4 in m. 102.

The image shows three systems of musical notation for Act III Scene III of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano reduction (grand staff).
 - The first system (mm. 198-199) shows the vocal line with lyrics "Lais-se-moi! Lais-se-moi re-le-ver-la tête...". The piano accompaniment features a whole-tone scale in the right hand and a more active bass line. Dynamics include *p* and *f*.
 - The second system (mm. 200-201) shows the vocal line with lyrics "J'entends un bruit de pas... Laisse-moi! C'est Go laud!...". The piano accompaniment continues with the whole-tone scale, marked "Même mouvt". Dynamics include *f*.
 - The third system (mm. 202-203) shows the vocal line with lyrics "je crois que c'est Go laud!... Il nous a en-ten-dus...". The piano accompaniment features a whole-tone scale in the right hand and a bass line with triplets. Dynamics include *f*.

Figure 1.4: mm. 198-205 of Act III Scene III from Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mélisande's vocal line and piano reduction of score, example of whole-tone scale use

Arthur Wenk observes that Debussy employed the whole-tone scale in *Pelléas* only when a character experiences fear (*Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 42). This is interesting because Debussy did not use the minor scale to display fear, but he used a different mode altogether. There is no pull for resolution when listening to a whole tone

scale because all of the intervals are equal. A sense of resolution only comes when there are half steps because they create tension that begs to be resolved. Debussy's employment of the whole tone scale in the hair scene escalates the sense of fear because there is no way for the scale to resolve itself.

These musical excerpts from *Pelléas* depict Debussy's lack of teleology, creating a sense of timelessness. The scenes and accompanying music were related to fairy tales by his use of the classic princess—beautiful, mysterious, and gentle. Mélisande's acapella song at the beginning of Act III Scene III is reminiscent of Rapunzel's singing from a tower which attracts a prince, but in this instance, Mélisande summons Pelléas with her voice. Debussy also denies the use of German techniques by the way that he denies the listeners of tonal harmony and any release from the tension that he builds. All of these aspects together created the timelessness that looms over Allemonde.

Conclusion

Both the play and Debussy's interpretation of *Pelléas et Mélisande* showcase the absence of teleology through the use of fairy tale techniques and a rejection of Germanic influences.

Maeterlinck's play included several fairy tale aspects, making it Debussy's perfect setting for an opera. By using the fairy tale mode of storytelling, Maeterlinck over exaggerates the static nature of his story, which Debussy further exaggerates by taking away tonal progression and release from tension.

Debussy's music was an important addition to Maeterlinck's play because the music took all of the symbolist concepts and added a beautiful layer of interpretation to

Maeterlinck's literature. Debussy denied the German ideals of tonal progression in his music by playing around with different modes and scales. Susan McClary describes the intentional avoidance of tonal progression when speaking about seventeenth-century French music:

missed cadences do not spark the rhetorical effects of disappointment or frustration; rather, the relatively low level of anticipation involved produces merely a bittersweet inconclusiveness. Gradually we learn from this music not to bother with future-oriented thought, but to embrace the serenity of each new configuration as it arises (248)

McClary describes a way to approach Debussy's music—stop anticipating what will happen. Though this speaks directly to the music of the seventeenth-century France, McClary's explanation is still relevant because Debussy used similar techniques to avoid audience anticipation. This new way of approaching music changed the way that audiences listen to music, yet many listeners did not enjoy the new, non-goal-oriented music. Debussy's response to the audience's distaste for this interpretation of *Pelléas* was blunt yet thoughtful. He wrote:

By a unique stroke of irony, this public which demands "something new" is the same one that is bewildered by, and which jeers at anything new or unusual, whenever someone is trying to break away from making the customary hullabaloo. This may seem hard to understand, but one must not forget that with a work of art an attempt at beauty is always taken as a personal insult by some people (Lesure and Langham Smith 75).

This response shines a realistic light on the people who viewed art during the *fin de siècle* because it shows that audiences did not necessarily understand Debussy's approach to storytelling even though they were asking for something different and new. Debussy's observation does, however, give an insight into France during the *fin de siècle* by showing that one cultural interpretation may not be the same for an entire population.

Debussy's only opera had so much depth within it, from the storyline to the music. In the next chapter, his collaboration work with Stéphane Mallarmé will be explored within the contexts of teleology, pastoral literature, and denial of German ideals to display the timelessness in Debussy's music.

Chapter 4: Analysis of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

Symbolist Poetry and Music: The Evolution of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

Debussy's composition, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, as well as Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, showcase the denial of teleology in French literature and music around the turn of the century. Mallarmé was hugely inspirational in symbolist literature and was known as a leader and “acknowledged master” of the movement during the *fin de siècle* (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 148). For most of his professional life, Mallarmé held weekly meetings at his house for young artists of all mediums to attend and talk about art (J. Brown 57-58). Debussy was one of these young artists who made an appearance at these weekly meetings, serving as the foundation of the friendship between Debussy and Mallarmé (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 148). Mallarmé did not typically allow musicians to set his poetry to music because he “sought to create a certain musicality in his verse” (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 148). However, his relationship with Debussy was different. He liked how Debussy set Baudelaire's *mélodies* to music, so he reached out to Debussy for a musical setting of *L'Après-midi d'un faune* in 1893, and though Debussy refused the offer at the time, he came back to set it to music shortly after (Code 504-506).

Mallarmé's poem had a long history before the finished product made its way into the hands of Debussy. In the 1860s, Mallarmé introduced the concept for the story of a faun as a theater piece, which failed (Code 498). In 1875, he brought the faun's story back as the faun's theatrical monolog, *Improvisation d'un faune*, but that failed as well

(Code 498). In 1876, however, Mallarmé introduced *L'Après-midi d'un faune* as the poem we know today (Code 498). David Code argues that this evolution of the piece from a dramatic monolog to a symbolist poem shows the maturation of Mallarmé's symbolism to the point that he was able to find a balance between "written verse and spoken drama" (Code 498-499). Around 1892, Debussy received the poem and the composition was performed for the first time in December of 1894 (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 151). The poem and musical score were then interpreted into a ballet and performed by the Ballet Russes in 1912 (Orledge 156). Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* has gone through several interpretations, from music to dance, which makes it a compelling symbolist work to analyze.

Mallarmé's poem, Debussy's *Prélude*, and Nijinsky's interpretation of Debussy's composition as a ballet all display the sense of anti-teleological movement. The poem, composition, and dance also express the pastoral mode with the idealization of the simplicity of the dream-like, natural world of the pastoral. The poem, composition, and ballet can also be interpreted as a rejection of German ideals, further expressing the feeling of stasis throughout the piece. The absence of teleology is expressed in French music, poetry, and dance during the *fin de siècle* when looking at these interpretations of a collaborative work by some of France's most well-known artists.

The Pastoral Mood: An Analysis of Mallarmé's Poem

Mallarmé's poem itself exhibits the ability to be interpreted in a way that captures readers from the very first line. *L'Après-midi d'un faune* follows the train of thought of a mythical faun as he ponders the existence of beautiful nymphs in the forest. The faun

goes back and forth between sleep and a hazy belief in the nymphs that he yearns for, creating a dreamy sense of timelessness that is carried through the poem. Mallarmé's use of the concept of sleep in the midst of the heat of the day slows down time to the point that it does not feel like time or the storyline of the faun are advancing, creating an anti-teleological progression. Progressive teleology implies the forward momentum of an event, that finishes or climaxes if there is no interruption (Kroll 2931). The faun's afternoon does not progress teleologically by this definition because there was no feasible goal to accomplish other than musing the idea of nymphs that never existed. Aristotle's definition of teleology argues that nature is teleological, but only in the sense that plants and other biological organisms grow and develop into something (Cameron 1099); this opinion does not address the "goals" of nature, like the overall objective that nature seeks to accomplish. The faun's behavior and experience show the relationship between French culture and the absence of teleology.

The poem opens with the line, "Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer," (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 153, line 1) or "These nymphs, I want to perpetuate them" (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 307), throwing the reader into the scene as if the poem begins at the very moment the faun awakens from his afternoon slumber. The line also denies a normal entrance to the poem because it gives the sense of beginning out of thin air, like a dream. The first line introduces the focus of the entire poem—the faun's confusion over the reality of the nymphs which creates the anti-teleological progression through the piece—and sets the reader up to experience the fluctuating thought process of the faun throughout the poem. In *Claude Debussy and the Poets*, Arthur Wenk suggests that the use of the word *perpétuer*, or "to perpetuate," is intentional because of its

ambiguity; “if the nymphs are real, then it suggests prolonging their existence in some fashion; if they are not, it implies giving them an existence” (*Claude Debussy and the Poets* 156). The poem continues along with the faun’s thought process as he questions whether or not the nymphs ever existed. “Assoupi de sommeils touffus. / Aimai-je un rêve?” (line 3) or “Drowsy with tufted slumbers. / Did I love a dream?” (307). This line acknowledges the sleepiness of the faun, further questioning whether or not he is falling in love with a dream or reality.

Though only the beginning, the poem has already denied the idea of progressive teleology, or the nature of an event that finishes if “nothing [was] to interfere with it” (Kroll 2931). The faun awakens to the fact that he was not pursuing a tangible object, and the existence of the nymphs was in question, leaving him at a stasis. The next excerpt continues the faun’s dreamy state by illustrating the environment that he is in.

This excerpt further pushes the feeling of stasis by describing the faun’s surroundings in the mystical forest:

Mais l’autre tout soupirs, dis-tu qu’elle contraste
Comme brise du jour chaude dans ta toison?
Que non! par l’immobile et lasse pâmoison
Suffoquant de chaleurs le matin frais s’il lutte (lines 12-15)

But, the other [nymph], all sighs, do you say she contrasts
Like a hot breeze of the (hot) day in your fleece?
But no! through the motionless and weary fainting [heat effect]
Suffocating with heat the fresh morning, if it struggles [up with a hot breath of air] (307)

The faun recounts his interaction with the nymphs with uncertainty in these lines. He wants to believe that the nymphs existed, but the so-called “memory” could not exist in the afternoon because of the sweltering heat (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 157).

The passage re-introduces the absence of progressive teleology because the faun has no goal and it is not possible for him to come to any conclusion in the stifling forest. Several pastoral poems and stories capture the feeling of stasis, such as in Virgil's first four eclogues and Edmund Spenser's *The Sheperdes Calendar* (Oram, Bjorvand, Bond, Cain, Dunlop, and Schell 3-4) yet the spirit of *L'Après-midi d'un faune* emulates the style of a specific older pastoral piece: John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Keats's poem tells the story of a person observing an old Grecian urn with two lovers depicted on its face. He describes their relationship as eternal because their love is preserved in that very moment forever (Keats). The poem's description of love is similar to the faun's desire for the nymphs that cannot become a reality because the nymphs never existed. The *Ode* and *L'Après-midi* are indicative of a certain pastoral technique that captures the feeling of stasis in pastoral art. It has been said that "pastoral is essentially literature of stasis" because of the way that the dialog and thoughts are presented as well as the way the shepherds live (Oram, Bjorvand, Bond, Cain, Dunlop, and Schell 3-4). Though the *Ode* and *L'après-midi* were written at different points of time, one at the beginning of the nineteenth century and one at the end of the nineteenth century, and in different places, the pastoral qualities of stasis and timelessness are present in both poems, serving as examples of a simpler time that the French yearned for. The next passage from *L'Après-midi d'un faune* shows more of a relationship between Mallarmé's symbolist piece to Keats's pastoral poem.

« Et le splendide bain de cheveux disparaît
 « Dans les clartés et les frissons, ô pierreries!
 « J'accours; quand, à mes pieds, s'entrejoignent (meurtries
 « De la languer goûtée à ce mal d'être deux)
 « Des dormeuses parmi leurs seuls bras hasardeux;

« *Je les ravis, sans le déseñlacer* (lines 66-71)

*“And the splendid bath of hair disappears
 “In the brightness and the shivers, o jewels!
 “I run up; when [whereupon] at my feet, are clasped (bruised
 “From the languor tasted of this [pain or] evil of being two)
 “[Two] Sleeping women amid their mere [they are naked] random arms;
 “I ravish them [snatch them up] without disentangling them, and flee] (308-309)*

Though the faun has “found” his nymphs, the italicization tells a different story, indicating that the faun has fallen back into a slumber and is dreaming about finding the nymphs. The following line in Keats’s poem relates to Mallarmé’s poem; they exhibit a stand-still in reality—the characters who are a part of the work of art have no way of obtaining the objects of their desire. This excerpt directly relates to this idea of impossible love:

More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
 For ever panting, and for ever young (Keats 24-26)

Both the faun’s dream and the characters on the urn cannot acquire the love that they desire, but those characters can dream about their love interests and know that their beauty and wonder will never fade because everything about their desires exists outside of reality. The faun and the character depicted on the face of the urn lack of success in this idea of love shows the absence of progressive teleology again because there is no goal since neither can exist.

The final lines of the poem show how the faun gives up on the hope of finding the nymphs and decides that he will chase them in his dreams.

De paroles vacante et ce corps alourdi
 Tard succombent au fier silence de midi:
 Sans plus il faut dormir en l’oubli du blasphème,
 Sur le sable altéré gisant et l’astre efficace des vins!

Couple, adieu, je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins (lines 105-110)

Empty of words and this weighted body
 Succumb late to the proud silence of noon:
 Without any more ado we must sleep in forgetfulness of the blasphemy,
 Lying in the thirsty sand and as I love
 To open my mouth to the wine-making star (the sun)!

Couple, adieu; I'll see the shadow you became. (310)

The faun comes to the conclusion that the nymphs did not exist, and the only way to chase them is to find them in his dreams. The poem ends just as it begins, calm and dream-like, which denies the reader of a real, climactic ending. The poem starts in the midst of thought about nymphs, and like any train of thought, the faun's story wanders around until it eventually disappears into our memories and is forgotten.

L'Après-midi d'un faune demonstrated pastoral qualities with its reference to love and personal expression. In *Literature and the Pastoral*, Andrew Ettin describes pastoral poetry as "a way of expressing private concerns and emotional reactions to personal circumstances, especially love," (Ettin 28), giving Mallarmé the opportunity to explore the faun's drowsy experience of love in his forest. The pastoral mode focuses on "putting the complex into the simple" (Empson 23), which both Mallarmé and Keats have accomplished in their poetry. Both poets address their character's desire for an impossible love and play with that idea. The pastoral simplicity and expression further prove the anti-teleological nature of the poem.

Mallarmé's relationship with social memory is something that can be seen in Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory*, both in relationship to the faun's experience and Mallarmé's potential notions for writing the poem. Nora describes memory as something

that is “constantly on our lips because it no longer exists” (Nora 1). The faun’s relationship with the nymphs shows the relationship to memory because of his constant curiosity about the nymphs as if his love interests were a close enough memory that he could practically taste it on his lips. It has been established by several scholars that pastoral literature is interpreted typically as a mode and not a genre, depending on varying definitions of the words “genre” and “mode” (Alpers 44 and Ettin, 58) because a literary mode “emphasizes not literary types in themselves but the cultural and ideological formation of those types” (Huth 45), making it possible for *L’Après-midi* to be considered a pastoral poem because of its traits—love, emotional reactions to the world around the character, and the use of the faun’s flute. Mallarmé’s use of such a mode could have been a nostalgic remembrance to a simpler time and place that took place in France but was slowly disappearing. Nora calls this the “acceleration of history,” which means that the history that is organized as society changes uproots social memory, thus “forgetting” things as they were (Nora 2). Nora makes the distinction between memory and history very clear: “Memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution...[while] history, on the other hand, is the reconstruction [of that memory], always problematic and incomplete” (Nora 3). Mallarmé could have been calling upon this lost memory of magic and simplicity that the faun is experiencing in his poem as a result of this societal forgetting. Mallarmé lived in a period of rapid change and most of the public was aware of what was happening in society. Mallarmé’s writings seem to hint at a reaction to the societal change because the culture wanted to go back to their idealized version of pastoral times. In Europe, many people rejected the notion of standardizing time in everyday life, which “synchroniz[ed] global human

activity,” yet the general population was forced into the regulation of time without a say in the matter (Barrows 45). One can conclude that Mallarmé’s *L’Après-midi d’un faune* can be interpreted as a reaction or acknowledgement as a result of the drastic cultural events during the *fin de siècle*. Art during this period conveys so much meaning to the audiences because the art can be interpreted a reflection of the culture that the artists and audience members lived in, and in France, this rejection was portrayed through the use of non-teleological techniques. This artistic way of expressing the rejection of a social change is critical because it extends past literature and makes its way to music.

Stasis in Music: An Analysis of Debussy’s Composition

Mallarmé’s poem and Debussy’s piece get along well with one another and they “demand to be understood together as well as separately” (Kramer 4). The music was never meant to replicate the poem (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 151), but rather be another interpretation of the piece. The program of the 1894 premier of the *Prélude* stated that it

did not by any means pretend to be a synthesis of [Mallarmé’s] poem: but rather a series of successive scenes across which the dreams and desires of the faun pass in the afternoon heat. Then, tired of pursuing the timid fight of nymphs, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep in which he can realize his dreams of possession in communion with universal Nature (Orledge 155)

Nature is hugely influential, and Debussy frequently used it as inspiration for his compositions (J. Brown 6), making Mallarmé’s poem a particularly attractive piece for him to set to music since the poem has many naturalistic characteristics. According to Leonard Meyer, nature is anti-teleological because “it has no purpose—it simply is, it exists,” (Meyer 160) and this way of approaching nature could potentially give a reason

for Debussy's fascination with nature. Pastoral traditions are referenced throughout the poem and in the composition, adding more depth to the naturalistic theme.

Two parts of the poem that exemplify the anti-teleological nature of the *Prélude* are the flute solo theme and the major key changes throughout the piece, particularly the key change from E Major to Db Major in the middle of the piece.

One of the most notable parts of the piece is the seemingly free-form solo flute entrance, featured below in Figure 2.1. This gentle introduction to the *Prélude* sets the pace for the whole piece.



Figure 2.1: mm. 1-4 of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, flute solo

The flute introduces the dream-like world of the faun's forest in the heat of the afternoon which continues throughout the entire piece. The use of the flute over any other instrument is also significant because its timbre was selected for the representation of the dreamy state the faun seems to be in throughout the poem as well as the pastoral roots of the poem. The timbre of a flute is considered dreamy because of its high, delicate sound quality. It represents the simplicity of the countryside because of its use in folk music. In Virgil's *Eclogues*, a very famous collection of pastoral stories from ancient Roman times, the shepherds had flutes (Code 502), which is significant because flutes are commonly found in the folk music of most cultures from around the world (Juzhong, Xinghua, and Kuen 769). This pastoral tradition is carried on through the music with Debussy's choice

of the gentle timbre. Debussy enjoyed playing with the timbres of different instruments to create a distinct sound in his music (Code 509) because he believed that “musicians no longer know how to decompose sound, to give it in its pure state...I try to employ each timbre in its pure form...We’ve learned too well to mix timbres” (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* 43). Though many pieces start with a solo instrument or theme, and they may be meaningful, in this instance, Debussy purposely chose a certain timbre to symbolize the faun’s dreamy state throughout the piece. David Code believes the flute was chosen to represent the dream, while the violins that appear a few bars later represents the more human, “full-bodied,” sound (Code 509).

The flute solo’s quiet entrance indicates the hazy awakening of the faun in the forest. It starts on a C# in E Major, descends chromatically to G natural, ascends back up to the C#, descends again to the G natural, then leaps upward to a high G# and makes its way back down to A#. The tonic of the key, E, is only played once in the entire chromatic solo, giving it a free, wandering feeling that does not particularly belong in any key yet. The ambiguity of the opening refers to the drowsiness of the faun’s state. This theme returns in variations and restatements several times, for instance, in mm. 11 to 12 and 100 to 104. The flute’s solo mainly belongs to the flute, but in certain places, a variation of the flute solo is taken by a different instrument, for instance the oboe in mm. 37 to 40, pictured below in Figure 2.2. The oboe brings a new timbre to the flute solo that Debussy placed intentionally.



Figure 2.2: mm. 37 to 40 of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, oboe's variation on flute solo

For a majority of the piece, however, the flute owns the solo and carries the sense of stasis throughout the composition.

The flute plays a significant role in the poem as well as in the *Prélude*, which could be another reason why Debussy chose the flute as the opening. The poem refers to the flute in a few instances, drawing attention to the faun's musicality. He created his flute out of reeds, tuned it as he thought about the nymphs he desired and left it behind when he wanted to make more of a statement by using his voice, indicated in the line, "Moi, de ma murmure fier, je vais parler longtemps / Des dées," or "I, proud of my rumor [sounds I made], am going to speak at length / Of [these?] goddesses" (54-55, 308). In Virgil's *Eclogues*, the shepherds would play their pipes "in compensation for lost love," but the faun does not want to use it for that purpose, he would rather "contact [the nymphs] directly with the lyric voice," (Code 502) giving him the ability to use his beautiful words to persuade them to love him back. Debussy himself even hypothesized that the *Prélude* itself was "perhaps the dream left over at the bottom of the faun's flute" (M. Brown 130). The flute plays an enormous role throughout the *Prélude* and responds to the poem in several ways, which is very symbolic.

Another significant trait of the *Prélude* is the frequent key changes and feelings of tonal ambiguity. It is known that Debussy rejected typical features of tonic and dominant, consonance and dissonance, and guidelines of tonal harmony (M. Brown 127, 143). He said he avoided tonal harmony because he wanted to “relieve [music] of its congestion, to find a less cluttered kind of music” (M. Brown 137), aiming to reach a more natural, emotional state rather than a formulaic one defined by the (predominantly German) rules of the past.

Debussy himself “describes his music as a general impression of the poem” though some believe that it could be much more in-depth (Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* 151). Mallarmé’s reaction to the poem was that it did “not present any dissonance with [his] text, if not [went] even further, truly, in nostalgia and light, with finesse, with malaise, with richness” (J. Brown 58-59). The questioning nature of the faun was captured by Debussy’s interpretation of the poem because it wanders and breathes just like the faun’s train of thought.

Debussy’s rejection of the guidelines of tonal harmony aim to reach a more natural, emotional state rather than a formulaic one defined by the past. The most dramatic key change takes place between mm. 43 and 55, traveling through the keys of E major, A minor, Ab major, and all the way to Db major for much of the remainder of the next 24 bars. This is pictured below in Figure 2.3.

Toujours en légèreté

mf

3

3

3

3

6

5

6

Figure 2.3: mm. 42-55 of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, piano reduction of key changes

During this change, he also dabbles in some other keys in mm. 44, 47, 49, 52, 53, and 55, but because of his rejection of tonality, the keys themselves are difficult to analyze or be accurately described within the context of tonal harmony. Debussy was creating a swelling momentum that kept building but ended up going nowhere and wandering timidly right back to where it started, flute solo and all. This anti-climactic return to the start represents the faun's return to where he started—intoxicating sleep.

The *fin de siècle* was a period of drastic change between the old world of the nineteenth century and the modern world of the twentieth century, especially in France; the Franco-Prussian War had just ended in 1871 (Nichols, Langham Smith, and Grayson 8) and time was officially standardized in 1884 with the introduction of train schedules across Europe (Barrows 22). The world was changing, and many people rejected these changes. Artists, like Mallarmé and Debussy, were denying the changes in society by putting their opinions into their art—both Mallarmé and Debussy turned to nature and its anti-teleological sense of stasis to realize their beliefs.

The artists were also reacting to what can be seen as an overbearing German culture by rejecting the ideals of tonal harmony. French music, as well as any other type of music outside of German classical/romantic music, has long been known for its anti-teleological music, and this lack of teleological progression can be seen in French music as early as the seventeenth century. Susan McClary's *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* explores the motion of French music during the seventeenth century. She claims that French music "seems designed to induce something like absorption in the listener, a quality of stillness in which consciousness hovers suspended outside linear time" (McClary 242) and creates "a series of events connected (if at all) only on a moment-by-moment basis" (243). The difference between French and German music are like night and day—the French preferred beauty, lightness, and delicateness in their music while the Germans preferred the sublime, ruggedness, and darkness in music that followed tonal harmony (Taruskin and Gibbs 466). These drastically different approaches to music between two countries that are so close together is not a coincidence. The effects of the Franco-Prussian war as well as the history between the two countries permanently changed their cultures and landed them on opposite ends of the musical spectrum, pushing the French towards timelessness in music. Debussy's approach to music can be summed up with these words: "Gradually we learn from this music not to bother with future-oriented thought, but to embrace the serenity of each new configuration as it arises" (McClary 248)

The next section will further develop the symbolist approach to Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* with another interpretation into the world of dance.

Stillness in Dance: An Analysis of Nijinsky's Setting

The setting of the stage production of the *Prélude* presents another interpretation of Mallarmé's poem through Debussy's musical setting. Vaslav Nijinsky and his sister, Bronislava, were given the task of choreographing the ballet for the Ballet Russes in 1912, almost two decades after its premier in 1894 (Orledge 155). The theatrical setting was yet another response to Mallarmé's poem and was interpreted with the music in mind, meaning that it had several layers of meaning.

Nijinsky and his sister used "stylised, two-dimensional choreography... [that may] have been inspired by seeing Egyptian paintings and reliefs in the Louvre" as well as the Greek frieze, which focused on stiff arms and profiles (Orledge 156). The dance was far from traditional ballet because the poem and the music called for these stylistic choices. After its premier, the ballet was criticized for its "dehumanizing choreography" and "non-balletic nature of the movements" (Orledge 156, 159). Though the dance was not understood by the public at first, the interpretation of the dance was still appropriate for the style that they were aiming to achieve—the anti-teleological stasis that both Debussy and Mallarmé evoked in their pieces. This stylistic choice resembles the figures depicted in Keats's poem, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, because *L'Après-midi* imitates the stiffness and anti-teleological nature of the pastoral characters on a Greek urn. In Keats's poem, he mentions the complete absence of teleological actions several times, for example:

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss;
 Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (Keats 17-20)

This passage speaks about how the lover will never be able to love the woman that he is chasing, but she will never fade, and the excitement of new love will be perfectly preserved forever. Nijinsky's ballet plays off of a similar idea—the faun is never able to touch or fully enjoy the nymphs as they pass by, but he can admire them and chase after them as long as he wants to since they are merely dreams. The faun's delusional idea of love and lust perfectly demonstrates the absence of progressive teleology because, though there is a “goal,” there is no way to go after that goal because it either does not exist or there is no physical way to begin achieving the goal of being with the nymphs, so he is fated to stay in this inescapable limbo.

In both the ballet and the poem, time stands still. Near the end of Keats's poem, we have the lines:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe (Keats 56-57)

These lines are significant because they show the timelessness as well as the lack of existence of such characters and also acknowledges the reality that we live in, here in the real world. The ballet accomplishes a similar objective, allowing the characters to be anti-teleological because of their vacillating existences, making us aware of our own lives and desires. It displays, along with the poem and score, how the French denied all sense of teleology through the faun's story.

Conclusion

The *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is an important work to be analyzed within the context of teleology, modes of storytelling, and relationship to German culture because it perfectly captures Debussy's notion of French music during the *fin de siècle*.

The poem itself denied the readers of teleology because there was no feasible goal for the faun to achieve, rendering him static in the middle of the forest on a warm afternoon. Debussy's composition played with Mallarmé's sense of timelessness by denying any resolution for the listeners through the lack of tonal progressions. Nijinsky's dance added the final layer of timelessness by portraying Mallarmé's story about the fated faun in such a way that the controversial dance became static.

Mallarmé's choice to tell a pastoral story contributed to the stasis present throughout all representations of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. Pastoral literature called upon a time that was seen as simpler than the time that the French were living in during the *fin de siècle*. The rapid change of the *fin de siècle* demanded so much of the people during the time that the artists used literature, music and dance to process what was going on in their culture. Mallarmé's clever use of a stasis mode, the pastoral, brought readers back to that simple time in the countryside.

Debussy's rejection of tonality simultaneously rejected teleology because tonal progression is founded on the implied movement toward a musical goal. Tonal progression works toward an end goal and creates the expectation of satisfaction. The opposite of tonal progression is seen in the *Prélude* because there are no moments that push forward to achieve another musical moment and relieve the tension built. The *Prélude* simply floats, traveling moment-by-moment, like a train of thought. Within the context of the faun's sleepy state, the dream-like wandering in the *Prélude* makes perfect sense. Debussy's choice to use the timbre of a flute also contributed to this anti-teleological use of music because of its connotation with folk music and dream-like states, further ridding the *Prélude* of teleological progression.

Nijinsky's dance captured the feeling of stasis found both in the poem and in the music, synthesizing them with other pastoral influences. The dance was rejected by the first audience that expected a typical ballet, which made the overall message even more clear: the world was moving too fast. The stiff, anti-teleological movement that was inspired by ancient artwork reminiscent of the urn that Keats observed was unfamiliar to the theatregoers, and therefore more meaningful once they understood the reason behind the employment of those movements. It is difficult to imagine dance as something that can be static, but with the influence of the pastoral mode, the anti-teleological story, and the timeless music, the dance encapsulated everything visually.

All of these factors come together to truly show how teleological techniques were avoided in the creation of Mallarmé's poem, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, Debussy's composition, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, and Nijinsky's choreography to Debussy's *Prélude* as a result of the anti-teleological nature of pastoral literature and the rejection of German culture.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The *Prélude* and *Pelléas* both display anti-teleological techniques that reject the forward motion of time during the *fin de siècle* in France through their use of storytelling modes and reaction to German culture.

This entire project was a synthesis and analysis on just a fraction of the literature that is available on Debussy, the *fin de siècle*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, fairy tales, pastoral literature, Wagner and Tristan, and the Symbolist movement. There is so much that can be explored within all of these areas, and this project is only one interpretation of the entire thing.

The significance of *Pelléas* lies in so many places—when referring to its connection with the fairy tales or Wagner, Debussy's music speaks for itself. Whether or not he was an emulation of Wagner or anti-Wagnerian, his works still provide interpretations for an intense period of France's history. Debussy's music added a positive layer of analysis to Maeterlinck's play by expanding upon Symbolist ideas with his use of scales and modes. This was Debussy's largest work and it embodies his unique ideas about the world around him during the *fin de siècle* which are debated to this day. The fairy tale world was a symbol of this confusing time, seemingly trapping the characters into a time and space that could not move forward. The *Prélude* also exuded this sense of stasis and timelessness in its music for very similar reasons.

Debussy's use of Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* was a significant choice that allowed for several points of interpretation. The use of a musical pastoral creature as the protagonist of the poem gave Debussy the freedom to play with the music, choosing the flute as the highlight of the orchestration. This is social commentary, idealizing a

“simpler” time in the past that the French wanted to connect to. Debussy’s inspiration from the symbolist movement and nature came together to create this work of art that was even interpreted as a dance. Artistic social commentary layers on top of itself with other creative minds and community members.

The modes of storytelling that were connected to *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* were both timeless genres that idealized an abstract idea of a time that existed before modern times. Both fairy tales and pastoral literature provided spaces for composers, writers, and dancers to interpret the stories as well as the world around them.

In conclusion, Debussy’s music from *Pelléas et Mélisande* and the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* displays the sense of timelessness in French music during the *fin de siècle*, which is proven when observing the music within the context of fairy tales, pastoral literature, and German influence on French music. This use of music shows how artists interpreted the world around them. Their performances, compositions, and writings were widely controversial, just like the cultural events happening during the *fin de siècle*. This is an important concept to understand because art and culture are so beautifully intertwined. Creative minds can have a major effect on the world, shown by how relevant Debussy, Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck are in the world today. Their works keep the life behind the *fin de siècle* alive by expressing controversial thoughts and feelings that are still relatable in this human experience. Debussy, Mallarmé, and Maeterlinck provided an artistic portrayal of how symbolist artists saw the world around them. The symbols that these artists used were very telling, yet still up for interpretation for the listeners to decide. The music added an additional layer of interpretation that captured the essence of the literature and made music static, unmoving, and non-goal-oriented. This thesis hopes

to prove the importance and relevance of art in culture and that no matter what is going on in any given society, art can capture this from a unique point of view and keep that alive for centuries or millennia.

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