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Lyrical *Pelleas et Melisande* at the Met

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 30th, 2019

Claude Debussy's moving *Pelleas et Melisande* defies operatic convention. Eschewing passionate arias where the divas pour out every thought and motive for their extreme actions, this mysterious love triangle is all recitative with inner feelings largely unexpressed in words. The music does that, exquisitely conducted at the Metropolitan Opera by new music director Yannick Nezet-Seguin. Those yearning for a splashy solo will be disappointed. The music is delicate and subtle, requiring careful attention. When it opened in Paris in 1902, some critics found it "sickly and practically lifeless." But there are contemplative joys to be found in its nuances and complex melodies. The Metropolitan Opera's revival of Jonathan Miller's 1995 production (restaged by Paula Williams) takes its time to establish an emotional connection between characters, music and audience, but by the third act, a mystical spell has been woven.



Isabel Leonard and Paul Appleby in *Pelleas et Melisande*.

Credit: Karen Almond

The plot, based on Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolic, anti-naturalistic stage play, has been seen a million times before and since. The title lovers engage in forbidden flirting though the innocent young Melisande is married to the older brother of the impetuous Pelleas. Suffice it to say, things do not end well. Miller has transported the setting from a medieval milieu to a ruined early 20th century castle, replete with covered furniture and crumbling statues. (The eerie sets and period costumes are by John Conklin and Clare Mitchell respectively.)



Kyle Ketelsen and Isabel Leonard in *Pelleas et Melisande*.

Credit: Karen Almond

Paul Appleby and Isabel Leonard give lyrically beautiful renditions of the titular sweethearts—their Act III duet is soaringly sublime—but the show is stolen by Kyle Ketelsen as Goulad, Pelleas' gruff sibling and Melisande's possessive husband. While the principal swooners display limited character development, Goulad goes through a full spectrum of emotions from enchantment with his waif-like bride to jealous rage to gut-wrenching remorse. Ketelsen gives full voice and color to these varied passions with his rich bass-baritone. Ferruccio Furlanetto provides girder-like support and a rumbling tone to the aging king Arkel and Marie-Nicole Lemieux is a warm Genevieve, mother to the battling siblings.

Pelleas et Melisande may not be for every opera fan, but those willing to listen to its sweetly

seductive charms will be rewarded.

Jan. 15—31. Metropolitan Opera, 30 Lincoln Center Plaza, Broadway at 66th St., NYC. Remaining performance: Jan. 31, 7:30pm. Running time: four hours including two intermissions. \$30—\$445. (212) 362-6000. www.metopera.org

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