

## Music and Impressionism

### Pelleas et Melisande vs. Ruslan and Lyudmila: Juxtapositions of love

John Vandever

Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, the folk inspired poem turned opera, recounting the heroic tale of Lyudmila's rescue from the grips of the maleficent Naina, an evil sorceress, incorporated foreign tunes both given and audibly caught, 3 Tatar melodies<sup>1</sup>, a Finnish postilions song<sup>2</sup>, and a Persian Song, heard in the Autumn of 1829 and one example of Glinka's use of oriental themes as a launching point for the use of '*changing background species of variations*'<sup>3</sup>, whose delineations are available to be read.<sup>4</sup> This Persian theme was so inspirational that it served as the catalyst for dances and choruses related to the '*khorovod type*', one of the oldest dances in Russia dating to Russia's Slavic roots, most notably the princesses' dance from *The Firebird*, whose oriental themes showcase a splitting of Russian personality when dealing with the East, integration versus domination.<sup>5</sup> *Ruslan and Lyudmila*'s story, based on Pushkin's 1820 poem, reflected unabashed sensuality and imaginative romanticism described as being ornamented with *ballet-like decorations*, alluding to the splendid grandeur of the story and stylized aesthetic. Dispersed within the surrealist depictions of the newly wedded couple, who face obstacles and eventually succeeding over the forces of evil, supposed by Dostovesky was the inclination for political symbolism, the two Knights tasked with rescuing Lyudmila representing Russia and Austria, and the evil dwarf being the personification of Turkey, and this interpretation was thought of merely the symbolic personification of Dostoesvsky's Slavophile views, and thus not widely shared.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, I attempt to formalize opinions not on the political implications of the opera and the symbolism attributed, but instead the emphasis on the splendor of the musical setting in relation to *Ruslan and Lyudmila*'s lovebond, juxtaposed against the fated love affair of Pelias and Melisande, whose relationship is ruled by destiny alone, bringing into question the futility of the fight against fate and the inevitability of a preordained future. The love triangle between Golaud, Pelias, and Melisande ends in tragedy, and could be easily taken at face value as a mere episodic story of the treachery of love and jealousy, but upon deeper analysis, this love triangle could suggest that perhaps Melisande's character is an analogy for that sensation of feeling utterly lost, ones inability to properly discern the correct way to go and after tasting the fruit of success, happiness, etc, we are unable to cope knowing that mode of living is gone. It is also hypothesized that Melisande is the wife of the serial killer Bluebird, and that her running through the woods

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<sup>1</sup>"Ayvazovsky [the marine painter] gave me three Tartar melodies, two of which I used for the lezginka and the third for the andante of Ratmir's scena in act III of the opera."

Abraham, G. "The Foundation-Stone of Russian Music." *Music and Letters* 18, no. 1 (January 1937): 50-50. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/18.1.50>.

<sup>2</sup> "During a holiday in Finland in 1829-" Ibid. Pg. 52

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Pg. 58

<sup>4</sup> Classifications are provided, which supposes that Glinka's use of varitional elements could be traced to sacred origin in chant.

McAdams, Stephen, and Daniel Matzkin. "The Roots of Musical Variation in Perceptual Similarity and Invariance." *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music*, October 2003, 78-94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198525202.003.0006>.

<sup>5</sup> More can be read on the Ballet Russes, and the influence of the East

Garafola, Lynn, and Nancy Van Norman Baer. *The Ballets Russes and Its World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> More on Dostovesky's views of the Slavophiles,

Kingston, Sharon L. "DOSTOYEVSKY AND THE SLAVOPHILES." *DOSTOYEVSKY AND THE SLAVOPHILES*, August 1970.

was her act of trying to escape, and to give more context it is said that Golaud, on a hunting trip, finds a *'very young, beautiful girl weeping by the side of a shallow pool.'*<sup>7</sup> This wife could have been a retelling of the fall of Eve, echoing a sentiment that the story itself is a metaphor for man's fall from grace and internal struggle for a sense of organization among the chaos, as Golaud's descent into madness is due to his insatiable need to understand Melisande's irrational behaviour and secretive mood. Melisande's behaviour throughout the opera is irrational, from her removal of the ring and subsequent lie to Golaud leading to a search mission, to her 'romance' with Pelleas, and following death, and one interpretation is that she is merely a manipulative force for evil, as her introduction and actions prove to perhaps have an ulterior motive or are driven by a dis-acknowledgment of consequences, colouring her as reminiscent of *'Kundry, a fallen angelic soul'*<sup>8</sup>, and sees Golaud as a tyrant and *'kind of devil who imprisons Melisande in a worldly marriage.'* This interpretation of the usage of Maeterlink's libretto could be a choice spurned by Debussy's tumultuous dealings with the Paris Conservatory, his father, and outside forces that sought to shape his compositional voice one way, while Debussy actively went the other way. Aspects of Debussy's own longings, either for love, acceptance or some kind of lasting affection not found are seen in exchanges between Melisande's *'Si, si; je suis heureuse, mais je suis triste ..'* and Pelleas's *'Quel est ce bruit'*<sup>9</sup>, which explicitly explains Melisande's reason for her joy of being with Pelleas although an interpretation exists that Melisande is simply saying what Pelleas wants to hear in order to remain in his favor of love, although Virgil Thompson had expressed her inconstancies in statements are to avoid not being loved<sup>10</sup>, which is could be applicable to Debussy as in his first marriage he hadn't been intellectually stimulated although loved, his second wife Emma Bardac being more confrontational, outspoken of Debussy's faults in character and emotional hypersensitivity hadn't provided Debussy a home for a healthy relationship to flourish. But even more prominent must have been his affair with Marie Vasnier, an older woman who Debussy dedicated many of his Melodie's to, most notably, *'Chansons : 13 Mélodies Dédiées A Marie Vasnier'*<sup>11</sup>, a composite of 13 songs out of 27 dedicated to her in the period of 7 years.<sup>12</sup>

In the words of Pelleas's first Melisande, Mary Garden, *"I honestly don't know if Debussy ever loved anybody really. He loved his music – and perhaps himself,"*<sup>13</sup> one can see the fruition of his self-reliance first and love second mentality characterized in Melisande's inability to be

<sup>7</sup> Act I, Scene I, *"Le rideau ouvert on découvre Mélisande au bord d'une fontaine."*

As the curtain rises, Melisande is discovered at the edge of a well.

<sup>8</sup> According to Messiaen's opera, *"Saint François d'Assise"* and commentary, Kundry is the celestial embodiment of God's love and man's ability to become spiritually pure. Although the reading insinuated here is the depiction of Kundry in the Parsafalic sense, where Kundry is a half animal-human, whose is spiritually purified and takes on the symbolic representation of the sacrificial lamb of the male gender.

Benítez Vincent P. Olivier Messiaens Opera, Saint François DAssise. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Exact dialogue available

Grayson, David. "The Libretto Of Debussys 'Pelleas Et Melisande.'" Music and Letters 66, no. 1 (1985): 34–50.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/66.1.34>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pg. 10

<sup>11</sup> Debussy, Claude. Chansons: Recueil De mélodies dédiées à Marie-Blanche Vasnier. Paris: Centre de documentation Claude Debussy, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> FULCHER, JANE F., ed. Debussy and His World. PRINCETON; OXFORD: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Accessed February 7, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1f2qqw1](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1f2qqw1).

<sup>13</sup> Interlude. "The Early Loves of Claude Debussy." Interlude.hk, July 14, 2019.

<https://interlude.hk/claude-debussy-need-something-love/>.

honest with either party, instead relying on saying what needs to be said in order to secure love, perhaps synonymous with a sense of stability. This is seen in Act V, where Golaud repeatedly demands of Melisande her admittance of her love with Pelleas, which she confesses to. But this isn't enough for Golaud, who then accosts her into giving a confession of her guilt, which she doesn't give, instead answering with the rebuttal, "*Why did not I tell the truth-Who will die? Is it me?*" She doesn't know she is going to die, although this is clearly untrue due to her intuition, "*I've never been better-It seems to me, however, that I know something,*" and this institutional knowledge is turned in a musical motif seen throughout Act V, the original melody being heard in measure 1 and 2.<sup>14</sup> Debussy held animosity against the Paris Conservatories reliance on old-school composers and yet, despite his rebellion the influence of Bach, Beethoven, and the greats are seen in his work. The Act V's second measure's melodies last 4 notes are quoted, 'note for note', from Bach's Toccata and Fugue in d minor and although rhythms are changed, the feeling that this four note motif creates is eerie and unsettling due to that ti-do that seems to go on forever. Bach's Toccata entrance motif seems like the antithesis of what Debussy would have wanted to create with the last Act, muted emotional ebullitions taking precedent over '*elemental and unbounded power,*' but perhaps it was that very idea, subverting such a powerful motif with subtlety and subdued emotional tension, formed by the consecutive dealings with d'minor, where the Ab helped to craft the incertitude of all parties in this final act, Melisande's final journey in the land of the living. The theme is polyphonic in measure 3, changing the feeling from being pessimistic to one of veiled courage, the motivic figure taking on a feeling of permanent minority, and using an implied Bbminor<sup>m7</sup> only once, which is followed by EM, FM, c#dim<sup>m7</sup> to gm. Notice measure 10 as when the motif goes up in anticipation of the expansive music to follow, the bottom left hand of the piano goes down, rooting us and preparing us for what is to eventually come next. These small nuanced noticings not only are imperative for Debussy's work but crucial in understanding Debussy's interpretation of one of the most vague stories in operatic repertoire.

Venturing into the land of Ruslan and Lyudmila, instead of muted colours we get exuberance and vibrancy, even in the simplest of places, ie., Scene no.9 with its whole note, half note exchanges. When one thinks of Glinka's Ruslan and Lyudmila, the overture with its two distinct themes and formal structure comes to mind and rightfully so, as Glinka's use of motivic variance is interwoven with explicit bombastic eighth note running passages, perfectly placed rests, and fully expanded chords all set to a lively Presto. Synthesized within the contrapuntal music of Glinka's overture are two leitmotifs, Chernomor the evil Dwarf, and Ruslan the hero and husband of Lyudmila. Their themes battle each other in 9-10 measures after rehearsal number 16<sup>15</sup>, where Ruslan is characterized as a arpeggiated Bb chord ascending topped by an arpeggiated F# chord including the octave, and Chernomor is characterized as a whole descending scale starting on D4 and descending to D3. The use of the WT scale is not subjugated to the overture as a simple dissonant allusion, rather it is used twice more throughout the opera in places of explicit dramatic weight, the moment in the finale of Act 1 where Chernomor seizes Lyudmila during the wedding festivities and during the chorus in Act IV, '*Pogibnet, Pogibnet.*' In Lyudmila's kidnapping music in

<sup>14</sup> (E, F, Ab, F, E, F, C#, D) Act V, first two measure.

<sup>15</sup>Page 14 in the Musik-Edition Lucie Galland version

the finale of Act 1<sup>16</sup>, we are introduced to cascading open 7ths spanning 4 measures that make a disjunct whole-tone scale. Upon first inspection, one wouldn't be able to quickly decipher the use of the whole-tone, but when simplified, the notes used are [F, G, A, B, Db, Eb]. Paired with the open sevenths are the concurrent octave note, leading to the ambiguity of the whole-tone scale's usage and helping to offset the sound of the whole tone scale are left hand piano descending tremolos in a whole-tone scale fashion, ending on a unison Eb in both hands, which is immediately followed by a Cb/B major glissando'd chord and accompanying Eb piano tremolo, Ebm and accompanying Eb piano tremolo, and finally F#dim<sup>m7</sup> with accompanying Eb piano tremolo. The third and final usage of the whole-tone scale occurs in the Act IV chorus, '*Pogibnet, Pogibnet*,'<sup>17</sup> where the usage of the 'Chernomor scale' is manipulated by subjecting the scale to ascension, descension, cutting, and harmonizational variations. The first instance is in measure 5, (figure 1) where the scale is akin to its Act I duplicate, the scale being subjected to a pairing with left hand tremolo'd octaves, following to the end of the scale, which is E. What also is noteworthy is the way the WT scale is offset with the use of Ruslan's theme<sup>18</sup> (figure 2), which outlines an E major chord by the way of a dotted eighth note, 16th note coupling ascending pattern, followed by a 6 eighth note group outlining E-C# or do-la, resolving to a root position E major chord. Ruslan's acrobatic theme juxtaposed against the leading-tone-lacking scale takes on different colourizations depending on how the scale is used, where it is, and what preceded and follows justified by rehearsal marking 26 where due to the constructing of the WT scale through each consecutive voice, a false sense of direction is built abandoned by the EM<sup>6/4</sup>, followed by two groups of 6 eighth note groups which resolves to EM. During this permutation of the WT scale heard at the beginning, a WT scale built on a descending E octave, this time starting on C going until G#, reminiscent of Lydian mode, the accompanying text reads, "немало погиблоб,"<sup>19</sup> whose declamation is accompanied by forthright music, a trumpeting call bidding Ruslan to come fight for Lyudmila if he dares. This is seen in the gradual whole note WT scale, which up until this point in Act IV the WT scale had not taken the form of. "-богатырей!"<sup>20</sup>, completes the phrase, "Quite a few hero's died," and as quick as the battle invitation had been given, Ruslan's theme jumps right in, and this is mirrored in the libretto as he makes quick work of Chernomor. Before moving to Pelleas et Melisande, striking is the use of the WT scale at the end of the piece, as instead of making the scale a simple embellishment or motif which fades into the melodious background, Glinka instead restates the scale with full charisma and it is this scale which makes up the harmonic foundation of the entire last page.<sup>21</sup> This time the scale is founded on D, continuing to E which would logically continue to D, but is instead kept from resolving for the sake of dramatic tension and instead goes to the octave E. Following is a 4 note semitone passage and for the last 8 bars are 5ths of A/E and B/E, constituting V-i. The voices, now finished stating

<sup>16</sup> Glinka, Mikhail. *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, pg. 76-77, Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1998

<sup>17</sup> Glinka, Mikhail. *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, pg. 266-\_\_\_\_, Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1998

<sup>18</sup> Realization of the motif, further reading.

Woodside, Mary S. "Leitmotiv in Russia: Glinkas Use of the Whole-Tone Scale." *19th-Century Music* 14, no. 1 (1990): 67-74. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nem.1990.14.1.02a00050>.

<sup>19</sup> немало погибло- (nyemala pagibla)-"Many have died" See next footnote.

<sup>20</sup> "-богатырей!: Hero

<sup>21</sup> Glinka, Mikhail. *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, pg. 276, Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 1998

what they had to say simply maintain E, which feels correct due to the oscillation of IV-i against the V/V-i<sup>2-3</sup>.

Debussy's use of the WT scale is characterized as a symbol for stasis and perpetual staticism and lacking of melodic direction, thus evoking fear transmuted to a state of 'paralysis'<sup>22</sup> which could be interpreted as the central tenant to Melisande's personality, actions, and lack of transparency, simply through her fear of an unknown force, thought to be Bluebeard<sup>23</sup> and this distinction leads one to the rationalization that perhaps Melisande's being is a transitory one, inclining one to the understanding of her imperceptibility as a simple secondary trait of being in an appartional state, neither concretely solidified in this world or the next. This speculative reasoning is supported by analysis of the beginning scene's text and accompanying music, the first lines given to the audience which foreshadow Melisande's ephemeral statute, "*Ne me touchez pas!*,"<sup>24</sup> fully acapella and connected with the marking, '*presque sans voix*.'<sup>25</sup> Everything about this entrance is without full body, lacking a place of its own as the musical line, in the visually similar format, has already been stated this time instead of using the bass clef, the treble clef is used but keeping the placement of the notes thus transforming the sung notes from c<sup>o</sup> to a<sup>b</sup>minor, paired with the dissimilar chords are the emotional meaning, one party genuinely caring and one party desperately trying to keep distance. It feels as if Debussy was trying to dissuade the listener from making conceptual assumptions of the musical, harmonic, or fundamental story progression and rather than provide copious details with unnecessary dialogue<sup>26</sup>, what is given is the bare minimum, neither divulging too much or keeping too much as to not be able to make conclusionary thoughts about the characters involved. Another key detail at this crucial moment of juxtaposing incentives, one of avoidance and another of a helping hand, is the Wagnerian influence rearing its head in a direct quoting of the Tristan Chord lasting 2 1/2 measures, under Golauds text, "*Pourquoi pleurez vous, ici, toute seule?*"<sup>27</sup> Subtly thrown into the Tristan chord is the Db/C#, providing the harmonization root to DbMajor as many revisitings of the progression of Tristan Chord to Db<sup>7-8</sup> has led to the discovery that not only is that second chord the Tristan Chord with an added Db/C#, but more significantly is the need of the second to resolve and due to this unmet need of the chord, we are stranded with an unresolved tension, from the French aug. 6th<sup>2-3</sup> and its clear passing tone quality, to the Db's feeling of tonal security offset by the 7-8 suspension and abm vocal line, and yet even despite the abm dominated vocal line, playing Db<sup>7-8</sup> under the abm doesn't offend the ear, rather it adds a level of continuity which perhaps is what Debussy intended, instead of using the predominant function the chord is used to build a tautness in the semi-released harmony. An early prominent use of the WT scale occurs in Act I Scene 1 when Golaud offers to fetch the crown that Melisande had let fall during her weeping under the tree beside the well. When Golaud offers to

<sup>22</sup>Wenk, Aurthier. "Debussy's Prism: An Approach to Pelléas Et Mélisande," n.d. Accessed February 10, 2020.

<sup>23</sup>Pasler, Jann. "Debussy the Man, His Music, and His Legacy: An Overview of Current Research." Notes, vol. 69, no. 2, Dec. 2012, pp. 197–216., doi:10.1353/not.2012.0167. This rationalization that Melisande is stuck within the constraints of a purgatorial realm is understood due to the knowledge that Bluebird had killed all but one of his wives, and deviating from the story, one could speculate that perhaps this is the wife that escaped although the reading of the lore doesn't accurately support this theory.

<sup>24</sup>Ne me touchez pas: Don't me touch not, Don't touch me. This entrance is found on pg. 6 of the United Publishers score.

<sup>25</sup>presque sans voix: Almost without voice.

<sup>26</sup>In fact, Act 1 Scene I's libretto used by Debussy contains no cuts. Ibid., 9

<sup>27</sup>Pourquoi pleurez vous, ici, toute seule?- Why are you crying here all alone?

retrieve the crown given to her by 'him', she responds by vehemently requesting Golaud to not retrieve the crown, stating that she would rather die than have it retrieved, and this serves as substantial evidence for the Bluebeard origin story, as her engagement with Bluebird must have culminated in a terror-filled flee for her life and the physical fetching of the crown would be enough to instill traumatic memories of that fateful flight from captivity. Here the WT scale is used in its linear form starting on G2, navigating upwards to E#4, before circling back and restarting the scale this time enclosed within two octaves, paired with the vocal line's bm dominant trail upwards and the piano's right hand playful triplet traversings. In this two page<sup>28</sup> display of emotional ambiguity and loss of concrete tonal center is the chordal progression of GM<sup>m7</sup>, AM<sup>m7</sup>, c#m<sup>m7</sup>, em, and the WT scale effectually anchors us to that progression, first outlining the G WT scale, and then outline the A equivalent, leading us into the c#m<sup>m7</sup> tremolo-em 'cadence'.

That is Debussy's true use of the WT scale, to create an environment of misalignment centered around tonal 'center's', obstructed by the WT's lack of ti-do resolution, and by disturbing the traditional practices of chordal progressions within operatic contexts, he inverts the notion of a streamline, discernable relationship between harmony, text, and plot. Debussy's tumultuousness with the Paris Conservatory and their strict adherence to traditional forms of teaching especially in relation to harmony, which Debussy had commented was detrimental to young musicians because it drove them to uniformity and sameness,<sup>29</sup> is directly expressed through the WT's synthesis with explicit chromaticism and lack of audible distinctions between scenes, ie., Act 2 Scene 2-3 with oscillating Tristan Chord/AM<sup>m7</sup> where the TC serves as the predominant suggested by the G# serving as the ti, being resolved to A which serves as the do, which is then followed by a broken up d<sup>om7</sup> which is followed by a severely misplaced WT scale (C-G) followed by a re-articulation of the opening d<sup>om7</sup>. Debussy's infatuation with nuanced tonalities, reoccurring melodic passages, and Wagnerian veins can be understood as symbolic for Debussy's internal angst at his combative relationship, not only with his parents and the Conservatoire, but the concept of eternal love and dedication to his craft. Glinka's run-in with the opposite sex, around 1836 a Jewish German contralto who's name is lost to time and who's affinity was transient after his necessary return to St. Petersburg caused to him to pursue Maria P. Ivanof, and eventual moving in with his mother and sister a short while after 1836, was irregular and flighty, but just like Natasha in Tolstoy's, "War and Peace," he must have constructed an imagination which far outweighed reality which ultimately caused him to change course on one love for another. This romantic, fanciful character is translated into *Ruslan and Lyudmila* through Glinka's secondary creation of the 'modern Russian school'<sup>30</sup>, and unyielding want to find unutilized scales and moods, ie., the WT scale, oriental melodies like Nadia's song<sup>31</sup> which lures Ratmir, a symbol perhaps of a lack of masculine qualities due to Pushkin's characterization as an 'incurable daydreamer', into her grasp, and pioneering

<sup>28</sup>18. Debussy, Claude. *Pelleas Et Melisande*. Pg. 12-13, A. Durand et Fils, 1907.

<sup>29</sup> Debussy and His World, edited by Jane F. Fulcher, Professor of Musicology

<sup>30</sup> Terms sourced from Famous Composers and Their Music, Volume 5 edited by Theodore Thomas

They accredit this term to Gustave Bertrand, "Russian art, become it is in its infancy, is therefore sadly afraid of showing its youth, and so their musicians feel the necessity of writing such music as is called to-day the most advanced."

<sup>31</sup> The melody is attributed to a Persian melody, heard by Glinka in the Autumn of 1829, "-by a secretary of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Khozrev Mirza." Although this is slightly contradicted due to the same article saying the melody was of Tartar origin which means we are looking at the inception of this music in Glinka's ear after being given 3 Tartar melodies by a marine painter, date unknown.

harmonies, most notably Lyudmila's kidnapping music where an offset WT scale is juxtaposed against tremolo's and an octave f<sup>o</sup> arpeggio. Debussy and Glinka both shared periods of intense love, followed by monumentally unhappy followthroughs and in result channelled their individual experiences into their operatic writing, thereby providing the listener with a true window to the captivation of love and loss from two dissimilar scenarios, using an identical scale but under the pretenses of vastly different situations, thus producing an incompleteness in one and malicious intent in the other.

Glinka preordained the conceptual Russian musical future through his music and Debussy gave composers the opportunity to not answer questions, to be vague, to be muted and intransparent with details but transparent with harmonic 'endings'. Ruslan finally retrieves Lyudmila from the clutches of Naina and when awoken from her magical sleep by a ring, the entire kingdom celebrates and sings, "*And on all over the earth, homeland glory is to fall to us.*" As Melisande lays dead on the bed with her arms priorly stretched outwards in an reaching fashion for an apparition unknown, her freshly born infant awaits its new life, the direct opposite of Melisande's internal and external condition. Perhaps she was already dead in her passion for living, or maybe it was stolen from here, or perhaps she didn't have it in the first place? In any case, the mysterious circumstances Golaud finds Melisande is the direct antithesis of Ruslan and Lyudmila's introduction and due to this, we can discern the usage of the WT scale simply by where the curtain opens and allows us to see, in the case of Glinka and Debussy, the epitome of eternal love versus the epitome of transient self-questioning.

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