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Gillian Opstad, *Debussy's Mélisande: The Lives of Georgette Leblanc, Mary Garden and Maggie Teyte*. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2009. xii + 348 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84383-459-5.

Review by Jolanta T. Pekacz, Dalhousie University.

The book's title indicates a biographical account of three female operatic soprano singers, linked by the character of Mélisande, a heroine of Claude Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* composed to the poem of Maurice Maeterlinck under the same title and premiered in 1902. The author, Gillian Opstad, states the book's purpose in the introduction: "What follows is not a technical analysis of the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but the story of the staging of the play which inspired the opera, its composition, and the relationship between author, composer, director, conductor and performers. The lives of Georgette Leblanc, Mary Garden and Maggie Teyte are interwoven, each not only remarkable for her resilience and initiative, but for her willingness to adapt to the opportunities offered by the emerging technologies of recording, radio and film" (pp. 5-6). The actual contents of the book is a chronological narrative of the lives of Georgette Leblanc (1875-1941), Mary Garden (1874-1967) and Maggie Teyte (1888-1976), arranged in twenty-three chapters, and encompassing biographical information beyond their stated connecting theme--Debussy's *Mélisande*.

Including in one book the three biographies and attempting to connect them with a leitmotif presents both opportunities and challenges. It allows Opstad to bring to life many details of the lives of the three female singers and their struggles to survive professionally in the operatic world of Europe and the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Further, it gives an opportunity to show the extent to which each of these women contributed to the dissemination of Maeterlinck's poem and Debussy's opera. Finally, it makes it possible to present the wealth of information pertaining to the performances of Debussy's *Pelléas*, from the first one in 1902 through the first half of the twentieth century, as well as information about the performances of the stage version of Maeterlinck's poem with incidental music by Gabriel Fauré. And the details and wealth of information are, indeed, what the book contains in abundance, filling up over 300 pages in print.

At the same time, however, these very qualities become at times the book's most serious liabilities. The wealth of information that Opstad is eager to present takes priority over interpretation and makes the book descriptive rather than analytical. The lack of discernment in the presentation of research facts and details obscures the book's focus, leaves out issues that beg questions and eventually makes the three lives appear merely juxtaposed chronologically, rather than connected by a common theme. For example, Opstad does not explain the role of Leblanc in the clash between Debussy and Maeterlinck over the issue of who should perform the role of Mélisande in the opera's premiere in 1902. Considering that Leblanc was Maeterlinck's lover at the time and was almost certain to be chosen to perform *Mélisande*, it seems plausible that she had some role in instigating the usually indifferent Maeterlinck to a violent reaction against Debussy when the composer eventually chose another singer as the first *Mélisande*, an episode discussed in Chapter Four "The Row (1898-1902)." At least one observer, Octave Mirabeau, had no doubt about the evil influence of Leblanc on Maeterlinck in this matter (p. 64). But Opstad's only

comment on Mirabeau's opinion and the whole episode is her rather naive rhetorical question—"Why was all the blame to be laid at the feet of Georgette?" (ibid).

Similarly, Opstad merely mentions such important decisions in the personal lives of the book's heroines, as Leblanc's abortion and Teyte's sterilization. And although there are sections in *Debussy's Mélisande*--for example, on the situation of women performers in the operatic world or Leblanc's lesbianism that marginalized her in some circles--which offer a hint of a cultural analysis, as opposed to mere reporting, Opstad drops such analyses almost as quickly as she introduces them and slips back to her descriptive mode. The broader context outside the immediate life stories of the three singers is almost non-existent.

The link meant to connect the lives of the three women--Debussy's *Mélisande*--may appear artificial at times. For while Mary Garden performed the role at the premiere, then sixty times at the Opéra Comique between 1902 and 1907 and about eighty times afterwards (p. 323), and Maggie Teyte sang *Mélisande* some twenty-four times altogether (p. 324), Georgette Leblanc performed the complete opera only once, in Boston in 1912 (p. 322). And while Debussy himself chose Garden for the premiere in 1902 and later tutored Teyte for the role, he did not consider Leblanc a suitable *Mélisande*. Finally, each of the three singers performed a wide variety of vocal repertoire, and there were many other performers of the role of *Mélisande* during their lifetimes. Indeed, it would be relevant to include information regarding who exactly they were and how they compared to the three "iconic" performers, just as it would be relevant to know the extent to which their contemporaries associated Leblanc, Garden and Teyte with the character of *Mélisande*.

The thin analytical content of the book is paired with the dearth of critical engagement with the existing literature about the three heroines, including the recent biographies of Leblanc and Garden. And although Opstad acknowledges that autobiographical accounts each of the singers left are unreliable sources, she reconstructs their life stories largely on the basis of these accounts. Similarly, there is no critical engagement with the recent scholarship on biography or women musicians in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, there is no argument, methodological approach or historical claim that Opstad wants her readers to accept, beyond the general statement of purpose quoted above, and the assumption that *Mélisande* was a meaningful connection among the lives of Leblanc, Garden and Teyte. And what seems particularly missing is the lack of critical engagement with the scholarship on "new biography" which takes women as a subject matter.[1]

## NOTES

[1] For example, Jo Burr Margadant, ed. *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000).

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