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Michela Niccolai, *Debussy's « Pelléas et Mélisande » : The Staging by Albert Carré*. Tr. Lesley Wright. Turnhout: Brepols, 2017. xvii + 253 pp. €100 excl. tax. (hb). ISBN 978-2-503-57462-2

Review by Richard Langham Smith, Royal College of Music.

This is volume III in the “Staging and Dramaturgy: Opera and the Performing Arts” series produced by the *Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini* (General Editor: Roberto Illiano). Nicolai's volume triumphantly adds a central staging of Debussy's masterly opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which ran at the Paris *Opéra-Comique* from its première in 1902 until the 1960s. This was the benchmark and developing first production by Albert Carré (1852–1938), director of the *Opéra-Comique* from 1898 to 1914. Nicolai approaches the subject from various fertile angles, culminating in an invaluable transcription of Durand's printed *mise-en-scène*, heavily (but neatly) annotated by Carré. The author convincingly estimates this as Carré's definitive version, after it had developed and improved—as operas do—after a first run of performances.

Accounting for nearly half the book, this staging document centres on diagrams of the scenery and props (a fascinating list of *meubles* and *accessoires* precedes the body-text) and the movements of the characters are clearly penned in with arrows indicating their trajectory, tied to precise lines in the text. Added to this are detailed comments on posture, mood and above all lighting, which emerges as a central issue in the book, not only because Carré operated in the first years of electric lighting, but because light and dark are a central theme of *Pelléas*, arguably more than in any other opera. This annotated source gives us an exact idea of the virtuosic use of lighting.

While this document gives us (in French) a document we can follow almost as an opera-goer sitting in an imaginary *Opéra-Comique*, a host of other materials surround the central staging document which the author calls a “Critical Edition.” Naturally there is a detailed list of extant theatrical and musical sources, the former focusing on the staging sources in the collection of the *Association de la régie théâtrale* in the *Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris*. Pictures from the large-format glossy magazine *Le Théâtre* are presented, and those from another contemporary review, *L'Art du théâtre*, are mentioned but, perhaps unfortunately (as some of them are better), not reproduced. A very useful glossary of French stage terms, compiled from various sources, follows the transcription of the central document, and gives us a nuanced vocabulary of jargon and an insight into the kitchen secrets of early twentieth-century stagecraft. It is a pity the explanations are in English only, in a book that elsewhere gives crucial texts in both French and English. Three appendixes are drawn from Carré's published and unpublished writings. A fourth consists of the script of a radio broadcast by his wife, the soprano Marguérite Carré, convincingly estimated by the author as distilling the ideas of her husband. These are presented only in French.

Three essays are added to the book. The first, entitled “Between shadow and light” (“*Entre ombre et lumière*”) begins with a clear focus on Carré's unwavering principles of staging as:

“...a synthesis of all the arts. Just as the composer of music tunes the various instruments of his orchestra in a skillful polyphony, so the staging director uses the elements he has available. In the theater, it is the staging that illustrates *the author's thought*, gives life to *his* work, locates the action, creates the atmosphere, and fixes the attention of the spectator.”

In respect to *Pelléas* he is more precise;

“The presentation of the premiere was as much Debussy's work as mine, or those of Jusseaume and Bianchini [the scenographers]. Nothing was done that was not wished for, chosen or conceptualized by him or with him.”

Niccolai estimates Carré's idea of respecting the author (or, more precisely, the authors of both text and music) as 'a very modern perspective'. If only! In my experience Carré's honourable respect for the authorial intention of an opera has all too often been abandoned by 'concept' interpreters who set the opera in locations far from the old castle of Allemonde; drown its delicate symbolism in concrete interpretations and—to cite some recent examples—turn Arkel into a pederast, Geneviève into a lesbian and have Mélisande hanging from a lampshade.

To probe the initial concepts of Maeterlinck and Debussy's first encounter with the play (in 1893) more deeply, Niccolai spends some time examining the differences between the single matinee of the play that Debussy saw at the *Théâtre des Bouffes Parisiens* and the opera itself, pointing out the enormous differences in production. She does not dip her toes very deeply into this *panier de crabs*, and thus does not emerge with the conclusion that might be reached: that the Carré production, beautiful though it was, was far from the aesthetics of Maeterlinck who was closely associated with the *Théâtre de l'Œuvre* of Lugné-Poe whose impoverished young troupe had hired the most unlikely (but no doubt cheap) theatre to mount their premiere.

While it is a very fertile exercise to juxtapose the innovative symbolist ideas of Lugné-Poe with the realist, romantic traditions of the *Opera-Comique*, such a comparison is hampered by the relative paucity of materials on how Lugné interpreted *Pelléas*. Perhaps the two documents reviewing the Paris performance might have been given a little more airtime (Henry de Régnier's review in *L'Art moderne* and the musings of Camille Mauclair—who was involved in the Lugné production—which were published in *L'Echo de Paris*). My own view is that the English critics, when Lugné-Poe brought the production to the ironically-named 'Opera-Comique' theatre in London for more than one night, the reaction of the English critics told us more about the production than any of those who witnessed that one afternoon showing in France. (See my article, "Aimer ainsi" in Elliot Antokoletz and Marianne Wheeldon, eds., *Rethinking Debussy*, Oxford University Press, pp. 76–95).

Moving on, Niccolai's probing not only of Carré's developing credo, but also his coal-faced involvement: he rolled up his sleeves to operate the 'wandering' light which could fade in and out the beacons out to sea in Act One Scene Three of *Pelléas*, where the eponymous couple see, and don't see, the symbolic lights guiding ships (or us) on the right path. He was, as far as I can see, the first theatre director to take on 'direction' (in the modern sense) so fully. In charge of the theatre itself, and its successes, failures and finances, he also had artistic vision: a break with the past structure of a hierarchy of *régisseurs* where the theatre director didn't dirty his hands so much with what went on onstage, more concerned with the fortune of the theatre itself. Carré emerges as a hero who believed that a successful production was a team-event: a brilliant director in both senses, deeply and rightly committed to respect for his authors and to the harnessing of a team (including everyone up from those who moved the scenery to the design of the tiniest props) and most importantly to the matching of the lighting to every moment in the narrative and its attendant music.

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The book contains rich material for *Pelléastres* and non-*Pelléastres* alike. It is a step forward in an approach to opera which is in its infancy, namely bringing together not only text and music, which has been the traditional way of study, but the scenographic and production aspects which lie at the roots of any opera. To my mind, Niccolai is right in exploring these as a vital component of operatic investigation. The first performances of operas are often a rootstock from which subsequent interpretations grow most successfully. Lopping off branches and trying to replant them in different soils often do not strike. Niccolai's approach is an excellent one, very thoroughly executed, and it illuminates Debussy's seminal opera as well as providing an essential reference book for further work in this field.

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