

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with *Pelléas and Mélisande*'s Golaud

by Mike Telin



Claude Debussy's journey to writing an opera had many false starts. Then he happened across the symbolist plays of Maurice Maeterlinck. After discovering that the author had given Vincent d'Indy permission to set his *La princesse Maleine* to music, Debussy turned his attention to Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

On May 2nd, 4th, and 6th at 7:30 pm at Severance Hall, The Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst will present three

performances of the new fully-staged production by Yuval Sharon of Debussy's only completed opera. The cast will include Elliot Madore (as Pelléas), Martina Janková (Mélisande), Hanno Müller-Brachmann (Golaud), Nancy Maultsby (Genevieve), Peter Rose (Arkel), Julie Mathevet (Yniold), and David Castillo (Doctor/Shepherd).

When the opera opens, Golaud discovers Mélisande by a stream in the woods having lost her crown in the water. Golaud and Mélisande marry. She falls in love with Pelléas, Golaud's brother. Later Golaud discovers the two caressing and kills Pelléas and wounds Mélisande, who later dies after childbirth.

I spoke by telephone to German bass-baritone [Hanno Müller-Brachmann](#), who will perform the role of Golaud, and began by asking him how he feels about playing the protagonist of an opera and yet not having his character's name mentioned in the title? "It's my kismet," he said laughing. "Leporello is a bigger part than Don Giovanni, and Golaud is a bigger part than Pelléas or Mélisande, but neither of them are in the title."

Mike Telin: You have lived with the character of Golaud for a few years — have you

figured out who he is as a person?

Hanno Müller-Brachmann: Nobody knows who he is. He's not understandable, but I think that is part of the story — it provides more questions than answers. He is a prince and a knight, and the perceived behaviors that go along with those titles are very important to him.

MT: When Golaud first encounters Mélisande in the forest, does he fall in love right away? And if not, what is his motivation for taking her home?

HM-B: I think he falls in love. But he is lost as a person, and taking her home and marrying her is a symbol for trying to find his way in life.

MT: Golaud has an interesting relationship with his grandfather, King Arkel of Allemonde.

HM-B: He's a little bit like Prince Charles. I'm not sure Golaud really wants to be King. His personality is not in line with his social stature and the expected behavior that goes along with that.

MT: Does he kill his brother Pelléas out of jealousy, or is there more to his decision?

HM-B: It is jealousy, but it also goes back to that expected behavior. If you are going to be the King, this is the way it should be. Killing him is awful, and he hates it in a way, but he has to do it — at least he thinks that he does. He is a knight, so it becomes a question of honor.

MT: Do you like Golaud?

HM-B: I enjoy Papageno more, although it is very interesting to play Golaud, especially from the point of psychological development. This piece was written during the time of Sigmund Freud, and it may be the only opera without vanity — there are no arias and no prima donna, it's just about psychology. You can hear that in the music as well. There's no highlight, it's always dusty and steamy. It's a very special opera.

MT: When did you first encounter the character of Golaud?

HM-B: I had my first Golaud experience when I was studying with Rudolf Piernay in Mannheim. We had a class on *Pelléas et Mélisande* and we performed several scenes from the opera. I fell in love with it right away.

MT: Do you come from a musical family?

HM-B: No, but we listened to a lot of music at home. When I decided to become a singer, my parents became very anxious about my chances to survive.

MT: Congratulations on your success.

HM-B: Thanks. I can feed my three kids, and that's important.

In a [Production Diary](#) video, Franz Welser-Möst and Yuval Sharon discuss the the new production.

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