



Isabel Bayrakdarian: The Canadian soprano is a dream come true in the role of Mélisande. J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR THE GLOBE

Cast is a gift – the set, an obstacle

PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE

by Claude Debussy
The Canadian Opera Company
At Four Seasons Centre
in Toronto on Tuesday

BY KEN WINTERS

Superbly sung, handsomely played, respectfully directed, the Canadian Opera Company's revival of its 2000 production of Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the first and some would say the finest operatic landmark of the 20th century, began its run of eight performances Tuesday night at the Four Seasons Centre.

It would be hard to imagine a better casting of the principal roles than we were blessed with in this production.

Canadian baritone Russell Braun was the ideal Pelléas, utterly believable as the younger brother of Golaud, the conflicted prince of the strange and fabled kingdom of Allemonde. Braun is lithe and modest and ingeniously exuberant in his physical assumption of the role and, astonishingly, able to manage the high, almost tenor-like tessitura of Pelléas's music with a passionate elegance and finesse quite unforgettable. This, one felt, was a Pelléas much as Debussy imagined him.

Canadian soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian was a Mélisande on a similarly high level. Within the limits of the production designs (more about those later), she was a Mélisande to dream about. Bayrakdarian is lissome and lovely, a subtle and restrained actress and also a singer ravishingly able to project the damaged innocence and timid simplicity of Mélisande's music and the human emotions of the shyly awakening woman within.

English-Ukrainian bass-baritone Pavlo Hunka's Prince Golaud, besides being masterfully sung, was perhaps the most dramatically complex and moving portrayal of all. Middle-aged, widowed, Golaud conceives a passion for the fragile Mélisande, whom he finds wandering, hurt, lost and abandoned in the forest. This passion consumes him and turns him jealous and brutal when he imagines, albeit accurately, the love that blossoms between the two young people. Hunka conveyed all this with telling effect and completely within the bounds of Debussy's music. His ultimate violence and breakdown were terrifying and poignant to witness.

Welsh bass Richard Wiegold is very fine and imposing as the blind King Arkel, the grandfather of Golaud and Pelléas, and

his gentle pity for his doomed heirs dominated the final scene. American mezzo-soprano Barbara Dever sang the role of Geneviève, mother of Golaud and Pelléas with warmth and dignity.

Perhaps the only miscasting was Canadian mezzo-soprano Erin Fisher, who sang well as Golaud's young son, Yniold, but was too tall to be credible. Surely the COC Children's Chorus could have offered up a seven- or eight-year-old boy able to deliver Yniold's music satisfactorily.

The excellent Canadian bass Alain Coulombe was not so much miscast as miscostumed in the role of the family's physician. With everyone else dressed in a kind of art nouveau, neo-medieval garb, the physician looked absurdly out of place in an ordinary present-day Bay Street suit and tie.

Which leads to the production: the set, and some of the costumes, by Dany Lyne. Apart from the physician's suit and Mélisande's scarlet outfits, which made her look more like Carmen in evening drag than a lost and ethereal princess, Lyne's costumes were suitable. Her set, while imposing and mysterious, brought problems with it that Nicholas Muni's generally adroit stage direction was unable to solve.

Most striking of these problems was the heavy constructionist causeway dividing the stage horizontally. When one end of this causeway had to be separated and raised high into the air to represent the tower of the palace, and Mélisande had to peek down at the enraptured Pelléas over the edge of the floor of it, credibility vanished. For one thing, there was no way she could loosen her hair and let it fall to envelop Pelléas's reaching hands and head, as the score and libretto indicated. Even if her hair were long enough, he couldn't possibly reach it, let alone tangle it into the willow bushes. Thus, this famous and exquisite scene was seriously impaired, in spite of its gorgeous singing.

English conductor Jan Latham-Koenig, the excellent COC orchestra and the top-drawer cast were all on the side of the music, but they did have a few such visually distressing obstacles to overcome. Perhaps that is why some of the opening-night audience seemed more bemused than bewitched. Or perhaps it was because this unique opera has nothing in common with those of Wagner or Puccini.

» *Pelléas et Mélisande continues on various dates to May 24 (416-363-8231).*

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