

DEBUSSY: *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Irène Joachim (s, *Mélisande*), Leila Ben Sedira (s, *Yniold*), Germaine Cernay (ms, *Geneviève*), Jacques Jansen (b, *Pelléas*), Henri-Bertrand Etcheverry (b, *Golaud*), Paul Cabanel (bs, *Arkel*), Armand Narcon (bs, *Médecin*), Choeurs Yvonne Gouverné, orchestra, Roger Désormière, cond. [Louis Beydts, prod.] EMI/France 2C-153-12513/5, three discs, mono.

More and more, I am certain, we will become aware of the gradual dilution of significant national performing traditions in the second half of the twentieth century and of the significance of earlier recordings in showing us what those traditions were like before the instabilities and corruptions induced by technological and social change had made serious inroads. One such tradition was that of French operatic singing, now substantially extinct, and a special branch of it was the special case of Debussy's *Pelléas*. Recorded in 1942 in Nazi-occupied Paris, the Désormière recording was the first complete one, and it remains one of the enduring glories of French art and of the phonograph. (It had been preceded by two electrically-recorded sets of excerpts, which also retain considerable historical and stylistic value; the Columbia set, conducted by Georges Truc and featuring Hector Dufranne, the original Golaud, was recently reissued in England as Pearl GEMM-145.)

Later recordings of *Pelléas* are certainly not without merit: the first Ansermet set, the Fournet, Cluytens, and Inghelbrecht recordings, even the second Ansermet with its more international cast, show that the central tradition retained its strength for at least another twenty years (although the more recent Boulez and Karajan sets surely represent, whatever their respective merits, entirely independent constructs of the opera's meaning, new approaches to its communication). However, the Désormière set represents a particularly happy conjunction of stylistic expertise, for within the general French tradition these singers were *Pelléas* specialists (some of them recorded little else), an ensemble known in the 1940s as "la grande distribution." They knew how to read Maeterlinck's lines on Debussy's notes, how to make the words color and vitalize the music's frequent rhythmic neutrality. Their voices were distinctive--Joachim's slightly tremulous whiteness, Jansen's bright nasality, Cernay's vibrance, Etcheverry's easy solidity--yet they share basically the same approach to diction and rhythmic placement, sure and steady intonation. One feels the security of a closed but still vital system of musical and theatrical education, intuitively in contact with the opera's original impulses.

Relative to the voices, the unnamed but expert orchestra is recorded somewhat backwardly, after the fashion of the times. (Malcolm Walker's discography in *Opera on Records* credits the Paris Conservatory Orchestra, though I would have supposed it to be primarily members of the Opéra-Comique band, which had surely played the score more often than any other ensemble in the world but apparently never recorded it.) This new LP edition, packaged in a box rather than in the separate sleeves of earlier versions, is an admirable transfer, the work of Keith Hardwick at EMI London. When Conrad L. Osborne reviewed an earlier issue in the same

numbers (High Fidelity, April 1975) it was in electronic stereo, and a still-earlier Pathé-Marconi edition (FALP-35001/3) had much more surface hiss without corresponding improvement of the sound; though there is occasional surface noise on the new edition, it is rarely distracting. The accompanying booklet, in French, tells us nothing about the recording, its circumstances, or the performers; there is an historical essay on the opera by Emile Vuillermoz, and a fairly elaborate plot summary, but no libretto. The illustrations are interesting; many of them have found their way into the recent Karajan set as well.

David Hamilton