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Rory Kinnear makes easy work of directing Debussy's enigmatic opera  
The Aldeburgh Festival's production of *Pelléas et Mélisande* is simple yet eloquent



A beautiful yet convoluted love triangle: Sophie Bevan and Jacques Imbrailo in *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Aldeburgh Festival Credit: Craig Fuller

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The Aldeburgh Festival, founded by [Benjamin Britten](#) on the Suffolk coast, has in recent years opened with the premiere of a new opera. But this year, with conductor Ryan Wigglesworth as the festival's featured artist, it has turned back towards arguably one of the most revolutionary of all operas: Debussy's enigmatic *Pelléas et Mélisande*, premiered in 1902, directed by none other than acclaimed British actor [Rory Kinnear](#).

On the wide open stage of Snape Maltings, Kinnear's simple yet eloquent semi-staging tells the convoluted story of what is essentially a love triangle between Mélisande (Sophie Bevan), her jealous husband Prince Golaud (Gordon Bintner) –

who encountered her lost in a forest – and his half-brother Pelléas (Jacques Imbrailo) to whom she becomes attached.

Some of the action seems unnecessarily restricted (singers fight for space on the conductor's podium, and it seems rather unfair that Mélisande has to finally expire sitting up on a stool), but it adds to the claustrophobic, oppressive atmosphere conjured up by Debussy's astonishing score.

With every detail emerging so clearly from the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, what we hear is less of a conventional opera and more of a vast, all-embracing tone-poem. The interludes that punctuate its five acts with grumbling, threatening bass lines and wailing woodwind dominate the drama, and the characters' interior lives are captured as much by what the orchestra plays as by what they sing.



Debussy's astonishing score and the staging create a claustrophobic, oppressive atmosphere Credit: Craig Fuller

Hidden within the symbolism of Maurice Maeterlinck's libretto – the precious ring lost in the cave, the beggars hiding, the stone which the young Yniold (Golaud's son with his previous wife) tries to lift – are the singers' deep conflicts.

Bevan's Mélisande is a ghostly white figure who emerges most forcefully in the scene with Pelléas where she combs her long hair, featuring sumptuous but always focussed sound, while Imbrailo's Pelléas gains strength and emotional confidence as their relationship deepens. The powerful scene of an increasingly hysterical Golaud

forcing the young Yniold (the bright-toned Beth Stirling) to spy on the couple is chilling.

[Sarah Connolly](#) as Geneviève, the mother of the half-brothers, Nicolas Testé as the wise King Arkel, and Fabian-Jakob Balkhausen as the doctor make up a stellar cast. But the star of this show remains the outstanding BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, guided by the ever-cool and charismatic Wigglesworth.

*The Aldeburgh Festival continues until June 28 (tickets: [here](#))*