

# THE TIMES

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Pelléas et Mélisande review – Rory Kinnear delivers thrills and chills

The actor brings his theatrical experience to bear on Debussy's intense and enigmatic opera, directing a fantastic semi-staging to open the Aldeburgh Festival at Snape Maltings

[Richard Morrison](#), Chief Culture Writer  
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Semi-staged but as absorbing visually as musically, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* offered three hours of intense psychodrama to open the Aldeburgh Festival at Snape Maltings. The director was the actor [Rory Kinnear](#), and his own stage experience was clearly apparent, not least in the way he skilfully extracted the humanity of the story from the tangled web of enigmatic (some would say unfathomable) symbols presented by Debussy and Maeterlinck, who wrote the original play. In that respect the concert setting helped. It freed Kinnear from any obligation to depict crowns and rings inexplicably lost in lakes, or sea caves full of Freudian dangers, or golden balls, or sunless gardens surrounding gloomy castles. Instead, he seemed to be following Debussy's original thoughts about staging *Pelléas* – that the orchestra would represent the foreboding forest in which Golaud meets the mysterious Mélisande, and that the latter would die in a "sea of violins".

That's exactly what happened here, with the excellent BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra spread out to allow characters to wander through, and the podium on which the conductor Ryan Wigglesworth stood also doubling as the tower from which Mélisande draped her blonde tresses. By clearing away the symbolist obfuscation Kinnear focused our attention on the twisted interactions between Mélisande and the two besotted, psychologically damaged brothers Golaud and Pelléas – a ménage à trois whose passions ebb and flow on quicksands of infatuation and deception, evasion and jealousy.

Bevan with Gordon Bintner, a superbly credible, seething Golaud  
Craig Fuller  
More than that, Kinnear gradually unleashed a chilling undercurrent of violence. That was first apparent in the scene where Gordon Bintner's superbly credible, seething Golaud forced his terrified son (the excellent Beth Stirling) to spy on Mélisande and Pelléas; and then when Golaud attacked Mélisande with horrific force, dragging her by her hair. To be confronted with such brutality in a concert hall was, somehow, even more shocking than in the theatre.

Sophie Bevan was remarkable as Mélisande, depicting a figure wrapped in nihilistic misery, and singing with a wonderfully mellow, mezzo timbre that still had plenty of power. I found Jacques Imbrailo's Pelléas touching too: such a weak, bullied brother suddenly exalted by a flash of imagined happiness only to have his hopes crushed.

And the score was beautifully crafted by Wigglesworth, the instrumental timbres finely blended and Debussy's drifting, tonally unshackled harmonies perfectly paced to enhance the story's unresolved tension. The whole production deserves a life after Aldeburgh.

★★★★★

Festival continues to Jun 28, [brittenpearsarts.org](http://brittenpearsarts.org)