

OPERA

By RICHARD ALDRICH.

MONA LISA, opera in two acts, with prologue and epilogue. Book in German by Beatrice Dowsky. Music by Max Schillings. At the Metropolitan Opera House. Characters in Prologue and Epilogue.
A tourist.....Michael Bohnen (debut)
His young wife.....Barbara Kemp (debut)
A young monk.....Curt Taucher
Characters in the Other Scenes.
Francesco.....Michael Bohnen
Mona Fiordaliso.....Barbara Kemp
Giovanni.....Curt Taucher
Sandro.....William Gustafson
Pietro.....Carl Schlegel
Arrigo.....George Meader
Alessio.....Max Bloch
Masolino.....Louis d'Angelo
Ginevra.....Frances Peralta
Diasora.....Ellen Dalossy
Piccarda.....Marion Telva
Conductor—Artur Bodanzky.

"Mona Lisa," by Max Schillings, was given for the first time in America last evening at the Metropolitan Opera House. It is the second of the two new operas that were announced to be given there this season, and its appearance is made according to the schedule. The production was arranged to occur upon the arrival of two new German members of the company, Mme. Barbara Kemp and Mr. Michael Bohnen, who assume the two leading parts in it, having won fame thereby in Germany. It is an opera that concerns them chiefly, in which the other characters are hardly more than subsidiary. They have a heavy burden to carry in it.

Both the two principals showed themselves last evening to be artists of high rank. Their performance in the opera was in nearly every respect superb, and made a deeper impression on the audience than has been made for a considerable time at the Metropolitan Opera House. After the first act, which closes with a powerful scene, though somewhat long-drawn-out, there was great applause, and Mme. Kemp and Mr. Bohnen were repeatedly and enthusiastically called out. Whatever may be thought of the opera itself, it was clear that they had made a success.

Max Schillings ranks in Germany among the most prominent composers; he is now 55 years old. Not much of his music has ever been heard in New York. The preludes to his earlier operas "Ingweide" and "Der Pfeifertag" and a symphonic prologue, "Oedipus the King," has been played in years past by the Philharmonic Society. David Bispham used to recite his "melodrama"—verses spoken to musical accompaniment—"Das Hexenlied." Perhaps a few more of his pieces may have been done by other musical agencies. But it is said that none of them have left any enduring mark.

"Mona Lisa" is not a new work. It was first produced in 1915, and has made no little success in Germany. Of course the heroine is none other than the original of the famous portrait by Leonardo da Vinci, that, as "la Gioconda," has for many years hung in the Louvre in Paris and was mysteriously stolen and restored to that gallery not long ago—the portrait whose baffling smile has intrigued generations of its admirers.

Beatrice Dowsky, the author of the libretto, has imagined a gruesome tale about this lady and her life and experiences in Florence. She is presented in the opera as nearly like the famous portrait in appearance and expression as theatrical skill in make-up and in facial expression could mold her; and no small part of Mme. Barbara Kemp's success has been in achieving this remarkable resemblance.

Mona, or Madonna Lisa, was historically the wife of Francesco del Giocondo of Florence. Any Italian lady of the fifteenth century, for the purposes of an operatic librettist, was unhappily married to a monster of cruelty and had a lover; and this is the starting point of the opera. The lover was Giovanni Salviato, delegated by the Pope to buy a pearl from Giocondo's collection. The jewels are taken from a large cabinet set in the wall, and are shown to and discussed by the assembled company. Mona Lisa recognizes in the papal agent the lover from whom she was parted by her marriage, and the jealous husband is immediately filled with suspicion. Giovanni departs with the others but steals back for a secret interview. But the husband returns unexpectedly, and the lover is unable to make his escape in time. Francesco discovers him in the cabinet and immediately pushes to and locks the door. Mocking his tortured wife in a long scene with derisive love-making and a refinement of ironical cruelty in his references to the imprisoned lover whom she knows to be dying, Francesco finally throws the key of the cabinet out of the window so drop into the Arno beneath, and embraces her, fallen senseless, as the curtain drops.

Thus she spends the night; and in the dawn is still lying there, at the beginning of the second act. She is roused by others and her young step-daughter brings her the key of the cabinet which has fallen, not into the Arno, but into her boat. Mona Lisa starts to open the door of the cabinet, well knowing her lover must be dead, when Francesco enters. She very calmly hands him the key, to his amazement and rage; and by her calmness, as she asks him for some other pearls, makes him think that his vengeance has miscarried. He opens the cabinet to get her the pearls, and as he enters it she crashes the door upon him, shutting him in as her lover had been shut in. A few frenzied words from her and the end comes.

This is the action of the tragedy; but it is represented as being the story told by a young priest of the present day who is showing a couple of tourists, a man and his young wife, over the palace of Giocondo in Florence. As he began his narration, the stage had been darkened, the scene changed and the action unfolded. At the close the stage is again darkened, the scene changed back again, and the tourists are shown taking their leave in modern Florence. Quite unnecessarily the young woman drops a bouquet for the priest as she goes off; and quite as unnecessarily he apostrophizes her passionately as he gathers it up, as "Eve, Magdalen, Bathsheba, temptress." This may have some occult connection with the story he has been recounting, some symbolical significance in connection with it. But it is perfectly inconsequential as far as the story goes and quite superfluous for the audience.

This whole contrivance of making the opera the realization of the story told in the prologue is analogous with the contrivance of the dream in "Die Tote Stadt," that other new German opera that has recently been visible at the Metropolitan. It seems, in fact needless, and does something at the close to damage the dramatic illusion of what has gone before. Why not have presented it as a mediæval tragedy standing on its own legs? It is a vivid piece of operatic melodrama, drawn in strong and somewhat garish lines; libretto of unusual strength and effectiveness, one that in and of itself can hold the listener's attention tense. It supplies not only quick and vigorous dramatic situations but as well a clear and vivid unfolding of emotion and passion, and characters drawn with broad, if rather obvious, strokes.

Mr. Schillings was well served by this literary basis for an opera. It offers great opportunities for a realization of the romantic atmosphere of the Renaissance in Italy; for dramatic music accompanying the stirring incidents, to illustrate character and to interpret the phases of passion and emotion that are disclosed upon the stage.

But the composer seems hardly to have done it full justice in his music. It is difficult to give it any higher place than skillful "Kapellmeistermusik," as the Germans call it; the music of a professional who has learned his business thoroughly. It has in several places dramatic quality and true expressive power. But it bears traces more of careful calculation and the use of well approved means than genuine and individual inspiration. This, indeed, seems frequently to lack. The music is lacking in potency, in real expressiveness. There is much that is simply dull; and the second act is musically naught.

The composer has followed a post-Wagnerian style in his declamation of the singers; and the general impression of the music, its harmonic sense, such as to be attributable to the influence of Wagner, with the modification of Strauss. It is at least without the intention of the newer, bold, bad harmonies of this latter day. Though the orchestral part is frequently thematic, it shows not much strong invention, much spontaneity in this direction. Much seems the product of thought and labor. At the decisive moments of the drama it has little to say. At the close of the second act, for instance

when Mona Lisa disposes of her husband, the orchestra's brief emphasis is made by some emphatic turn upon the xylophone, and this is far from impressive. Its contribution in the emotional passages is not distinguished.

The orchestration is that of a competent practitioner. It, too, is generally lacking in real distinction or force; though it is not infrequently loud, which is a different matter. The singers are confined to an incessant arioso of not much real significance musically; and in the "strong" scenes they are made to be more rhetorical and explosive than expressive.

The chief interest in the production was the notable interpretation of Mme. Barbara Kemp as Mona Lisa, and, in almost the same measure, of Michael Bohnen as Giocondo, the husband. Both artists are ranked among the finer of the contemporary exponents of the lyric drama in Germany; both showed unusual power in this opera. Both have the skill of dramatic singing, the potent expression of passion and emotion, and both showed remarkable endurance in exceedingly exacting parts.

The remarkable resemblance with which Mme. Kemp is made to represent the lady of Da Vinci's portrait is the most obvious feature of the portrayal; and not only physically, but spiritually. She denotes the character thus represented with repose of manner and with an intensity and poignancy that are equally notable. Her plasticity of pose, her gesture, her subtlety of facial expression that is a summons to pity, all are focused skillfully upon the portrayal. She showed qualities, in fact, that make her a lyric actress of unusual power and resource. She is a singer of parts, with a voice perhaps not of the most beautiful quality, but possessing emotional and dramatic expression and capable of power. But it will need a further experience in works of a more specifically musical quality to determine what the true value of the voice is.

Mr. Bohnen made a characteristic figure as the Italian nobleman, likewise modelled apparently after some of the Renaissance portraits. He has skill as an actor; alert, active, picturesque—sometimes perhaps a bit too consciously so—he is fully expert in denoting the malevolent nature of the injured husband, ragingly possessed of the desire to injure. He disclosed a voice of uncommonly fine quality, somewhat metallic at times—the metal is bronze—but often of rich color and expressiveness, as well as sonority. His singing is better than that of some Germans lately heard here. He has a power of dramatic declamation, a fitness of the words to the action, that stood him in good stead throughout.

Mr. Taucher was acceptable as Giovanni, the lover, but hardly distinguished, though he did some good singing of a passionate sort. Mr. Meader had an agreeable song to sing in the first act, which he did well, and added the one small touch of humor to an otherwise unrelieved tragedy.

The setting of the drama is confined to the hall of the palace, sumptuously designed and carried out, with a picturesque view of Florence and the surrounding hills through the broad windows. The prologue and epilogue take place in a gallery of a cloister, also effective in its architectural features.

The performance had clearly been prepared with much care and was conducted by Mr. Bodanzky with unflagging zeal and devotion, with great elaboration of the orchestral part, and with as much of the illusion of musical impressiveness and power as could well be given it.

The New York Symphony.

Mr. Walter Damrosch returned to face the New York Symphony Orchestra as its conductor yesterday afternoon, after several weeks' absence. There was a large audience in Carnegie Hall to welcome him warmly; and the members of the orchestra, animated by those springs that work so promptly in all well-trained orchestras of the present day, rose to greet him.

There were new things on the program, and unfamiliar tunes. There was a symphony by Mozart in C, not the great one known as "Jupiter," but an earlier one, a boy's work, for it dates from Mozart's nineteenth year. It was played for the first time at these concerts. It is very charming in its spontaneity, its melodiousness and its clearness and grace, and was charmingly played. The attention that has been paid to little known works of Mozart has had some delightful results, and this may be included among them.

The new composition was a symphonic poem entitled "Il Beato Regno," "The Blessed Reign," by Vincenzo Tommasini, one of the young Italian composers, though not one of the youngest, who are turning their attention to symphonic music. "The Blessed Reign" follows no program. The composer has suggested the choiring saints and trumpeting angels of Fra Angelico as the starting point of his inspiration. He has made his work almost wholly from Gregorian plain chants, not strictly reproduced, and treated with the freedom with which other themes are habitually treated, rhythmically as well as harmonically. It is written for a large orchestra with the addition of piano and bells, and there are many ingenious tonal colorings produced, some of which are singularly apt as an expression of the substance of the music. There are many learned ingenuities in the writing, and there is much that gave pleasure. It seemed, however, that there were undoubted lengths in the work, and a certain monotony that perhaps is almost inevitable from the use of themes drawn wholly from the plain song. There was no little applause for the new composition.

The soloist was Mr. Rachmaninoff whose appearances this season with orchestra have been few, and who played his second piano concerto. He played it with the same detachment, the same absorption in its spirit as he has before lucidly, powerfully, making it seem a long and poignant utterance of beauty as he views it. There is a great deal of piano playing in this concerto, and very little respite for the pianist. Mr. Rachmaninoff's performance is one that raises the music to its highest power. He was enthusiastically received and much applauded.