MUSIC

The Barber of Seville.

MR. MAPLESON has actually produced "Il Barbiere di Seviglia," and Rossini's sparkling opera promises to brighten the whole season. For Mr. Mapleson to give repeated performances of an opera which has so infrequently been heard here is extraordinary. Mr. Mapleson cannot be regarded as belonging to the progressive school of musicians, his most daring ventures never cause conservatives to tremble. The first performance of "Il Barbiere" was careful in every detail. Ravelli was thoroughly good as Almaviva. Indeed the critic of one of the daily papers erred only in his metaphor in saying that he "enunciated the delicate embroidery of his part with great fluency and the true Rossinian flavor." Mme. Gerster, as Rosina, introduced the "Carnival of Venice" into the singing lesson scene, and put such life into it as to win an encore, in response to which she sang a polka by Arditi, "Fior di Margherita." Figaro was admirably played by Del Puente; and Corsini, as Bartolo, surprised the audience. As he had done nothing noteworthy last season it was not expected that he would prove himself a capital buffo in "Il Barbiere." The libretto and music of this opera were written and composed by Sterbini and Rossini in thirteen days, the poet and the composer working together in the house of Luigi Zamboni, who was to take the part of Figaro. Rossini's pen moved so rapidly as to put him at times ahead of the librettist. Then he would compose melodies, to which Sterbini had to adapt his metres. He slept and ate irregularly, and gave no thought to his personal appearance. He failed even to shave. Strange, as a friend remarked, that his Barber should have allowed his beard to grow. Azevedo, one of his biographers, claims that Rossini wrote an original overture to this opera which was lost; but other contemporaries say that the overture played at the first performance and subsequently was the overture to "Aureliano in Palmira," which a year before the production of the latter opera introduced the opera "Elisabetta." Not every overture is adapted both to tragic and to comic opera, and the fate of this one only goes to show how grossly the spirit of the operas they preceded was disregarded in the overtures of those days.

At the first public performance of "Il Barbiere," Garcia, who played the part of Almaviva, insisted upon singing beneath Rosina's window and with a guitar accompaniment, a serenade of his own composition. He forgot, however, to tune his instrument, and when he attempted to do so on the stage, the audience tittered audibly. Then a string broke and the people laughed. When the air was sung, after these awkward preliminaries it met with no favor, and some of the audience began to imitate phrases of it in grotesque tones. The orchestral introduction to Figaro's air was listened to, but when Zamboni also entered with a guitar, the hissing and hooting were so loud that not a note of "Largo al Factotum" could be heard. Vitarelli, who took the part of Don Basilio, was admirably made up, but as he entered he stumbled over an open trap, and struck his head so violently that he was obliged to sing with a handkerchief to his nose. But as if these ludicrous mishaps were not enough, one more absurd occurred. Hardly had the finale of the first act begun when a cat ran on the stage. It was chased by the singers from one side to the other, and at last ran into the skirt of Rosina's dress. The audience was convulsed with laughter, and the music of the finale was lost in a general uproar. When the curtain fell the composer turned around and applauded. The audience took revenge on his audacity by hissing and hooting so loudly during the next act that not a note of it was heard. Not at all disconcerted by this failure, Rossini went home and to bed. When the principal singers came to offer their sympathy, they found him fast asleep.

THE object of Grove's dictionary* is to meet the "growing demand in England and the United States for information on all matters directly or indirectly connected with music." Be it said at once that, although it is wrong in certain particulars and omits information on some interesting points, while giving too much, in proportion to their importance, on certain others, it is in the main a useful book of reference. It is mostly at fault in regard to American matters. As to European affairs it will be remembered that when the first instalments of the work were issued a number of flaws were discovered, and the subsequent volumes were more carefully edited. Under "Ballo in Maschera," for instance, we find a mere reference to Verdi's opera and Somma's libretto. No mention is made of certain interesting facts concerning the work. The original hero was Gustave III. of Sweden, whose privy councillor was Ankerstrom. As the Roman censors objected to certain political references, the King of Sweden became a governor of Boston, Mass., and Ankerstrom his secretary. Of course many incongruities result from this change. Puritanical costumes hardly go with gondolas and Italian melodies. In Sir Henry Bishop's biography no mention is made of his wife, Madame Anna Bishop, who has enjoyed quite as much celebrity as a singer in England as in this country. The space allotted to the biographies of celebrated musicians is curiously out of proportion to their relative merit. Beethoven has forty-seven pages, Haydn twenty, Mozart twenty-seven, Mendelssohn fifty-seven and Berlioz two. Nothing can show the absurd exaggeration of Mendelssohn's merit in England better than the fact that in this dictionary his life occupies more space than that of Beethoven, Haydn, or Mozart. But then Mendelssohn visited England, gave concerts there and kissed the hand of the queen. Englishmen may consider Beethoven's place in music much higher than Mendelssohn's; but Beethoven did not have the honor and good fortune to kiss Victoria s hand. No musician has lost ground so rapidly in Germany, France, and America, in the last decade as Mendelssohn, and of all his works we now hear but one or two during a season. His life might have been given in seven pages. Who would not kiss the hand of the queen to get fifty superfluous pages in Grove's "Dictionary of Music and Musicians?" But the most objectionable manifestation of English prejudice is the dismissal of Berlioz with two pages—Berlioz, one of the most remarkable figures in the musical history of the century. He was a master of instrumentation. Wagner, Liszt, and indeed even the musicians who cry out loudest against him, have sat at his feet for instruction. Yet in this dictionary no more than mention is made of his profound work on orchestration, the "Traité d'instrumentation." Besides this he wrote a number of sparkling musical essays and sketches and memoirs often referring to his compositions and their production. So the materials for an interesting biography are plentiful. Berlioz and his followers are the musicians who are forcing Mendelssohn and his disciples from the modern repertory; and few modern musicians are better entitled to attention. Faults in the American department are plenty. No mention is made of Dudley Buck, the most distinguished American composer, whose works are well known in England. From the notice of "Home, Sweet Home," J. H. Payne's name is omitted; nor is it stated that Donizetti introduced the melody into his opera "Anna Bolena." No reference is made to Dr. Damrosch, the founder and conductor of the Oratorio and Symphony societies. London, Leipzig, and other cities have special articles; but New York, Cincinnati, and Boston are passed by. This might be forgiven if all cities in the United States were similarly neglected. One city however, is mentioned—Philadelphia—"remarkable among the cities of the United States for its vigorous musical life!" It is hardly necessary to insist upon the absurdity of this statement. The article is signed W. B. S; but the name corresponding to these initials is not found in the list of contributors. The author can hardly be an American and certainly he is not a Philadelphian.