

Watching Mary Garden, the Many-Sided, As She Rehearses Her "Melisande"

How the Unforgettable Interpreter of Debussy's Masterpiece Prepares to Re-enact Her Greatest Rôle

By CLARE PEELER

THINGS were a little slow-moving on that damp, dull morning over at the Lexington Theater. *Golaud*, wearing his derby hat and carrying his silver-topped cane, was lost in a dreary wood, and was mentioning the fact in half-voice to the musicians, to five or six girls that may have been students, and to three cleaning women, besides one or two other hearers lurking in the dim auditorium.

Suddenly the atmosphere sharpened. From somewhere in the lobby a slender figure, tricorne-hatted, white-gloved, spatted, white-satin-collared, dashed down the aisle. She threw her fur coat at a woman friend in the orchestra, and with a "Good! Now you don't need to buy a ticket to hear me!" for the girl students, raising startled eyes as she passed, disappeared to the left, to reappear on the stage at the precise beat on which *Mélisande's* first look must meet *Golaud's*.

That, as "Dere Mable's" rookie would say, was Mary Garden all over. It was seven years since I first saw her rehearsing, sitting on a throne in street dress as the bored *Prince* in "Cendrillon," five years since I had watched her work up the details of *Dulcinée* in "Don Quichotte"; but Time isn't writing any wrinkles on that lady's fair brow, in any sense of the word. She was as vivid yesterday as ever; as dominating, as intensely responsive, as marvelous in her instant comprehension of detail, and, one may add, as delightful in her kindness to everyone.

That is, to everyone that attended to his or her duties properly from her point of view. The strongest words in a singularly vivid vocabulary Mary Garden saves for the slacker, the inefficient or the stupid. As we sat together that morning, on occasion, she gave me the benefit, in a few well chosen words, of what she thought of the dilatory type in general; but she wasted comparatively little vitality thereon. As a matter of fact, it seemed to leave her refreshed.

"Aren't you very tired?" I asked her, apropos of some other exertions.

Doesn't Tire

"I'm never tired," she said quickly. And it was not a phrase just "for publication," either. Too often before, one has seen her perfectly fresh at the end of a rehearsal that it had exhausted others merely to watch, not to know that. Once, in Philadelphia, when she was rehearsing for "Carmen," for instance. Every bit of the music was sung through, every bit of the stage business done, though the properties were all *non est* (it was funny to see her come in the last act, vigorously waving an imaginary fan!) every step of the two dances gone over. Breathless, warm, on that sleepy late October afternoon, she would dash her hair out of her eyes, where she had shaken most of it in her vehement dancing, and go at it all over again. When I spoke of it to her the next day she said, "Oh, that wasn't much of a rehearsal! I didn't feel in trim somehow. I wish you had seen me the day before; I had more spirit then!"

But to go back to this particular rehearsal of "Pelléas et Mélisande." It looked like a bad day to get any talk with her; for *Mélisande* was on the stage most of the time, and when she wasn't, there were conferences to be held with the stage manager about the position of this or that; with Charlier about the way in which a phrase was played by his men; with Rufus Dewey about a pile of photographs for the forthcoming "Cleopatra." She broke off in the middle of a sentence to me about "La Reine Fiammette," which she had sung forty times after creating the part in Paris, and rushed off to get a better light on those *Cleopatras*; then, to the stage again, holding a conference *en route* with the mild-faced young prompter, who, eye-glasses focused on his book, seemed to have no function but to stroll back and

forth continuously while *Mélisande* and *Pelléas* improved their acquaintance.

Artistry Beyond Accessories

But only such an artist could have given one, as she did that morning, the complete illusion at will, without assistance from externals. One had only time to be amused for a minute at *Golaud*, still wearing his derby hat for protection from the draughts, stretched out on the nuptial couch, giving a fine imitation of

whose whole being is thrilled with rhythm; a woman of the world; an ideal hostess, full of gayety and wit and charm. And suddenly Miss Garden is none of these; she is just a jolly, fair girl who "loves bonbons, don't you?" and calls something she doesn't like "fierce," and responds cheerfully "What, dear?" when you ask her a question.

Absorption Acted, Not Talked

One cannot imagine Miss Garden tell-

of cremation, and then another side of her came uppermost.

"I went to a crematory in Paris," Miss Garden remarked, cheerfully. "I wanted to see what one looked like—afterwards. And it was just like a handful of little shells, you know, that you pick up on the beach. I'm going to be buried like that," she added, as though she were planning for a party.

"But would your family like that?"

"Oh, they'd love it!" she responded, with the utmost *bonhomie*. "I'll tell you what you do. You just leave directions in your will, you see—"

And she went on to explain just how to do it. But it was a little chilling, that idea, and the subject was changed by another question.

No "Isolde" Till France Forgets

"You used to say you would sing *Isolde* some day. I suppose you will never do that now?"

She turned around sharply to the speaker.

"When France does," she said quickly.



Other Rôles That Mary Garden Made Famous

No. 1—"Salome" (photo © by Matzene); No. 2—"Cleopatra," heroine of Massenet's opera, which received its New York première Feb. 11 (photo © by Moffett); No. 3—"Tosca" (photo © by Matzene); No. 4—"Jean," in the "Juggler of Notre Dame," rewritten by Massenet for Miss Garden (photo © by Matzene)

an aged husband with a particularly bad grouch, when the amusement gave place to wonder. For his rage was so real; her fear, her horror of her dreary life, her dread of going to that dark shore with *Pelléas* so poignant, that one forgot her short skirts and her tricorne hat. No accessories make this *Mélisande*, whom, their brushes dropped, even the cleaning women were watching open-mouthed. Then, it was over; she had shuddered out her "*Je suis malheureuse*," and the curtains closed.

From back of them one heard her peculiar distinctive voice, never to be mistaken for anyone's else, with its odd thrilling quality. She was explaining that the noise the curtain made was a thing that nobody could be expected to tolerate for a moment. As usual, everyone was conferring with and deferring to her; and, as usual, nobody went away unenlightened as to her viewpoint.

Many people say they know Mary Garden; some people even think they do; personally, I doubt that anyone ever does. She has as many facets as a diamond, as many colors as a chameleon. Perhaps you think you are talking to a clever business woman, who understands every detail of practical life, from dress-making to getting her photographs to the press on time. So you are; but you are also talking to an artist whose whole life is an adoration of beauty; a musician

ing anyone she "lives for her art." One can much more readily imagine her comment on any such bromidic observation; it would assuredly be worth the price of admission. But if you want to see anyone do that particular thing of living for her art, watch Mary Garden create a new part, or restudy an old one, as she was doing that day. She came back between her appearances and sat with us—there were four of us by then—but she had neither eyes nor ears for anything but her *Mélisande*, except for a minute at a time.

So we naturally talked *Mélisande*.

Speaking of her death scene, she was asked:

"Have you ever seen anyone die? You know, you are so fearfully realistic one wonders whether in that scene you won't really drift away sometime. It's almost a relief when you come before the curtain."

"No, I never have," she said absently, her eyes on the stage. Then abruptly: "*Mélisande dies Mélisande*. She lives a mystery and she dies one. *Golaud* finds her. But where she comes from he never knows, and when she dies she just goes back into that mystery again."

Her eyes, blue-gray, dilated. As she spoke, all the mystery, the elusiveness of *Mélisande* surrounded her; perhaps in that minute she was *Mélisande* herself. Somehow, we got over to the subject

"I will sing her then, certainly, but not before."

Someone remarked:

"Oh, I think all that seems to unnecessary. Music is music."

Miss Garden's eyes flashed just once. "France has lost her sons," she said, briefly. "It is all very well to say music is music, but France has lost too much to sing German music—for a while."

"Did you notice very much difference between your last visit here and this one?" I asked her. "Very much let-down from the strain, I mean?"

"I never saw any strain here," she said. "We didn't know, except in a comparatively few cases, what *strain* was. France knows."

And there was more pity in those two words of hers than in a whole volume of sentimentalities.

But that sudden sternness, that flame of loyalty, still possessed her.

"To stand on a platform and sing ditties!" she said, apropos of some war activities. "Do they think that helps? I'll give a representation, yes; sing a whole opera, and give the proceeds to the Red Cross. I've done it. But I won't sing a lot of ditties!"

It seemed a good time to change the subject, somehow, especially as the music had begun once more to throb and wave