

Mattiwilda Dobbs, First Negro Lead at Met, Scores in 'Rigoletto'

By DOUGLAS WATT

This girl, Mattiwilda Dobbs, has got it. The first Negro singer to be given a leading role at the Met, Miss Dobbs made her debut last night as Gilda in "Rigoletto" and was enchanting.

A coloratura soprano, Miss Dobbs is alone among her contemporaries in being able to combine florid vocalism with warmth of expression. I, for one, attribute this happy circumstance partly to the characteristic veiled tones that distinguish the Negro voice from any other.

Moments of Anxiety

Because of it, and also because of her appealing presence (she is a short, slightly plump, attractive young woman), this was an unusually touching performance of Verdi's rending, melodramatic opera. Gilda's scenes with her father, the tragic jester of the title, superbly sung and acted by Leonard Warren, were enormously effective.

I cannot remember ever hav-

ing been so nervous at a debut, because Miss Dobbs was a bundle of nerves herself when she made her first appearance in Act II, and I feared for her every note. Her body was tense and her breathing was deep. But her lovely voice responded for her and she delivered "Caro Nome" in exquisite style.

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:



Mattiwilda Dobbs In 'Rigoletto' Triumph

• Makes debut at Met as Gilda and gets deserved ovation from packed house.

History was made at the Metropolitan Opera House Friday evening, when Mattiwilda Dobbs made her debut there as Gilda in "Rigoletto." She thus became the first Negro ever to sing a romantic lead on the Met's stage. Marian Anderson paved the way for this event with her appearance in "A Masked Ball," also by Verdi.

THE BIG HOUSE was packed for the heartwarming occasion. It was evident that the first-nighters had come to lend their encouragement to Miss Dobbs. She made but a brief appearance in the first act, and had her best vocal opportunities in the second. After the duet with Leonard Warren and her eloquent singing of "Cara Nome," the well-wishers fairly rocked the venerable rafters with applause and cheers.

The ovations were justified. Miss Dobbs had remarkable stage presence, and sang with notable assurance. It takes a lot of doing to make the transition from the concert hall, where she has had a distinguished career, to grand opera. We thought she accomplished the feat most creditably.

Her top notes were good, sometimes brilliant, though she left a bit to be desired in the lower register. The breathing, voice production itself, and style for opera are a far cry from the concert medium. The demands are different. So Miss Dobbs, all things considered, made a most favorable impression.

KNOWING THE importance of the debut to her people, the Georgia-born and-trained singer must have been more than a little nervous. But she didn't show it. Her self-possession was admirable, and she received commendable support from Warren and Jan Peerce. It was obvious that the entire cast was doing everything possible to make her feel at home.

DAILY MIRROR SATURDAY NOVEMBER 10 1956

THE NEW YORK TIMES,
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1956.

Opera: Equal to Role

Mattiwilda Dobbs Has Debut in 'Rigoletto'

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

MATTIWILDA DOBBS, a Negro girl from Atlanta, was entrusted with one of the beloved prima donna roles at the Metropolitan Opera last night—Gilda in "Rigoletto." She proved that she was equal to the opportunity.

The day is not far off when an artist's color or race will not require special emphasis. But Miss Dobbs is one of the history makers. Two seasons ago Marian Anderson and Robert McFerrin joined the Metropolitan; Miss Dobbs, making her debut last night, was the third Negro to become a principal singer in the theatre where for seven decades none had been welcomed, though there had been worthy candidates.

Miss Dobbs stood on the famous stage, expecting only to be evaluated as any other performer. She was nervous, of course, though there were few indications of it, except for a momentary shortness of breath in several places. But she rose to the occasion admirably.

The young soprano has a voice of substance and quality, well placed and expertly controlled. Her singing is true, flexible at the top in coloratura passages and glowing in texture throughout the scale. "Caro nome" and "Tutte le feste al tempio" were delivered cleanly and musically, and her duets with Leonard Warren, the Rigoletto, were done with sensitivity of style.



Mattiwilda Dobbs as Gilda

Miss Dobbs, who has had operatic experience abroad and in San Francisco, had sung Gilda before at Covent Garden in London—but in English. This was her first experience with the original Italian. It would have been surprising if she had been perfectly at home in the role under these conditions. But she acted unaffectionately. All told, a fine debut. It may even be that greatness is within this girl's reach.

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NEWS ITEM

Mattiwilda Dobbs

Makes History!

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM AND SUN, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1956

Music

The Met Hails New Star

By LOUIS BIANCOLLI.

History was made on two counts at the Metropolitan Opera House last night, both of them by the young lady assigned the part of Gilda in Verdi's "Rigoletto."

For the first time in the 72-year-old house a Negro girl was singing a romantic lead, and in doing so she revealed one of the most beautiful operatic voices of our time.

The gifted newcomer was Mattiwilda Dobbs of Atlanta, the 29-year-old coloratura who had been winning plaudits on the European opera circuit until Rudolf Bing decided to rectify the oversight here at home.

Remarkable Artist.

Miss Dobbs, an extremely pretty girl with a model's figure, won a richly deserved ovation for a combination of warm, sweet-tone, expressive acting, and a personality that may best be described as endearing.

By any standards Miss Dobbs is a remarkable artist, very much in the tradition of great coloraturas in that her phrasing and shading are fully as fascinating as her breathtaking agility in the upper register.

There were hints of nervousness at the beginning—a little breathiness and one high note that was a shade off pitch. But that subsided speedily. Thereafter she was fully in command of her resources.

Except for the high B, the "Caro nome" unreeled in smooth, faultless sequence, word and note blending effortlessly in a tender reverie. This note of tenderness marked what was a wholly appealing impersonation.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 1956

OPERA

'Rigoletto'

By PAUL HENRY LANG

METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE

Opera in three acts. Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, music by Giuseppe Verdi. The cast:

The Duke.....Jan Peerce
Rigoletto.....Leonard Warren
Gilda.....Mattiwilda Dobbs (debut)
Sparafucile.....Giorgio Tozzi
Maddalena.....Rosalind Elias
Giovanna.....Thelma Votipka
Monterone.....Louis Sgarro
Marullo.....Clifford Harvuot
Borsa.....Gabor Carelli
Count Ceprano.....George Cehanovsky
Countess Ceprano.....Maria Leone
A Page.....Helen Vanni (debut)
Chief Guard.....Calvin Marsh
Conductor, Fausto Cleva; production by Herbert Graf; sets and costumes by Eugene Berman; stage director, Robert Herman.

The season's first "Rigoletto" at the Metropolitan Opera was a spanking good one that held the attention of a delighted audience from beginning to end. It was a real old-fashioned grand opera evening where good voices dominated, and, let it be said, they were American voices.

Interest focused upon the debut of Mattiwilda Dobbs, the new coloratura soprano. Needless to say, Miss Dobbs is anything but unknown, but she is new at the Met. That the Met was new to her did not show in her singing, which exhibited little if any of the usual nervous strain that besets even the veterans when they first appear on this famous—and large—stage.

Miss Dobbs is a great artist who has a brilliant future. Her voice, pure and true, can easily fill any house and she uses it with musicianly understanding. Above all, though she sings with real warmth of feeling, her voice is at all times beautifully disciplined and the pitch clean and clear as a tuning fork. The soprano made an arresting figure and moved about the stage with confidence. While, of course, one appearance in one role does not permit unequivocal indorsement, there can be no doubt about the management's excellent judgment in engaging this remarkable young woman; she is a major addition to the roster.

14-Sat., Nov. 10, 1956 ★★★ New York Journal-American

'RIGOLETTO':

Dobbs Debut At Met Gives Great Thrill

By MILES KASTENDIECK

MATTIWILDA DOBBS thrilled her first Metropolitan Opera audience with the warmth and the natural beauty of her voice last night. Making her debut as Gilda in the season's first "Rigoletto," she became the first Negro soprano to sing at the Met. It was a momentous occasion for her at 29, for her race, and for the opera.

Though obviously nervous, Miss Dobbs had won her audience before she sang "Caro Nome," an achievement in itself. Seldom has Gilda's scene with her father conveyed so much meaning. She sang knowingly and beautifully.

Unfortunately the audience broke in before she had finished the aria, so that she could not fully enjoy her triumph through an outright ovation. The applause nevertheless suspended action momentarily.

Voice Fires the Imagination

Here is a voice to fire the imagination. It is unusually big and full for a coloratura. Its full-bodied quality comes out clean and pure; it also soars through the house. Whether it is equally strong in the lower register cannot be determined until a less tense moment than a debut. To hear it grow still more should prove exciting.