

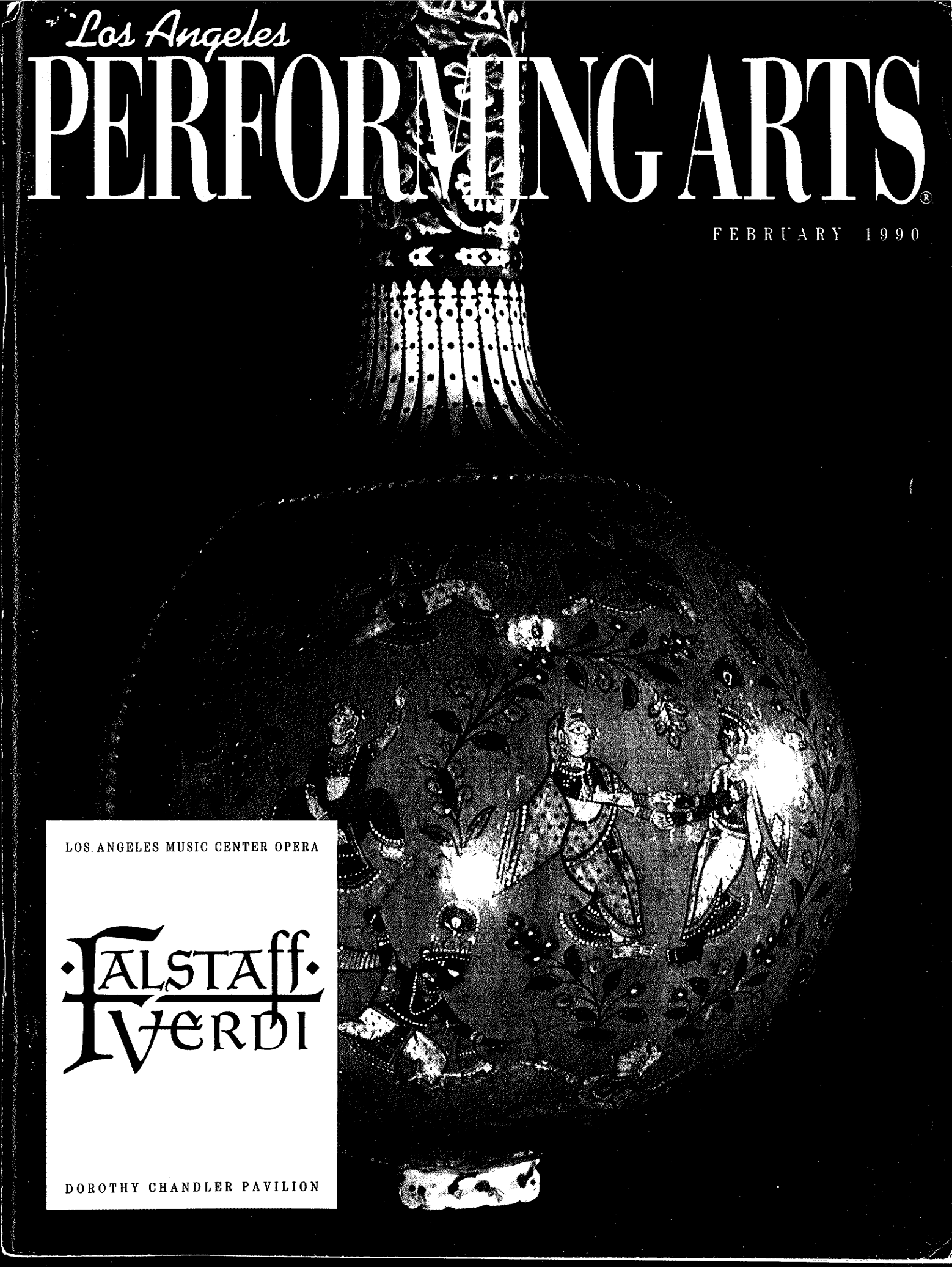
Los Angeles
PERFORMING ARTS

FEBRUARY 1990

LOS ANGELES MUSIC CENTER OPERA

FALSTAFF
VERDI

DOROTHY CHANDLER PAVILION



Falstaff as "Modern" Opera

by James A. Hepokoski

For over a century audiences have marveled at the intensity, concentration, and sophistication of Verdi's last works, most strikingly represented by the complementary pair of Shakespearean operas written on texts by Arrigo Boito — the tragic *Otello* (1887) and the comic *Falstaff* (1893). Both works contrast markedly with the relatively "spontaneous" operas that Verdi had produced in his earliest years. Perhaps the most telling differences are those of intention and aesthetic. Unlike many of Verdi's more "functional" or "social" operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff* openly invited their first audiences to perceive them as "masterpieces," that is, as purely artistic statements presented to a "modern" European world that was increasingly expecting a more "absolutized" art, even on the operatic stage. As such these late works demanded unusually meticulous planning. From the initial proposals of the projects to their eventual premieres *Otello* took nearly eight years, *Falstaff* nearly four. By Verdian standards these were extraordinarily long stretches of time. (The whole *La Traviata* project in 1852-53, for instance, had required only about four months.)

Conceived explicitly as Verdi's valedictory gestures, then, *Otello* and *Falstaff* were intended to be special works produced and received within a unique, emphatically aesthetic aura. As final statements, their aims were twofold. First, of course, they were to serve as capstones of Verdi's long career. As Arrigo Boito put it while tempting the seventy-five-year-old composer with the proposed scenario for *Falstaff* in July 1889 (and touching on the all too well-known sore point that Verdi's half-century-long career had included no successful comic opera): "There is only one way of ending your career more effectively than with *Otello*, and that is to conclude victoriously with

Falstaff. After having brought forth all of the human heart's cries and laments, to conclude with an immense burst of hilarity! That will astonish them all!" Second, the two operas were to prove that the *maestro's* creativity had neither faltered nor been eclipsed by musical "progress." In short, they strove to demonstrate that "old Verdi" was still relevant to a musical world that certainly loved his earlier operas but regarded them as dated "period pieces" — works that, created in a simpler time, could no longer serve as serious compositional models in an age of sophisticated "modernism" and operatic internationalism.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the late-Verdi style is how close the world came to not having it at all. Outwardly contemptuous of the complications and polemics of the modern theater, Verdi had retired from operatic composition after *Aida* (1871-2). In the last third of the nineteenth cen-

tury the Italian operatic world was changing rapidly, mostly in directions for which the maestro had little sympathy. Younger composers, critics, and journalists were calling for operatic reform, for an assimilation into Italy of the psychological, flexible naturalism of the recent French opera or the self-conscious "symphonic" seriousness of Germanic music drama. The Bolognese premiere of *Lohengrin* in 1871 — the first performance of any Wagnerian opera in Italy — was a watershed event. It led to an ever-increasing stream of Italian Wagner productions, to endless discussions about the merits of German "symphonism" versus Italian "melody," and, most ominously, to a lurking fear that, however one decided the issue, the earlier Italian operatic style had been rendered obsolete.

It was only after the application of considerable charm (accompanied by the delicious temptations of Boito's brilliant, "modernist" librettos) that Verdi's publisher, Giulio Ricordi, twice persuaded the maestro to re-enter the fray. "Old Verdi" — the embodiment of the past half-century of opera, the composer who had had his first true success with *Nabucco* in the long-distant world of 1842 — thus broke into the world of Italian modernism with *Otello* and *Falstaff*. And, twice, he surprised everyone. Still, there is no denying that as Italian opera moved inexorably in modernist directions in the 1870's and 1880's Verdi believed that he was witnessing the collapse of a more purely Italian vocal tradition, or at least its disappearance under a web of complex orchestral strands and pretentious, verbally elaborated aesthetic theories. If we are to confront the core of *Falstaff*, we need to realize that its comedy is embedded in an ashen vision of the demise of Italian opera.

Careful listeners are thus presented with a paradox. On the

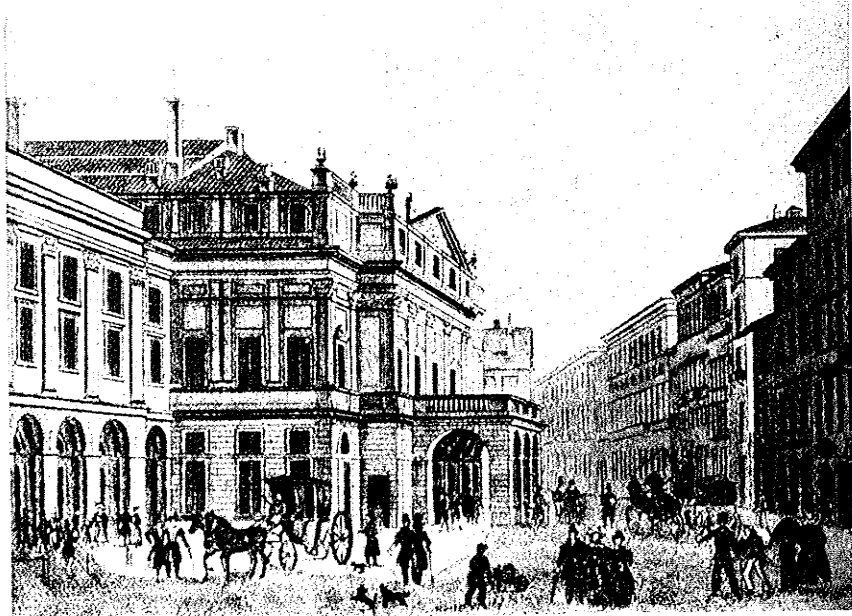


one hand *Falstaff* inevitably impresses us as one of most amusing operas. This is particularly true of its speedy first two acts. Sir John's rotund praise of his own belly, along with his outrageous appetite for sheer self-indulgence, Meg's and Alice's reading of Falstaff's two identical love-letters, Mistress Quickly's repeated curtsies to Sir John ("Reverenza"), and the incidents comprising the laundry-basket scene provided sure-fire comedy in any production. On the other hand the opera's humor darkens remarkably the further we move into it. By Act III this seems especially clear. Here individual lines suggest meanings that transcend the immediate subject matter. "Tutto declina," sings the drenched and abused Falstaff towards the beginning of that act, "Everything is in decline . . . Go, old John, go, go on your way; walk on until you die. And then will disappear the true virility of the world." For a moment the character Falstaff, Verdi the *vecchio maestro*, and the Italian tradition itself have become strangely fused, and we may well begin to reassess here what this opera is really "about." Similarly, for all of the comedy in the final Windsor forest scene we are more likely to be struck by the late autumnal tone of its nocturnal and "mythic" imagery. This is a journey into our own interiors, where the very young and the very old, masquerade and reality, innocence and guile, and dramatic flexibility and archetypal patterning commingle in mysterious, yet resonant ways. After such an extraordinary scene the meaning of the final chorus, "Tutto nel mondo è burla" — "Everything in the world is a joke . . . We are all deceived," and so on — is anything but clear. To be sure, it provides the requisite, generic "happy ending" of reconciliation, and perhaps in its general ethos of merriment it does not ask to be too deeply inquired into. Still, beneath its laughing, major-key surface lurk darker things. Its text, after all, may be read as disturbingly pessimistic, and perhaps Sachs' "Wahn" monologue from *Die Meistersinger*, however far removed in musical

Opposite: Arrigo Boito.

Below top: La Scala, Milan, where the world premiere of Falstaff took place.

Below: St. Agata, the home where Verdi wrote Falstaff.

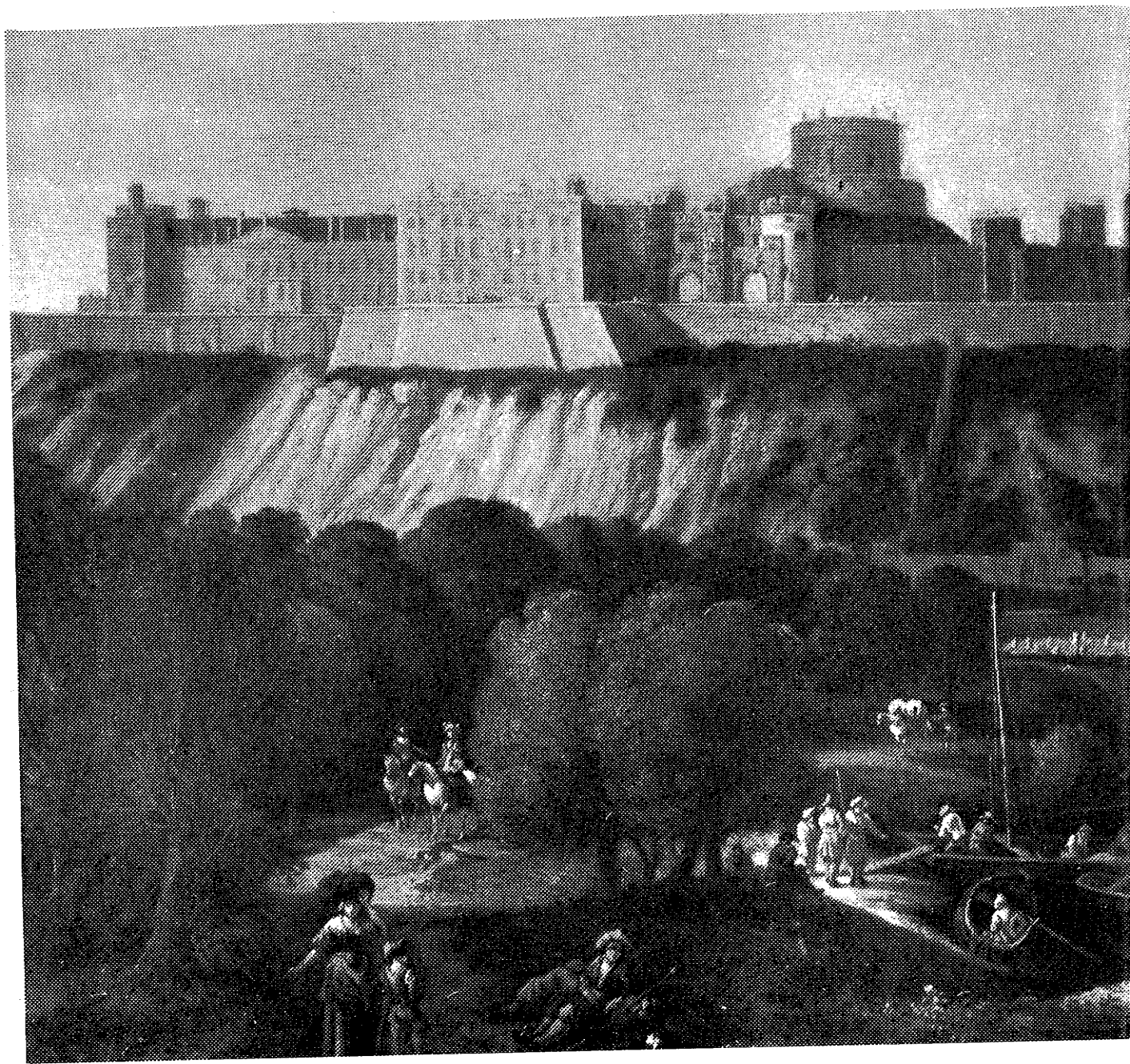


tone from Verdi's concluding fugue, is not as distant from it in sense and impact as might be initially imagined.

Boito and Verdi identified *Falstaff* as a *commedia lirica*. This was a new, pointed rubric that explicitly paired the work with *Otello*, which had been called a *dramma lirico*, and set those two works apart from

Verdi's earlier output. (*Aida*, for example, had been called only an *opera*.) Around 1890 the labels *commedia lirica* and *dramma lirico* identified genres that emphatically claimed to retain melody as their centerpoints, yet stressed such things as fluid (as opposed to the older, "static") lyricism, *ad hoc* freedom from the traditional conven-





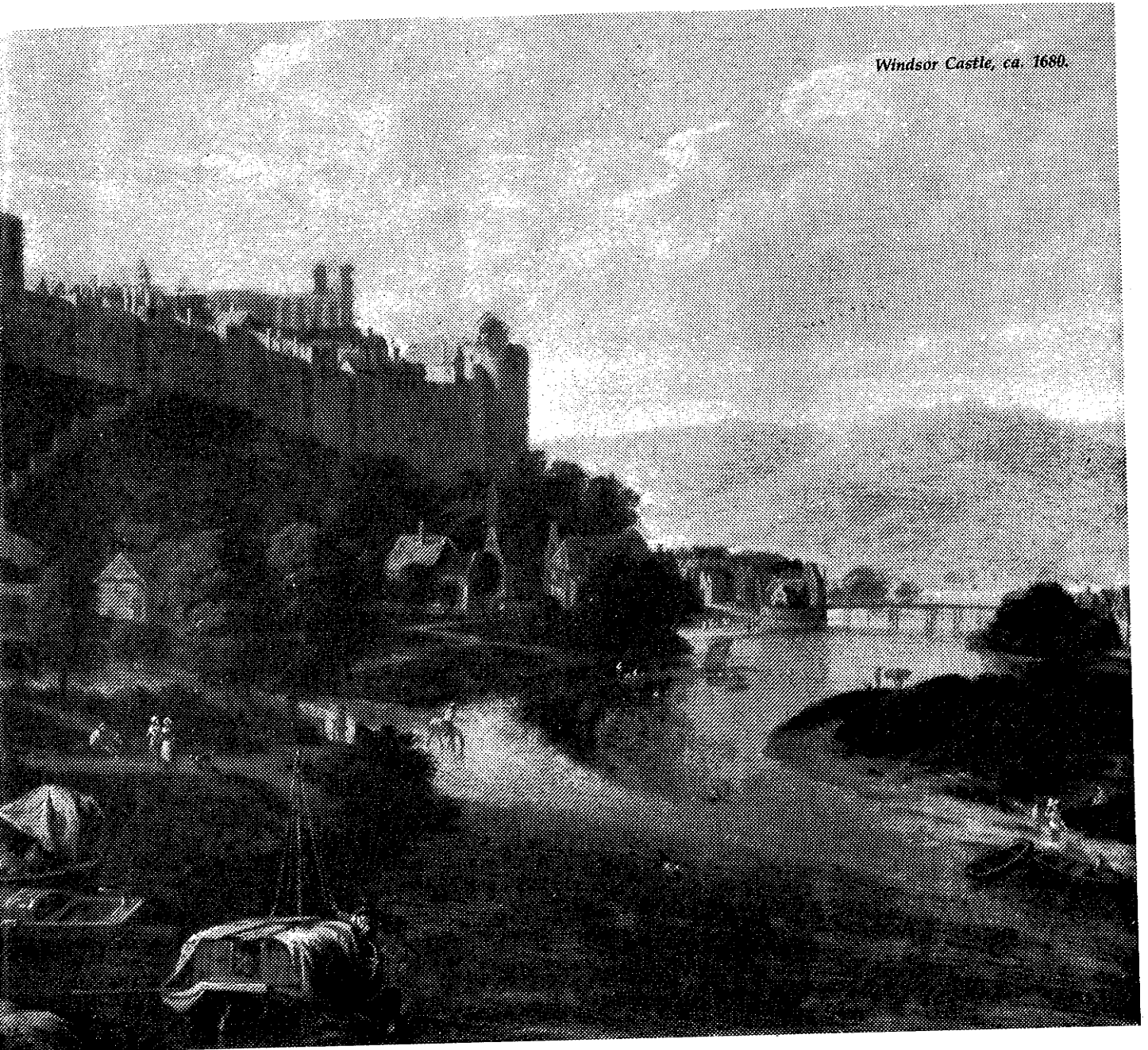
tions, self-consciously elevated subject matter, psychological realism, and a new sophistication of orchestral and motivic work. Italian audiences of the time would have understood the genres of "lyric drama" and "lyric comedy" to be "modern" Mediterranean responses to Wagnerism. We may choose to see them as part of a grand, if historically doomed, effort to shore up what remained of the Italian tradition.

In other words, *Falstaff* was intended to be something of an anti-Wagnerian manifesto by example. This is the thrust of Boito's interpretation of the work, as is clear from his 1894 remark to the fellow conservative Camille Bellaigue. "Ah,

this *Falstaff*! How right you are to love this masterpiece. And what a boon we shall see for art when everyone manages to understand it. We shall do everything we can to achieve this goal." And then, alluding to Nietzsche's recent polemic, *The Case of Wagner*, Boito added, "The human spirit must be 'Mediterraneanized,' only here will one find true progress." Similarly, it was important to Boito that, although he had adapted his text from French and Italian translations of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, along with selected passages from the two parts of *Henry IV*, Shakespeare's own source for the story had been an Italian tale from Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's 1558

collection *Il pecorone*. Boito underscored the nationalistic point again in another 1894 letter to Bellaigue. Verdi's music, he claimed, had managed to guide "Shakespeare's sparkling farce back again to its clear Tuscan source." And even while writing the libretto he had been careful to inlay certain non-Shakespearian, "Mediterranean" features, such as the proverb-like, concluding refrain of Fenton and Nannetta's love duettino — "Bocca baciata non perde ventura./Anzi rinnova come fa la luna" ("A mouth once kissed loses not its future./ Rather, it renews itself like the moon") — which he had borrowed from Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

It is generally characteristic of



operatic comedy (as opposed to "serious" opera) to privilege the play of the verbal text — something akin to what Roland Barthes has recently called *le plaisir du texte* — but nowhere is this more true than in *Falstaff*. This "word-centered" opera is very much a collaboration between equal partners composer and librettist. Even Verdi's instructions for its performance acknowledges this. "[*Falstaff*] must be sung differently from the other modern comic operas and the older *opere buffe*" he wrote: sweeping lyricism and the cult of the beautiful voice were now to give way to effective acting, clear textual delivery, and clean pronunciation. Boito's libretto is the most subtle,

even artificial, that Verdi had ever received. A large part of its humor springs from a barrage of richly colored, often arcane words that sent even some of its initial Italian readers scurrying to their dictionaries. As if striving to outperform the feats of the exploded vocabulary, Boito also packed the libretto with conceits of poetic structure. Most listeners, for instance, will be unaware that the texts of the first two Garter Inn scenes and the beginning of the third, Falstaff's "Trill" Monologue — are written for the most part in a poetic meter known as *doppio settenario* — succession of highly unusual, "fat" fourteen-syllable lines, doubtless selected to match Falstaff's girth. (These rela-

tively "shapeless" lines provided an unprecedented challenge to Verdi as a composer, they offered no clues for the traditional separation into recitative and aria.) Elsewhere in the opera Boito wrote certain ariatexts that unfold in cleverly anarchic mixed meters. Alice's brief "Gaie comari di Windsor" near the beginning of Act II, for example, joins together lines of odd- and even-numbered syllables — as if to display the "freedom" or, as we might say today, the "liberation" of the wives — in defiance of the traditions. Fenton's and Nannetta's magical "Bocca baciata" couplet which, as mentioned above, alludes to the constant renewal of desire, itself returns as a refrain. Most ele-

gantly, it reappears to form the twelfth and thirteenth lines of Fenton's love sonnet, which opens the final scene, and that final refrain—"renewal" is immediately extinguished by the concluding fourteenth line, "Ma il canto muor nel bacio che lo tocca" ("But the song dies with the kiss that touches it"). We learn here, that is, that the "Boccaccian" couplet comprises only the first two-thirds of the final *terzina* of a Petrarchan sonnet, left tantalizingly incomplete until this moment. And how may one convey in a brief space the purely "aesthetic" pleasure of such conceits as that which occurs in Nannetta's Song of the Queen of the Fairies? Her song proceeds in two musically identical eight-line stanzas, but at what ought to be the concluding line of the second, "Germogliano parole" ("Words blossom"), the words themselves blossom into four more surplus lines, the most enchanting of the whole song: "Parole alluminate / Di puro argento e d'or, / Carmi e malie. Le Fate / Hanno per cifre i fior" ("Illumined words of pure silver and gold, charms and magic. The fairies write with flowers").

In some fundamental ways, then *Falstaff* asks us to don the mantle of the connoisseur in order to relish the intensely pleasurable play of an art from realizing its own subtle possibilities. Verdi's music, too, is concerned with details, and it overflows with nimble, fleeting gestures that animate Boito's libretto, line for line, often word for word. In accordance with the "modern" conception of *commedia lirica* Verdi's principles seem to have been brevity, fluidity, and the avoidance of literal repetition. Nowhere is this obsessive compression clearer than in the opera's first act. Here the rapid pace and density of the musical setting is dizzying. As spectators, we have scarcely settled back in our seats before the first part of the act is over — and then the second. (As Verdi noted at these points in his score during the 1893 rehearsals for the premiere, "14½ minutes" and "14 min!")

This rapid-fire "close reading" of Boito's text is enhanced all the more

by Verdi's sparing use of expansive, rounded lyricism, particularly in the initial two acts. As many of Verdi's contemporaries observed, the "melodic principle" may still be recognizable in *Falstaff*, but the vocal melodies are evanescent, confined to incisive phrases rather than expanded over longer periods of time. These melodies — or better, glimpses of melody — often seem conjured out of nowhere, and they disappear as suddenly as they have appeared. This creates an elusive style that, although melodically grounded, simultaneously suggests that expansive melodies — at least those too explicitly recalling "the old style" — are no longer attainable. As if to underscore the point, the opera's longer or more "ambitious" solo pieces are invariably more declamatory than lyrical, although they do contain sporadic *arioso* lines to bolster key utterances and to provide concluding gestures. This is the case with such word-specific passages as Falstaff's Honor Monologue in Act I, Ford's Monologue in Act II, and Falstaff's Trill Monologue at the beginning of Act III. These are the operatic equivalents of multifaceted Shakespearean soliloquies, and their roots may be traced within Verdi's career to a few celebrated heightened *scene* or recitatives: Macbeth's Dagger Speech (1847) or Rigoletto's celebrated "Pari siamo" Monologue (1851), for example. In pieces like these Verdi took the risk of shunning lyricism *per se*, along with the concomitant spotlighting of *la bella voce* ("the beautiful voice"), in order to pursue what he came to call *dramma*: the constant, compelling engagement of the spectator with the events portrayed on the stage, a total absorption into "theater," not merely into "music."

For moments in *Falstaff* less "ambitious" than the large monologues Verdi often provides his characters with smaller, more lyrical patches. Falstaff's rapidly quaffed songs, "Va, vecchio John" and "Quand'ero paggio" in Act II or Alice's "Gaie comari di Windsor! è l'ora" in Act II. But the lyricism is fleeting, at best. Alice's song is the principal "aria" for the *prima donna*,

but although most "artfully" composed — it is dominated by the image of a "spark" of laughter rising and igniting in the air — it is over in less than a minute. Many of the other pieces seem more or less uniquely conceived and may be described, at best, as semi-lyrical: the reading of Falstaff's letter in Act I, for example, with its parodistic, glowing close; the purposely incomprehensible babble of the polytextual women's quartet and men's quintet in Act I; the two duets of Act II, Falstaff-Quickly and Falstaff-Ford; and so on. Each piece is characteristically underpinned by orchestral motive-work of exquisite finesse — another hallmark of the "modernistic" intent of the opera.

In *Falstaff* a purely vocal lyricism seems reserved only for the two young lovers, Nannetta and Fenton. The aesthetic point here, one supposes, is that as young people they have not yet lost the naive glow of lyricism. The world's guiles, in which they are just beginning to be invited to participate, have not yet tarnished this glow or put it effectively out of reach, as has happened with the older characters. Thus the wonderful, stanzaic Love Duet, "Labbra di foco" with its "Bocca baciata" refrain, both provides a welcome refuge from the otherwise omnipresent intrigue and serves to remind the "sophisticated" 1893 audiences — and perhaps us as well — of what has been lost with the inevitable onset of more complex or critical modes of thought. In terms of what might be called the opera's "stylistic structure" the Love Duet is the seed planted early on that ultimately blossoms into the lyrical Windsor Forest Scene. Fenton's Sonnet, for example, may be considered a "transcended" third stanza of the Duet, and it launches a concluding scene that, unlike the rest of the opera, proceeds in large part as a series of static set pieces. The blossoming of the Duet's lyrical principles at the end of the opera is particularly apt, for despite the Falstaff-aspect of the plot — a redundant second punishment in which Sir John is lured into entering the forest with strapped-on

Below: Falstaff's composer and librettist, Verdi and Boito.

horns, and so on — this scene was necessary only for the sake of Nannetta and Fenton, who now move strikingly to the fore as principal characters and are treated in ways that can only be described as (nostalgically) radiant. Because Verdi and Boito have been conditioning us in the preceding scenes to see and hear all of this from the point of view of the adult characters — that is, in the context of jaded plots and a dissolved melodic syntax — the unstated undercurrent of their youthful lyricism is that it, too, is mortal.

But Fenton and Nannetta are stylistic exceptions within the opera. And when one confronts the opera's historical reception over the past century, it is only fair to admit that Verdi's "close reading" of Boito's text, however brilliant, has also been the subject of some controversy. The rapidity of the music, its reliance on brief, fleeting orchestral motives, the "intellectual" effect of its pointed wit, the markedly literary gamesmanship of its libretto and technical gamesmanship of its music: these things, which seemed so "non-Verdian" to many members of its first Italian audiences are ironically the very things that commanded international attention for the opera. For European "progressives" at the turn of the century *Otello* and *Falstaff* would be vaunted (as Verdi surely had hoped) as the pinnacles of the composer's career: at last Italian works has been created which impressed even skeptical outsiders as sufficiently "profound," overtly complex, and masterly (in the pan-European sense) to be admitted without reservation to the international canon of respectability — to command attention from non-Italian composers and critics, to elicit nearly unanimous words of approval from major German- and English-language histories of music, and so on. Rather perversely, however, in its earliest years non-Italian audiences missed the point of the "Mediterraneanized" *commedia lirica* and frequently lauded the work on the exaggerated basis of its presumed adaptation of some of the principles of Wagner.



For whatever reason, the essential "difference" of the *Falstaff* style from that of Verdi's earlier works — more radically different and elliptical, even, than that of *Otello* — has always been something of a puzzle for some listeners. Over the years the opera has even found a few strong detractors, who, albeit constituting a minority, have generally laid the "blame" for its fin de siècle complications and self-reflexive aestheticism at the door of Boito. While connoisseurs have always been attracted to the opera, among more general audiences the exuberant, intricate *Falstaff* has often impressed as an undeniable

"masterpiece" — again, Verdi's and Boito's intention — but one more respected than known and loved. Perhaps reflecting this, it has frequently been offered as a special vehicle of certain conductors or as an opera appropriate for gala occasions or festivals. Whatever its mode of presentation, however, it has been a work characteristically treated with particular care — an opera "different from the others."

Currently Professor of Musicology at the University of Minnesota, James A. Hepokoski is preparing the critical edition of *Falstaff* for The Works of Giuseppe Verdi being published by the University of Chicago Press and G. Ricordi & Co.