



Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

Falstaff

Commedia lirica in tre atti/Lyric comedy in three acts
Lyrische Komödie in drei Akten/Comédie lyrique en trois actes

Libretto: Arrigo Boito
da/after/nach/d'après
Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *King Henry IV*

First performed at La Scala, Milan, February 9, 1893

THE CAST

Sir John Falstaff Rolando Panerai, *bass*
Ford, *marito d'Alice/Alice's husband/*
Alices Mann/mari d'Alice Alan Titus, *baritone*
Fenton Frank Lopardo, *tenor*
Dr. Cajus Piero de Palma, *tenor*
Bardolfo Ulrich Ress, *tenor*
} *sequaci di Falstaff/Falstaff's retainers/*
} *Diener Falstaffs/compagnons de Falstaff*
Pistola Francesco Ellero d'Artegna, *bass*
Mrs. Alice Ford Sharon Sweet, *soprano*
Nannetta, *figlia d'Alice/Alice's daughter/*
Tochter von Alice/fille d'Alice Julie Kaufmann, *soprano*
Mrs. Quickly Marilyn Horne, *mezzo-soprano*
Mrs. Meg Page Susan Quittmeyer, *mezzo-soprano*

Symphonieorchester und Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks
Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus
Sir Colin Davis, *conductor*
Hans-Joachim Willrich, *chorus master*
David Syrus, *coach* • Maria Cleva, *Italian coach*

Recorded April 8–18, 1991, in the Herkulesaal der Residenz, Munich

Art director: J.J. Stelmach • Photo of Marilyn Horne: Bette Marshall • Other photos: Tom Lipton
Front Cover Art: The character of Falstaff from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—
engraving, 19th century (The Granger Collection)

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Falstaff as "Modern" Opera

James Hepokiski

(adapted from program notes written for the
Los Angeles Music Center Opera, February 1990)

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 on texts by Arrigo Boito: the tragic *Otello* (La Scala, 1887) and the comic *Falstaff* (La Scala, 1893). Both works contrast markedly with the almost spontaneous way in which Verdi had produced his earliest operas. *Otello* took nearly eight years from initial proposal to premiere, *Falstaff* nearly four—extraordinarily long by Verdian standards. (The whole *La traviata* project in 1852–53, for instance, had taken only about four months.)

Otello and *Falstaff*, the capstones of the composer's long career, were conceived explicitly to become durable "masterpieces" in the international repertory. It was a sore point with Verdi that his half-century-long career had included no successful comic opera, as Boito knew very well when he wrote the 75-year-old composer with the proposed *Falstaff* scenario in 1889: "There is only one way of ending your career more effectively than with *Otello*, and that is to conclude victoriously with *Falstaff*. After hav-

ing brought forth all of the human heart's cries and laments, to conclude with an immense burst of hilarity! That will astonish them all!" With these two operas, composer and librettist strove to demonstrate that "Old Verdi" could still speak to an aggressively commercialized and urbanized world in love with musical "progress"—to a musical public that loved his earlier operas but regarded them as dated "period pieces" and believed that works created in simpler time could no longer set an artistic example to the age of sophisticated, pan-European "modernism."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Verdi's late style is how close the world came to not having it at all. After *Aida* (1871–72) Verdi had retired from operatic composition, claiming to scorn the complexities and polemics of the modern theater. In the last third of the 19th century the Italian operatic world was changing rapidly, mostly in directions for which the *maestro* had little sympathy. Younger "reform" composers and critics were demanding that Italy embrace either the flexible psychological naturalism of 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 a growing 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 the earlier Italian operatic style could do little to prevent its own eclipse.

In the 1870s and 1880s, then, Verdi believed that he was witnessing the disappearance of a native Italian vocal tradition, smothered under a densely symphonic orchestral fabric and stifled by pretentious, abstract aesthetic theory. It required not only the brilliant librettos of Boito but also the considerable charm of the publisher Giulio Ricordi to persuade Verdi twice to re-enter the fray. If we are to confront the core of *Falstaff*, we must realize that its comedy emerges from an ashen vision of the demise of a genuinely Italian opera.

We are thus confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, *Falstaff* simply is one of the most amusing of operas, particularly in the first two acts, whose constant orchestral and melodic virtuosity leaves us breathless. Sir John's orotund praise of his own belly and his outrageous appetite for sheer self-indulgence, Meg's and

Alice's reading of his two identical love-letters, Mistress Quickly's repeated curtsies ("Reverenza"), and the incident-packed laundry-basket scene provide surefire comedy in any production. On the other hand, the humor darkens remarkably as the opera proceeds. By Act III the text has begun to suggest meanings that transcend the apparent subject matter. "Tutto declina," sings the drenched and abused Falstaff near the beginning of that act: "Everything's in decline ... Go, old John, go, go thy ways; go on till you die. Then true manhood will vanish from the world." For a moment the character Falstaff, Verdi the *vecchio maestro*, and the Italian tradition itself speak as one, and we begin to reassess what this opera is really about.

Similarly, in the final Windsor Park scene—the broad delta into which the entire work flows—we are likely to be struck less by its comedy than by its late-autumnal tone and "mythic" imagery. This is a journey into our own inner selves: the very young and the very old, masquerade and reality, innocence and guile, dramatic artifice and archetypal patterning commingle in mysterious yet resonant ways. After such a ritualized scene the meaning of the final fugal chorus, "Tutto nel mondo è burla"—"Everything in the world's a jest ... We all are figures of fun"—is anything but

clear. On the surface it provides the requisite "happy ending" of reconciliation, and a general ethos of merriment, yet beneath its laughing, major-key surface lurk darker things. Its text may be read as disturbingly pessimistic; perhaps Sachs's "Wahn" monologue from *Die Meistersinger*, however remote in musical tone from Verdi's concluding fugue, is not so distant from it in sense and impact as one might at first suppose.

Boito and Verdi called *Falstaff* a *commedia lirica*, using a new rubric that explicitly paired the work with *Otello*, which they had labeled a *dramma lirico*, and set those two works apart from Verdi's earlier output. (*Aida*, for example, had been called an *opera*; *Rigoletto* a *melodramma*.) Around 1890 the terms *commedia lirica* and *dramma lirico* identified genres that emphatically claimed to retain melody at their center, yet stressed such features as fluid (rather than the older "static") lyricism, freedom from convention, self-consciously lofty subject matter, psychological realism, and a new orchestral and motivic sophistication. Italian audiences of the time understood these new genres to be "modern" Mediterranean responses to Wagnerism; we may see them as part of a brave but historically doomed effort to shore up what remained of the Italian tradition.

Into this brief *commedia lirica* are packed

innumerable fleeting wonders, many of them unapologetically "aesthetic" in their appeal. In some fundamental ways *Falstaff* offers us the rarefied pleasures of the connoisseur, inviting us to relish the play of an art form realizing its own subtle possibilities. Fenton's and Nannetta's magical "Bocca baciata" couplet, for example, alludes to the constant renewal of desire—and itself returns as a refrain. It appears twice in Act I and, most elegantly, reappears as the 12th and 13th lines of Fenton's love sonnet to open the final scene; yet that final refrain—"renewal"—is immediately extinguished by the concluding 14th line. "But the song dies in the kiss when they meet." That is, only now do we learn that the couplet (borrowed from Boccaccio's *Decameron*) is actually 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 "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 stanzas, but at what ought to be the concluding line of the second, "Germogliano parole" (Words blossom), the words themselves *do* blossom—into four more surplus lines, the most enchanting of the whole song.

Falstaff brims over unceasingly with such

aesthetic gamesmanship played at the highest levels. For moments less "ambitious" than the large declamatory soliloquy-monologues (two for Falstaff and one for Ford) Verdi often provides his characters with smaller, more lyrical patches. These include Falstaff's rapidly quaffed "Va, vecchio John," and his "Quand'ero paggio" and Alice's "Gaie comari di Windsor" in Act II. But in the "modern" world that *Falstaff* set out to address, such lyricism no sooner emerges than it is consumed. Alice's song is the principal "aria" for the *prima donna*, but although most "artfully" composed—it is dominated by a "spark" of laughter rising and igniting in the air—it is over in less than a minute. Such is the evanescent style of the "modern" *Falstaff*, given to us by "Old Verdi"—constant bursts of unrepeatable, ever-new invention for an ever more rapidly changing, restless world that could cling no longer to the styles and certainties of the past.

Sir Colin Davis served as Music Director of Sadler's Wells Opera (now the English National Opera) in 1959–65, as Principal Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1967–71 and as Music Director of the Royal Opera (Covent Garden) from 1971 to 1986. While at Covent Garden he led the company in tours to La Scala (1976), the Far East (1979) and the USA

(1984). He conducted many new productions, including numerous Mozart operas, Tippett's *Midsummer Marriage*, *The Knot Garden* (world premiere) and *The Ice Break*, Wagner's *Ring*, Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, and Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Since 1975 Sir Colin has been Principal Guest Conductor of the London Symphony; he is also a frequent guest with many distinguished ensembles, including the Vienna Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Concertgebouw, the Dresden Staatskapelle and the Orchestre National de France. He was the first British conductor to appear at Bayreuth when he opened the 1977 festival with *Tannhäuser* (which was also filmed).

In 1984 Sir Colin became Music Director and Principal Conductor of the symphony orchestra of the Bavarian Radio Network. A recent recording contract makes Sir Colin and this orchestra major partners with BMG Classics/RCA Red Seal. Already released are the complete Brahms symphonies, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and the Mozart Requiem; among those now in preparation are the Verdi Requiem, Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, and Brahms's *Deutsches Requiem*, *Marienlieder* and *Alto Rhapsody*.

Since his debut as a 22-year-old in Naples (Rossini's *Mosè*), Rolando Panerai's extraor-