

Program Notes

Text by Robert Markow

Verdi: Opera *Falstaff*

The world of opera is filled with great tragedies: Verdi's *Otello*, Bellini's *Norma*, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Puccini's *Tosca*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and Berg's *Wozzeck* just for starters. But what about comedies? How many truly great comedies are there? Very few. At the top of the list is surely Verdi's *Falstaff*. There are no "big issues" here, no profound character development, no doomed love – just an engaging story filled with fun and frolic, youthful high spirits, memorable characters, scintillating music, and rapid-fire dialogue (no repeating the same words over and over!). *Falstaff* is an opera almost impossible not to love.

Verdi's 26 operas were not evenly spaced across his career. Between 1839 (*Oberto*) and 1850 (*Stiffelio*) he turned out an opera a year, sometimes two. Beginning with *Rigoletto* in 1851 the spacing began to get wider. There were six more until 1862, then just four more over the next thirty years. With *Otello* in 1887, Verdi truly thought he had done enough, and looked forward to living out the rest of his life in quiet comfort (in fact, he lived right into the twentieth century, dying at the age of 87 in 1901).

But there was one final masterpiece waiting to be born, and it was Verdi's librettist for *Otello*, Arrigo Boïto (also composer of *Mefistofele*), who was largely responsible for its conception. Boïto knew that Verdi had long wanted to write a comedy. He also knew of Verdi's profound love of Shakespeare. The bait Boïto dangled in front of Verdi consisted of his adaptation of the bard's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (condensing here, expanding there), laced with monologues from *Henry IV* Parts I and II. The result, first presented on February 9, 1893 at Milan's La Scala, was predictably a roaring success. Notables from all over Europe attended. Tickets went for incredible sums. The applause afterwards lasted an hour. *Falstaff* was given 23 more times in its first season alone at La Scala.

20
Oct

21
Oct

23
Oct

Falstaff was quickly recognized for what it is – a magnificent synthesis of poetry, drama, and music, much in the manner of a Wagnerian music drama but without all the mythological and philosophical baggage. The action is swift. the design is compact, there is not a single wasted moment. Every word is important, and the orchestra is an equal partner with the singers. In fact, the orchestra is probably more important in *Falstaff* than in any other Verdi opera, providing continuous commentary on the action and a vast array of colors to match the mood at any given moment. Often the music flies by so fast that it takes multiple hearings to catch it all, but a few moments stand out. In the first scene, for example, when Falstaff looks in his purse for coins to pay the tavern-keeper, he discovers it is nearly empty, a notion reflected in the orchestra by horns alone, sustaining widely-spaced long tones to create the sensation of “emptiness” (no notes in between). Introducing Scene 2 is a deliciously appropriate bit of orchestral writing that perfectly sets the mood of frivolity for the capricious, chattering ladies we are about to meet. Perhaps the most memorable moment for the orchestra occurs at the conclusion of Falstaff’s opening monologue in Act III. As the wine he is drinking begins to take effect, warming his body and mellowing his spirit, a single flute begins to trill. More flutes, then more woodwinds, strings, and finally the entire orchestra – even trombones! – join in to paint the unmistakable picture of Falstaff having returned to his jolly old self.

There are ten characters in the opera, and all have important parts. There is an almost constant coming-and-going of cast members. Ensemble passages abound; there are even several rare examples of nonets. For this reason it is one of the most difficult operas in the repertory to conduct, to prompt, to direct, or in which to manage the surtitles (or sidetitles). There are no passages suitable for excerpts on operatic or vocal recital programs, either because they are too short, lack tidy endings, or just don’t work out of context (Ford’s and Falstaff’s monologues, for example).

20
Oct21
Oct23
Oct

Falstaff has been called “among the loveliest dreams of yesterday ever imagined by the mind of man ... It has the mobility of mercury and the durability of silver, and sounds as a combination of those two might come from a sorcerer capable of converting a sensation of the hand into a sensation of the ear.” (Irving Kolodin)

Kolodin’s reference to a sorcerer is apt. Verdi magically transformed the whole world of Italian opera. Even his early opera *Nabucco* (Verdi’s third and the one that made him famous) has a raw energy that went far beyond what Italians were used to hearing in their *bel canto* repertory. The orchestra was larger and more powerful, the singers had more forceful and strongly defined roles, and the entire opera was deeply imbued with dignity, monumental strength, tragic pathos and Biblical grandeur. These qualities carried over into many of Verdi’s subsequent operas. The transformation of Italian opera reached even greater heights with the great central trilogy of *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*. With these, Verdi became the only opera composer who could rival the French Meyerbeer, and by far the most popular Italian composer of the mid-nineteenth century.

Verdi’s public life was not limited to the world of opera. He was deeply involved with a political and social movement known as the Risorgimento, whose purpose was the overthrow of Austrian domination and unification of the various Italian city-states into a single country. Verdi lived to see his dream come true: Italy became a unified country in 1861. He was briefly a member of the country’s first Parliament, and even his name was turned into an acrostic symbolizing his nationalistic sentiment: Vittorio Emmanuele, Re D’Italia (Victor Emmanuel II was King of Sardinia from 1849 to 1861 and became the first king of a united Italy in 1861). When Verdi died, forty years after unification, all Italy went into mourning. For the interment of his body in the crypt of the Casa di Riposo in Milan, a crowd of more than a quarter of a million gathered for the event. Verdi the man was gone, but his legacy lives on, with operaphiles around the world loudly singing the praises of *Falstaff* as one of his greatest achievements.

20
Oct21
Oct23
Oct

SYNOPSIS

ACT I Scene 1

There is no overture. With a “bang” from the full orchestra we’re off and running. The scene is Sir John Falstaff’s favorite watering hole, the Garter Inn in fifteenth-century Windsor (a small city near London). Old Dr. Caius is complaining mightily to Falstaff that one or the other of Falstaff’s sidekicks, Bardolfo and Pistola, picked his pocket last night. Before the matter is resolved the bill for today’s food and drink arrives. Falstaff has virtually no money, but he has contrived a plan to get some. He has prepared identical letters to send to Alice Ford and Meg Page (the merry wives), both married to wealthy gentlemen and both of whom control the purse-strings in their households. Falstaff expects Bardolfo and Pistola to deliver the mail for him, but they sanctimoniously refuse to be part of such an intrigue, citing “honor” as their justification. This prompts Falstaff to launch into his famous monologue about honor and how completely useless it is. He gets a page to deliver the letters and chases his two useless sidekicks out the door.

Scene 2 introduces us to the ladies of the story in the garden of Ford’s luxurious home. Alice and Meg have received their letters and discover them to be identical, which greatly amuses them. Also on the scene are Dame Quickly (a gossipy neighbor) and Nanetta (pretty, young daughter of Ford, who wants her to marry Dr. Caius). To delightfully lighthearted music, their voices unite in a quartet as they plot how to deal with this fat old fool. They leave, and five men enter: Dr. Caius, Bardolfo, Pistola, Ford (Alice’s husband) and Fenton (a young man in love with Nanetta). In a quintet they too spin a web of conspiracy against Falstaff. Suddenly, as if flipping a switch, we become party to an intimate scene between Fenton and Nanetta – an oasis of calm amidst the mad turmoil around them. Here is miraculous music of sweet young love, written by a man of nearly eighty. Then, just as suddenly, we are thrust back into the world of gleeful plotting. At one point every character in the opera save Falstaff – nine of them! – is babbling away simultaneously, the five men to one rhythm, the four women to another. The men leave, and the act ends with the women summarizing

20
Oct21
Oct23
Oct

the plans they have devised for Falstaff, who has no idea how badly his flirtatious intentions are going to backfire.

ACT II Scene 1

We're back at the Garter Inn, where Dame Quickly has come with news for Falstaff. Her presence, here and for the rest of the opera, is punctuated by a memorable gesture in word and tone: "Reverenza," delivered with unctuous, mock-serious courtesy. The news is that Alice Ford has responded favorably to Falstaff's letter; furthermore, her husband is always out between two and three in the afternoon ("dalle due alle tre"). Falstaff is delighted and flattered. The news gets better: Meg too can't wait to meet him. Falstaff sings a monolog of self-congratulation ("Va, vecchio John!") and sends Quickly away with a reward. Bardolfo enters with news of another visitor, one Fontana, who is really Ford in disguise. Ford has come bearing gifts of wine and cash for Falstaff, if only the fine gentleman would do him the favor of seducing a lady who has hitherto refused him. If Falstaff can break down her resistance, Fontana suggests, then he (Fontana) can move in later. The lady is really Ford's own wife Alice, of course, but this is all part of the elaborate plot to trap Falstaff. Falstaff assures Fontana (Ford) that this will be no problem, as he already has an assignation this very afternoon between two and three with the lady in question. Ford is outraged to hear this, though he conceals this reaction from Falstaff. While Falstaff leaves to change his clothes, Ford delivers his famous soliloquy ("E sogno? O realta?") in which he rages over what he presumes is his own wife's faithlessness and vows revenge.

Scene 2 takes place in a spacious room in Ford's house. The four ladies are back, chattering away over the success of their plan so far and preparing for the next chapter in their little comedy, which is to get Falstaff into a large laundry basket and dump him into the river below. All except Alice disappear as Falstaff arrives, right on schedule, mouthing all manner of fulsome praise and flattery for his intended beloved. Suddenly Quickly interrupts Falstaff's ridiculous attempt at love-making to announce that

20
Oct21
Oct23
Oct

Meg is coming. Falstaff hides behind a screen as Meg bursts in with the news that Alice's husband is heading home in a fury with murder in his heart, believing that his wife is entertaining a lover in his own home. (In fact, from the previous scene Ford really *does* think his wife is guilty; this was not part of the plan to trap Falstaff.) Orchestra and singers respond frantically. The breathless pace goes up another notch when Ford and his buddies burst in and begin searching everywhere (including the laundry basket but not behind the screen) for Alice's guest. When they are all off in another room, the ladies stuff Falstaff into the laundry basket while Fenton and Nanetta slip behind the screen for another intimate interlude. Ford and Company return, notice movement behind the screen, and believe they've cornered Falstaff. Wrong! More mad scurrying around looking for the scoundrel, words and notes flying by like the wind. This is the moment for the servants to hoist the laundry basket over to the window and empty its contents.

20
Oct21
Oct23
Oct

Act III Scene 1

Sitting alone outside the Garter Inn, Falstaff, bruised in both body and spirit, laments his sad fate in another of his famous monologues. He calls for wine. Gradually its warming effect spreads through his body, an effect graphically mirrored in the orchestra. But Falstaff's misadventures are far from over. Quickly arrives to assure him that being dumped into the river was a misunderstanding on the servants' part, and that Alice really still loves him. She wants to meet him tonight in Windsor Park under Herne's Oak (legendary site where a huntsman long ago met his fate and still roams as a ghost). Falstaff is to arrive disguised as the Black Hunter (Herne). As he and Quickly enter the inn, all the remaining characters assemble to discuss their roles in the upcoming masquerade. In an aside, Ford and Dr. Caius conspire how to trick Nanetta into marrying the doctor.

The opera's **final scene** takes place at midnight in the park. Distant horn calls add a touch of magic to the sylvan setting. Fenton sings a love song, then joins the rest of the group for last-minute preparations for the

intrigue against Falstaff. Sir John enters, a bit fearful of the spot, but eagerly looking forward to seeing Alice again. She appears on cue, and the fun begins – well, fun for everyone but Falstaff! At first the shenanigans are low-keyed: fairies, sylphs, and elves emerge from the woods while Nanetta (in disguise, as are all except Ford) sings a lovely fairy song. The action suddenly picks up as everyone takes turns at poking, pinching, kicking, biting, hitting, and hurling insults at Falstaff until he can take no more. Eventually recognizing the true identity of his tormenters, he accepts defeat and asks for forgiveness. Off to the side, Ford blesses the union of Nanetta and the masked Fenton, Ford mistakenly thinking the latter is Dr. Caius. In a mood of joy and reconciliation, all voices join in a brilliant fugal episode. The opera’s grand finale is described by Edward Downes as “a reckless, joyous sort of roller-coaster ride past technical perils, leaving the listener dizzy with exhilaration.” It was Verdi’s spectacular farewell to a spectacular operatic career.

20
Oct21
Oct23
Oct

GIUSEPPE VERDI: Born in Le Roncole, Italy, October 10, 1813; died in Milan, Italy, January 27, 1901

Original work: William Shakespeare *The Merry Wives of Windsor, Henry IV*

Libretto: Arrigo Boïto **Work composed:** 1890-1892

World premiere: February 9, 1893 at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, cimbasso, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle, cymbals), harp, strings

[banda] guitar, bass horn in A \flat , bell in F

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, **Robert Markow** now writes program notes for orchestras as well as for numerous other musical organizations in North America and Asia. He taught at Montreal’s McGill University for many years, has led music tours to several countries, and writes for numerous leading classical music journals.