

FALSTAFF
Verdi's Last Masterpiece

By
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Falstaff

Commedia lirica in three acts

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Arrigo Boito

After Shakespeare's plays "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and "Henry IV"

- Verdi's operatic timing
- Verdi and his librettist Arrigo Boito
- Falstaff, the character
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- **Verdi's operatic timing**

Giuseppe Verdi was born in 1813 and died in 1901. He composed his first opera, **Oberto**, when he was 26 years old and his last, **Falstaff**, when he was 80. In between he composed 28 other operas, but only two of these are comic works.

- His second opera, **Un giorno di Regno**, in 1840 turned out to be a fiasco.
- His last opera, **Falstaff**, premiered in 1893 at La Scala of Milano, was a big success.

Why, when we think of Verdi, we immediately think of **Aida**, **La Traviata**, **Rigoletto**, **Il Trovatore**, **Nabucco**, and many more of his operas, but we do not think of **Falstaff**? Perhaps it is because this opera is so much different and so modern that it does not seem to be a work of Verdi. For over 50 years this composer had given the opera houses masterpiece which dealt with every aspect of death; death by natural

forces, by disease, by fate, for vengeance, for jealousy, for mistaken identity, and so on. Now, at age 80, and 6 years after **Otello**, Verdi creates a comedy and puts on the stage an obese hilarious knight who makes a fool of himself with his nasty behavior. **Falstaff** is not immensely popular as other Verdi's operas, but it is a favorite among critics and musicians because of

its brilliant orchestration, its refined melodic motifs and its scintillating libretto.

Besides being Verdi's second of his 28 operas to be a comedy, **Falstaff** is also the third of his operas to be based on a Shakespearean play, following his earlier **Macbeth** and **Otello**. Verdi was a great admirer of Shakespeare and was familiar with many of his plays which had been translated into Italian. At one time he was

also contemplating an opera based on 'King Lear'.

- **Verdi and Boito**

There was an episode in the life of Verdi which had a great impact on his last two operas. After the great success of Aida in 1871, Verdi went into some kind of retirement. For a composer who had created an average of 2 operas a year, now he moved to his beloved country home in Sant'Agata and

for the next 15 years took care of his farm and actually lived the life of a farmer without even thinking of composing any more operas. His publisher, Giulio Ricordi, became very concerned about this long unproductive period, and thought that Verdi needed a librettist who could spark his Imagination and get him to compose again. This librettist had to be Arrigo Boito, a young poet and a very influential artist among the advocates for the modernization of the Arts

in Italy. He had published an essay 'The Scapigliatura Manifesto' where he claimed that the style of music had become dull and stagnated. Verdi himself took this statement personally and was insulted by it. The rift between the two healed when Verdi accepted to work with Boito, trusting the younger man's perception of what modern drama needed.

The maneuvering of this collaboration was handled by the patient and sensitive publisher, Giulio Ricordi and the result were the last two of Verdi's operas, **Otello** and **Falstaff**. This collaboration between Verdi and Boito was also defined by their age difference for Verdi was 80 and Boito was 51, so coming from two different generations they both had complete different attitudes towards the Italian operatic tradition.

So in both operas we find a new re-invented operatic language and a more flexible mode of musical expression, where the music reacts to the constant changes of the mood and the story. After **Otello**, it was Boito who convinced the elderly composer to try another comedy and “After the tragedy of **Otello**, to finish with a mighty burst of laughter, that is to astonish the world!”

- **Falstaff, the character**

Sir John Falstaff, whom we know from the dramas of Shakespeare mentioned earlier, is a very comic character who is also full of humanity. A middle age fat man of large appetite, Falstaff is in love with eating, with drinking and is in love with being in love, but he sees himself getting old, running out of money and must do something about it. He decides to seduce

two wealthy married Windsor ladies and sends them the exact same love letter. When the two ladies, Alice Ford and Meg Page, compare the letters and discover that they are being played for fools, they join forces with another friend, Mistress Quickly, and decide to take revenge by punishing Falstaff. The musical result is one of the rare occasions when comic opera is actually funny.

Often there are complaints that in this opera there are not enough tunes, but critics have pointed out that on the contrary there are many different tunes, but they go by so rapidly that it is difficult for us to pick them up. The whole opera is a dynamic, electric performance full of refined melodic inventions and Verdi, who is very sensitive to the text, chooses to move from one melody to another rather quickly

as he changes the tune in order to stay with the text.

Act I Scene 1 The Garter Inn

The opera is set in Windsor, England in the early 15th century. Verdi immediately signals the comic nature of the work with an offbeat C-major chord. From then on, the action is fast and lively. We meet this huge, fat Falstaff who is exchanging insults with

Dr. Caius, who in turn accuses him and his two companions of causing drunken confusion in his house. As Caius leaves, Falstaff with famous monologue celebrates his enormous belly, proclaiming that it is his regal arena, his immenso, enorme kingdom, and it must expand. It is a rapid piece of many different tunes, the fluid music of drinking and wondering from one Inn to another changes quickly to other melodic ideas referring to the letters to be delivered to the wealthy Mistresses Alice and Meg.

Pistol and Bardolph refuse to deliver the letters claiming that it is not honorable. And Falstaff in another monologue, full of orchestral combinations, delivers an ironic lecture on 'honor' where he derides the two thieves and their high-flown ideals. The letters are sent with another page.

Act I Scene 2 Ford's Garden

Upon reading the letters and realizing that they are identical, they pour scorn on the knight and decide to get even by taking revenge. The women are joined by Nannetta and Mistress Quickly and engage in a great Quartet. From the other side of the stage appears a male quintet; Fenton, Caius, Bardolph, Pistol and Ford are also plotting against Falstaff and, unaware of the women, superimpose their own ensemble. The women fade away, then they

return and Verdi throws them all together simultaneously in a vital rhythmic chaos of two ensembles which create a great comic moment. This has been defined the best ensemble since Mozart for it is truly a dynamic, electric performance. In any production it is the supreme test of any opera company's ensemble and of any conductor skill.

Act II Scene 1 The Garter Inn

Mistress Quickly has visited Falstaff and announced an appointment with Alice,

who is burning with love for him. Falstaff prides himself in the aria 'Va, vecchio John' and then goes to get ready in his best attire and reappears dressed to kill for his date.

Act II Scene 2 A room in Ford's house

Before the arrival of Falstaff, Alice had a large clothes basket placed in readiness; then she settles down playing her flute and Falstaff joins her, but as the courtship reaches an

intimate stage, the arrival of her insane jealous husband is announced, Falstaff has to hide while everybody is searching for him. He is shoved into the laundry basket and thrown out the window into a ditch. The music dives into a furious *Allegro agitato*, as it continues to respond to the verbal element of the drama and the listener is bombarded by a stunning diversity of rhythms and orchestral textures.

Act III Scene 1 Before the Garter Inn

In a gloomy mood, Falstaff is back at the Inn recalling his humiliating adventure and drinking to improve his mood. His monologue is a musical discourse with a magnificent orchestral trill to the tune of the liquor tingling through his body to revive his spirit. Mistress Quickly shows up and invites again to meet Alice at midnight under the Herne's Oak in the Royal Park, dressed as a Black Huntsman.

Act III Scene 2 The Windsor Forest

A moonlit midnight in the park where more vengeance on Falstaff is being planned. The knight arrives and is counting the twelve bells of midnight while everybody else disguised as elves and fairies begin to thrash him. Meg warns Falstaff of an approaching pack of witches and he throws himself to the ground because he is afraid of supernatural beings.

In the mist of all this chaotic and very colorful orchestral scene, Bardolph's hood slips off and the entire deception is revealed. Now Falstaff assumes a new stature in his philosophical acceptance of what has happened to him. The opera ends with another magnificent ensemble led by Falstaff with a *fugue to the words: "The whole world is a jest...but he who laughs last laughs best."*

“Ride bene chi ride ultimo” is the last statement made by our great composer through the mouth of an irresistible character of a very colorful opera.

So, when we think of Verdi, we should unquestionably think of **Aida**, **La Traviata**, **Rigoletto**, **Il Trovatore**, and **Nabucco**; but we should also say “and then... there is **Falstaff**”.

