

Falstaff

2013-14 Season
by Giuseppe Verdi



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Purpose

This study guide is intended to aid you, the teacher, in increasing your students' understanding and appreciation of *Falstaff*. This will not only add to knowledge about opera, but should develop awareness of other related subjects, making the performance they attend much more enjoyable.

Most Important

If you only have a limited amount of time, concentrate on the cast of characters, the plot and some of the musical and dramatic highlights of the opera. Recognition produces familiarity which in turn produces a positive experience.

The Language

The Virginia Opera will perform *Falstaff* in the original language, Italian, but an English translation will be projected on a screen above the stage. With these Supertitles, audiences can experience the beauty of opera in the original language, yet still understand the meaning of all that is being sung.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Premiere: First performance on February 9, 1893 at La Scala opera house, Milan, Italy

Sir John Falstaff	Bass-baritone
Ford	Baritone
Fenton	Tenor
Doctor Caius	Tenor
Bardolph	Tenor
Pistol	Bass
Alice Ford	Soprano
Nanetta	Soprano
Mistress Quickly	Mezzo-soprano
Meg Page	Mezzo-soprano

Setting: the village of Windsor, England in Elizabethan times. Sir John Falstaff, an aging, obese, gluttonous, womanizing ne'er-do-well, schemes to arrange romantic liaisons with Alice Ford and Meg Page, two respectable married women, by having his drinking buddies deliver identical love-letters to each. The women are friends, however, and when they compare their letters they decide to teach the old fool a lesson, aided by Alice's daughter Nannetta and their neighbor Mistress Quickly. Unknown to Alice, her husband Ford, upon learning of Falstaff's plan, also vows to punish the fat knight. Meanwhile, Nannetta meets in secret with her beau Fenton, a young man of whom her father disapproves.

At the Garter Inn, Quickly calls on Falstaff to tell him that Alice wishes to see him, with the tip that her husband Ford is always away between two and three o'clock. Next, Falstaff is visited by Ford, in disguise as "Master Fontana". "Fontana" proposes to pay Falstaff to woo Alice Ford for the purpose of softening her up, thus paving the way for his own seduction afterwards. Falstaff readily agrees, mentioning that he already has a date with her that very afternoon between two and three. Ford, who hadn't expected this news, can barely contain his jealous rage, but collects himself as the two leave the inn together.

At Ford's house, the Merry Wives of Windsor are laying a trap for Falstaff. Nannetta is softly weeping, revealing that Ford has decreed that she must marry the elderly Dr. Caius. The three ladies assure her that will never happen. A large laundry basket is placed in the room as Alice readies herself to receive her amorous visitor. Falstaff, dressed to the nines, enters and begins courting Alice, who plays along as if infatuated. They are interrupted by Quickly, who announces that Meg is approaching with news. Meg, feigning anxiety, says that Ford knows about his wife's affair and is on his way to search the house for her lover at any moment. Suddenly the practical joke turns serious as Quickly re-enters in genuine alarm: Ford really is on his way to do as Meg had stated. Falstaff hides in the laundry basket as Ford and his men burst in to confront Alice. Meanwhile, Fenton has snuck in to steal some kisses from Nannetta. Hiding behind a screen, the lovers' noisy smooch is heard by Ford, who assumes it's his wife and Falstaff behind the screen. The discovery of the hated Fenton only enrages Ford still more. A chaotic search erupts, with men racing this way and that in search of the illicit "lovers". Alice seizes the opportunity to have her servants hoist the laundry basket out the window, dumping Falstaff in the Thames. Ford, understanding the truth at last, joins in the general laughter.

Falstaff, back at the Garter, is cold and soaked to the bone. In a foul mood, he orders mulled wine, the warming effects of which quickly raise his spirits. Quickly arrives with another “message from Alice”, this time apologizing for his dunking and offering to meet him at midnight in the Royal Park underneath Herne’s Oak. He is to come dressed as the Black Knight, a figure of legend whose ghost is said to haunt the Park. The gullible knight hastily agrees as the Ford family, Quickly, Meg, Caius and Fenton, all having overheard, congratulate themselves on the setting of another trap. Alice explains Falstaff’s impending punishment: he will be tormented by fairies, elves and imps, none other than they themselves in disguise. Ford, alone with Caius, reveals his plan to wed the doctor to Nannetta as part of the evening’s festivities. Quickly, listening in, departs to warn Alice and her daughter.

In the Royal Park at night, Fenton and Nannetta manage a mini-rendezvous before being cut short by Alice, full of instructions and bearing disguises. Falstaff’s approach sends them scurrying to their stations. Looking ludicrous with enormous stag horns adorning his head and in a giant black cloak, Falstaff counts out the chimes signaling midnight and is joined by Alice. The “lovers” are again interrupted by Meg, shouting in alarm that witches are pursuing her. Alice flees and Falstaff hides as Nannetta, dressed as the Queen of the Fairies, sings a song of enchantment. Soon they are joined by Pistol in disguise and children dressed as devils; they begin tormenting Falstaff, dancing round him and pinching him without mercy. Falstaff realizes it’s all a joke when Bardolph’s mask falls off, prompting a furious torrent of curses from the “Black Knight”. During the tumult, Quickly leads Bardolph away to dress him in Nannetta’s costume. Falstaff accepts being the butt of the joke with grace, insisting that his own wit is the source of others’ wit. Ford then announces the evening will end with his daughter’s wedding; Alice innocently asks if another masked couple might make it a double wedding. Ford blesses both unions, then is stunned when masks are removed, revealing that Nannetta has wed Fenton and Dr. Caius is now the husband of Bardolph. Ford’s better nature prevails as he accepts Fenton as his son-in-law. All join in a rousing chorus proclaiming that the world is a joke and all people are jesters.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Dispensing with a traditional overture or prelude, the orchestra sets the scene with a burst of energetic music that, in a handful of measures, depicts the raucous pace of the comedy to come as we are immediately plunged into the action. Falstaff's after-dinner drinking at the Garter Inn is interrupted by the elderly Doctor Caius who bursts in, raging and hurling accusations at the rotund ne'er-do-well. Falstaff, he complains, has worn out one of his horses as well as breaking into his home. Falstaff, not bothering to deny the charges, points out he that he at least left the housekeeper alone. When Caius threatens legal action, Falstaff shrugs, saying "Go with God". Falstaff's cronies Bardolph and Pistol also come in for accusations, Caius claiming that Bardolph got him drunk and Pistol stole money from his pockets. The two sanctimoniously deny any wrong-doing, prompting Falstaff to tell Caius to leave them in peace as Bardolph and Pistol usher him out. Falstaff turns his attention to a serious matter: the innkeeper has presented the bill for his dinner, and he lacks the funds to pay for it. Scolding his pals for spending all his money, Falstaff worries that lack of finances might force him to lose weight, a terrible fate in his mind. Pointing to his gigantic belly, Falstaff declares "This is my kingdom! I shall increase it!" while Bardolph and Pistol chime in with mock praise.

Now the subject turns to Falstaff's interest in two women of Windsor: Alice Ford, the wife of a wealthy burgher named Ford, and one Meg Page. Alice, he recounts, smiled at him in passing one day, leading him to conclude that she burns with lust for his "manly physique". Falstaff's true motives for pursuing the two women become apparent when he notes that both are women of means who control their family's finances. Falstaff bids his two wing-men deliver love-letters to Alice and Meg, which will lead (once they've been seduced) to an improvement in his financial situation. To his shock and disdain, both Bardolph and Pistol decline to participate in this scheme, citing their code of honor. Falstaff sets them straight in the first of his great monologues, "L'onore!" ("Honor!"). Furiously summoning a page to deliver the two letters, Falstaff then turns on his friends in a rage, hooting cynically at the very notion of a useless thing like honor. Like a prosecuting attorney, he asks them a series of rhetorical questions, beginning with "Can honor fill your belly? No.", introducing a melodic phrase which

will return at the end of the scene:

Ex. 1



Continuing, he declares that honor is just a word, a word made of insubstantial air. Since honor is too easily corrupted and tainted, he, Falstaff, has no use for it. The orchestra restates the "honor theme" in a majestic tutti suggesting that Falstaff's logic has triumphed again. Then the theme is played at top speed by the solo trumpet as the Fat Knight chases his disgraced companions out of the inn with the business end of a broom.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

In a garden outside Ford's house, his wife Alice and daughter Nannetta greet their neighbors Meg Page and Mistress Quickly, an elderly gossip. Both Alice and Meg are bursting with news, each eager to tell the group. Alice goes first, jokingly saying that she has the opportunity to become a Knight's lady. Meg blurts out that the same goes for her as well. Amazed, each woman produces a copy of the love-letter they've just received from Falstaff. Exchanging letters and reading aloud side by side, they are highly amused to note that the two notes are exactly identical. "A pair of three", sardonically concludes Quickly. Now the four of them continue to read aloud simultaneously, reveling in Falstaff's cheesy verbiage, reaching a climax in Alice's solo rendition of the line "And your face will shine upon me as a star upon the immense firmament". The vocal line assigned to this phrase is a parody of the type of intensely emotional melody Verdi assigned to many of the sopranos of his earlier operas, complete with a grandly arching contour:

Ex. 2



Collapsing in gales of laughter, the "Merry Wives of Windsor" then vow to teach the foolish "monster" a lesson, allowing

themselves to marvel at the size of his repugnantly obese body which Meg compares to a “whale cast on a beach by the wave of a tempest”. No sooner do they scurry off to begin plotting their revenge than Ford appears, accompanied by Caius, Fenton, Bardolph and Pistol. Caius is ranting about the crimes perpetrated by not only Falstaff but his cronies as well while Bardolph and Pistol self-righteously proclaim their scorn for the “infamous” Falstaff and Fenton, hoping to gain favor with his sweetheart’s father, offers to straighten out the rascal by any means necessary. Ford, dizzy with all four men shouting at once, begs them to speak one at a time. Pistol tells Ford about Falstaff’s plan to cuckold him by seducing Alice, proudly proclaiming that he refused to deliver the infamous love-letter. As the women re-enter the garden, there is another example of a parody of old-fashioned operatic melodramas. In countless such works, when one character spies another about whom he’s just been emoting he will turn to the audience and exclaim, “’Tis she!” or “’Tis he!!” Now, as all parties in Falstaff have been speaking about one another and are suddenly all together on the stage for the first time, there is a deliberately ludicrous sequence in which Fenton, Nannetta, Ford, Alice, Caius and Meg all indulge in either “’Tis he!” or “’Tis she!” one after another. All then beat a hasty retreat save Fenton and Nannetta, who can’t resist some hasty kisses in this fleeting moment of privacy. Before parting, they share a final phrase which will recur later in the opera and serves as a musical motto for their innocent love:

Ex. 3



Their innocent tryst is interrupted by the return of Alice, Meg and Quickly, who are discussing various strategies to trap the would-be suitor. Alice proposes that Quickly will call on Falstaff employing flattery to appeal to his vanity. She will convey a message from Alice inviting him to call on her. They leave again, leaving Fenton and Nannetta free to cuddle playfully for a moment or two, repeating their musical motto before parting just as the men return. They, too, are discussing strategic options: Ford, unaware of his wife’s plans, decides that he will pay Falstaff a visit, but under an assumed name. Bardolph and Pistol agree to be fellow-conspirators. The scene continues with a virtuosic ensemble of nine voices (four ladies, five men),

sung at a virtuosically rapid tempo in which three layers of activity are heard:

1. The men, savoring Falstaff’s comeuppance;
2. Alice, Meg and Quickly doing likewise; and
3. Soaring above the patter of the first two groups, the voices of Nanetta and Fenton who are observing their elders.

As Alice visualizes Falstaff’s belly swelling to monstrous proportions before bursting, the orchestra accompanies her with a graphic depiction of that image. As the scene races to a conclusion, Alice sardonically reprises Example 2 above, her favorite passage from Falstaff’s love letter.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Outside the Garter Inn, Bardolph and Pistola have returned to Falstaff, claiming repentance for their earlier lack of cooperation. After being granted a reprieve, Bardolph ushers in a woman who has come requesting an audience with Sir John. It is Quickly, who greets him with an elaborate courtesy, addressing him as “Your Reverence” in a phrase she will employ several times throughout the action to come:

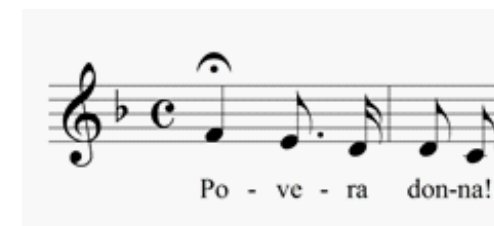
Ex. 4



After further buttering up her victim with more flattery, Quickly brings up the subject of Alice Ford, whom she refers to as “that poor woman” in another phrase she will oft repeat:

Ex. 5

Quickly assures Falstaff that Alice returns his love, wants



to see him, and that her jealous husband will be out of the house between two and three o’clock. She adds that, sadly,

Meg Page's husband is always nearby, making a rendezvous impossible though naturally, she also admires Falstaff. With utter coolness of demeanor, Falstaff bids Quickly return to Alice with his promise of appearing between two and three. No sooner has she departed than Sir John erupts in heel-clicking joy: "Alice is MINE!" he crows, before singing an ode to his own greatness. Bardolph returns with news of another visitor: a "Signor Fontana". Ford enters, greeting Falstaff as if he were a man of great importance. He presents himself as a wealthy man for whom money is never an object in acquiring whatever he wants, promptly setting a stack of gold coins in front of the highly-interested Falstaff. "Fontana" confides that he is burning with love for a certain woman of Windsor named Alice Ford, but that she has rebuffed his advances. Falstaff, wishing to convey his sympathy as a fellow man of the world, sings a little refrain about the frustrations of unrequited love:

Ex. 6



Acknowledging Falstaff's fame as a gentleman of wide experience, "Fontana" proposes to pay Falstaff to seduce Alice, the logic being that in so doing, Sir John will break down Alice's coldness towards men and pave the way for "Fontana's" own seduction afterwards. Falstaff, unable to believe his luck, readily accepts, idly mentioning that, as fortune would have it, Alice has already invited him to her home for an affair between two and three that very afternoon. As Ford processes this new information, barely able to remain poised as "Fontana", Falstaff excuses himself to go change into suitable courting clothing. Alone on stage, Ford seethes with rage over Alice's apparent betrayal in a volatile monologue lambasting womankind for its treachery. ("È sogno? O realtà?") ("Is it a dream? Or reality?") The solo concludes with an arch-shaped phrase similar to Ex. 2, but this time in deadly earnest as he vows that jealousy will remain in his heart forever:

Ex. 7



Falstaff returns, decked out in an outfit of ludicrous foppish-

ness, wildly inappropriate for a man of his age and bulk. On their way out, the two men pause momentarily at the door. Following several exchanges of "After you", they finally squeeze through the door together as the curtain falls.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

The curtain rises on a large room in Ford's house; scurrying staccato figures in the orchestra are heard, suggesting the women making last-minute preparations for Falstaff's expected visit. Alice and Meg are chatting as Quickly enters to report a successful mission: Falstaff has taken the bait and will arrive at any moment, as it's already two o'clock. Alice instructs her servants to bring in a large laundry basket and place it near a window overlooking the Thames. Seeing that Nannetta is weeping, Alice takes her aside to learn the tearful news that Ford has decreed his daughter shall marry old Doctor Caius and never see Fenton again. Reassuring Nannetta that this will never come to pass, she instructs the servants to await her signal, upon which Falstaff will be dumped out the window into the river. With the stage all set, the ladies await Sir John's arrival; Alice sits demurely while the other three hurry to hidden posts of observation. Falstaff enters; Alice begins playing a lute, prompting her caller to warble a delicate love ditty. The wooing now begins full steam ahead, with Alice playing the shy maiden and Falstaff attempting a suave and debonair persona. When Alice teasingly refers to his weight, Falstaff hurries to assure her that in his youth, he was slender. This is the mercurial short aria "Quand'ero paggio":

Ex. 8



Falstaff's ardent courting is abruptly cut off by Quickly who, right on cue, bursts in to warn the couple that Meg Page is on her way in a state of alarm. Falstaff, of course, cannot be caught compromising Alice's honor, so he hides behind a screen in a corner. Playing her role to perfection, Meg enters to say that Ford is on his way to search the house for his wife's lover and do him violence. Just then, Quickly comes in again, confusing everyone in the room by repeating Meg's words. "No, really!" cries Quickly, in a state of genuine panic as Ford's thunderous voice is heard nearing the house. The joke has gone horribly wrong as Ford enters with a posse of men in tow. He begins to search the room while hurling accusations

at Alice, who motions Falstaff to remain behind the screen. Ford overturns the laundry basket, emptying soiled linen in all directions before running out to look elsewhere in the house. The three women lead Falstaff to the basket and order him to climb in it, piling dirty clothing on top of him; Alice exits. Meanwhile, the irrepressible young lovers Fenton and Nannetta, oblivious to the chaos around them, sneak behind the screen for some stealthy kissing. In short order, Ford, Pistol, Bardolph, Caius and assorted men of Windsor re-enter to resume their search. There is a brief lull in the general commotion during which the loud smacking sound of a kiss is plainly heard by everyone. Naturally, Ford concludes that his wife and Falstaff are behind the screen: he has caught them red-handed. At this point, Verdi indulges himself with another brilliant parody of old-fashioned operatic melodramas. His particular target here is the lengthy concerted ensemble in which characters tell the audience that they are now going to do something rash (in this case, pull down the screen and kill Fenton); while the audience notes with irritation that instead of actually doing the action, they merely sing about it repeatedly. Verdi, being the genius that he was, manages to write the most brilliant and complex example of such an ensemble while making fun of it as well. The following layers of activity are heard with utter clarity:

1. Ford and his posse muttering dire threats in a stage whisper (“I’ll smash you!” “I’ll break your snout!” etc. etc.)
2. Meg and Quickly guarding the laundry basket while making discreet, amused commentary on the foolishness of the men;
3. Falstaff trying to come up for air while suffocating in a mountain of dirty clothes; and
4. The sweet and innocent voices of Fenton and Nannetta soaring over the entire group, reveling in the passion of young love:

Ex. 9



Tut-to de-li-ra, sos-pi-ro'e ri-so

At last Ford knocks the screen aside and is shocked to discover his daughter and the hated boyfriend. The chaotic search resumes with Ford’s posse racing in all directions looking for

Falstaff. In the hubbub, the women signal the servants to hoist the basket out the window. Ford returns just in time to see Falstaff land in the Thames below while the women collapse in laughter. Understanding at once all that has taken place, he joins them in laughing at the fate of foolish Falstaff.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

At sunset of the same day, Falstaff, dripping wet and shivering with cold, sits on a bench outside the Garter Inn. In a foul mood, he bitterly reflects on the rottenness of the world, interrupting himself briefly to call to the innkeeper for a mug of mulled wine. However, his spirits are quickly lifted as he sips the hot spiced wine. In a virtuoso bit of orchestration, Verdi depicts the effects of the wine with a trill in which every family of instruments gradually takes up until the entire orchestra is vibrating with a fortissimo trill: Falstaff feels better! His mood quickly sours again, however, as Quickly enters, bowing and scraping with her customary repetitions of “Reverenza!” At first inclined to order her away in disgust, Falstaff falls victim to her protestations that Alice (“Povera donna!”) had nothing to do with his dunking and is still madly in love with him. Producing a letter from Alice, she gives it for Falstaff to read while Alice, Meg, Nannetta, Ford (now a full partner in the practical jokes), Caius and Fenton, eavesdropping out of sight, chuckle at his gullibility. Alice spells out the latest scheme: she has asked Falstaff to meet her for a midnight rendezvous in the Royal Park at Herne’s Oak. Falstaff is to come costumed as the legendary Black Huntsman complete with enormous horns on his head. He will be greeted by Nannetta, disguised as the Queen of the Fairies; she will summon a horde of imps, sprites and devils (children of the town in disguise) who will descend on Falstaff with kicks, pinches and general torment until he confesses his sins. As the schemers hurry away to complete preparations, Ford takes Caius aside, unaware that Quickly is listening to their conversation. Ford assures the aging doctor that his nuptials with Nannetta will be completed during the evening’s revels. Caius is to costume himself as a monk and, at Ford’s signal, stand next to Nannetta in her white fairy garment. Ford will quickly bless their union, and the marriage will be official. Muttering “that’s what you think!”, Quickly rushes off to warn Alice as the sun sets over Windsor.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

Fenton is alone under the light of the moon in Royal Park at the appointed meeting-place. Seizing a moment of calm

before the impending hilarity erupts, he dreams of yet more kisses with his beloved in a rapturous and lyrical aria:

Example 10



As he concludes, his voice is joined by that of Nannetta who is nearby; their voices swell passionately but in mid-high note, Alice brusquely cuts them off, handing Fenton a cloak and mask. His costume is identical to the monk's robes in which Caius will also be dressed. They are joined by Quickly who is dressed as a witch. The three restate their strategy regarding foil Ford's plan to marry off his daughter: Bardolph will be costumed and veiled identically to Nannetta, thus providing Caius with an unexpected "bride". Hearing the approach of their "Black Huntsman", all make themselves scarce as Falstaff lumbers in. He is greatly apprehensive of the prospect of ghosts and goblins in this supposedly haunted forest; in his great black cloak and with enormous antlers on his head, he cowers as the twelve chimes of midnight are heard in the distance. Verdi here displays great harmonic ingenuity, assigning a completely different harmony to each repeated note as Falstaff counts the hours out one by one. Alice makes her promised appearance but before Falstaff can embrace her she tells him that Meg is hard on her heels. The off-stage voice of Meg is heard, warning that there are witches pursuing her, prompting Alice to flee. Alone again, Falstaff takes cover, cowering as the costumed Nannetta appears with a coterie of women in fairy garb. The Queen of the Fairies calls out to Elves, Nymphs and all supernatural creatures to arise. Her aria "Sul fil d'un soffio etesio" ("Over the thread of the breath of an Ethesian breeze") is notable not only for being the last aria for soprano Verdi ever wrote, but also for its ethereal delicacy and remarkably atmospheric orchestration. The vocal line floats rapturously above instrumentation suggesting the beating of fairies' wings:

Ex. 11



Falstaff, who has been covering his eyes in the belief that

whoever looks at the fairies will be struck dead, opens them to find himself surrounded by all other cast members plus chorus, everyone remaining in character in an array of devils, satyrs, witches and nymphs. They set upon him in feigned rage, Bardolph calling for him to be "exorcised". A general tumult begins in which a ring of "creatures" dances around the terrified Sir John, shouting, poking, pinching and otherwise tormenting him, including a stream of insults aimed at his obesity. Amidst the din, Alice warns her daughter that Caius is looking for her already to stake his claim; Nannetta and Fenton retreat to a point of safety. Meanwhile, Ford, Caius, Bardolph and Pistol now start in with a list of Falstaff's offences, demanding that he repent. While they lambaste him, the womenfolk begin a mock hymn, piously asking God to forgive the sinner. Falstaff answers them in kind, begging for God to spare his magnificent abdomen. This creates a play on words in Italian, as the word for "God" is "Domine", while the Italian for "abdomen" is "addomine":

Ex. 12



All jokes must come to an end, and when Bardolph's hood falls away to reveal his face, Falstaff explodes with a virtuosic stream of highly colorful curses in true Shakespearean manner. Exhausted by his own vitriolic performance, he asks for a minute to recover while the crowd, duly impressed with his vocabulary, offers their "bravo". One by one the "supernatural beings" unmask themselves as Falstaff comes to realize the magnitude of this joke perpetrated by virtually the entire town. He also greets "Signor Fontana", only to receive a further surprise: Alice sweetly introduces him as her husband Ford. Now in danger of becoming an object of ridicule, Falstaff draws himself up in wounded dignity, declaring that "It is I who make you all so clever; my own cleverness creates the cleverness of others." This earns him another good-natured "Bravo!" from all. Ford now seizes the opportunity to usher in the lovely couple he wishes to marry on this festive occasion as a be-robed Caius enters with a veiled figure in white fairy clothing. Alice quickly mentions that another couple wishes to be married also. Ford, feeling benevolent, agrees as Nannetta and Fenton,

now masked and disguised, take their places as well.

Ford declares both couples man and wife only to reel back in horror as the masks are dropped. He shout of “Fenton with my daughter!” is answered by Caius screaming “I’ve married Bardolph!” Everyone laughs, none louder than Falstaff who can’t resist asking who the fool is now. This debate is ended abruptly by Alice, who declares both men foolish, along with old Caius. Alice gently turns Ford’s attention to Nannetta and Fenton, who are glowing with happiness. Rising to his better nature, the mollified Ford adds his blessing to their union, inviting all parties to join together for dinner. The opera ends with one of Verdi’s most brilliant creations: a final chorus in the form of a fugue in which state that “Tutto nel mondo è burla; l’uom se nato burlone” (“All the world is a jest; Man is born a jester”). The fugue races along in strict multi-voice polyphony at top speed in a display of compositional virtuosity demanding equal virtuosity from chorus, orchestra and conductor:

Ex. 13



Tut-to nel mon-do'e bur-la; L'uom - se na-to bur-lo-ne, bur-lo-ne, bur-lo-ne.

All exit to end the evening with a celebratory supper as the final curtain falls.

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

Giuseppe Verdi's career as the leading Italian operatic composer of the eighteenth century was built on a sturdy collection of darkly tragic masterpieces such as *Nabucco*, *Macbeth*, *La Traviata*, and *Il Trovatore* among many others. True, his first published opera was a comedy called *Un Giorno di Regno*, but it proved a disastrous failure.

In 1879, when the composer was about to begin work on *Otello*, yet another serious work, he was irritated to note an article in the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* in which Rossini (the composer of *The Barber of Seville*) was quoted as saying that Verdi was incapable of writing a comedy. Verdi, offended that no notice had apparently been taken of comic elements and scenes in *Rigoletto*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *La Forza del Destino*, complained to his publisher that such comments might pre-dispose the public to hiss any comedy he might compose in the future.

Otello featured a brilliant libretto by Arrigo Boito, a composer and man of letters who managed to persuade Verdi to emerge from his retirement by appealing to the master's lifelong love of Shakespeare. Boito's work on *Otello* was simply too good for Verdi to resist returning to composition. Convinced that Verdi had at least one more masterpiece in him, Boito, aware of Verdi's desire to prove he could write a comedy, chose the character of Sir John Falstaff, another creation of the composer's beloved Shakespeare.

Falstaff as a character appears in three Shakespearean plays: *Henry IV*, part 1; *Henry IV* part 2, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the last of which had already been adapted into a successful opera by the composer Otto Nicolai in 1849. A Falstaffian opera presented an even greater challenge to Boito than had *Otello*, the problem being that the character is at his best and most colorful in the *Henry* plays in which he is merely a supporting role, whereas *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is one of the Bard's weakest, most slapdash comedies, having been hastily written upon a request from Queen Elizabeth for a play featuring Sir John in love.

Boito managed to create a remarkable libretto, the plot of which outlines that of *Merry Wives* but strengthens it by condensing the action, eliminating extraneous characters and (perhaps most important) enriching the role of Falstaff by incorporating some of his best material from the *Henry* plays,

such as the cynical monologue about honor in the opera's opening scene.

Verdi, whose working relationships with previous librettists had often been combative and demanding, was so pleased with Boito's work that he had few suggestions to make. In a letter to a theatrical friend, the composer wrote:

What can I tell you? I've wanted to write a comic opera for forty years, and I've known The Merry Wives of Windsor for fifty... however, the usual 'buts' which are everywhere always prevented me from satisfying this wish of mine. Now Boito has resolved all the 'buts' and has written me a lyric comedy quite unlike any other. I'm enjoying myself writing the music; without plans of any sort and I don't even know whether I'll finish it... I repeat... I'm enjoying myself.

The process of composition took Verdi longer than was his custom earlier in his career. For one thing, he was not working on commission with the pressure of a deadline. In addition, the aging musician experienced bouts of depression as friends and colleagues of his generation passed away, briefly robbing him of his motivation. The timeline of the work is this:

- 1889-1890: Boito writes the libretto under Verdi's supervision;
- Spring, 1890: Verdi begins work on the music
- September, 1891: the score is complete in piano version
- Fall, 1892: the orchestration is complete

The premiere performance at the La Scala opera house of Milan was a gala event with a star-studded cast of singers hand-picked by the composer for their acting abilities as much as for their vocal gifts. By now, Verdi was a beloved national hero to his countrymen and the performance was a complete triumph, with the eight-year-old composer taking a number of curtain calls.

The opera has become part of the permanent standard repertoire, much praised by critics and connoisseurs for its sparkling orchestration, fast-paced action, vivid musical characterizations, word-play and wit. Perhaps owing to the bewildering mercurial nature of the music, lacking the lengthy arias and general air of pathos of Verdi's most popular works, *Falstaff* has never attained the popularity with the general public it deserves.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Giuseppe Verdi was born in the small village of Le Roncole, Italy, in 1813. His parents belonged to a middle class family of innkeepers and his father was enthusiastic about his son's education and chosen field. From an early age Giuseppe studied with local teachers. He received an old spinet as a gift from his father, and was eventually made the town's official organist. He also entered the ginnasio (high school) to study humanities and began formal music lessons with the director of the local Philharmonic Society. Antonio Barezzi, a wealthy merchant and musician, recognized Verdi's musical talent and became his patron, providing financial support and encouragement for many years. With his aid, Verdi applied to the Milan Conservatory, but was refused, partly because he was past the entering age, but mostly because of his unorthodox piano technique. Instead, Verdi became the pupil of Vincenzo Lavigna, a former principal conductor at La Scala Opera House in Milan. Beyond this more formalized training, Verdi considered himself largely self-taught.

After completing his studies in 1835, Verdi was appointed maestro di musica in Busseto, near his hometown of Le Roncole. He held the post for three years, during which time he also composed, gave private lessons and married his benefactor Barezzi's daughter. Verdi soon wrote his first opera, *Oberto*, in 1839, and began a professional career marked by continual rounds of negotiations with theaters and librettists, and intense periods of composition and preparation for the production of his work. Soon thereafter, terrible tragedy struck with the deaths of his wife and two very small children, causing him to nearly renounce composition altogether. However *Nabucco*, his next premiere, was an unprecedented success. In what is referred to as his "galley slave" years (1842-1853), Verdi arduously wrote sixteen operas - an average of one every nine months. *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata*, written near the end of this period, soon became cornerstones of the Italian operatic repertory and are still immensely popular today.

Verdi's accumulated wealth granted him greater artistic freedom. In the second half of his life he would only compose eight more operas. He spent most of his time away from the theater, now married to his companion of many years, the former soprano Giuseppina Strepponi. In 1859 the public honored Verdi's patriotism by using his name as an acronym to

spell out Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia, king of the newly united independent Italy.

He was nearing the age of sixty when he produced *AIDA* in 1871. With *AIDA*, Verdi achieved that fusion of French and Italian opera traditions that he had long desired. The death of his friend, the great writer Alessandro Manzoni, would inspire him to write the magnificent *Messa da Requiem* in 1874. After a period of general disillusionment and unhappiness, Verdi regained the will to compose during his later years. He subsequently composed two of his greatest masterpieces, *Otello* in 1887 and *Falstaff* in 1893.

Although many of Verdi's operas had disappeared from the repertory by the time of his death in 1901, he had nevertheless become a profound artistic symbol of Italy's achievement of statehood. It is said that during Verdi's funeral thousands of mourners paid homage by spontaneously singing "Va pensiero," a chorus from *Nabucco* written some sixty years earlier. "Va pensiero" expressed the public's deep feelings and the extent to which Verdi's music had been assimilated into the Italian consciousness.

A SHORT HISTORY OF OPERA

The word opera is the plural form of the Latin word opus, which translates quite literally as work. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word opera as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the Camerata which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of recitative sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo* arias which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the chorus in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*),

and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Falstaff*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English ballad opera, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

THE OPERATIC VOICE

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “squillo” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass) there is a further delineation into categories (Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic) which help to define each particular instrument. The Coloratura is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The Lyric is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The Spinto is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a Dramatic, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The Dramatic instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in Rigoletto to the dramatic Turandot in Turandot. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	Coloratura	Lyric	Spinto	Dramatic
Soprano	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
Mezzo-Soprano	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Cosi fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Falstaff)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
Tenor	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
Baritone	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
Bass	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Cosi fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized light-

ing instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Verdi's tragedies such as *Rigoletto*, and *Il Trovatore*, the leading female characters of Gilda and Leonora are depicted as being pure, maidenly, serious, and devoted to the men they love (the Duke of Mantua and Manrico, respectively). How does Alice Ford compare with them as regards a portrait of a woman?
2. Falstaff's "Honor" monologue in Act 1, scene 1 is never referred to as an "aria" or a "song". Why not? What about Verdi's musical setting and the nature of the text leads one away from thinking of it as a standard operatic aria or song?
3. Ford has a monologue in Act 2, scene 1 in which, believing his wife to be cheating on him, he bitterly tirades about the faithlessness of women. He is certainly angry. Do you consider this solo to be a comic or serious musical number?
4. Verdi's orchestration in the early operas of his youthful period has been criticized for the unimaginative nature of the orchestration; it is often called "The big guitar" for over-use of crude oop-pa-pa accompaniment patterns. How would you describe the use of the orchestra in Falstaff? How does the orchestra function in Falstaff's Honor monologue? What might account for the contrasting styles of orchestration from one composer?
5. Falstaff's character, some say, is derived from a stock character of old English folk festivals called "The Lord of Misrule", who represented an attitude of disregard for all rules, living life only for "fun for fun's sake", and turning order and propriety upside down. Story-telling tends to hand down such stock characters from generation to generation. Can you think of any contemporary characters from popular culture such as television and movies who are modern versions of either the Lord of Misrule or Falstaff?
6. In other ways, one can say Falstaff also derives from stock characters of the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. Study the list of Italian comic characters at this link: <http://italian.about.com/library/weekly/aa110800b.htm>. Of these, who does Falstaff most resemble? Does he borrow traits from more than one of them? If so, which ones and why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7. Is Falstaff a good person or a bad person? Refer to specific moments in the opera to make your case.
8. Many have criticized Falstaff for having “no melodies”. Do you agree? Given that Verdi’s earlier operas feature a different style of melody, why did he change his style for Falstaff?

Before bringing a group to the Opera, please go over etiquette with your students to ensure an enjoyable experience for all audience members.

WHAT TO WEAR

Most people like to dress up when they go to the opera because it's part of the fun! Nowadays you can pretty much wear whatever you want. However, an evening at the opera is usually considered to be a special occasion. We encourage dressing in layers so bring a sweater, wrap or jacket just in case.

ARRIVE ON TIME

You should always make sure you get to the opera house in plenty of time to find parking, get your tickets and be seated before the performance starts. Thirty minutes before start time (curtain) is usually sufficient. If you are late, the ushers may let you in after the overture, but, if there is not an overture, you may have to wait until intermission and miss the entire first act!

REMAIN QUIET DURING THE PERFORMANCE

There is nothing worse than sitting near a chatterbox, someone text messaging or a ringing cell phone during a performance. Please turn off anything that can make noise or light. Save your comments for intermission and, by all means, do not sing along! Remember recording devices, video and photography is not permitted of any Virginia Opera performance.

APPLAUD WHEN APPROPRIATE

The correct times to applaud are when the conductor takes the podium at the very beginning of the performance, after the overture, after a big aria, at the end of each act, and when the singers come out to take a bow. If you are unsure when those times are, it is best to wait and follow the lead of other audience members.

APPLAUD APPROPRIATELY

Clapping while sitting or standing is always acceptable, and you can yell "Bravo!" to show appreciation for a male singer, "Brava!" to show appreciation for a female singer, and "Bravi!" to show appreciation for a group of singers. Yelling out anything other than those three words, as well as screaming or whistling, is inappropriate.

WHY WE FOLLOW THESE ETIQUETTE RULES:

- Because it is respectful to the performers and the theater to dress nicely.
- Because it's dangerous to try to step over people in the dark, and because it's disrespectful to the performers and the other audience members.
- Because the performers really can hear the whispers from on stage, and other people are trying to watch.
- Gum, candy, and drinks make noise that will distract the performers, and are not permitted in the theatre.