

Falstaff

Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto adapted by Arrigo Boito
from the play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and scenes
from *Henry IV, Part 1 and Part 2*, by William Shakespeare

PITTSBURGH OPERA
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Opera

Natalia Santaliz as Nannetta, Chanáe Curtis as Alice Ford (front), Shanley Horvitz as Meg Page (back), and Megan Esther Grey as Mistress Quickly in Opera San José's *Falstaff*. Photo Credit: David Allen



Verdi's last laugh: *Tutto nel mondo è burla*

Adapted from an essay by Ben Werley

Falstaff premiered on February 9, 1893 in Milan. It was an historic day for opera because Verdi was nearly 80 years old, and because a storm that blew in from the north dumped waist-high snow during the evening. It was as if nature provided a weather surprise that mirrored Verdi's response to his contemporaries who had criticized the composer's lack of counterpoint skills. Verdi had been "self-taught" and claimed that "Of all composers, past and present, I am the least learned. I mean that in all seriousness, and by *learning*, I do not mean *knowledge* of music." The Maestro had retired from opera composition after *Aida* in 1871, but then took up his pen 14 years later to create *Otello*. Then, five years after that, the Italian, non-English speaking Verdi took on a comedy based on his love of stories by Shakespeare.

Opera fans of Verdi's time must have been surprised when he had long last chosen to write a comedy after his many earlier tragedies. The biggest amusement is the final number—a **fugue**, the most complex form of counterpoint imaginable. A fugue is a highly-developed form of imitation, following a specific set of rules. All fugues have a **subject** (the main melody), and at least one **countersubject** (a secondary melody that offsets the subject). These melodies weave in and out of one another through the different voices, each of which begins with a statement of the subject. Often the subject and countersubjects are heard at the same time, creating many complex layers, or **strata**, as the melodies weave in and out.

After all the conflicts are resolved and everyone is merry, Falstaff

FALSTAFF
Allegro brioso

All in the world's but fol - ly. Man is born to be jol - ly, is born to be jo - lly.
Tut-to nel mon - do è bur - la. L'uom è na - to bur - lo - ne, bur - lo - ne, bur - lo - ne.

sings the subject: "Tutto nel mondo è burla." Fenton then joins in, the subject moves from person to person, and layers keep adding up until everyone is singing. As the fugue builds to a climax, Verdi unexpectedly disrupts it with Falstaff's gloomy "Tutti gabati" (Everyone's fooled). This switch to minor is done to be funny, for the music winds up again and a **crescendo** builds quickly to a big **fortissimo**, back in the major key. Listen to the fun in the sparkling music and the cleverness of the interweaving lines. The text is only a few lines, but the music is devilishly difficult, the rhythm is complicated, and the counterpoint is masterful. The orchestra rounds off the opera with a big flourish—it's as if Verdi leaves us laughing with "All the world's but folly."

Falstaff Synopsis

Time: The reign of Henry IV, 1399–1413 Place: Windsor, England
Verdi's 26th and final opera premiered in 1893 at La Scala in Milan



Poster for the Paris première in 1894,
by Adolfo Hohenstein

ACT I

The Garter Inn. Dr. Caius bursts into Sir John Falstaff's room in the Garter Inn, accusing him of unseemly behavior the previous night. He further accuses Falstaff's two henchmen, Bardolfo and Pistola, of having robbed him while he was drunk. Unable to obtain reparations, Dr. Caius leaves in a fury. Falstaff contemplates the large bill he has run up at the inn. He informs Bardolfo and Pistola that in order to repair his finances he plans to seduce Alice Ford and Meg Page, both wives of prosperous Windsor citizens. When Bardolfo and Pistola refuse to deliver the letters Falstaff has written to the two ladies, Falstaff instructs a page to do so instead. He then ridicules Bardolfo and Pistola's newly discovered sense of honor, before throwing them out of his room.

The Garter Inn. Alice Ford and Meg Page laugh over the identical love letters they have received from Sir John Falstaff. They share their amusement with Alice's daughter Nannetta, and with their friend Mistress Quickly. Ford arrives, followed by four men all proffering advice: Dr. Caius, whom Ford favors as Nannetta's future husband; Bardolfo and Pistola, who are now seeking advantageous employment from Ford; and Fenton, who is in love with Ford's daughter Nannetta. When Ford learns of Falstaff's plan to seduce his wife, he immediately becomes jealous. While Alice and Meg plan how to take revenge on their importunate suitor, Ford decides to disguise himself in order to pay a visit to Falstaff. Unnoticed in the midst of all the commotion, Nannetta and Fenton manage to steal a few precious moments together.

ACT II

The Garter Inn. Feigning penitence, Bardolfo and Pistola rejoin Falstaff's service. They show in Mistress Quickly, who informs Falstaff that both Alice and Meg are madly in love with him. She explains that it will be easier to seduce Alice, since her husband is out of the house every afternoon, between two and three. Falstaff joyously anticipates his seduction of Alice. Bardolfo now announces that a "Mister Brook" (Ford in disguise) wishes to speak to Falstaff. To Falstaff's surprise, "Brook" offers him wine and money if he will seduce Alice Ford, explaining that he has long been in love with the lady, but to no avail. If she were to be seduced by the more experienced Falstaff, she might then be more likely to fall a second time and accept "Brook." Falstaff agrees to the plan, telling his surprised new friend that he already has a rendezvous with Alice that very afternoon. As Falstaff leaves to prepare himself, Ford gives way to jealous rage. When Falstaff returns, dressed in his best clothes, the two men exchange compliments before leaving together.

Ford's house. Mistress Quickly, Alice, and Meg are preparing for Falstaff's visit. Nannetta tearfully tells her mother that her father insists on her marrying Dr. Caius, but Alice tells her daughter not to worry. Falstaff arrives and begins his seduction of Alice, nostalgically boasting of his aristocratic youth as page to the Duke of Norfolk. As Falstaff becomes more amorous, Meg Page interrupts the tête-à-tête, as planned, to announce (in jest) that Ford is approaching. But just at that point Mistress Quickly suddenly returns in a panic to inform Alice that Ford really is on his way, and in a jealous temper. As Ford rushes in with a group of townsfolk, the terrified Falstaff seeks a hiding place, eventually ending up in a large laundry basket. Fenton and Nannetta also hide. Ford and the other men ransack the house. Hearing the sound of kissing, Ford is convinced that he has found his wife and her lover Falstaff together, but is furious to discover Nannetta and Fenton instead. While Ford argues with Fenton, Alice instructs her servants to empty the laundry basket out of the window. To general hilarity, Falstaff is thrown into the River Thames.

ACT III

Outside the Garter Inn. A wet and bruised Falstaff laments the wickedness of the world, but soon cheers up with a glass of mulled wine. Mistress Quickly persuades him that Alice was innocent of the unfortunate incident at Ford's house. To prove that Alice still loves him, she proposes a new rendezvous that night in Windsor Great Park. In a letter that Quickly gives to Falstaff, Alice asks the knight to appear at midnight, disguised as the Black Huntsman. Ford, Nannetta, Meg, and Alice prepare the second part of their plot:

Nannetta will be Queen of the Fairies and the others, also in disguise, will help to continue Falstaff's punishment. Ford secretly promises Caius that he will marry Nannetta that evening. Mistress Quickly overhears them.

Windsor Great Park. As Fenton and Nannetta are reunited, Alice explains her plan to trick Ford into marrying them. They all hide as Falstaff approaches. On the stroke of midnight, Alice appears. She declares her love for Falstaff, but suddenly runs away, saying that she hears spirits approaching. Nannetta, disguised as the Queen of the Fairies, summons her followers who attack the terrified Falstaff, pinching and poking him until he promises to give up his dissolute ways. In the midst of the assault Falstaff suddenly recognizes Bardolfo, and realizes that he has been tricked. While Ford explains that he was "Brook," Quickly scolds Falstaff for his attempts at seducing two younger, virtuous women.

Falstaff accepts that he has been made a figure of fun, but points out that he remains the real source of wit in others. Dr. Caius now comes forward with a figure in white. They are to be married by Ford. Alice brings forward another couple, who also receive Ford's blessing. When the brides remove their veils it is revealed that Ford has just married Fenton to Nannetta, and Dr. Caius to Bardolfo. With everyone now laughing at his expense, Ford has no choice but to forgive the lovers and bless their marriage. Before sitting down to a wedding supper with Sir John Falstaff, the entire company agrees that the whole world may be nothing but a jest filled with jesters, but he who laughs last, laughs best.

— Metropolitan Opera

Characters

The Knight and his Cronies

Sir John Falstaff *baritone*

A rotund, obnoxious womanizer who tries to woo wealthy matrons Alice Ford and Meg Page in order to better his fortunes.

Bardolfo [bar-DOLE-foh] *tenor*

One of Falstaff's lackeys and buddies. When Falstaff vows to stop paying for Bardolfo's food and drink, he joins the plot against his patron.

Pistola [pih-STOLE-ah] *bass*

Falstaff's other lackey and drinking buddy. When Falstaff offends him, Pistola informs Ford of the knight's plans to seduce Alice.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Alice Ford [ah-LEE-cheh] *soprano*

The wealthy matron of Ford, mother of Nannetta, and the object of Falstaff's false affection. She plans to teach Falstaff a lesson.

Nannetta [nah-NET-tah] *soprano*

The beautiful daughter of Alice Ford. Her father has promised her to Caius, but she loves Fenton.

Meg Page *mezzo-soprano*

The neighbor of Alice Ford and also an object of Falstaff's false affection. She schemes, along with Alice, to humiliate Falstaff.

Dame (Mistress) Quickly *mezzo-soprano*

The witty town gossip and messenger in the merry wives' plot; carries messages between the two ladies and Falstaff.

The Gentlemen

Fenton *tenor*

A young gentleman of the village in love with Nannetta. He joins Ford and the others in the scheme against Falstaff.

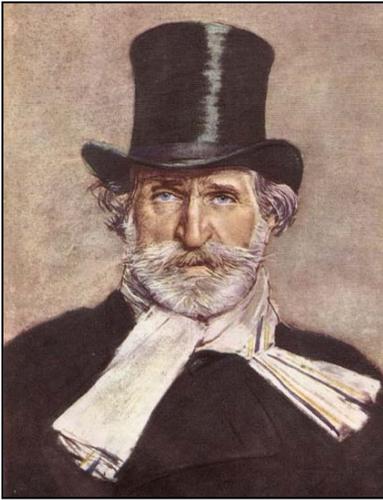
Ford *baritone*

Alice's husband and Nannetta's father, a loving but jealous man. He is terrified that his wife will cuckold him with Falstaff.

Dr. Caius [KAH-yoos] *tenor*

A phony doctor who Falstaff delights in outwitting. He joins forces with Ford to pay Falstaff back.

Innkeeper, Townspeople, Servants, Pages, Maskers

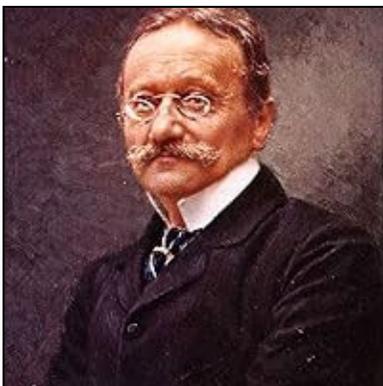


Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi
1813–1901

The myth of Verdi as the *Risorgimento's* composer also led to claims that the slogan "Viva VERDI!" was used throughout Italy to secretly call for *Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia* (Victor Emmanuel King of Italy) to assume the throne.

Un ballo in maschera, La forza del destino, Don Carlos, Aida, and Otello. After this long list of serious dramas, his final opera, *Falstaff*, was a comedy based on an amalgam of three of Shakespeare's plays.

For years, Verdi lived on a humble farm and accumulated some 2,500 acres of land. What most attracted him was the earth itself. He sowed corn and wheat, planted trees, and worked in the fields until he was exhausted; he was obsessed with redeeming *brutta natura*. During the years of political struggle within Italy, Verdi used his music to express the struggles of the Italian people for independence. In 1861, Verdi was elected to the Italian parliament after Italy became a unified nation. When he died in 1901, thousands of people blocked the streets of Milan and the entire country went into mourning.



Enrico Giuseppe Giovanni Boito
1842–1918

publisher Giulio Ricordi persuaded them to work together again. Their mutual friendship and respect grew over the years, and when Verdi died, Boito was at his bedside.

Meet the Composer

Born near Busseto, **Giuseppe Verdi** is one of Italy's most beloved composers, but he took a circuitous route to learning composition. His musical talent began to shine when he was young, so when he was not admitted to the Conservatory in Milan, he continued his private studies and ultimately wrote many successful operas that were performed in all of the major Italian and European theaters. His operas include familiar names: *Nabucco, Macbeth, Rigoletto, Il trovatore, La traviata, Simon Boccanegra,*

Meet the Librettist

Born in Padua, **Arrigo Boito** was an Italian librettist, composer, poet, and critic. His only finished opera was *Mefistofele*, based on Goethe's *Faust*. Boito is mostly known for writing the libretti for Verdi's last two operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Boito collaborated with Verdi as early as 1862; after a perceived offense, the music

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Marilyn Michalka Egan, PhD
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
www.pittsburghopera.org