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Very Verdi

by *Jay Nordlinger*



Riccardo Muti and Ambrogio Maestri shake on it./Photo: Todd Rosenberg Photography, courtesy the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

On this 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra has been engaged in a Shakespeare celebration. They have done *Romeo and Juliet*, for example: *Romeo and Juliet* in treatments by Berlioz and Tchaikovsky. And they are doing Verdi's opera *Falstaff*.

The celebration is presided over by the CSO's music director, Riccardo Muti. He is on record as saying that his two favorite operas are *Così fan tutte* (Mozart) and *Falstaff*. These are two comedies, sort of. There is plenty of pain in each.

The CSO is doing *Falstaff* in a concert version; there is no staging whatsoever. Muti is not a fan of semi-staging. His view can be summed up in the expression "In for a penny, in for a pound." If you're going to stage an opera, go ahead and stage it—but no half-measures, which are often so awkward.

In the title role, Muti has the baritone who is probably the Falstaff of our day: Ambrogio Maestri. The

entire cast is Italian—which is probably important in an opera so talky. Italian diction is at a premium (and Maestri is a paragon of such diction).

I say the cast is all-Italian, but that’s cheating a bit, for the tenor portraying Fenton, Saimir Pirgu, is Albanian. Yet he studied in Italy and, as Maestro Muti pointed out to me in an interview, holds an Italian passport.

As a rule, these singers have worked with Muti in the past. He is familiar with them, and they with him. From what I can tell, they are, to Muti, a trusted core.

On Thursday night, they trooped onto the stage of Orchestra Hall, all ten of them. Only after they were applauded and seated did Muti take the stage. As he began, I had this thought: “I’ve been listening to him, and looking at him, since about 1980. And, from the seats, he looks just the same.”

Ambrogio Maestri has sung Falstaff hundreds of times, and he has the part in his bones. In fact, he was the only singer who performed from memory. His Italian was a model, of course, and his characterization sure. Sometimes, when singing soft, he swallowed his sound. But this is a minor complaint.

Singing Alice Ford was the soprano Eleonora Buratto—heard recently at the Metropolitan Opera as Norina in *Don Pasquale* (Donizetti). I have a word about this in my forthcoming “New York Chronicle,” in the magazine. The first words of Buratto’s bio describe her as “one of the most interesting voices of her generation.” For once, a boast in a bio is true. Her voice *is* interesting, and so is her singing. She has a variety of weights and colors. She can sing high and light, like a coloratura. And she can sing with something like dramatic power, or lyric-dramatic power. As Alice Ford, she was accurate, intelligent, and musical.

In the role of Ford was the baritone Luca Salsi. His sound was rich, with a desirable glow, and there was a bonus: he put on a nice comic falsetto.

Our Nannetta was the soprano Rosa Feola. She is a touching singer—the kind of singer an audience roots for. She also has a working technique, as when in the upper regions, gossamer. Her Fenton, Mr. Pirgu, did not bring his best intonation. He had a bout of flatness, but he acquitted himself credibly.

There are two mezzo-sopranos in this show: Meg Page and Mistress Quickly. The former was Laura Polverelli, who was smoky, a little wobbly—and canny. The latter was Daniela Barcellona, known to Met audiences as Malcolm in Rossini’s *Donna del lago*. (This is a pants role, or, given the Scottish setting, a kilt role.) As Quickly, she was solid and comic.

Speaking of comedy: the audience laughed at the jokes all through. Laughter of this type is made possible by surtitles (or, in the case of the Met, backseat titles). Before the advent of titles, audiences laughed at physical humor—but not words. Titles changed that, and it is a welcome change.

I have said that the CSO’s *Falstaff* is unstaged—utterly and completely unstaged—and that’s true. With

an asterisk. The script calls for a kiss at the end of Act II. This is a kiss between Nannetta and Fenton, and it is an important kiss. A kiss that must be heard. I don't know who or what made the sound on Thursday night. But it was flatulent.

I'm sorry to write those words, but what can I do, as your faithful reporter?

Riccardo Muti is never better than in Verdi, and he was at his best on Thursday night. He was at his most animated, in this most animated of operas. He squeezed every last drop of character out of the thing. Often, he was in his crouching-tiger mode. (Literally, I mean.) He was nimble and acute. With a few small exceptions, he kept the train on the tracks, which is no easy task. He conducted with great economy—allowing no excess. *Falstaff* is a tidy opera, and untidiness kills it.

There is also the factor of experience: Muti has lived with this opera for a long time—ever since he attended the rehearsals of his teacher, Antonino Votto.

You could argue with Muti here or there. I sometimes think he is too brisk for his own good, or the music's. Take “Quand'ero paggio,” that ditty of Falstaff's. Muti took it at record speed. You sacrifice some grace at this speed. But Muti, Maestri, and the CSO pulled it off.

The CSO is a royal orchestra, and they played royally, as well as nimbly. What a luxury to have the Chicagoans as a “pit band.” In the final measures, the fat, fast brass were fantastic. And Muti is arguably the Verdian of our age.

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