

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIFTH SEASON

**Chicago Symphony Orchestra****Riccardo Muti** Zell Music Director**Yo-Yo Ma** Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant**Bank of America**   
Global Sponsor of the CSO

Thursday, April 21, 2016, at 8:00

Saturday, April 23, 2016, at 8:00

Tuesday, April 26, 2016, at 7:30

**Falstaff, Lyric comedy in three acts**

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Arrigo Boito, after William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*  
and parts of *Henry IV***Riccardo Muti** Conductor**CAST**

Sir John Falstaff ..... **Ambrogio Maestri** baritone  
 Ford, husband of Alice ..... **Luca Salsi** baritone  
 Fenton ..... **Saimir Pirgu** tenor  
 Doctor Caius ..... **Saverio Fiore** tenor  
 Bardolfo, follower of Falstaff ..... **Anicio Zorzi Giustiniani** tenor  
 Pistola, follower of Falstaff ..... **Luca Dall'Amico** bass  
 Mrs. Alice Ford ..... **Eleonora Buratto** soprano  
 Nannetta, daughter of Alice and Ford ..... **Rosa Feola** soprano  
 Mrs. Quickly ..... **Daniela Barcellona** mezzo-soprano  
 Mrs. Meg Page ..... **Laura Polverelli** mezzo-soprano

Burglers and street-folk; Ford's servants; masquerade of devils, sprites, fairies, and witches

**Chicago Symphony Chorus****Duain Wolfe** Director

(continued)

# **Falstaff, Lyric comedy in three acts**

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Arrigo Boito, after William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and parts of *Henry IV*

## Act 1

Part 1 Garter Inn

Part 2 A garden

### **INTERMISSION**

## Act 2

Part 1 Garter Inn

Part 2 Ford's house

### **INTERMISSION**

## Act 3

Part 1 A square

Part 2 Windsor Park

The action takes place in Windsor during the reign of King Henry IV of England

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**These concerts are made possible by a generous gift from the Zell Family Foundation.**

**The appearance of the soloists is made possible by a generous gift from Pam and Roger Hull.**

**The appearance of the Chicago Symphony Chorus is made possible by a generous gift from Jim and Kay Mabie.**

**This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.**

**CSO Tuesday series concerts are sponsored by United Airlines.**

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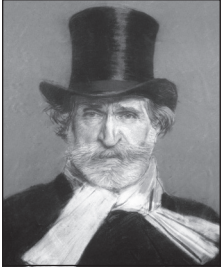
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**This program is part of the citywide Shakespeare 400 Celebration.**

## Giuseppe Verdi

Born October 10, 1813, Le Roncole, near Busseto, Italy.  
Died January 27, 1901, Milan, Italy.

### *Falstaff*, Lyric comedy in three acts



“The great event has happened,” began a special cable from Milan, Italy, that ran in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 10, 1893. “*Falstaff* was performed this evening and all the world has entered into possession of

the new opera. Not even the production of *Otello* was received with interest so great as now.” The La Scala premiere of Verdi’s new opera made headlines around the world, and Chicago, like other major music centers, was eager to know what the great composer had unveiled in his eightieth year. *Falstaff* was described as Verdi’s latest opera, not his last, because no one knew for certain what he still had up his sleeve beyond the miracle of this new masterpiece. In fact, the week of the Chicago *Falstaff* premiere, local papers reported that Verdi was writing a new opera for his Falstaff, Victor Maurel, and then a week later that Verdi had begun work on an opera based on *King Lear*. Both were the kind of suspicious

rumors that go with the territory of being a genuine celebrity, and Verdi was certainly as famous as any living musician. Later, when Arrigo Boito, Verdi’s brilliant librettist, proposed that it was time for the two of them to set to work on a new Shakespeare opera, and suggested they tackle *King Lear*, Verdi’s wife Giuseppina pulled Boito aside. “For Heaven’s sake,” she said. “Verdi is too old, too tired.”

Verdi had been worried that he might not live to finish *Falstaff* since the day he and Boito first discussed the possibility of a new opera to follow the extraordinary success of their *Otello* in 1887. As soon as he received Boito’s first draft of the text, in June 1889, he fired back: “In sketching *Falstaff*, did you ever consider the extreme number of my years?” (He was seventy-five at the time.) It would be rash, he said, for him to undertake such a project. It might turn out to be a waste of Boito’s time. “Suppose I couldn’t stand the strain and was unable to finish it?” But clearly Verdi was excited by the idea of working with Boito again—to warm up, he had already reread the Shakespeare plays in which Falstaff appears: *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; *Henry IV*, parts 1 and

**COMPOSED**  
1889–92

**FIRST PERFORMANCE**

February 9, 1893; Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Italy. The composer conducting

**FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES**

August 3, 1976, Ravinia Festival. Donald Gramm as soloist, Sarah Caldwell conducting (“L’onore! Ladri!” and “Mondo ladro”)

April 25, 26 & 27, 1985, Orchestra Hall. Guillermo Sarabia, Wolfgang Brendel, Yordi Ramiro, Heinz Zednik, Francis Egerton, Aage Haugland, Katia Ricciarelli, Kathleen Battle, Christa Ludwig, and Ann Murray, as soloists; Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret

Hillis, director); Sir Georg Solti conducting (complete opera)

April 29, 1985, Carnegie Hall. Guillermo Sarabia, Wolfgang Brendel, Yordi Ramiro, Heinz Zednik, Francis Egerton, Aage Haugland, Katia Ricciarelli, Kathleen Battle, Christa Ludwig, and Ann Murray, as soloists; Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director); Sir Georg Solti conducting (complete opera)

**MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES**

July 11, 1998, Ravinia Festival. Kathleen Battle as soloist, Christoph Eschenbach conducting (“Sul fil d’un soffio etesio”)

**INSTRUMENTATION**

three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and bass trombone, timpani, triangle, cymbals, bass drum, harp, strings; plus offstage guitar, horn, and chime

**APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME**

Act 1: 32 minutes  
Act 2: 46 minutes  
Act 3: 50 minutes

2; and *Henry V*. Verdi had wanted to write a new comic opera for forty years. (Of his more than two dozen operas, only one—his second, the ill-fated *Un giorno di regno*, written nearly a half century earlier—was a comedy.) “And I’ve known *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for fifty,” he said at the time. “A smile adds a thread to life’s tapestry,” was all that Boito needed to say, quoting Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, to refute Verdi’s anxieties.

Verdi’s apprehension was not unfounded. Few major composers before him had lived so long—Haydn died at seventy-seven, Rameau at eighty, Cherubini at eighty-one. In the months ahead, as Verdi began to compose music again, thoughts of aging and death were never far from his mind. “When we are young,” he wrote to Teresa Stolz, the soprano who sang in the premiere of Verdi’s Requiem, “everything is pleasant, we are carefree, impertinent, proud, and it seems that the world should exist just for us. When we are old . . . But never mind these miseries.” Over the course of the three years that were devoted to *Falstaff*, Verdi learned that several of his lifelong friends and dearest colleagues were seriously ill and dying. Often he was too disturbed to write music at all.

**T**he late nineteenth century was not prime time for comedy. “Wherever we look we see only disasters of every sort—crimes, suicides, and murders,” Eduard Hanslick, the world-famous critic, wrote only months before the premiere of *Falstaff*—words that still ring true today. “Where, amidst this universal sadness, is to be found hearty comic operatic music?” Verdi had made an entire career—as long and rich as any in operatic history—writing tragedies. And Rossini had been quoted in the newspapers saying that Verdi was incapable of treating a comic subject. But Richard Wagner, who took himself as seriously as any artist in history, had created genuine comedy in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Although there is no documentation,

it is difficult to believe that Verdi would have missed the Italian premiere of *Die Meistersinger* at La Scala in 1889, just as he was throwing himself into work on his own comic opera—and the dazzling ensemble at the end of Verdi’s first act, with its tenor melody floating above the general mayhem, argues persuasively that he was there. “I don’t think that writing a comedy should tire you out,” Boito had told Verdi early in their discussions. “A tragedy causes its author genuinely to suffer . . . The jokes and laughter of comedy exhilarate mind and body.”

Verdi began by sketching a fugue, just as the opera itself would end with one. “I am having a great time writing fugues!” he told Boito over the summer of 1889. The librettist assured Verdi that a comic fugue perfectly matched the spirit of their new opera and that they would find a place to put it. Verdi probably already had the final scene of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* in the back of his mind, with its counterpoint for the main roles, and that is ultimately what happens at the end of *Falstaff*. But these fugal exercises were just a clearing of the throat—a way for Verdi to assure himself that his technical skills were still in good working order.

In the fall of 1889, Boito delivered the text for the first two acts to Verdi. They spent a week or so together, sharing ideas, and talking through the work that lay ahead. Once Verdi began to compose in earnest, his progress was erratic, with surges of activity alternating with dry spells. Verdi didn’t work entirely in sequence, as was his normal method, but jumped from scene to scene. When his friends asked how it was going, he invariably deflected the question, giving differing accounts to different people, and sometimes simply saying that he was writing purely for the pleasure of it, as if this important new opera was merely a pastime—as if, in fact, he didn’t care whether he finished it or not. For the first time in fifty years, he said, he was composing not for the public, but for himself.

Verdi and Boito kept *Falstaff* to themselves for some time. No one beyond the circle of their



**Boito and Verdi in the garden of Giulio Ricordi’s residence in Milan, photograph by Achille Ferrario, 1892. Archivio Storico Ricordi © Ricordi & C.S.r.l. Milano**

closest friends knew. Verdi even had his manuscript paper shipped from Paris, to cover his tracks. Then, in November 1890, the *Corriere della Sera* leaked the news that Verdi was composing a new opera. From then on, all anyone wanted to know was when it would be done. That winter there were more setbacks. Verdi lost two dear friends. “And both were younger than I!” he wrote to Maria Waldmann, his favorite Amneris in *Aida*. “Everything ends!! Life is a sad thing! . . . And so I have very little desire to write an opera I have begun but not got very far with. Don’t pay any attention to the newspaper gossip. Will I finish it? Or will I not finish it? Who knows.”

“We have to begin the year smiling,” Boito wrote him that January, to coax him out of his sorrow. But Verdi was disconsolate. “I am upset and distracted,” he replied. “The Big Belly,” he said, using their code name for their corpulent title character, “is not moving on.” Verdi wrote to Ricordi, his publisher, that he couldn’t possibly finish the opera in 1891. “When I was young, even if I was under the weather, I could



**Painting by production designer Adolf Hohenstein of Verdi (seated at right) with the original cast during a piano rehearsal of *Falstaff*, 1893. Archivio Storico Ricordi @ Ricordi & C.S.r.l. Milano**

stay at my desk for up to ten hours at a stretch,” he said. “Now I cannot.” Later that spring, Verdi complained that *Falstaff* was pale and wan. But then slowly, Verdi began to rally—as did *Falstaff*. In September 1891, he broke his usual routine and began orchestrating what he had already written, even though the opera was far from finished. Eventually the pieces all

fell into place. The first act was completed in April 1892; the second and third were done late that summer.

Verdi had already begun worrying over his cast before the opera was even finished. Franco Faccio, the conductor he would have most desired, had recently died. Verdi agreed to conduct the first three performances, as he had often done with a new work in the past, and then turn the rest of the run over to another. For a chorus master he wanted someone who was subordinate to the conductor on the one hand, but so invested in the performance that, as Verdi suggested, he could dress in costume and sing on stage with his chorus. And for each character in the comedy, he had a laundry list of requirements. He would be more demanding than ever in rehearsal, he warned, because he knew that he was writing a new kind of opera, one that required a precise, flexible, and quicksilver vocalism that would not come easily—it would “have to be sung differently from other modern operas,” he said. In the end, *Falstaff* was cast with the finest singers of the day, many of whom would be the leading

stars of the new verismo operas by Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Puccini, and others. Verdi’s Ford would create Schaunard in *La bohème*; his Nannetta and Fenton would become a popular Mimì and Rodolfo. And Victor Maurel, already a triumphant Tonio in *Pagliacci* and Verdi’s original Iago in *Otello*, had from the very beginning been the only singer the composer had in mind for *Falstaff*.

**U**nlike either Verdi’s *Otello* or *Macbeth*, each of which closely followed the corresponding

Shakespeare play, *Falstaff* is a freshly created work, drawing its material piecemeal from different Shakespearean sources—*The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the two *Henry IV* plays. Boito was determined to “squeeze all the juice from that Shakespearean orange without letting any of the useless pips fall into the glass”—to cut, streamline, and reshape, in other words. “It

is very difficult and it must seem very, very easy.” And since Falstaff himself is quite a different man in each of the Shakespeare plays, Verdi and

Boito “created a character never seen before on sea or land, inside Shakespeare’s works or outside them,” as Garry Wills has written. Verdi said

## CHICAGO’S FIRST FALSTAFF

In August 1893, six months after the premiere of Verdi’s *Falstaff* at La Scala in Milan, Italy, the Chicago papers reported that the new opera was likely to be produced in Chicago in 1894. But despite the high level of curiosity about the work, it was not staged in Chicago that year. The next season, the Metropolitan Opera gave the U.S. premiere on February 4, 1895, and the Chicago premiere of *Falstaff* followed on March 14, given at the Auditorium Theatre by the Abbey & Grau company, with Victor Maurel, Verdi’s original Falstaff, in the title role. Another famous singer and Chicago

Boston, where she had last appeared. Once in Chicago, she canceled a single performance as Desdemona in Verdi’s *Otello* in order to be ready for the *Falstaff* premiere. (The Chicago Orchestra, in the closing weeks of its fourth season, was playing a concert in East Saginaw, Michigan, the night of the *Falstaff* premiere, as part of a thirty-six city regional tour in honor of Thomas’s fifty years of service to American music.)

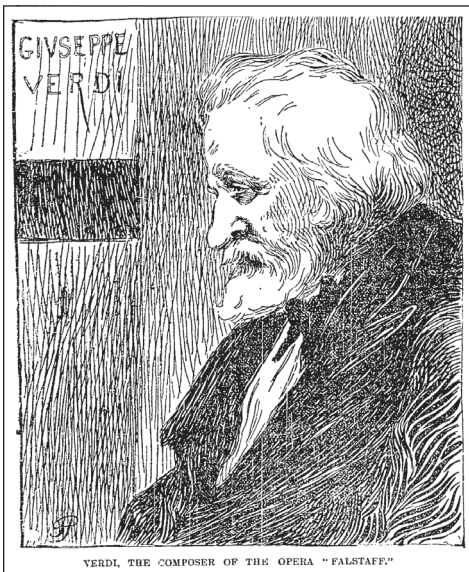
“Verdi Makes a Hit” was the headline on the *Chicago Tribune* review of the *Falstaff* performance, with the subtitle “Great Interest Manifested in the Master’s Latest Work.” Nonetheless, the *Tribune* reported that the audience response was somewhat muted. “It was not a performance to call forth great enthusiasm; rather one for smiling approval.” Eames did appear, although she was announced as “consenting to sing to oblige the management.” The *Tribune* reported that she “was not at all in good voice,” and found her acting stiff. Although the subtlety and detail of Maurel’s Falstaff tended to evaporate in the vast spaces of the Auditorium, “his portrayal was a work of eminent art.” After his “inimical” singing of “Quand’ ero paggio,” three encores were demanded. “There

company in *Manon* and *Carmen*. “The audience is wonderfully quick and appreciative tonight,” he told the *Tribune*. “They do not seem to miss a point and are entering into the spirit of it all so thoroughly. It is a pleasure for the singers to have their work so intelligently received.”

A very young Willa Cather, a decade before she first gained great popularity with her novels *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, traveled to Chicago to cover the performance for the *Nebraska State Journal*, where her earliest writings were regularly published. “There is something especially wonderful and sacred about any great masterpiece in its first youth,” she wrote, “before its romanzas have become street music, before the concoctors of comic opera have stolen the choruses, while it is played by the first cast, and the ink of the score is scarcely dry.” Cather was a great lover of opera—Thea Kronberg in *The Song of the Lark* is one of the great fictional opera singers—and she brought all of her customary insight and sensitivity to her early newspaper work. “Something of the very personality of the composer seems to cling to it,” she continued.

Its bloom, its freshness, the wonderful charm of its novelty, even the slight uncertainty with which some of the principals carry their parts, all emphasize that one is witnessing an absolutely new creation, a new work that did not exist yesterday, that has been called up out of nothingness and that henceforth will be a part of the art of the world. On such an occasion one feels dimly what it must be to create, to dream and to send out of one’s dreams golden song that shall be immortal.

Phillip Huscher



Aubrey Beardsley’s illustration that accompanied the March 5, 1893, *Chicago Tribune* review of the *Falstaff* premiere.

favorite, the American soprano Emma Eames, sang Alice Ford. (In addition to her operatic appearances in Chicago, Eames had sung Mozart and Schubert with music director Theodore Thomas and the Chicago Orchestra in May 1894.) Eames had arrived in Chicago earlier in the week feeling ill—she blamed the air in

was much curiosity in musical circles to hear the heralded work,” wrote another reporter, “and there were many listeners who followed the music with their fingers on the score.” Among those was the great tenor Jean de Reszke, who had sung both *Otello* and *Radames* in Chicago and had returned to appear with the touring

simply that Boito had written “a lyric comedy quite unlike any other.”

The score of *Falstaff* is an anomaly in Verdi’s output. Unlike *Otello*, Verdi’s other late-career masterpiece, written just six years earlier, it is an ensemble opera from beginning to end, with nothing that resembles a conventional aria or duet, and offering no star turns in the spotlight. Boito insisted that even the young lovers, Nannetta and Fenton, should not have a duet. Their love, he said, should be “as sugar is sprinkled on a cake, to sprinkle the whole comedy with their merry love without accumulating it at any point.” Only Falstaff’s tiny monologue, “Quand’ ero paggio,” which lasts little more than thirty seconds, has often been extracted by baritones to stand on its own. (It was regularly encored in Verdi’s day. Victor Maurel, Verdi’s original Falstaff as well as the lead in both the Metropolitan Opera and Chicago premieres in 1895, made a recording of it in 1907, singing it in Italian and then again, incongruously, in French—six years after the composer’s death.)

*Falstaff* proceeds as one seamless tapestry of ideas, a profusion of melodic abundance and brilliant orchestral effects unmatched in any other single opera—there is enough raw material here for a lifetime of writing operas. Verdi’s creative resources had never been more fertile, and he tosses off his astonishments as if the supply were endless. The wealth of his musical-dramatic gift is everywhere apparent, in the tiniest of details and in broad strokes—in the counterpoint of the feigned love music for Falstaff and Alice against the real love music for Fenton and Nannetta in act 2, the universal trilling that courses through the entire orchestra as Falstaff begins to drink his wine in the opening of act 3, the astonishingly modern progression of twelve chords underlining the chimes of midnight in the magical final scene—an effect since imitated but never equaled. And, finally, after so much dazzling invention, all of it woven together with an uncanny sense of the grand narrative arc, in one scene after another, at last comes the fugue—the fugue that in a sense started it all. Beginning with Falstaff, each of the opera’s ten characters, one by one, joins the uproarious, life-affirming fugue that brings down the curtain on one of opera’s greatest careers.

A postscript about reputation, tradition, Arturo Toscanini, and Riccardo Muti. Following the original La Scala production (a run of twenty-two performances) and a subsequent tour (to Genoa, Rome, Venice, Trieste, Vienna, and Berlin), *Falstaff* began to make the rounds of the world’s most important opera houses very quickly—from Buenos Aires and Mexico City to Prague (in Czech), Hamburg (under the baton of Gustav Mahler), and Saint Petersburg (in Russian), before moving on to Paris and London and finally to the United States in 1895, beginning in New York City and Chicago. [see sidebar, page 6] Yet, for all its triumphs, *Falstaff* did not easily achieve the immediate audience appeal of Verdi’s earlier masterpieces, even in Italy. “*Falstaff* is a fiasco! Really, a genuine fiasco,” Verdi wrote in a panic in December 1894. “Nobody is going to the theater! The best part is that they are saying they have never heard an opera so perfectly performed and coordinated. So we must conclude that the music is accursed!”

It was left to the young conductor Arturo Toscanini to turn the public’s opinion around, and to reveal for once and all the incomparable mastery of Verdi’s last operatic score. (Toscanini had played cello in the orchestra at the *Otello* premiere; he and Verdi became well acquainted and conferred over many details in Verdi’s scores.) When Toscanini was appointed music director of La Scala in 1898, his opening season pointedly juxtaposed Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger* and Verdi’s *Falstaff*—the two great comic masterpieces of the era. For the next half century, Toscanini was regularly identified with Verdi’s score. (His two recordings, the first made in Salzburg in 1937, the second a studio recording from 1950, made after six weeks of daily six-hour rehearsals, are widely considered among the triumphs of recorded music). In 1913, the centenary of Verdi’s birth, Toscanini presented *Falstaff* in the tiny theater of Busseto, near Verdi’s beloved home, Sant’Agata. In 2001, the 100th anniversary of Verdi’s death, Riccardo Muti conducted the opera there, with Abrogio Maestri—our Falstaff in Chicago this week—whom he had handpicked and intensively coached for the title role, and recreating the sets and costumes Toscanini had used nearly a century before. ■

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**Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.**