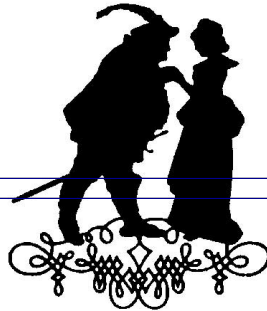


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Amleto and Falstaff Captivate OperaDelaware Festival 2016



Victor de Renzi
Photo: Salvatore Brancifort

1989. It concluded this past winter with one of Verdi's least performed works, *La battaglia di Legnano*, and one of his most performed works, the monumental *Aida*, a fitting cap to what had become a world-renowned Verdi cycle. Many similarly obsessed opera aficionados, like me, can now claim to have heard all of Verdi's operas performed on stage (plus the French version of *Il Trovatore*, *Le Trouvère*, not an "official" Verdi revision),

The winter of 2016 marked the completion of an event of historic proportions – the twenty-eight-year journey by Sarasota Opera through all of Verdi's thirty-two operas, and indeed all his non-operatic music as well. The brainchild of the company's enterprising and admittedly Verdi-obsessed Artistic Director and Principal Conductor, Victor de Renzi, the cycle began in

something rather unimaginable before Maestro Renzi took on this exceptional project. Likewise, the general public owes many thanks for idiomatic and historically informed productions that acquainted them with the great sweep and vitality of Verdi's genius as music-dramatist.

By happy coincidence, the wave of Verdi enthusiasm seems not to have abated, moving up the coast to Wilmington, Delaware. There, just three months later in May, OperaDelaware presented its second Spring Festival. With stunning success, it too tapped the gold mine of Giuseppe Verdi, the "Grandfather of Italian Opera," as correctly labeled by the young General Director of this enterprising company, Brendan Cooke. (Among other things, he performed as a studio artist in 2004 under Maestro De Renzi in Sarasota.)



Brendan Cooke
Photo: OperaDelaware

Not that both of the operas that OperaDelaware presented were by Verdi, but the connections between the two are interesting, to say the least. As part of the Delaware Shakespeare Festival, celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of the Bard's birth, the Company offered two full-scale productions: one, a rarity by any measure, Franco Faccio's 1865 opera *Amleto*; the other, a celebrated masterpiece, Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff* (1893), an amalgamation of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV*, Parts I and II. The Verdi connection comes by way of the skilled librettist Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), who with his first-ever libretto reduced Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for Faccio and then, late in Verdi's career, provided the masterful librettos for both *Otello* and *Falstaff*, thus also encouraging the aging Verdi not to put down his pen.

Rescued from Obscurity: Faccio's *Amleto* Triumphs

Verdi eventually came to admire Faccio (1840-1891), the outstanding conductor of the day, as much as he did Boito. (Faccio indeed conducted the Italian premiere of *Aida* in 1872 as well as the premier of *Otello* in 1887.) But years earlier all was not so cozy. The young Faccio and Boito were central figures in the so-called *Scapigliatura*, a mid-century movement in Milan by these and other high-minded young men to rejuvenate Italian culture via the promotion of a closer interrelation between poetry and its "sister arts," music and painting. With regard to opera, the principal art form of the day, their belief was that words should be as important as the music, and that librettos should be based on major literary works by great masters. Verdi, at the peak of his popularity in mid-century, was deemed a culprit by proponents of the movement.

Boito's response, having already written a well-circulated poem implying that Verdi had sullied Italian Art like "the stains on the walls of

a whore house," tried to show the way with his failed opera of 1868 *Mefistofele*, a reduction of Goethe's *Faust* for which he wrote both words and music. Faccio's contribution, in his pre-conductor days, was *Amleto*, for which the young and as yet inexperienced Boito reduced Shakespeare's play to a rather effective libretto. Written three years before Boito's opera, and revived briefly three years later at La Scala, *Amleto* failed as well. Until the recent revival by Opera Southwest in Albuquerque in 2013, a historic event in the opera world, *Amleto* was never heard again. This second airing by OperaDelaware, a new production and an East Coast premiere, was no less important an event, revealing again the opera's considerable merits.

Thanks goes foremost to Maestro Anthony Barrese, who not only conducted both the Albuquerque and Delaware productions, but who also found the lost score in the first place and then, over the course of many years, meticulously sculpted the performing edition used in both productions. Much credit must go also to the production team in Delaware that so effectively brought the fascinating score to light, and the young, talented cast who not only sung with such fervor, but also articulated Boito's masterful text with a clarity that certainly would have pleased the *scapigliati*.



Joshua Kohl as Amleto

Photo: Joe del Tufo, Moonloop Photography

The Cast and Set for *Amleto*

Photo: Joe del Tufo, Moonloop Photography

Typical of enterprising regional companies that must adhere to a limited budget, the spare set illustrated once again that less could indeed be more. Set Designer Peter Tupitza offered merely a contemporary metal scaffold, like an erector set, spanning most of the stage, serving for scenes both outside and inside Elsinore Castle. Alas, I first thought this was going to be a long night. Not so, as both the careful lighting and selective projections by Driscoll Otto facilitated Director E. Loren Meeker as he orchestrated the flow and dramatic interactions of the many characters – all aptly clad in period medieval costumes. The culminating fight-to-the death between Laertes and Hamlet was breathtaking, and the final image of these two, spread out in an ascending line from the mortally wounded Claudio to the poisoned Gertrude, equally so.

While alive, this young cast acquitted themselves admirably, both vocally and dramatically. Contributing to the initial failure of *Amleto* in Milan was an indisposed tenor who could barely make it through the arduous title role. In contrast, Delaware's healthy, athletic tenor, Joshua Kohl, not only made it through the evening, but also did so with firm voice and requisite passion. Baritone Matthew Vickers was an equally forceful Laertes, helping to make the fight scene such a tour de

force. (Mr. Vickers recently admirably handled the mellow role of Fritz in Boston Midsummer Opera's *L'amico Fritz*.) Another baritone, Timothy Mix, made for an appropriately malevolent King Claudio, and mezzo Lara Tillotson, as his guilt-ridden Queen, was especially moving in her critical duet with Amleto.

Indeed the cast throughout was strong. I especially enjoyed the bass Harold Wilson who doubled as the Gravedigger and Polonius (and whom I had heard just two months earlier as a most effective Rocco in *Fidelio* at Sarasota Opera.) So too, the minor roles of Horatio and Marcellus were well realized by Justin Hopkins and José Saín. But

best of all, was the stunning Ophelia of soprano Sarah Asmar, who certainly has some of the opera's most beautiful music, right from her delicate entrance aria. A highlight of the opera, as with many nineteenth-century melodramas, from Donizetti's *Lucia* to Verdi's *Macbeth*, was the mad scene for the despondent Ophelia. Faccio's long scene certainly ranks as one of the best, with its distinct Tristanesque flavor, and Ms. Asmar was simply magnificent, rendering the melancholy of the sad tune with ease and purity of tone.

Notably, with his first *Macbeth* in 1847, Verdi was already well on the way toward achieving the goals of the *Scapigliati*, a marriage of words and music capturing the essence of a great work of literature. Faccio made a compelling effort to do so as well with *Amleto*, but little did the opera world know this - at least until now. At every turn, including scenes with large chorus and elaborate ensembles, Maestro Barrese and his musical forces captured the sheer power – and yes beauty - of the forgotten but compelling score. I suspect Victor de Renzi, who attended the final performance of *Amleto*, a work as rarely performed as some he brought to stage in his Verdi cycle, would agree. Certainly the audience did, rising quickly for a prolonged ovation.

Verdi's *Falstaff* Delights

Offered between the two performances of *Amleto* I attended was Verdi's magnificent final opera, *Falstaff*, a perfect complement to the Festival's completely unknown intense and tragic offering that framed it. Outstripping all expectations, this OperaDelaware production turned out to be one of the best acted and directed I have ever encountered of this comic masterpiece, so familiar that one almost takes it for granted. This production instead captivated in every moment, and at the famous final comic fugue, this audience too leapt to its feet with rapturous applause. A thrilling night indeed.

Verdi's final opera takes us to the end of the century, far from all the mid-century controversy engendered by the *Scapigliati*. Yet with it, Verdi indeed has the last laugh, fulfilling the goals of this rebellious group while not necessarily writing to please anyone but himself. As he wrote to a journalist friend at age 77, in March of 1890, three years before the premiere:

Now Boito 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. Falstaff is a rogue who gets up to every kind of mischief, but in an amusing way... The opera is entirely comic. Amen.

A key phrase here is "a lyric comedy [*comedia lyrica*] quite unlike any other." As Julian Budden has written in his famous three-volume study of Verdi's operas: "For an artist to blaze a new trail in his 80th year is no mean achievement." In no other Verdi opera is the "word," so important, especially so with the quicksilver pacing of the words that Boito provides in his brilliant libretto. Throughout the later part of his career Verdi savored the *parola scenica* ("theatrical word," a phrase he coined in 1870). The principle, which he much exploited in this opera, helped produce a fragmented melodic style, without the big arias, all of which sometimes unsettles lovers of Verdi's other more traditional operas.



Steven Condy as Falstaff
Photo: Joe del Tufo, Moonloop Photography

Among the many familiar melodic kernels, oft repeated, are Mistress Quickly's "Reverenza," (a minuet-like phrase inviting a deep curtsy), and "Povera donna," (a deep contralto cadence expressing sympathy for the supposedly love-sick Alice and Meg). Soon left alone on stage, Falstaff congratulates himself with the gleeful mini-aria, "Va, vecchio John"; it's now up to the orchestra - with tramping strings, brass, and timpani - to suggest Falstaff's inflated self-satisfaction, which the oft-repeated phrase articulates. Such writing naturally contributes to the mercurial moods of the work.

David Evitts, a fine Falstaff who sang some years ago in a 1996 Boston Lyric Opera production, noted "in acting Falstaff you have to remember that less is more; all of it is written in the music." The young director of the OperaDelaware production, Dean Anthony, certainly understood this. As many time as I've seen this magnificent work, his direction was a revelation - perhaps the very best of all I have attended. He brought to light not just the familiar examples mentioned above, but every nuance and turn in the music - the tinkle of coins when the disguised Ford bribes Falstaff, for example, or Falstaff's sigh of relief soaking his feet in a tub of water. So too, in the many ensembles of this ensemble-rich opera, every gesture was coordinated with the music - as



Maariana Vikse as Meg Page; Victoria Cannizzo as Alice Ford; Sharin Apostolou as Nannetta; and Ann McMahon Quintero as Mistress Quickly
Photo: Joe del Tufo, Moonloop Photography

with the famous “nonet” in Ford’s house (a female quartet juxtaposed against a male quintet) as the women, sing “death to Falstaff” in a chaotic canon miming the anapestic “death figure” with which the timpani and winds punctuate the number.

Helping in this endeavor was the fact that this insightful director had at his disposal exactly what Verdi required in this fast-paced comedy: “singing actors” rather than just “acting singers.” The quartet of women – Victoria Cannizzo as Alice Ford, Sharin Apostolou as her daughter Nannetta, Maariana Vikse as Meg Page, and Ann McMahon Quintero as Mistress Quickly – were as lively and quick-witted as they need to be while at the same time singing the complex ensembles with such seeming ease. As Verdi had also commented, “the opera is entirely comic. Amen.” This Mr. Anthony well understood too, playing the piece as one big farce, which it really is. The low types, Bardolfo, Pistola and Dr. Caius were hysterical at every turn, likewise responding to every nuance of the music.

As for Falstaff, baritone Steven Condry was a commanding presence, vocally secure and imposing as well. Without playing to hyperbolic antics, he too remembered that the orchestra is a literal embodiment of the fat knight; it brays like a donkey when Falstaff acts like one; it laughs and trills, as the wine makes its way into the fat knight’s belly. (“This is my kingdom – I must increase it,” he had proudly proclaimed earlier.)

Rounding out the cast, bass-baritone Sean Anderson was properly assertive as Ford, without overdoing it. (He had a busy spring, first as Don Pizarro in Sarasota Opera’s *Fidelio* and the following month as Ned Keene in *Peter Grimes* at the Princeton Festival.)

By contrast, the light-voiced tenor Ryan MacPherson was a refreshing Fenton, especially in his fleeting moments with Nannetta. As Boito had written to Verdi: “I like the love of theirs; it serves to make the whole comedy fresher and to hold it together...I can’t quite explain it; I would like as one sprinkles sugar on a tart to sprinkle the whole comedy with that happy love without concentrating it at any one point.” This production happily caught the essence of the “sprinkle” as the two constantly popped up playfully from behind the scenes.



Jeremy Blosssey as Bardolfo; Ryan MacPherson as Fenton; Sharin Apostolou as Nannetta; Matthew Curran as Pistola
Photo: Joe del Tufo, Moonloop Photography

As for the set, again less was more. An attractive simple set with only slight adjustments made do for both the Garter Inn and Ford’s house. The only flaw was that it didn’t quite work for the final scene in the Windsor Forest, to which the enchantment of a distant horn call magically leads us. Verdi, always concerned with keeping the audience in their seats for the final act, had written to Boito: “Above all we must make as much as we can of the last scene.... The fantastic ambience which has not been touched upon in the rest of the opera can help here; it strikes a note which is fresh and light and



Steven Condy as Falstaff, with fairies and elves Photo: Joe del Tufo, Moonloop Photography

A Final Note

new.” The set did not do this, although happily the music did, with the orchestra, under the able direction of Maestro Giovanni Reggioli, nicely capturing the delicate, transparent scoring of Verdi’s ever-green last scene, filled with gleeful children as fairies and elves. “Tutti gabbati,” the whole cast finally sings lined up at the edge of the stage in the ebullient closing double fugue. “He who laughs well has the last laugh.” And so Verdi did, achieving at long last – without perhaps even intending to do so – the goals of the rebellious *Scapigliati*.



Giuseppi Verdi
Portrait: Giovanni Boldini, 1886

I had made the trek to Sarasota many times over the years to catch Verdi rarities, and more. However, I had never visited Wilmington or OperaDelaware, although it is evidently the eleventh oldest opera company in the United States. Nor had I visited its acoustically friendly jewel box of a theater, The Grand Opera House. Coincidentally, it turns out The Grand Opera House opened in 1871, the same year *Amleto* was performed for the last time at La Scala. Before the curtain went up on each performance, Mr. Cooke proudly announced that this year’s OperaDelaware Spring Festival attracted more than 1200 new patrons and roughly 800 people from more than thirty miles away. Much has been written these days about small regional companies with limited budgets that are reviving themselves with considerable success. Sarasota Opera, now an international force, was once one of these. OperaDelaware seems one of those next in line. The 2017 festival, April 29 - May 7, will focus on Rossini. What could be better? I’ll be there.

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