

BRAVO!

Lexington Opera Society Newsletter Vol. 11 No. 2 Winter 2012



The Fat Knight Schemes

In 1596, so the story goes, Queen

Elizabeth I was so charmed with the character of Falstaff, the genial rogue and companion of Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, that she expressed a desire to see Falstaff in love. To please the queen, the playwright dashed off *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, first performed at a 1597 royal feast honoring newly-elected knights of the Order of the Garter.

Giuseppe Verdi, an ardent admirer of Shakespeare, was also fascinated by "the fat knight" and made him the subject of his final opera, written when he was 80, which premiered in 1893 at La Scala in Milan. For *Otello* (1887), Verdi and librettist Arrigo Boito had closely adapted Shakespeare's text but streamlined the action, as Verdi and Francesca Maria Piave had done for *Macbeth* in 1847. Writing the libretto for *Falstaff*, however, Verdi and Boito drew upon all three of Shakespeare's Falstaff plays (*Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, and *Merry Wives*), tightening the focus on "vecchio John" by eliminating peripheral characters and plot lines. The result is a brilliant comedy whose sparkling text and non-stop action complement Verdi's exceptionally rich orchestral score.

UK Opera Theatre is fortunate to have two baritones, Jonathan Green and Reginald Smith Jr., who possess the vocal command, acting chops, and -- yes -- even the generous physique to bring Sir John to life. Sopranos Brittany Benningfield and Catherine Nardolillo bring Mistress Ford to life, with Dannica Burson covering the role. Baritones Michael S. Preacely and Taeun Moon share the role of Ford, and tenors Jason Brown and Luther



Clockwise from upper left: Smith, Green and Nardolillo.



Falstaff Performance Schedule

See *Falstaff* at the Lexington Opera House at 7:30 p.m. February 24, 25; and at 2 p.m. Feb. 25, 26. Tickets can be purchased at the Lexington Center box office (859-233-3535) or the Opera House.

Lewis III alternate as Fenton. Tenors Jermaine Brown Jr. and Elliot W. Lane sing Bardolph, and Matt Turner and Jacob Waid share the bass role of Pistol. Mezzo-sopranos Ellen Graham and Sarah Klopfenstein sing Mistress Page and Holly Dodson and Karmesha Peake are Mistress Quickly. Nanetta Ford is sung by Rebecca Farley and Elizabeth Maurey, with Kathryn Gervasi covering.

All named characters are double cast, except Dr. Caius sung by tenor Phillip Eschweiler, so "each ensemble has its own unique dynamic," said Guest Director Richard Kagey. He characterizes *Falstaff* as one of Verdi's most "conversational" operas, the effect achieved through the continual succession of duets, trios and quartets rather than lengthy recitatives.

At curtain rise, Falstaff is embarking on another of his schemes to get money to support his extravagant lifestyle: he has written love letters to two wealthy and respectable married women, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, whom he mistakenly believes find him irresistibly attractive. Unfortunately for Falstaff, they are close friends and so immediately compare the letters and, finding them identical, resolve to humiliate the perpetrator and wound his monstrous ego. They succeed not

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Samson et Dalila: A tale of love, war and betrayal

UK Opera Theatre, continuing its partnership with the Kentucky Symphony Orchestra, will perform Camille Saint-Saëns' passionate story of love, war and betrayal, *Samson et Dalila*, January 22.

The concert version — without full staging and scenery — will include nationally acclaimed singers in the two lead roles with UK singers completing the cast. Samson will be sung by tenor Michael Robert Hendrick, who has performed with leading opera companies in Europe and North America.

Mezzo Soprano Stacey Rishoi, who has sung major roles with Lyric Opera of Chicago, Cincinnati Opera and many others, will perform Delilah.

The relationship with the Kentucky Symphony Orchestra (KSO) of Northern Kentucky started several years ago when Dr. Everett McCorvey and Maestro J.R. Cassidy decided to create an opportunity for their audiences to experience something unique. Typically they perform a concert opera together every other year. Past productions have included *Otello* and *Rigoletto* by Verdi and Puccini's *La Bohème* with Metropolitan Opera singers in the leading roles.

"For our Lexington audiences, it gives them a chance to hear national singers perform in an opera that we would not normally do because of the age of our singers and vocal requirements of a particular role," McCorvey said. "For the Northern Kentucky audience, they get to hear some of our very talented UK singers in these concert roles."

Samson et Dalila, first performed in its entirety in Weimar, Germany in 1877, is the only opera of Saint-Saëns' that is regularly performed. The French libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire diverged widely from the Old Testament narrative, placing more stress on the love interest and its di-

sastrous consequences. The second act love scene in Delilah's tent is one of the "set pieces" that define French opera. Two of her arias are particularly well known, "Printemps qui commence" ("Spring is Coming") and "Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix" ("My Heart Opens at Your Voice"). The latter is one of the most popular recital pieces in the mezzo soprano repertoire.

The three-act opera opens with a crowd of captive Israelites voicing their despair. Samson assures them they will ultimately be delivered from the Philistines. After Samson repels and kills the Philistine leader Abimelech, the High Priest curses against the Israelites and their hero and plots to use Delilah's beauty to overcome Samson's strength. At the end of the first act Delilah begins her seduction with a beautiful song.

In Act II Delilah tries every means in her power to entice him to her house and weaken his resolve. Samson ultimately declares his love and reveals that his long hair is the secret to his extraordinary strength. Hidden Philistine soldiers capture Samson, shearing off his hair and blinding him.

In the final act a blind and humbled Samson gets revenge. Taunted by the Philistine priests and Delilah in the Temple of Dagon, he begs God to restore his strength and uses it to pull down the pillars supporting the temple, destroying it and crushing the Philistines and himself.

UK singers will include Michael Preacely, High Priest; Nicholas Davis, Abimelech; Jason Brown, Philistine Messenger; Evan Johnson, First Philistine; Andre Campelo, Second Philistine; and Matt Turner, Old Hebrew.

Samson et Dalila

When: Jan. 22, 3 p.m.

Where: Singletary Center

Tickets: \$25, \$20 for seniors, \$15 for students; available at the Singletary ticket office.

THE SINGING SERGEANTS

UK alums touring, inspiring in Army's Soldiers' Chorus

The careers of UKOT students follow varied and meandering paths. Five of those paths have led to the Soldiers' Chorus, the vocal complement of The United States Army Field Band of Washington, DC.

Staff Sergeants Charis Strange, Jeremy Cady and Daniel Erbe, and Sergeants First Class Mario Garcia and Mark Huseth are part of the 29-member mixed choral ensemble that travels the nation and abroad, performing separately and in joint concerts with the Concert Band of the "Musical Ambassadors of the Army." According to Dr. Everett McCorvey, UK is represented by more singers in the Chorus than any other college or conservatory!

The musical backgrounds of the Chorus personnel range from opera and musical theater to music education and vocal coaching. Their versatility has earned the Soldiers' Chorus an international reputation for musical excellence and inspiring patriotism. Critics have acclaimed their recent appearances with the Boston Pops, the Cincinnati Pops, and the Jacksonville, Atlanta, Dallas, Detroit, Nashville, and National Symphony orchestras.

Baritone Mark Huseth, a former doctoral candidate at UK, sings the bass choral part with the Chorus. His training and experience at UK have been vitally important because the Chorus regularly performs opera arias and classic American Musical Theater pieces. "The opportunities at UK were an extraordinary training ground for what it means to perform and to entertain. We perform all over the United States, from the smallest town gymnasium to the country's premiere concert halls. We get to connect with the American public and endeavor to foster patriotism and support for those soldiers doing the tough work. I feel unbelievably lucky to be where I am."

Daniel Erbe, a tenor from Lexington who is also rumored to play a mean trumpet, says his first opera roles at UKOT have served him well. "I use techniques I learned at UK on a daily basis while performing out in front of the band. Whether I'm



From left: Huseth, Erbe, Garcia, Strange. Tenor Jeremy Cady, a former UK doctoral student, is not shown here because he is recuperating from an injury. To see him singing the "National Anthem" go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqvEyAgwvW4.

singing for 500 or 5,000 people, the experiences I gained during my time at UK gave me the confidence I now possess while engaging the audience."

Both Mario Garcia, a tenor who completed his DMA at UK in 2009, and his wife, Staff Sergeant Elizabeth Garcia, are members of the Chorus.

Charis Strange, a soprano who received the 2003 Metropolitan Opera District Auditions' Encouragement Award, says she is grateful for the intense training at UKOT. "I could not be the soldier I am today without it. My audition for the Soldiers' Chorus was the toughest of my life—and this was after two years of living in New York! When I was invited to audition in person, I used every ounce of musical and artistic prowess I possessed. It was grueling!"

And, it wasn't just singing. "We all had to undergo MEPS (Military Entrance Processing System) and 10 weeks of basic training."

But, she says, it was worth it. "I am still awed by this opportunity. I am honored to represent UKOT as a member of the Soldiers' Chorus."

UKOT is honored to be represented in this stellar group, which is scheduled to perform in Kentucky in the fall of 2013.

— by Sylvia C. Davis



Partying with The Boss: Everett McCorvey, Rebecca Farley, Jermaine Brown, Jr., Isaac S. Jones, Allyson A. Hankins, Bruce Springsteen, Markel Reed, Luther Lewis III, Ellen Graham, and Savanna Sokolnicki.

Opera students shine in many venues

Sterrenberg gains regional spot

UKOT soprano Rachel Sterrenberg will compete February 11 in the Mid-South Regional Round of the Metropolitan Opera Auditions. Sterrenberg won the spot at the Kentucky District Auditions, held at UK's Memorial Hall November 19.



Sterrenberg

The judges also recognized UK soprano Rebecca Farley and baritone Reginald Smith Jr. with encouragement awards. Last year Smith advanced to the Regional Auditions, where he placed third.

Sterrenberg, a native of Madison, GA, sang Juliet in UKOT's production of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* this past fall.

Twenty-eight singers, including 10 current or former UK students, participated in the competition.

Singers nationwide are competing to win a spot in a Grand Finals Concert, accompanied by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Five Grand Winners will receive \$15,000 each.

UKOT singers party with The Boss

Earlier in November, a competition of a different sort led to UKOT singers meeting rock 'n roll icon Bruce Springsteen. The singers were the featured entertainment, along with world-

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renowned tenor Ronan Tynan, for the Alltech National Horse Show at the Kentucky Horse Park. As it happened, Jessica Springsteen was competing at the show and her parents, Patti Scialfa and Bruce Springsteen were there to cheer her on.

UKOT's Dr. Everett McCorvey said evening parties gave the musicians a chance to meet the equestrians, as well as Jessica's famous father. "On Friday and Saturday evenings they danced the night away with The Boss, his family and many of the guests at a special after-event party at the Horse Park."

Springsteen "was very complimentary of their singing," McCorvey added.

UK grad hosts voice symposium

UK graduate Brian Gill, now Assistant Professor of Vocal Performance and Associate Director for Vocal Pedagogy at New York University, was a lead organizer and host of the International Voice Symposium at NYU in early January.

The two-day gathering included talks by NYU faculty and other voice experts on work in the many different areas that focus on voice, from communicative sciences and disorders to vocal pedagogy/performance, ethnomusicology, neurology, psychology, and psychiatry. A complete symposium schedule is at steinhardt.nyu.edu/music/voice/jansymposium.

Milnes' Master Class teaches taste, magic

Renowned baritone Sherrill Milnes, one of the three judges for the 2011 Metropolitan Opera National Council District Auditions, offered a Master Class the following day. He opened by inviting the audience to move down to the front of the auditorium in Memorial Hall. Distant seating provides a broad stage picture capturing the "magic," he said, but up-front seating shows "the hard work of creating opera," the real subject of his class.



Milnes

Drawing upon his years of experience on opera stages worldwide and, in recent years, teaching voice at Northwestern, Milnes repeatedly emphasized the importance of being thoroughly prepared – vocally, physically, and emotionally – for every public performance, whether a private "run out" gig at a wealthy patron's party, an audition for a local opera company or for the Met, or the creation of a new role. He spoke about the particular value of including art songs in a repertory because, "They are about beautiful music, poetry, and expressive communication, and they explore the softer timbres of your voice." But learning a song is just the beginning, he said. "The breaths that you take are part of the 'body memory' process of owning the song, how you sing each phrase and link it to the next phrase. You can't step aside from the emotion to breathe. You learn during your training how to 'tank up' on breath at appropriate moments, how to unobtrusively seize each opportunity."

During the three-hour session, Milnes worked with seven young singers, coaching them in physical presentation as well as vocal interpretation, including UK's Reginald Smith Jr. and Rebecca Farley.

Milnes gave many pointers on the elusive subject of taste, the individual interpretation of a song or aria that convincingly conveys the emotional content of the work. He also noted that a singer must find the right body language to "send 'energy signals' to cue the audience that the high C is not the end of this aria. Otherwise they will applaud at that point, interrupting the singer's concentration and embarrassing themselves. Don't wait for applause to 'break' the mood – the singer should be one on control of the break."

Smith, who won an Encouragement Award at the Met Auditions the previous day, sang "O du, mein holder Abendstern" (*Tannhäuser*, Wagner). Milnes suggested a bit more swell (forward movement) to keep the pulse going above the orchestra. Farley performed "Ach, ich fühl's" (*Die Zauberflöte*, Mozart). After complimenting her tone, Milnes again discussed the elusive topic of taste. "Renata Scotto is an excellent opera singer not only for her vocal beauty but because she expresses her thoughts as they form clearly in her face. This gives an immediacy and intimacy to her singing."

Milnes ended with some general advice, including practicing in front of a mirror. "You know what your gestures feel like in your body, but without a mirror you will never know what they look like to the audience."

Throughout the Class, Milnes' kindness to these young singers eased their nervousness, and his generosity toward them was expressed in his personalized remarks, as he reminded them (and the audience) that professionalism in opera extends far beyond beauty of tone or of person. This Master Class was truly an educational experience for all who attended it.

— by Mary Lucas Powell

"You have memorized the words to the aria, but remember that the character has not: she is putting her thoughts together as she sings. The rests indicate that she is thinking what to say next, and so they are an integral part of your interpretation."

Lexington Opera Society Calendar

JANUARY

Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* (concert version) with Kentucky Symphony Orchestra, Singletary Center, 3 p.m. Jan. 22. Ticketed event.

FEBRUARY

Verdi's *Falstaff*, Opera House. 7:30 p.m. Feb. 24; 2 p.m., 7:30 p.m. Feb. 25; 2 p.m., Feb. 26. Ticketed event.

MARCH

Alltech Vocal Scholarship Competition, Singletary Center. 2 p.m. March 4. Free.

MAY

Prelude to *It's a Grand Night for Singing*, Singletary Center. May 19, 6:30 p.m. Ticketed event.

JUNE

It's a Grand Night for Singing, Singletary Center. 7:30 p.m. June 8-10, 15-16; 2 p.m. on June 10, 17. Ticketed event.

For tickets call:

Singletary events: 859.257.4929

Opera House events: 859.233.3535

Story celebrates middle class, female empowerment

From Page 1

once but twice, and the opera ends with Falstaff hilariously tormented by "fairies" (the company and chorus in disguise) in the deep woods of Windsor, while Ford's daughter Nanetta and her young lover Fenton evade her father's command and are secretly wed. Kagey notes that the setting for this final scene, "like the Forest in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ... is a realm where mysterious, spooky things happen, but everything is set right at the end."

Shakespeare's *Merry Wives* celebrates the rise of the prosperous middle class in Elizabethan England when economic power vied with the older hierarchy. Falstaff is the only titled character, but his knighthood was gained through duplicity. By contrast, the Page and Ford households, while not ennobled by conferred rank, are wealthy and well-educated. Even Falstaff's boon companions Bardolph and Pistol can read and write, a far cry from their ignorant and scabrous state in the earlier plays. Shakespeare conceived Mistress Ford as a strong and resourceful woman, clearly equal to

Falstaff's schemes; she shapes events by her firm and wise decisions, wittily punishing Falstaff's amorous ambitions while defying her husband to save Nanetta from a forced marriage. She is aided by Mistress Page and Mistress Quickly, the latter magically transformed by the playwright from the slatternly innkeeper in *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* into a respectable bourgeois housekeeper in *Merry Wives*. The wit and verve of these women mirror the forceful character of the queen herself, a polite (and politic) compliment to the sovereign who commissioned this merry farce.

Verdi's music complements the characters' foibles, as in the scene where Ford works himself into a jealous rage when, determined to reveal his wife's imagined faithlessness, he persuades Falstaff to help him woo her in disguise. The opera ends with a marvelous fugue that, in Kagey's words, "turns the corner" from the sharp note of Falstaff's punishment for his vanity to general rejoicing, appropriate for the *Merry Wives'* original purpose as a prelude to a glorious royal feast.

— By Mary Lucas Powell

Tedrin's Recording Corner

Voices that do justice to Verdi's comic masterpiece

by Tedrin Blair Lindsay, PhD

As UKOT turns its attention toward producing Verdi's comic masterpiece *Falstaff* in February 2012, it seems appropriate to devote this column to recordings of Verdi's last two operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. Verdi came out of retirement twice late in life, both times for the purpose of setting a Shakespearean story for the opera stage, and these two superb works were the result.



Dr. Lindsay

Verdi composed *Otello*, with a libretto by Arrigo Boito based on Shakespeare's *Othello*, from 1884 to 1886, and it was premiered at La

Scala in Milan in 1887. It is one of the most successful of all operas with a Shakespearean antecedent, and has always enticed dramatic tenors, lyric sopranos, and Verdi baritones to the roles of Otello, Desdemona, and Iago, respectively. The opera has been well served on recordings by such tenors as Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, and Jon Vickers and such sopranos as Mirella Freni and Kiri Te Kanawa, to name but a few. However, my favorite recording of this opera is a 1954 traversal by the great Mario del Monaco and Renata Tebaldi, now available on CD (London 440 245-2). Del Monaco was prone to shouting throughout his career, as was Tebaldi to singing flat, but these roles are very flattering to their voices and stage personas. Del Monaco sounds alternately heroic and given to violence then manly and suave, and Tebaldi's voice

unfolds refulgently as the innocent wife, and since the role lies mainly in her glorious middle voice without taxing her squally high notes, one can easily enjoy the legendary beauty of her sound without the qualifications. Aldo Protti makes a stentorian Iago, and Alberto Erede is the conductor of the Roman forces of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia.

Boito also adapted Shakespeare (*The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *King Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*) for an opera celebrating the buffoonery of Sir John Falstaff.

Verdi worked on the music from 1889 to

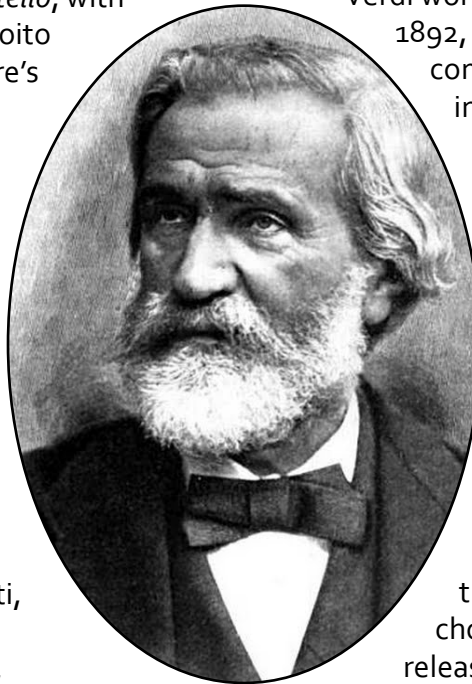
1892, and La Scala again premiered the composer's latest (and last) opera,

in 1893. This opera is celebrated for its detailed characterizations, dependency on ensemble more than solo turns, and for the quicksilver humor of its music, especially in its rambunctious finale, a fugue in which Verdi declared "All the world is a joke" as his artistic final statement.

It too has received many good recordings, but the one that I feel captures the spirit of the work best is a 1963 recording with the RCA Italiana orchestra and chorus led by Sir Georg Solti, now released on CD by Decca (475 6677). The Welsh baritone Geraint Evans embodies the larger-than-life clown Falstaff brilliantly, and the magnificent ensemble includes such Verdi luminaries

as Mirella Freni, Giulietta Simionato, Robert Merrill, Alfredo Kraus, Rosalind Elias, and Ilva Ligabue.

These two operas and recordings will be the featured works in the LOS Lecture Series to start off another whole semester's study of operas based on Shakespeare. Don't miss them!



Verdi left retirement to write *Falstaff*.

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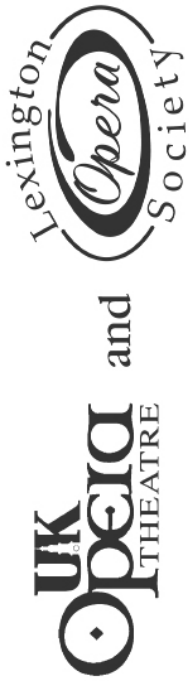
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