

## Verdi's *Falstaff* - A discographical survey

by Ralph Moore

There are ninety recordings of *Falstaff* in the catalogue, of which nine are studio versions in Italian. I have discounted two more studio recordings in Russian and English, because, as with his *Otello*, Boito's witty, brilliantly crafted libretto demands to be heard in the original language. It is an amalgam based mostly on *The Merry Wives of Windsor* but with judicious selections from *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2, to which Verdi fitted his effervescent music. Boito incorporated some deliberately archaic Italian in order to "lead Shakespeare's farce back to its clear Tuscan source" and remind listeners that Shakespeare had based the character of Falstaff on trecento Italian authors. A couple of mono, radio broadcasts and a handful of live composite recordings are also worthy of consideration but those older live recordings which are of sufficient artistic merit are also often in trying sound making them hard to recommend. On the other hand, in my estimation, despite being well engineered, none of the ten stereo and digital recordings post Solti's 1963 studio *Falstaff* reaches the same artistic standard as most of those vintage accounts. Indeed, this is the first survey I have done in which I felt that although I enjoy a couple of them, there are more duds than crackers among more modern recordings.

There must be reasons for this. First, *Falstaff* is harder to bring off, either on stage or in the studio, than it appears; its fleeting, filigree, through-composed melodies demand an especially light touch and comic, vocal actors of extraordinary skill. Furthermore, it sometimes attracts baritones who are – shall we say? - just past their vocal prime and looking for a vehicle suitable for their diminishing resources, but many of those are already compromised not just by age, wear and tear but also simply by having the wrong kind of voice to impersonate Shakespeare's greatest and most popular comic creation. Most baritones have spent their stage careers singing villainous, vengeful brothers and austere, patrician fathers, which does not necessarily prepare or qualify them for the unusual role of Falstaff. It is not a role for a typical buffo bass-baritone as it is not enough to be a funny old fat man with a fruity voice – and in too many cases the eponymous lead singer in question does not even have that. The demands made on him are varied and complex, ranging from delivering the thistledown-light arioso "Quando ero paggio" to the monumental, manufactured outrage of the "Honour" monologue, to the slapstick comedy of the concluding Herne's Oak scene. He needs the suavity and legato to carry off the scenes where he is absurdly playing the ardent lover and wooing his objects of desire but must also be able to splutter and rant musically without barking or wobbling and a singer with fading technical control will be cruelly exposed. Finally, although hammy over-acting is inimical to the subtlety of the characterisation, just as some baritones overdo the comedy, others under-play it. The baritone most associated with the role was Mariano Stabile, who, reputedly sang it an astonishing 1200 times over thirty-years; I admire his portrayal and his longevity but he is not my favourite Falstaff; there are only three recordings featuring him and he sang it well past the time when he had much voice left and was living off the interest of experience and good technique. Unfortunately, he is best heard in the one from 1941 which has sections missing. Other baritones, especially Geraint Evans, Giuseppe Taddei and Tito Gobbi, have since owned the part, but none has, or ever will, reach anything like Stabile's tally. The *Falstaff* aficionado will at least want to hear him in the role.

For all the importance of the lead singer, *Falstaff* is an ensemble piece and interesting in that it departs from the casting pattern of Verdi's preceding works by putting the spotlight on two very different baritones in Falstaff and Ford and eschewing the requirement for the other principals to come from the dramatic, spinto category; they must be proficient in a rather different *Fach*: Fenton is a lyric tenor, Alice more quicksilver than forceful and Nannetta a dreamy soprano *leggiero*. Pistola is not your typical big, authoritative bass role, the mezzo part of Meg needs a dexterity similar to that of Alice, and although the contralto needs to be able to boom "Reverenza!", Mistress Quickly is far from heavy Verdian roles like Amneris and Azucena. Furthermore, slick, homogeneous ensemble with expert comic timing is crucial to the success of this opera, too; the verve and brilliance of *Falstaff* is in fact Mozartian in character and all the more remarkable when one considers that Verdi's only previous

comic opera had been his second, *Un giorno di regno*, composed over fifty years earlier – and that had been a resounding failure.

Toscanini regarded *Falstaff* as Verdi's greatest work while admitting that it would take "years and years before the general public understand this masterpiece"; similarly, Beecham, another great admirer, observed that its comparative lack of popularity was due to its "wanting in tunes of a broad and impressive character". It has thus retained a reputation as "a connoisseur's opera", "caviar to the general", in that its fluid, through-composed style and subject mark a complete departure on Verdi's part from virtually everything that had previously characterised the operas which had made him famous. There are plenty of Verdi aficionados today who grant it no more than grudging respect but don't really relish it, insofar as they miss the conventional operatic arias and choruses and feel cheated of the high drama of, for example, *Don Carlos* or *Otello*. That response reflects initial critical reaction at its premiere: "Is this our Verdi?" However, a little familiarity with the score will permit the listener to perceive and register the fact that, contrary to first impressions, there flows through the opera a stream of delightful melodies, often little more than fragments but extraordinarily apt, skilfully devised and couched in orchestration of great variety; a charming little *arioso* like "Quand'ero paggio" can slip past in an instant like a shooting star leaving a shining furrow.

However, there is of course one element of *Falstaff* which clearly marks it out as being a natural development in Verdi's artistic progress, and that is in its reverence for Shakespeare, shared by Verdi's librettist and polymath Arrigo Boito who coaxed and cajoled the aging composer into picking up his pen one last time. Verdi had already written *Macbeth*, in its original and revised form – again, with Boito's assistance; *Otello* had been a triumph only six years earlier, and Verdi long toyed with the idea of writing an opera about *King Lear*; instead, he channelled his remaining energies in this most unexpected direction and left us this final, mercurial masterpiece.

I consider below twenty-three recordings, including all nine studio versions in Italian.

### The recordings

**Lorenzo Molajoli – 1932** (studio; mono) Naxos; Opera d'Oro; VAI  
Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala  
Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Falstaff - Giacomo Rimini  
Fenton - Roberto D' Alessio  
Ford - Emilio Ghirardini  
Dr. Cajus - Emilio Venturini  
Bardolfo - Giuseppe Nessi  
Pistola - Salvatore Baccaloni  
Alice Ford - Pia Tassinari  
Nannetta - Ines Alfani-Tellini  
Meg Page - Rita Monticone  
Mistress Quickly - Aurora Buades

This is in remarkably good sound for so old a recording, certainly little worse than a live, mono recording from the 50's, permitting plenty of vocal and instrumental detail to emerge. There is some background rustle and distortion on high notes and in concerted, ensemble passage but this remains very listenable. It is played so swiftly, with so light a touch that I first assumed that it was cut, but in fact the whole score is here, complete.

Most of the voices here are no longer remembered; the exceptions are Pia Tassinari, eventually married to celebrated lyric tenor Ferruccio Tagliavini, here heard very early in her career, and Giuseppe

Nessi by virtue of his having been the first Emperor in Turandot and the leading comprimario tenor at La Scala for forty years – but that demonstrates the depth of vocal talent in the Italy of the period. The Falstaff is especially good: he has a nice firm, rich sound, deploys falsetto and soft singing skilfully and acts vividly to bring the character to life. The “Mondo ladro!” monologue which opens Act 3 is a masterclass in sung verbal inflection to rival Gobbi's. Such neat, fleet, pleasing singing all round, displaying secure technique, the female voices deploying both registers and the male free of grab and growl. I'm not wild about the rather weedy Fenton but he is secure with a nice, steady top and is untroubled by the high tessitura of his music.

The comedy is constantly to the fore and you will find yourself smiling along as you listen. It might not be a library choice for reasons of sound but it's virtually flawless as a performance and if you are tolerant of vintage recordings it will afford you much pleasure.

**Arturo Toscanini – 1937** (live; mono) Arkadia; Aura, Andante-Naïve; Bongiovanni; Arkadia; Pristine  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Falstaff - Mariano Stabile  
Fenton - Dino Borgioli  
Ford - Piero Biasini  
Dr. Cajus - Alfredo Tedeschi  
Bardolfo - Giuseppe Nessi  
Pistola - Virgilio Lazzari  
Alice Ford - Franca Somigli  
Nannetta - Augusta Oltrabella  
Meg Page - Mita Vasari  
Mistress Quickly - Angelica Cravcenco

Compromised by distortion, echo and a “frying tonight” underlay, the execrable sound here, regardless of the issue – even in Pristine's remastering - disqualifies this live recording except for historical recording buffs or Toscanini completists. For all his fame in the role, Mariano Stabile is not in any case by any means my favourite Falstaff: his wide vibrato, weak top notes and rather hard nasal tone, lacking “fatness”, render him inferior in colour and variety to the best. There are some other good voices, especially Borgioli's sweet-toned, elegant Fenton and Biasini's strong, Ford, although for my taste he over-acts a bit and the women adequate, although the Nannetta, for example, is hardly pure or seductive but sound elderly. We can hear that the conductor knows what he is about, and ensemble in particular is strong, but proceedings can seem – incredibly I know, give that its Toscanini we are talking about – a bit dull and laboured; he is clearly more relaxed here but the result is hardly comparable to the drive and excitement of his 1950 broadcast. There is better to be had.

**Tullio Serafin – 1941** (live; mono) GOP; Music & Arts  
Orchestra - Teatro Reale dell'Opera di Roma  
Chorus - Teatro Reale dell'Opera di Roma

Falstaff - Mariano Stabile  
Fenton - Ferruccio Tagliavini  
Ford - Tito Gobbi  
Dr. Cajus - Adelio Zagonora  
Bardolfo - Cesare Masini-Sperti  
Pistola – Giulio Neri  
Alice Ford - Franca Somigli  
Nannetta - Augusta Oltrabella  
Meg Page - Vittorico Palambini

## Mistress Quickly - Cloe Elmo

The same reservations I expressed over Stabile's *Falstaff* in Salzburg four years earlier apply here, although his co-singers are a much stronger team and the sound considerably better, if still afflicted with background hiss and hardly recommendable in comparison with later, studio versions. Furthermore, I would say, insofar as I can tell, that Stabile himself is in better voice for Serafin; even if he still doesn't have the richness I want, he is pushing less and top notes are marginally fuller. It is surely a luxury to have singers of the calibre of Tagliavini, a young Gobbi and Neri in secondary roles. The women, Cloe Elmo apart, are hardly remembered today; two are the same as in that live performance under Toscanini and, as I said of them regarding that recording, are adequate without being special, except for the Nannetta, who is squawky. I like Serafin's flexible, responsive conducting but – here's the rub – this recording has chunks missing, to wit: the end of the first act from about one minute into the Honour Monologue, the start of the Windsor Forest Scene, immediately after Fenton's aria, and the passage leading up to and including most of the final fugue – so that's that; it can at best be a supplement. A great pity, really, as several performances here are first-class and Serafin is in fine form.

**Fritz Reiner – 1949** (live; mono) IDIS; Walhall; Guild; IDIS

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Falstaff - Leonard Warren

Fenton - Giuseppe di Stefano

Ford - Giuseppe Valdengo

Dr. Cajus - Leslie Chabay

Bardolfo - Alessio De Paolis

Pistola - Lorenzo Alvary

Alice Ford - Regina Resnik

Nannetta - Licia Albanese

Meg Page - Martha Lipton

Mistress Quickly - Cloe Elmo

In harsh, blaring mono with a fair amount of surface noise, especially at change-over points on the 78s (or acetates?), a skip at 1:24 in track 9, CD1, and several random slurs, overlaps and drop-outs in the source tape used for the IDIS issue I have, this is no aural treat, but the solo voices emerge clearly, even if the orchestra is recessed. I haven't heard the Guild remastering; I believe and would expect it to be a bit better but the sound will always be poor.

Although Leonard Warren is not necessarily the first baritone you would think could make a convincing Falstaff, he darkens his resonant timbre to sound fat and fruity and the sheer sound of his voice is thrilling. He's not really subtle like Gobbi but he brings out the comedy of the text successfully; his monologues are absorbing and he has the strongest top notes of any Falstaff on record. The rest of the cast is very strong, with a trio of excellent American singers as three of Merry Wives; unfortunately, Albanese isn't right for Nannetta, sounding too mature and knowing and goes flat at the end of her Act 3 aria. However, Cloe Elmo is possibly the best Quickly; she specialised in the role. The clean-voiced Valdengo is a virile, powerful Ford before he graduated under Toscanini's tuition to the eponymous leading role and his baritone makes a strong contrast with Warren's. It might be thought that Regina Resnik would be too stentorian for the wily Alice, but she was then still in the soprano phase of her very long career and sounds ideal. Finally – what a bonus – we have the young Giuseppe Di Stefano as a passionate Fenton, so much more red-blooded than the usual effete young suitor.

Reiner's conducting is sharp and pointed, making the dim orchestra and the distortion on loud, high notes all the more regrettable – and you can hear from the audience's laughter and applause how

entertaining this performance must have been. Those deficiencies in the sound exclude this from being a first recommendation but I want it on my shelves as a supplementary, vintage recording for the excellence of the singing and acting.

(You can hear Warren in somewhat better sound in the 1956 Orleans live performance below, but he is neither as well partnered nor as well conducted there.)

**Mario Rossi – 1949** (live radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit; Arkadia; Opera d'Oro; History Orchestra - RAI Torino  
Chorus - RAI Torino

Falstaff - Giuseppe Taddei  
Fenton - Emilio Renzi  
Ford - Saturno Meletti  
Dr. Cajus - Gino Del Signore  
Bardolfo - Giuseppe Nessi  
Pistola - Christiano Dalamangas  
Alice Ford - Rosanna Carteri  
Nannetta - Lina Pagliughi  
Meg Page - Anna Maria Canali  
Mistress Quickly - Amalia Pini

When I returned to this vintage mono recording, having previously discarded my first copy for reasons of poor sound, I found that either my memory had been faulty or Cetra/Warner have now done a better clean-up job. It's probably a bit of both; in any case, the sound is now rather distant and "crispy", with some blaring but no real distortion in loud, concerted passages and remains very acceptable to anyone tolerant of historical sound. The voices emerge clearly and cleanly - and what voices they are. These Cetra radio broadcast recordings, made in front of a studio audience, often sound as if they come from another era earlier than just post-war; there is something very old-fashioned in the manner of the performances - and I mean that as a compliment.

The voices themselves bear witness to this: several have the fast vibrato and purity of emission we associate with a style typified by artists of the age of Caruso. Star of the show is of course Giuseppe Taddei, Gobbi's equal in terms of characterisation and verbal inflection; he is sharp, funny, deploying a sweet falsetto when necessary and sounding "fatter" than his illustrious coeval baritone. It is no accident that both singers had great voices for "Rigoletto". Saturno Meletti punches successfully above his weight as a virile Ford and acts very well. Amalia Pini is a real contralto with that flickering vibrato that irritates some but she is the real thing and often sounds like Dame Clara Butt, with her dark, almost husky timbre rather than the fruitier sound we have become used to. Lina Pagliughi's stage career was limited by her amplexity but she has bright, light, white voice of stark purity very apt for the child-like Nannetta. Her Fenton is an adequate second-rank tenor and sounds impassioned. Alice and Meg are famous sopranos of their day and first class.

The conducting is really sharp and pointed, as good as Toscanini and Karajan, I think - and I was struck by the verve, confidence and accuracy of the orchestral playing. Ensembles are fast and furious and there is much delicious pointing of the humour.

So this a version to sit on my shelves alongside Toscanini's and Karajan's; all three have baritones of the first order in Valdengo, Gobbi and Taddei and even if the rest of the cast isn't quite the equal of theirs it's certainly good enough to convey the spirit of this gloriously free and inventive opera.

**Arturo Toscanini – 1950** (live radio broadcast; mono) RCA

Orchestra - NBC Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Robert Shaw Chorale

Falstaff - Giuseppe Valdengo

Fenton - Antonio Madasi

Ford - Frank Guarrera

Dr. Cajus - Gabor Carelli

Bardolfo - John Carmen Rossi

Pistola - Norman Scott

Alice Ford - Herva Nelli

Nannetta - Teresa Stich-Randall

Meg Page - Nan Merriman

Mistress Quickly - Cloe Elmo

This has long been cited as a paragon of its kind, especially as Valdengo, under Toscanini's authoritative coaching, gave the performance of his life as Falstaff, equalled only by his Iago three years earlier. The dry, immediate mono sound is no barrier to enjoyment, especially as it has now been so well cleaned up; one scarcely notices that it is not stereo. As with the *Otello*, the whole enterprise palpitates with raw energy and a little roughness in ensemble, compared with Karajan's precision, is a price worth paying. I sometimes wonder which of the two recordings of *Falstaff* – Karajan or Toscanini - I would cling to if forced to choose, as although even an inspired Valdengo does not have Gobbi's variety and the latter has the advantage of good stereo sound and a studio recording, there is a special atmosphere to this live broadcast and I stand amazed at the way Valdengo erases all "Iago-esque" qualities in his voice and transforms himself into the Fat Knight incarnate. He has a voice quite similar to Gobbi's; lean, incisive, with a fast vibrato and a serviceable snarl and growl and he brings almost as many inflections to his utterance of the text.

His co-singers are first-class, especially Cloe Elmo's classic Mistress Quickly in a starry quartet of female voices. Nelli is lovely as Alice, it's always a pleasure to hear Nan Merriman's "old-fashioned" mezzo - she repeats her vibrant Meg for Karajan six years later – and the attractively pure, white-voiced Stich-Randall is as ethereal as Moffo as Nannetta. Madasi is a bit throaty as Fenton but ardent and adequate. Guarrera has the right voice for Ford and throws himself into the role, acting vividly and rising impressively to the climax of his big "Vengeance Aria".

Toscanini's way with the score is wonderful: detailed, flexible, precise and affectionate; the ensemble is as good as in Karajan's somewhat more refined recording. Seventy years on, this is as fresh as the day it was broadcast.

**Victor de Sabata – 1951** (live; mono) Opera d'Oro; Urania; Music & Arts; Nuova Era

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Falstaff - Mariano Stabile

Fenton - Cesare Valletti

Ford - Paolo Silveri

Dr. Cajus - Mariano Caruso

Bardolfo - Giuseppe Nessi

Pistola - Silvio Maionica

Alice Ford - Renata Tebaldi

Nannetta - Alda Noni

Meg Page - Anna Maria Canali

Mistress Quickly - Cloe Elmo

The piercing Dr Caius of Mario Caruso (no relation or vocal similarity) is the first voice we hear and that quality is just as well given the harsh, murky, distorted sound quality of this live recording. Stabile's voice, too, emerges relatively clearly; even though he was sixty-four at the time of recording and had never had a particularly large or beautiful baritone, he husbanded his vocal resources carefully, avoiding the killer roles, his verbal acuity and dexterity remain undiminished, even if you might prefer a richer timbre. There is some noticeable loosening of his vibrato but his interpretation is not markedly different from his performance for Toscanini fifteen years earlier: he is amusing and his falsetto is intact for "Io son di Sir John Falstaff" and "di San Martino". His co-singers are truly excellent: a wonderful trio of ladies, including Renata Tebaldi relishing a comic role and Cloe Elmo repeating her exemplary Mistress Quickly, two first-rate young lovers in the lyrical Valletti and soubrette Alda Noni – even if she is a tad squeaky, Minnie Mouse style - a sturdy, ringing Ford in dependable baritone Paolo Silveri and even distinguished singers in the smaller roles of Pistol and Bardolph.

De Sabata's direction is full of delicious, delicate pointing and phrasing – perhaps the best of any of the conductors considered here, most of whom are in the Toscanini mould, whereas de Sabata is more lyrical and mercurial, but exacts similarly precise orchestral playing.

All of which makes the abysmal sound quality all the more regrettable. If you can tolerate it and feel able to pierce the veil sufficiently to appreciate what a splendid performance this must have been, try it – but it cannot be a first choice.

**Renato Cellini – 1956** (live; mono) VAI Audio

Orchestra - New Orleans Opera

Chorus - New Orleans Opera

Falstaff - Leonard Warren

Fenton - André Turp

Ford - Richard Torigi

Dr. Caius - Virginio Assandri

Bardolfo - Luigi Vellucci

Pistola - Norman Treigle

Alice Ford - Viviane Della Chiesa

Nannetta - Audrey Schuh

Meg Page - Evelyn Sachs

Mistress Quickly - Lizabeth Pritchett

This starts unpromisingly with the Caius entirely missing his first cue and omitting the first cry of "Falstaff!" but such vagaries are the occasional, but inevitable, results of nerves in live performance. If you want to hear Leonard Warren's estimable Falstaff, the sound is a lot better here than in the 1949 live Met recording above but the conducting isn't as taut and his co-singers are less impressive. Apart from missing that cue, the Caius is weak and none of the cast is particularly distinguished except for Audrey Schuh's clear, pure Nannetta; Warren thought highly enough of her to recommend her in the role to the San Francisco Opera. I don't much like André Turp's Fenton, which lacks easy lyricism and sounds marginally flat. There's some hammy over-emphasis from Treigle and Vellucci and the Mistress Quickly is cloudy-voiced, lacking resonance. Viviane Della Chiesa is rather good as Alice but had to learn the part as the last-minute replacement and is understandably tentative at times. Richard Torigi lacks weight and presence as Ford and he consistently sings sharp with something of a bleat in his baritone.

Warren is in best voice and his performance is as good as the earlier one, only considerably more audible. As before "Quand'ero paggio" lacks lightness and charm, however; he never got that right. The orchestral playing and conducting are adequate but neither exactly sparkles. Sadly, not as recommendable as it might have been, Warren notwithstanding

**Herbert von Karajan – 1956** (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra

Chorus - Philharmonia Chorus

Falstaff - Tito Gobbi

Fenton - Luigi Alva

Ford - Rolando Panerai

Dr. Cajus - Tomaso Spataro

Bardolfo - Renato Ercolani

Pistola - Nicola Zaccaria

Alice Ford - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf

Nannetta - Anna Moffo

Meg Page - Nan Merriman

Mistress Quickly - Fedora Barbieri

My MWI colleague Christopher Fifield [reviewed this classic recording](#) back in 2001 and I have little to add to his encomium. It is true that many of us are imprinted with it as our first experience of the opera, but that is no bad thing when a performance is this close to perfection. No other Falstaff has Gobbi's gift for encompassing the range of colours, emotions and nuances inherent in effective delivery of Falstaff's monologues, diatribes, boastings and laments. There are myriad examples of his mastery; to take but a few from the first Act, the way the bloviating grandeur of "Questo è il mio regno. Lo ingrandirò" is succeeded by the crafty "Ma è tempo d'assottigliar l'ingegno" then segues into the saccharine praise of Alice as "un fior che ride" and culminates in the scornful "Honour" monologue with its cackling audience is to hear kaleidoscopic expressive genius. The supporting cast is flawless and the precision of the ensemble and the orchestra a sheer joy. I have read elsewhere invidious comparison of the Philharmonia with the VPO to its disadvantage which strikes me as absurd; the Philharmonia was stuffed with virtuosos drilled and inspired by Karajan to become a crack outfit.

It joins the handful of untouchable opera recording classics like Callas' *Tosca*, Klemperer's *Fidelio* and Leinsdorf's *Turandot* (note to self: sit back and wait for cries of outrage objecting to that shortlist...).

**Vittorio Gui – 1957** (live; mono) Gala

Orchestra - Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Glyndebourne Festival Chorus

Falstaff - Geraint Evans

Fenton - Juan Oncina

Ford - Antonio Boyer

Dr. Cajus - Hugues Cuénod

Bardolfo - John Lewis

Pistola - Hervey Alan

Alice Ford - Orietta Moscucci

Nannetta - Antonietta Pastori

Meg Page - Fernanda Cadoni

Mistress Quickly - Oralia Domínguez

Rather distant mono sound, with the singers too far back in the aural picture compared with the orchestra does not disguise the fact that this is a good ensemble headed by Geraint Evans in good voice. His vibrato is rather pronounced but his rounded tone and verbal acuity make for an entertaining Falstaff, although I don't think he has the variety of Gobbi, Taddei or Valdengo; I feel that for all his he misses nuances in big moments like the "Mondo ladro" monologue. The ladies are competent without being as distinguished as starrier names in rival recordings; the exception is the under-recorded Oralia

Dominguez as a fruity, powerfully-voiced Quickly. The same is true of the supporting male roles: adequate without being very individual. Antonio Boyer's baritone is light for Ford but he sings smoothly and avoids blandness. Juan Oncina could be more impassioned as the supposedly ardent young Fenton and Antonietta Pastori does not sound especially ethereal as Nannetta. Hugues Cuénod's provides an oily, comical Caius. There is a fair amount of stage noise and audience laughter but that reinforces the fact that this can be a genuinely funny opera, and the verve of the performance is palpable. Gui seems completely at home conducting this; he had a gift and a lightness of touch in comic opera, as we know from his other Glyndebourne recordings

Göran Forsling has previously [reviewed](#) this.

This has its charms but for reasons of sound and a certain routineness in the casting, is not a top choice.

**Herbert von Karajan – 1957** (live; mono) Hunt; Orfeo; Walhall

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Falstaff - Tito Gobbi

Fenton - Luigi Alva

Ford - Rolando Panerai

Dr. Cajus - Tomaso Spataro

Bardolfo - Renato Ercolani

Pistola - Mario Petri

Alice Ford - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf

Nannetta - Anna Moffo

Meg Page - Anna Maria Canali

Mistress Quickly - Giulietta Simionato

The live, mono sound here, with the prompter quite audible, might not be demonstration class but balances are good and it comes as a relief after listening to a succession of muddy, live recordings from the 50's. Equally welcome, to my ears at least, is the rich, yet incisive sound of Gobbi's baritone, which I find more apt than Stabile's lighter, thinner timbre. The virtues of this performances are thus pretty much the same Karajan's studio recording of the preceding year but obviously that has stereo sound, and although the two casts have many of the same singers in common, the substitutions do not necessarily represent an improvement: Mario Petri replaces Zaccaria as Pistola and Anna Maria Canali – also de Sabata's Meg Page – replaces Nan Merriman. Both of those artists here are adequate but they are inferior to their predecessors: Petri's bass is cloudy compared with Zaccaria - whereas having either Giulietta Simionato or Fedora Barbieri as Quickly presents an equally welcome prospect, even if I concede that Barbieri is occasionally a little coarser. I am also disappointed by a few little things here, such as Gobbi's avoidance of the usual comic falsetto imitation of Alice in "Io son di Sir John Falstaff" and the occasional mistake or flat note – indeed a whole flat passage when wooing Alice ending on "arcobalen". Karajan's conducting is slick and fluid, just as it is in the studio version, without the raw energy of Toscanini's but certainly not dull; he whips up excitement at key points and the ensemble is as good as on the recording.

I hear no great difference in, or indeed any advantage to, having the VPO instead of the Philharmonia. In short, if you have or happen upon this performance, you will not be disappointed but the studio recording is sonically superior, marginally better cast and less prone to accidents and thus preferable.

**Vittorio Gui – 1960** (live; mono) Glyndebourne

Orchestra - Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Glyndebourne Festival Chorus

Falstaff - Geraint Evans  
 Fenton - Juan Oncina  
 Ford – Sesto Bruscantini  
 Dr. Cajus - Hugues Cuénod  
 Bardolfo – Mario Carlin  
 Pistola – Marco Stefanoni  
 Alice Ford – Ilva Ligabue  
 Nannetta – Mariella Adani  
 Meg Page – Anna Maria Rota  
 Mistress Quickly - Oralia Domínguez

This is a lighter, wittier, livelier *Falstaff* than Geraint Evans' studio recording for Solti three years after this Glyndebourne performance, and he is arguably in firmer, freer voice, but of course the disadvantage is that it is in live, mono sound – perfectly decent but no match for Decca stereo. The under-appreciated and under-recorded Oralia Dominguez is an excellent Quickly and Ilva Ligabue is lovely as Alice but she was even better when she had the chance to perfect her Alice under studio conditions and Solti's Simionato is hardly a poor substitute for Dominguez. Indeed, in general, Solti lined up considerably starrier co-singers for Evans than Gui had at Glyndebourne. Anna Maria Rota isn't s captivating as Rosalind Elias and the rather dry-voiced Sesto Bruscantini lacks Merrill's bravura and sonority, although, as always, he characterises well, bringing out Ford's rage and desperation. Gui's lovers, Oncina and Adanai, are distinctly inferior to the dream pairing of Mirella Freni and a young Alfredo Kraus; they are positively dull – and that matters when they need to conjure magic.

Gui's conducting is predictably subtler and more delicate than Solti's; he is more inclined to caress the music in lyrical passages but on the other hand some will prefer Solti's energy in an opera which teems with sparkling ensembles. Ultimately, it isn't as compelling as the more overt, "in-your-face" Solti recording.

**Georg Solti – 1963** (studio; stereo) Decca  
 Orchestra - RCA Italiana Opera Orchestra  
 Chorus - RCA Italiana Opera Chorus

Falstaff - Geraint Evans  
 Fenton - Alfredo Kraus  
 Ford - Robert Merrill  
 Dr. Cajus - John Lanigan  
 Bardolfo - Piero De Palma  
 Pistola - Giovanni Foiani  
 Alice Ford - Ilva Ligabue  
 Nannetta - Mirella Freni  
 Meg Page - Rosalind Elias  
 Mistress Quickly - Giulietta Simionato

In the BBC Radio 3 Record Review, this excellent recording from 1963 was just pipped at the post by the classic Karajan recording from seven years earlier, a verdict with which I agree yet I still think that Evans, with his truly rich, "fat" bass-baritone, offers another vocal dimension which Gobbi, with his leaner, more acerbic tone, cannot. On the other hand, nobody tops Gobbi when it comes to teasing out the subtle inflections of the text - and he is funnier than Evans' more straightforward blusterer.

Upon re-acquaintance with this recording, I realised that I had not heard it for more than forty years and I must say that Evans comes out of it as much better than I had remembered him. He was in his vocal prime at forty-one years old and there is scarcely any loosening of the vibrato, which occurred later in his long career. The top is secure and the vocal personality just right, especially in the "Honour"

and "Mondo ladro", post-dunking monologues. He can lighten his tone for "Quando ero paggio" and is a perfect foil for the more virile, youthful and noble sound of Merrill's splendid Ford; the latter dominates the aural stage when he is singing and is a match for Karajan's Panerai.

The trio of older women is also virtually the equal of Karajan's: the under-recorded Ilva Ligabue is especially warm and vibrant, beautifully partnered by Rosalind Elias's Meg; both have that swift, flickering vibrato now almost extinct in our wobble-plagued age. Simionato is of course suitably stentorian and amusing as Quickly, although I think Barbieri has the edge in bringing out the comedy of "Reverenza". Similarly, you would think that the lovers could hardly be better cast with Freni and Kraus as Nanetta and Fenton respectively and they are indeed charming, but Moffo and Alva are again just that bit sweeter and more vulnerable. The last, Herne's Oak scene does not quite achieve the magical, ethereal quality that Karajan conjures up in his recording.

That latter deficiency of course has a lot to do with Solti's conductorial style, which is swift, boisterous and driven, great for the farcical ensembles but less apt for the moments of repose. As Toscanini's successor in manner, he replicates that older master's energy but not his flexibility; nor does he emulate Karajan's affection for the score.

I wonder, too, whether, the recorded sound amplifies that driven quality; I found it to be very bright and a bit treble-biased, a touch harsh in parts - yet I note that another reviewer found it muddy; it seems that one's equipment and indeed ears play their own part in the perception of the aural landscape, so I won't attempt to expand on that. Certainly the sound is very good for so venerable a recording and I am glad to have this set sitting alongside my Karajan and Toscanini recordings on my shelves.

**Leonard Bernstein – 1966** (studio; stereo) Sony

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Falstaff - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Fenton - Juan Oncina

Ford - Rolando Panerai

Dr. Cajus - Gerhard Stolze

Bardolfo - Murray Dickie

Pistola - Erich Kunz

Alice Ford - Ilva Ligabue

Nannetta - Graziella Sciutti

Meg Page - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Mistress Quickly - Regina Resnik

As was so often the case, Fischer-Dieskau's forays into Italian territory provoked controversy; probably his most successful assumption there was Rodrigo in *Don Carlos* and that by no means attracts universal approval, while his Iago, Rigoletto and Macbeth are for many more problematic. The only relevant criterion is whether his voice and art are suited to the depiction of the Fat Knight; I am one of those who find his lyric baritone wholly unsuitable to Verdian roles; I acknowledge that the vocal demands of Falstaff constitute something rather different but would maintain that the role still demands heroic elements. He was still in younger, sappier voice in 1966 and still singing big-voiced baritone roles in Wagner and Verdi operas, but the lack of Italianate pharyngeal resonance in his tone was always a barrier – at least to some ears.

The first voice we hear is Gerhard Stolze, who might be passable as Mime but I find his barking whine incongruously and grotesquely intolerable as Caius. DFD then responds and we can immediately hear that he is attempting to darken and puff up his tone but it sounds peculiarly woolly; meanwhile

Bernstein has gone off like a rocket and is already making the orchestra similarly explode like a box of firecrackers – fun but frenetic. Fischer-Dieskau proceeds to roll every ‘r’ with excessive relish and pounce on consonants without actually bringing the text alive and the lack of resonance in the bottom, middle and top of his voice hampers him at every turn; he simply doesn’t have enough voice for “l’onore!”.

DFD fans will already be seething, but for me the issue of the hole in this operatic Polo cannot be compensated for by Bernstein’s detailed, enthusiastic and mercurial conducting, the VPO’s beautiful playing, or by the quality of the co-singers – and as it happens, while the conducting and playing are infectiously animated, the singing is indifferent. The Bardolph and Pistol make little impact; I like Ilva Ligabue’s rich tone, just as I did in Solti’s recording, but in general the ladies are adequate, if rather heavy and charmless – and not especially well individuated; the lovers are not as beguiling as other pairs -Sciutti’s vibrato is a tremolo and Oncina’s tight tenor lacks lyricism; the saving grace is of course Panerai’s Ford – but he sings the same role in several other recordings rather better than here, where he sounds a little tight.

Apparently, Fischer-Dieskau was disappointed by the luke-warm reception accorded his Falstaff at Covent Garden in 1967 and didn’t return; I have no difficulty in understanding how and why that happened. Here is a case in point where my oft-quoted “learned friend” and I fundamentally disagree – but as I first said above, DFD has that effect.

**Herbert von Karajan – 1980** (studio; stereo) Philips

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Falstaff - Giuseppe Taddei

Fenton - Francisco Araiza

Ford - Rolando Panerai

Dr. Cajus - Piero De Palma

Bardolfo - Heinz Zednik

Pistola - Federico Davià

Alice Ford - Raina Kabaivanska

Nannetta - Janet Perry

Meg Page - Trudeliese Schmidt

Mistress Quickly - Christa Ludwig

Karajan made an interesting amalgam of the casting here, recruiting several veteran stalwarts in combination with some new, young singers. The reappearance of Rolando Panerai in the same role he sang in Karajan’s first studio recording 27 years earlier is remarkable. Obviously, his baritone is not quite as fresh and just a little bit hard up top but it is still an estimable performance and he is still in superb voice. More remarkable still is the appearance of Giuseppe Taddei who recorded Falstaff thirty years previously for Cetra. Now 64 years old, Taddei’s voice is dry, he occasionally has to breathe in the middle of phrases, sustained notes are a challenge and he sometimes resorts to over-emphatic barking, but the characterisation is full of piquant vocal and verbal shading; he is the only singer to rival his almost exact contemporary and rival Tito Gobbi – listen, for example, to the control and humour he injects into his pure falsetto rendering of “Un acciuga”! Like Gobbi, he is genuinely funny in the “Honour Monologue”, employing a myriad different colours and inflections.

His co-singers are more variable. I have already remarked upon the quality of Panerai’s Ford and by far the best passages in this recording is when they are together, as when “Signor Fontana” visits Falstaff; wholly and predictably dependable, too, is the excellent Dr. Caius from Piero De Palma. Christa Ludwig enjoys plunging into her still rich and serviceable lower register and the tessitura of the role of Mistress Quickly doesn’t bother her. However, Zednik is irritatingly nasal as Bardolfo, Davià gruff and woolly as

Pistola. Kabaivanska and Schmidt are rather more workaday and grainy-toned as the scheming wives and Janet Perry – slightly puzzlingly, a Karajan favourite – is rather thin-toned and twittery as Nannetta, although she acquits herself well in her Act 3 aria, floating her long cantilena lines appealingly, even if she is no Anna Moffo. Finally, I have the same aversion to Francisco Araiza's Fenton as I do to Frank Lopardo for Colin Davis in the same role; I find both tenors squeezed and constricted and much prefer open, lyric tenors like Alva or even the young Di Stefano. For some reason, Karajan's later opera recordings are often compromised by these kinds of vocal deficiencies. However, he is as much master of the score as before; like Taddei, the subtlety of his shading, phrasing and pacing is a joy; as my "learned friend" (we haven't yet heard from him in this survey) says, he and the VPO play the Windsor Forest moonlight music in Act III more beautifully than anyone.

As much as I enjoy Taddei here, as an ensemble – and *Falstaff* is emphatically an ensemble opera - this recording does not rival Karajan's first one with Gobbi.

**Carlo Maria Giulini – 1982** (live composite; digital) DG

Orchestra - Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Los Angeles Master Chorale

Falstaff - Renato Bruson

Fenton - Dalmacio González

Ford - Leo Nucci

Dr. Cajus - Michael Sells

Bardolfo - Francis Egerton

Pistola - William Wilderman

Alice Ford - Katia Ricciarelli

Nannetta - Barbara Hendricks

Meg Page - Brenda Booser

Mistress Quickly - Lucia Valentini-Terrani

In truth, my heart sank a bit when I first saw this recording, for a number of reasons. First, Giulini was a great conductor but his manner became increasingly stately as he aged and I could envisage him producing a recording of *Falstaff* similar to the one he made of *Rigoletto* and eviscerating it. Secondly, the cast did not entice me: I could never appreciate Bruson's baritone, which I invariably found bleaty and, in any case, he always struck me as singularly serious artist, by no means suited to the eponymous role; Nucci's voice soon went into steep decline whereby he acquired all sorts of bad habits, including terrible scooping and a persistent bleat, worse than Bruson's; after great youthful promise, Ricciarelli soon experienced the early onset of vocal problems; none of that boded well for this recording.

So, coming to the recording with all those preconceptions, if not prejudices, what was the actual experience of listening to it?

I like Bruson's smooth, imperturbable singing rather more than I thought I would; his is a noble, dignified Falstaff – but, as I feared, hardly much fun and I miss the variety of more demonstrative vocal actors like Gobbi, Stabile and Valdengo – and the bleat on loud notes is still there. The supporting cast is fair, but I don't like the slide and wide pulse in Ricciarelli's tone, Booser is not as vibrant a Meg as many a predecessor and Valentini-Terrani lacks the bronze lower-register of the best Mistresses Quickly. Nucci's baritone is indeed already loosening and he tends to bluster; his duets with Bruson make me wish for the neat, tight sound of pairs such as Gobbi and Panerai, or Valdengo and Guarrera. Francis Egerton makes good use of word-painting to portray a vivid Bardolph, but William Wilderman lacks the black resonance of true Italianate bases who have sung Pistola. Gonzales is a pleasant, if rather constricted and lachrymose Fenton. Barbara Hendricks' highly individual lyric soprano makes for a different Nannetta with a soaring top range; she provides the most affecting performance here. In short, apart from Hendricks they are otherwise a bit...well, ordinary.

As for the conducting, as “the learned friend” observes, “with Giulini there [is] an air of autumnal melancholy”. It’s all elegantly shaped and considered but not terribly exciting; it lacks punch and sparkle. For instance, Giulini and Bruson make very little of the “mezzanotte” chimes and count, whereas with Karajan and Gobbi, it is a moment of high drama. I hesitate to use the word “boring” as there is much of incidental interest and beauty here; it’s another way of doing it, but not one I much thirst to hear.

**Colin Davis – 1991** (studio; digital) RCA; Sony

Orchestra - Münchner Rundfunkorchester

Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Falstaff - Rolando Panerai

Fenton - Frank Lopardo

Ford - Alan Titus

Dr. Cajus - Piero De Palma

Bardolfo - Ulrich Reß

Pistola - Francesco Ellero d'Artegna

Alice Ford - Sharon Sweet

Nannetta - Julie Kaufmann

Meg Page - Susan Quittmeyer

Mistress Quickly - Marilyn Horne

This starts really well; Davis generates plenty of sparkle, the voices of veteran Panerai and De Palma are clearly well up to the demands of that first scene and the Bardolfo and Pistola are characterful. Panerai’s fast vibrato is instantly recognisable; he is occasionally a little unsteady but the top notes and incisive tone are superb for a man in his 67<sup>th</sup> year and he manages to sound old and fat without wobbling. Yes; there is a little dryness, especially in the scene where he is courting Alice, he husbands his resources and he hasn’t the variety of colours in his voice of some, but his delivery of text is masterly, his falsetto “Io son di Sir John Falstaff” very amusing and he makes a nice job of the fleeting “Quand’ero paggio”. Furthermore, he has no trouble with a sustained, resonant G flat on “San Martino” or the top F and concluding top G in the “L’onore!” monologue; the voice is intact. I much prefer his sound to a rocky, wobbling bass-baritone where the centre of the voice has been blown.

The predominately American cast is an interesting mix of the youthful and the veteran: the team ladies might not feature the most apt or distinguished voices on record, but I like Sharon Sweet’s full-toned Alice and Marilyn Horne’s butch, feisty, formidable Quickly. Julie Kaufmann makes a pretty Nannetta even if her pure tone is not complemented by the incipient pulse in her soprano. Susan Quittmeyer is perfectly competent but anonymous in the admittedly unrewarding role of Meg. Alan Titus makes a strong Ford, not as febrile and enraged as Panerai’s younger self for Karajan but certainly good enough. My bugbear is Lopardo’s throaty, constricted tenor; I have never been able to endure it and although he could be worse here, his contribution forms a serious blot.

Davis has a superb orchestra at his disposal and if occasionally he lingers a little too lovingly, perhaps that makes a change from the usual hell-for-leather approach; his direction, is often light, witty and pointed and the laundry basket scene is brisk enough, but he misses the indefinable magic which lights up Karajan’s and Toscanini’s recordings in the final faery scene. The concluding fugue, however, is as light as thistledown and very winning, ending with a wallop.

The recording is well-balanced with a properly calibrated dynamic range; apparently some objected to the bass-biased reverberance of the first issue but the subsequent Sony Opera House one I have doesn’t have that problem. All-round this is easily my favourite of the modern, digital recordings, even if it cannot compete with the best vintage versions.

**Riccardo Muti – 1993** (live composite; digital) Sony

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Falstaff - Juan Pons

Fenton - Ramón Vargas

Ford - Roberto Frontali

Dr. Cajus - Ernesto Gavazzi

Bardolfo - Paolo Barbacini

Pistola - Luigi Roni

Alice Ford - Daniela Dessi

Nannetta - Maureen O'Flynn

Meg Page - Delores Ziegler

Mistress Quickly - Bernadette Manca Di Nissa

The distant, echoing acoustic of this live composite recording is rather off-putting after so many more intimate and immediate studio recordings. I suppose it faithfully reproduces a theatrical ambience but there is some stage thumping, quite a lot of ambient hiss for a digital recording and it places considerable distance between the listener and the on-stage action.

This is otherwise a typically, sharp, driven, precise performance under Muti's direction. After a rather strait-laced start, he relaxes nicely for the moments of light comedy, such as the exchanges between Quickly and Falstaff and Falstaff and Ford, and he catches the mercurial delicacy of the final scene. The problem is just as another reviewer has identified it: the voices are mostly pleasant but generic, without that spark of humour and originality that marks the best. I like the lively impersonations of Caius, Bardolph and Pistol of Ernesto Gavazzi, Paolo Barbacini and Luigi Roni respectively, but Juan Pons doesn't really have the right, "fat" voice for Falstaff: it is simultaneously rather cloudy and noble of timbre - the timbre is unvarying - he can't rumble and growl with the best, and he tends to yell - although he has a nice falsetto and great top notes. Nonetheless, many inflections caught by such as Gobbi are passed over and although he is adequate, his Falstaff forms the biggest drawback in his recording.

I like Dessi's Alice; her voice is often very similar in quality to that of Mirella Freni; her two companions are less distinguished and less vividly differentiated than they can be, especially as Bernadette Manca Di Nissa doesn't make much of her lower register excursions compared with juicier-voiced predecessors. Roberto Frontali has a lean, rather nasal baritone, suggestive of a nervous, volatile Ford, though its harshness isn't very pleasant on the ear and his big aria lacks heft at climactic points.

Ramón Vargas makes a manly, passionate, clean-voiced Fenton without the whiteness or whine which too often characterises tenors in that role; he is nicely matched by the shimmering soprano of Maureen O'Flynn as Nannetta and their Act 3 duet is charming.

This is in many ways a pleasing recording and there is little wrong with it; I find myself warming to it as I listen and can imagine that it made for a very rewarding evening's entertainment at La Scala and the audience sounds appreciative. It is only when you set it alongside more vivid performances that it pales.

**Georg Solti – 1993** (live composite; digital) Decca

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Berliner Rundfunkchor

Falstaff - José van Dam

Fenton - Luca Canonici  
 Ford - Paolo Coni  
 Dr. Cajus - Kim Begley  
 Bardolfo - Pierre Lefèbre  
 Pistola - Mario Luperi  
 Alice Ford - Luciana Serra  
 Nannetta - Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz  
 Meg Page - Susan Graham  
 Mistress Quickly - Marjana Lipovsek

I don't think it is just projection that created my impression, right from a first glance at the box cover and booklet, that this is a dour and joyless recording, Solti was too emphatic and driven for some tastes in his earlier studio version, a full thirty years before this one, but there he had Geraint Evans' bluff, jovial Falstaff to leaven the lump, whereas here he has José van Dam, an artist I usually hugely admire, but not one necessarily ideally suited to that role. Having said that, he makes a surprisingly amusing Gianni Schicchi for Pappano on EMI five years later, so Falstaff should not necessarily have been beyond his range, either from the point of view of tessitura, as a bass-baritone, or of emotional, expressive affect. However, his naturally noble, patrician sound is too removed from that which suits the Fat Knight, and although he was only in his early fifties, he had already been singing professionally thirty years and his top notes were already beginning to turn a bit grey and the bottom was losing resonance – and his attempted falsetto on “Ion son di Sir John Falstaff” is embarrassing. Nor do I think I emulates the comic nuances achieved by the best in key passages such as the “Honour Monologue”.

His supporting cast are variable: Kim Begley and Pierre Lefèbre contribute a strong, tenorial comic presence and Susan Graham makes a warm, smooth-voiced Meg, but Marjana Lipovsek is a rather bland Quickly without much lower register heft and Luciana Serra is a shrill, nasal, charmless Alice – just awful. The Pistol is woolly; the young lovers are adequate but undistinguished: Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz' Nannetta is pretty but hardly ethereal and Canonici's Fenton lacks elegance; Paolo Coni's neat, incisive baritone adds a touch of much-needed Italianate bite to proceedings but his vibrato can become obtrusive and his top notes turn cloudy.

Solti's conducting is more flexible and affectionate here than before and of course the BPO plays beautifully but this emerges as a strangely chilly, earthbound account of what should be a magical opera; this is simply best avoided.

**Will Humburg – 1996** (studio; digital) Naxos

Orchestra - Hungarian State Opera  
 Chorus - Hungarian State Opera

Falstaff - Domenico Trimarchi  
 Fenton - Maurizio Comencini  
 Ford - Roberto Servile  
 Dr. Cajus - Enrico Facini  
 Bardolfo - Alessandro Cosentino  
 Pistola - Franco De Grandis  
 Alice Ford - Julia Faulkner  
 Nannetta - Dilbèr  
 Meg Page - Anna Bonitatibus  
 Mistress Quickly - Anna Maria di Micco

The lack of vocal allure in Trimarchi's grey, wobbly Falstaff constitutes the main weakness here; he barks and growls because he cannot sustain any legato. Julia Faulkner and Anna Bonitatibus make a pleasant Alice and Meg and Anna Maria di Micco is quite good as Quickly but there isn't much heft in

the middle of her voice. Roberto Servile sings a firm, if rather faceless and slightly throaty, Ford. In truth, none of the voices here is especially enticing or memorable, ranging between acceptable and less so; Facini's Caius is hoarse, the Bardolph nasal, the Fenton bleaty and throaty, Dilbè's Nannetta has good, full tone but also a pronounced beat; he final "faery scene" is compromised by that, although the off-stage hunting horns and choir are nicely managed. Humburg's conducting there is suitably ethereal but he sometimes drives too hard and fast, then goes in for "meaningful" pauses which are irritating and overall his reading lacks warmth and charm.

The sound is very good, the orchestra neat and alert, there are some nice stage effects and there is some good ensemble work but those virtues are irrelevant when you can drive a truck through the gaps in Trimarchi's vibrato - he won't do.

**John Eliot Gardiner – 1998** (studio; digital) Philips  
Orchestra - Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique

Falstaff - Jean-Philippe Lafont  
Fenton - Antonello Palombi  
Ford - Anthony Michaels-Moore  
Dr. Cajus - Peter Bronder  
Bardolfo - Francis Egerton  
Pistola - Gabriele Monici  
Alice Ford - Hillevi Martinpelto  
Nannetta - Rebecca Evans  
Meg Page - Eirian James  
Mistress Quickly - Sara Mingardo

One wonders what is meant by "a period instrument orchestra" for a work premiered in 1893, but I cannot hear much which is very different from a conventional performance beyond a certain raucousness. The woodwind, especially the cor anglais, are rawer, more pungent and prominent and some nice detail emerges in Gardiner's quite conventional conducting. What I can immediately hear, however, is the bleat in both Lafont's and Bronder's voices and the effect is clumsy. There isn't much variety of tone in Lafont's nasal baritone and he labours over long lines. In truth, not much of the singing impresses, especially as Gardiner has placed the singers at a disadvantage to the orchestra in the sound picture. Francis Egerton repeats the characterful Bardolph he gave Giulini; the sopranos are pleasant if rather low-key – diction is often mushy and they lack individuality; Sara Mingardo lacks the fruity heft of a real Mistress Quickly; the lovers are nothing special and Anthony Michaels-Moore sounds terribly English-prim as the supposedly volatile Ford. Of course, Gardiner doesn't actually want "star-singers" to overshadow his fiddling about with the orchestration, instrumentation and placement, but the result is decidedly underwhelming. It seems to me he has two gears: frequent bludgeoning fortissimo-prestissimo and a sudden, irritating slowing down of tempi, as in the Faery scene, which is devoid of enchantment; this is not the touch of a Maestro. I cannot resist quoting from Dan Davis' review on the Classics Today website: "As Gardiner says in the booklet interview, 'My idea was to arrange the orchestra centre-stage with the action taking place all around it, in front and behind it. . .' Too bad Verdi didn't think of that, but then, he thought he was writing an opera."

This is a recording devoid of distinction, not *Falstaff* as Verdi conceived or deserves it.

(Predictably but still inexplicably, BBC Music Magazine gave it the highest possible endorsement and claimed that it was the "single version of Verdi's comic masterpiece...to go for.")

**Claudio Abbado – 2001** (studio; digital) DG  
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Rundfunkchor Berlin

Falstaff - Bryn Terfel  
 Fenton - Daniil Shtoda  
 Ford - Thomas Hampson  
 Dr. Cajus - Enrico Facini  
 Bardolfo - Anthony Mee  
 Pistola - Anatoly Kotcherga  
 Alice Ford - Adrienne Pieczonka  
 Nannetta - Dorothea Röschmann  
 Meg Page - Stella Doufexis  
 Mistress Quickly - Larissa Diadkova

One Enrico Facini's weedy Caius is enough to make you lose patience immediately but then Terfel's rotund bass-baritone kicks in and things look up; one notices, too, the pearlescent roudades from the BPO flute and other, similarly virtuosic details in the playing. However, despite the care with which he enunciates the text and follows Verdi's markings, there is no getting away from the fact that at only 35 Terfel sounds too young and clean-voiced, not "fat". If you can get over that, this is a performance full of delicate nuances and subtle shadings. I only wish all Terfel's co-singers were in such healthy vocal estate, as they are a mixed bag: Kotcherga's bass has lost its tonal centre and sounds worn and cloudy and the Bardolfo is weak like the Caius. On the other hand, the ladies are charming, if a little understated owing to a lack of lower-register heft. Even Larissa Diadkova, whose voice I have long admired, needs to inject more weight into Mistress Quickly's interjections; she sounds very Russian, too, more reminiscent of illustrious predecessors like Arkhipova and Obraztsova than Italian "gaie comari di Windsor" like Elmo, Simionato and Barbieri. Dorothea Röschmann's silvery soprano is absolutely lovely, one of the best Nannettas on record, but her Fenton could do with more lyrical warmth in his small, throaty tenor. Thomas Hampson is always an intelligent artist but I usually find his excursions into Verdi unsatisfactory because he lacks that essential Italianate steel in his soft-edged baritone.

My MWI colleague Marc Bridle has [reviewed this recording](#).

We agree on much but he has fewer reservations about the singing and is more glowing in his recommendations. For me, one vital element is lacking overall: somehow, for all the care and precision of this recording – or perhaps because of it – it simply isn't funny and I'm not sure why. The whole thing, like the Giulini recording, has a rather sterile atmosphere and lacks "face"; I rarely find myself smiling in the way I do while listening to Karajan, Toscanini or Solti. The best things about this recording are Terfel's verbal and vocal acuity, the superb sound, the of the BPO and the detail of Abbado's direction; its weaknesses are in the under-cast supporting roles and a pervasive po-faced quality.

**Colin Davis – 2004** (live; digital) LSO Live  
 Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra  
 Chorus - London Symphony Chorus

Falstaff - Michele Pertusi  
 Fenton - Bülent Bezdüz  
 Ford - Carlos Álvarez  
 Dr. Cajus - Alasdair Elliot  
 Bardolfo - Peter Hoare  
 Pistola - Darren Jeffery  
 Alice Ford - Ana Ibarra  
 Nannetta - María José Moreno  
 Meg Page - Marina Domashenko  
 Mistress Quickly - Jane Henschel

First, be warned: Sir Colin Davis was by this stage of his career inclined to vocalise loudly with groans, grunts, hums and tuneless accompaniments to the singers throughout his performances. It's mostly bearable but sometimes really intrusive.

This concert recording reminds me of Muti's – also live - in several respects: the alert, driven tempi, excellent orchestral playing and the pleasant, all-purpose but essentially generic Falstaff of Michele Pertusi, whose voice is a little dry and laboured, without the individuality of Taddei, Gobbi or Valdengo, although he colours his words in animated fashion and is in considerably fresher voice than when I last heard him at Covent Garden in late 2017. I like his fleeting "Quand'ero paggio" and he is comical in the laundry basket scene.

The supporting cast are, as I so often remark regarding modern recordings, like Pertusi perfectly competent without being individual or differentiated in the manner of earlier casts; their voices are essentially interchangeable and that contributes to the impression of homogeneity in the flawless ensembles. Ana Ibarra has a warm, honied soprano, Falstaff's servants are excellent vocal actors and the young lovers attractive but no singer has much of that indefinable quality of charisma. Bülent Bezdüz has a fuller tenor than many as Fenton but produces moments of delicacy and María José Moreno is charming as Nannetta; she and Davis make more magic in the fairy song than he achieved in his earlier recording, although his vocal obbligato is no asset. Jane Henschel is a first-rate actor but her lower register isn't as amusingly cavernous and fruity as the best; Carlos Álvarez initially creates a strong impression as Ford, his harder baritone providing proper contrast with Pertusi's woollier sound, so it's a pity that a wobble intrudes on loud, high notes. A minor complaint: I realise that the women are deliberately eschewing all vibrato in the "Pizzica, pizzica" scene in order to mimic the petitioning chant of a church choir but it makes them sound horribly flat.

The Barbican acoustic is typically flat and airless but balances are good and everything is audible; if anything, the orchestra is given preference over the voices although that allows you to hear their virtuosity.

As with Davis' 1991 recording, this is a thoroughly likeable recording, just not quite as sparkling, seductive, or vocally accomplished as the best.

### **Recommendations**

In truth, I might just as easily have picked the following favourites before opting to trawl through so many recordings in order to effect this survey – but at least I have now put my preferences and prejudices to the test by so doing. Considerations of sound rule out a good few pre-stereo recordings, but it is aesthetic criteria which cause me to jettison so many later accounts which are otherwise in best sound. I can appreciate that some might balk at my recommending venerable, vintage recordings rather than anything more modern; I can only say that none since, apart from Solti's which is scarcely more recent, has given me as much enjoyment as these three, whose conducting and singing embrace the spirit of the work more fully than any others. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that it's a rum old state of affairs when in 2019 the prime recommendations remain recordings made sixty, seventy and even nearly ninety years ago.

Studio mono: Lorenzo Molajoli – 1932

Live mono: Toscanini – 1950

Studio stereo/digital: Karajan – 1956\*

\*First choice

### ***Ralph Moore***