



SALZBURGER
FESTSPIELE
20. JULI – 31. AUGUST 2023

Press Text: Terrace Talk *Falstaff* “Almost incessant acceleration”



Falstaff is the third of Verdi's Shakespeare operas, while also his second comical and the last opera he wrote – this year, the Salzburg Festival presents a new production of this work. A premiere for **Ingo Metzmacher**, who conducts it for the first time. “I have conducted a lot of Verdi, however,” he assured those unlikely to associate this repertoire with his name. Asked for his first impressions from rehearsals, he said: “I'm very happy with the progress, and the work is a treasure trove of ideas. I think despite all the formal planning that went into the structure of the opera, Verdi's enthusiasm was always inspired by the figure of Falstaff as an anarchic spirit giving in to his whims, according to the motto that one must enjoy the moment and grasp the opportunities presenting themselves. That was also Verdi's lodestar. He basically wrote this opera for fun, and for himself.”

Asked about the inspiration he took from Orson Welles' film version of the tale, director **Christoph Marthaler** said: “I think that in this opera, the music is the most interesting aspect.” Based on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*, the action is not really a comedy, especially not from today's perspective, he added: “However, the music reveals an incredible amount. Taking a leaf from the film by Orson Welles, in which he played Falstaff himself, there will be an additional director on stage in our version.”

With regard to this “double” play of directors, veering between film set and reality, and the costumes, which she is using to create “real” figures for the performers as well when they step out of their roles, **Anna Viebrock** said: “Looking at other films by Orson Welles, you encounter *The Other Side of the Wind*, for example, which has a similar constellation.”

The audience need not have seen the two Orson Welles films in order to understand the staging, the dramaturge **Malte Ubenauf** explained: “I think the viewer will understand this naturally. *The Other Side of the Wind* is a film about a stage director, a kind of ‘backstage story’. We are interested in the work and the multi-faceted nature of staging a piece. In the libretto, everyone is directing everyone else, and this is a fact we want to exponentiate.” Christoph Marthaler added: “In the story, people are continuously staging themselves and others – that is a significant characteristic. I love how the singers are implementing this, for this mutual staging is essential to their ensemble interaction. We are looking forward to finding out how this transmits to the Festival audience.”



The setting is dominated by a film crew played by supernumeraries, reminiscent of the legendary Cinecittà. “The film team may be handling cameras, but the truth is that nothing is being recorded. No one will ever see this film, and therefore every viewer can develop their own version of it,” Anna Viebrock explained. Christoph Marthaler added: “There is lots of confusion in this story; everything hangs together.” To Ingo Metzmacher, this aspect is also evident on the musical level: “The well-known nonet at the end of Act I with its different texts sung by individual figures is conceived as if for instruments. It is not constructed with an eye to comprehensibility; language is merely a means of articulation here. In the end, the figures dissolve in the context – this also applies to the construction of the final fugue – and the music is particularly clear. The fugue itself remains a mystery. You can’t compare it to a Bach fugue, but Verdi is making his last musical statement, and he does so consciously.”

Asked whether *Falstaff*, in which Verdi also quotes many motifs from previous operas, marks a new style in his late work, Ingo Metzmacher responded: “Verdi wasn’t really planning to write another opera. He was only inspired by Arrigo Boito’s idea and his libretto. I am sure that Verdi started composing from the end, i.e. with the fugue, knowing this was how the piece would end. That is also apparent from any formal comparison of the opera’s beginning and ending.” Christoph Marthaler said: “The fugue is an ingenious ending. Personally, I don’t believe in happy endings in comedies. I find it fitting that the fugue leaves everything open, beyond the apparent resolution indicated in the text: after everything has got out of joint, it ends with a fugue.” Ingo Metzmacher reminded us of Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser’s word: for this central statement, Verdi used “the most complicated and stringent form in music history. If we combine the German word for ‘fuga’, *Flucht* (escape), with the world that

is out of joint [German: *aus den Fugen*], we arrive at *Weltflucht* [escape or retreat from the world].”

Malte Ubenauf argued that there is no one fundamental statement of the piece, nor one figure holding all the strings: “Due to the multitude of players and the almost incessant acceleration in this opera, that’s not possible here. The whole thing is like an implosion. There are hardly any resting points or stops, and – despite the label *commedia lirica* – hardly any lyrical elements either. One always has the feeling that one is behind the action. We counteract this by introducing individual characters – e.g. that of the film director, the ‘Orson Welles figure’, on stage. This gives Falstaff a kind of doppelganger. It will be interesting to see how these two figures relate to one another.”



Ingo Metzmacher agreed: „The only quiet moment is really at the beginning of Act III, in the second scene, when Fenton sings his aria. Together with the following scene and Nannetta’s aria, these are the only moments of calm in the opera. We have no real scene changes, so that we can use the open-stage situation of the film studio to move seamlessly from one scene to the next, even between the acts.” About the opera’s tonality, beginning in C-major and ultimately finishing with the fugue in this key as well, he said: “Verdi uses C-major for Falstaff, a key that stands for clarity.”

Anna Viebrock discussed the challenge of using the full breadth of the stage at the Großes Festspielhaus, an issue that led her to design a kind of triptych. At the same time, she pointed out that it was fun to use the entirety of the stage for the setting of the Californian outdoor studio and also a bar, inspired by the Orson Welles film. Christoph Marthaler added this about the merging and ambiguity of the various levels: “No one knows whether all this takes place at Falstaff’s film studio, or whether there might be other films being produced there simultaneously.” He explained that he takes the text of the final fugue literally: “All the world’s a jest.” (“Tutto nel mondo è burla.”) Musically, this passage also has special meaning to Ingo Metzmacher: “When the fugue ends, we are looking into an abyss.” To Metzmacher, this is also a moment of particular artistic freedom for Gerald Finley as Falstaff.

He went on to point out that Verdi’s music has great theatrical obviousness, occasionally appearing as if improvised, made up on the spur of the moment. To him, *Falstaff* defies stylistic categorization: “It is a solitary achievement, without precedent and without heirs.”

Christoph Marthaler emphasized the earnestness of the character: “In our case, Falstaff is not just the pompous clown many people take him for. We are not interested in that. He is quite a

different character, someone who knows exactly the consequences his actions set in motion.” Asked about the ongoing rehearsals, he said: “We’re making good progress. For us, it’s a great joy to see everyone accepting these premises and participating in a joint development.”

The premiere takes place on 12 August 2023 at the Großes Festspielhaus. Five further performances are scheduled through 30 August.

