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## Molto Buffo

At the age of forty-three, Ambrogio Maestri, star of the Met's new *Falstaff*, has become the opera world's Sir John of choice. The ebullient Italian baritone, who marks his 200th career performance as Verdi's fat knight this month, talks to BARRY SINGER.



Maestri as Falstaff at La Scala, 2001

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"After two glasses of wine, all Italians sing," insists Ambrogio Maestri — a statement of Falstaffian philosophy with an appropriately Mediterranean spin. Having romped triumphantly as Falstaff on most of the world's major opera stages, Maestri is today widely acknowledged to be the role's reigning master, a baritone of burnished brawn, who blends buffa broadness with a searing dramatic naturalness. His characterization of Verdi's quintessential Shakespearean comic character is at last coming to the Metropolitan Opera this month in a new Robert Carsen production coproduced with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (where Maestri sang it in May 2012); Teatro alla Scala, Milan; Canadian Opera

Company, Toronto; and De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam. It will be conducted by James Levine and directed by Carsen.

Often in opera, the greatest onstage interpreters of a particular role do not look the part offstage. Maestri, as Falstaff, does. He is enormous — a man of epic height and girth, more boyish than dissolute, but with a puckish Falstaffian edge. "I am so lucky to do so many Falstaffs," he slyly smiles. "Nobody dies. There is plenty of wine. I feel for the singers who are always singing tragic operas."

Maestri shared these thoughts many months before he was to tackle Falstaff at the Met, on an off day toward the end of his scene-stealing run in fall 2012 as Dr. Dulcamara in *L'Elisir d'Amore* opposite Anna Netrebko. Turning up backstage with his wife, Valeria, at his side to assist as his English translator, the forty-three-year-old Maestri uncomplainingly folded his length and width into the Met's less-than-plus-sized press lounge for an interview.

"I was always very tall," he shrugs, perching on a barely sufficient black couch. "When I was nine, I started taking piano lessons. My father had a beautiful voice, but the means were meager in his family, and he could not study. He made sure that I could. At eleven or twelve, I did my first opera, *Pollicino* [Tom Thumb], at the Teatro Frascini in my hometown of Pavia. I didn't play Pollicino, because I was already too big! I was the owl, Signor Gufo, singing on a rickety ladder.

"After that, nothing. I fell in love with basketball and joined the juvenile team of my town, playing in Italy's A series for some years. I trained every day. So as not to neglect my schoolwork and the piano, I gave up singing."

It wasn't until Maestri returned from military service at twenty-one that he rediscovered his voice. "My parents owned a restaurant in Pavia, and the main dining room had a piano. When I visited, people always asked me to play and to sing. Pretty soon I was singing there every night. 'Go and study singing,' everybody would say. Even opera-lovers with subscriptions at La Scala told me that I really had a voice. So, slowly — first once a week, then twice a week, three times a week — I began to study with a tenor named Umberto Grilli, who had substituted for Pavarotti at La Scala many times. Grilli never came to the USA, because he was afraid of flying. He wasn't Pavarotti, but he was *un bel tenore*. I started to study singing in the morning with him and then go to work in the restaurant in the evenings. Till I was twenty-seven, twenty-eight, I never sang anywhere else but the restaurant. I never went to the theater, let alone to the opera."



As Falstaff in Robert Carsen's production at Covent Garden, 2012  
© Catherine Ashmore 2013

"After six years, Ambrogio was ready to give it up," Valeria interjects in English.

"Sì!" her husband concurs, adding in English, "Grilli was from the old school! Other students were singing arias after a year," he continues in Italian. "I did six years of scales. Then, eventually, we tackled some sentences. Only now do I understand what I did. I had *some* patience."

That patience was at last rewarded in 1999 with his first professional opera job, courtesy of Plácido Domingo, then artistic director of Washington National Opera. "At the restaurant, I was singing Italian dialect songs, Neapolitan songs," Maestri recalls. "I learned and sang songs that not even the songwriters of the songs remembered anymore. Eventually I was noticed by a big agent who knew Domingo. His name is Mario Dradi. He conceived the first Three Tenors concert. With Dradi behind me, I finally started to go to competitions and win awards. Domingo heard me in Rome at an audition to find new voices in Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. He was himself singing *Fedora* there. He perceived my potential, I suppose, but on the other hand I had never done anything, worked anywhere. I had no experience. He gave me a small part in Washington as Count Monterone in *Rigoletto*. So my first professional opera appearance was in the U.S., not Italy. I didn't feel all that nervous. I was so used to performing for all kinds of audiences at my parents' *ristorante*. An audience should not make you afraid. They should stimulate you."

The preternaturally grounded quality that underscores Maestri's singing and acting, even with buffa roles — his ability, even while clowning, to let an audience come to him, rather than impose himself on the audience — is not something that can be taught. It can, however, be nurtured. Maestri's nurturer would be Riccardo Muti.

"I auditioned for Muti at La Scala in 2000. We were thirty-five, forty baritones. I arrived late — I was the last one. I got in and sang something from *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Afterward, Muti stopped me and asked if I had five minutes. 'I want to talk to you,' he said. '*Dio mio!*' I said. 'That is why I am here.' He



offered me *La Forza del Destino* on a La Scala tour to Japan — four performances in Tokyo in September 2000. I studied the part with him — Don Carlo di Vargas. One day soon after, he said to me, 'Now I want you to do Falstaff. We have one year. Let's try and learn it.'



In the Windsor Park scene of Damiano Michieletto's Salzburg staging of *Falstaff*, 2013  
© Silvia Lelli 2013

Maestri's Falstaff debut would not merely come at La Scala; it was to be the centerpiece of Italy's celebration of the centennial of Verdi's death, with a follow-up performance at the 328-seat Teatro Verdi in Busseto, Verdi's birthplace.

"I asked Muti if I wasn't too young to play Falstaff. He answered, 'The time when a tired, old voice was used to sing Falstaff is gone. We must use a nice, strong, voice now!' So I learned how to act old and use my young voice at the same time. I would go and see Muti every two months or so, and he would say, 'No, we are not there yet.' It was all about the words. The word is everything in *Falstaff*, even more important than the music. 'You have to be an instrument in the orchestra,' Muti would say to me. 'Forget Verdi and *la linea di canto Verdiana*. You have been singing in an osteria. Falstaff sings in the tavern. That is your through line.'

"Muti insisted I be present for every orchestra rehearsal with my book in front of me, so that I would always know which instrument was playing at any given time. I was not to follow the conductor. I was to follow the orchestra. To be a singer is one thing. To be an instrument in the orchestra is another. Muti demanded that I know my part better than the Ave Maria. 'Only then will you enjoy yourself,' he said."

As invaluable as Muti's mentoring was, it was the tutoring of Marise Flach, a mime and body-movement teacher at the Piccolo Teatro of Milan, that set Maestri on his course as an actor/singer of matchless physicality and expressiveness.

"Muti's *Falstaff* production at La Scala," Maestri explains, "was the director Giorgio Strehler's production, however posthumously — Strehler died in 1997. Strehler had been one of the biggest names in Italian theater history. He was the founder of Piccolo Teatro di Milano, perhaps the greatest theater company in Europe in its day. He had championed Brecht, whom he knew, on the Italian stage and directed many operas at La Scala. Strehler placed great importance on the movement of the body in acting and in singing. Marise Flach was his priestess of movement. It was she who taught me how to get up from a chair as an old person, how to use my hands, how to move like an old man — how to *be* an old man. It took a year, all told. But that first *Falstaff*, when it opened at the end of March in 2001, was super successful. I was reviewed in *The New York Times* — the greatest surprise. Immaculate diction, they said. After that, my career increased."

With little more than two years of professional stage experience behind him, Maestri undertook Iago in *Otello* at La Scala in 2001, as well as at La Fenice in Venice. He next tackled *La Traviata*, as Giorgio Germont, at La Scala. Finally, in 2004, he made his Metropolitan Opera debut as Amonasro in Sonja Frisell's panoramic production of *Aida*.

"That was beautiful," he recalls. "But opening night, I was sad." Maestri shakes his head ruefully. "*Aida* is an Italian opera, I found myself thinking. Why is it we cannot do something like this in Italy? Not even La Scala can put on an *Aida* like *this*."



As Dulcamara in the Met's *Elisir d'Amore*, 2012  
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Maestri returned to the Met in 2006 to sing Alfio in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*. His career, however, would continue to be inextricably bound with Falstaff, a role he has now sung in Berlin, Munich, Dresden, Vienna, Salzburg, Barcelona, Baden-Baden, Parma, Naples, London, Paris, Zurich and elsewhere. As opera's uncrowned king of the buffa repertory, he has lately undertaken *L'Elisir's* Dr. Dulcamara almost as often as Falstaff. He has also become an acclaimed Verdian, unclowned, with triumphs as Nabucco and Simon Boccanegra.

"I have always sung Verdi," he reiterates. "I sang some Mozart when I was young, but when I was studying, it was always Verdi. For *il legato*, for the breath, for the diction, Verdi teaches you how to sing. Just recently I have begun approaching Puccini, singing Scarpia in *Tosca*. Still, Verdi, in his simplicity, remains the most difficult. It is all about breath — especially in big theaters.

"Maybe one day I will sing Macbeth," he muses. "I would love to do *Chénier*, *La Gioconda* — operas that are disappearing from the repertory. I like to sing in French, in German. It's interesting — in France and Germany they like Falstaff funny and light. In Italy they want a more melancholic shade. It really does depend where you do it. I like to vary my performances accordingly. I enjoy the challenge of changing things. Verdi said, 'All I have written, everything is *burla* — a hoax. Life itself is *burla*. Nothing is really worth anything.' You can have many ways of reading a role. *Falstaff*, after all, is not a comedy."

Maestri grins enigmatically. Then, with a buffa grunt and grimace, he slowly raises himself up out of his confining press-room seat. "Ambrogio will be riding a horse in this *Falstaff* production at the Met," observes Valeria, as she gathers up their things. "Everybody is a little afraid."

"*Ciao mamma!*" Maestri cries, with a booming laugh and a heavenward wave. "I am happy coming back to the Met," he adds quietly, after a breath. "I like to think I go places, and then I come back to New York City and show the New York audience what I have learned. Always, there is more I can do, but for today this is what I can do that is new. Happily, I have done Falstaff all over the world. I am missing only the Metropolitan." □

BARRY SINGER *is the author of Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill, recently published by Abrams.*

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