

**VERDI FALSTAFF (2 complete performances) • IMMORTAL**  
PERFORMANCES 1156-4 (4 CDs for the price of 3) (5:00:26) Live: Rome  
4/28/1941; Teatro alla Scala, Milan 6/7/1952

**VERDI: FALSTAFF**

**ROME - 28 APRIL 1941**

Falstaff	Mariano Stabile
Ford	Tito Gobbi
Fenton	Ferruccio Tagliavini
Alicia	Franca Somiglia
Meg	Vittoria Polumbina
Quickly	Cloë Elmo
Nannetta	Augusta Oltrabella
Bardolfo	Cesare Masini-Sperti
Pistola	Gino Conti
Dr. Cajus	Adelio Zagonora

**Orchestra and Chorus**  
Tullio Serafin

**LA SCALA - 7 JUNE 1952**

Falstaff	Mariano Stabile
Ford	Paolo Silveri
Fenton	Cesare Valletti
Alicia	Renata Tebaldi
Meg	Anna Maria Canali
Quickly	Cloë Elmo
Nannetta	Rosanna Carteri
Bardolfo	Giuseppe Nessi
Pistola	Italo Tajo
Dr. Cajus	Mariano Caruso

**Orchestra and Chorus**  
Victor de Sabata

& **BONUS:** Cloë Elmo, arias and scenes from **CILEA** *Adriana Lecouvreur* (with Gina Cigna). **PONCHIELLI** *La Gioconda* (with Gina Cigna). **WAGNER** *Tristan und Isolde*. **VERDI** *Il trovatore* (with Charles Kullman). Cesare Valletti, arias and scenes from **MASCAGNI** *L'amico Fritz* (with Rosanna Carteri). **CIMAROSA** *Il matrimonio segreto*. **VERDI** *Luisa Miller*. **BIZET** *Les pêcheurs de perles*. **BELLINI** *La sonnambula* (with Maria Callas)

By Ken Meltzer  
FANFARE November / December 2021

Immortal Performances (IP) pairs 1941 Rome and 1952 La Scala, Milan renditions of Verdi's final opera and comic masterpiece, *Falstaff*. Both star the Italian baritone Mariano Stabile (1888-1968) in the title role. With the support and coaching of Arturo Toscanini, Stabile gave his first performance of Falstaff at the reopening of La Scala on December 26, 1921. In 1961, Stabile sang his final Sir John. All told, Stabile gave approximately 1,200 performances in the role. Stabile may have not possessed the most beautiful or powerful baritone voice. But he employed that voice with the utmost intelligence, creativity, and attentiveness to the music and drama. Time and again, Stabile found just the right vocal color and weight for Verdi's music and Boito's text, the latter always delivered with exemplary clarity. It is true that artists like Giuseppe Taddei and Geraint Evans demonstrated that a rich and powerful baritone can be a wonderful asset in performing Verdi's Falstaff. But it is also true, I think, that the role does not primarily require the kinds of gifts demanded by such Verdi baritone characters as Rigoletto, the Count di Luna, or Don Alvaro. A great Falstaff should, of course, sing the music securely, with attractive tone, and keen attention to the directives in Verdi's score. But artists such as Stabile and Giuseppe Valdengo (who also studied the role under Toscanini) have shown us that more important than the basic vocal gifts is how the artist deploys them. This is unforgettably illustrated in a 1907 recording of Falstaff's brief solo, "Quand'ero paggio", made by the French baritone Victor Maurel, who created the title role in *Falstaff's* 1893 La Scala premiere. In the 1907 recording, Maurel, 58 years old and past his vocal prime, entertains an appreciative studio audience (and himself!) with a trio of performances of the music, each time varying his interpretation, and to most delicious effect. In that spirit, I'll mention that no two of Stabile's performances of Falstaff sounded the same. To be sure, Stabile was always seeking ways to deepen and improve his interpretation. But I also think he was a singing actor who thrived upon the atmosphere of an individual performance. Regardless of any variations of approach, a unifying factor among Stabile's renditions of Falstaff is that he always seemed to be having the time of his life. And that joy is, without fail, communicated to the audience. Stabile did not make a complete commercial recording of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Among those baritones who did, Giuseppe Taddei (Cetra, 1949, Mario Rossi, cond.), Giuseppe Valdengo (RCA, 1950, Arturo Toscanini, cond.), Tito Gobbi (EMI, Herbert von Karajan, cond.), and Geraint Evans (Decca, Georg Solti, cond.) remain my favorites. But Stabile's Falstaff is of at least comparable greatness and importance.

We are fortunate that several recorded documents of Stabile *Falstaff* performances have survived. In the Mar/Apr 2018 issue of *Fanfare* (41:4), I reviewed IP's restoration of an August 9, 1937 Salzburg Festival staging of *Falstaff*, with Stabile in the title role, and Toscanini conducting (that release also includes the 1950 broadcast recording of the opera, again with Toscanini, and Valdengo, referred to above). The 1937 *Falstaff* is a magnificent performance in every way, and IP has done a superb job of restoring the original Selenophone recording to a state in which the performance now may be enjoyed, and not just endured. That 5-disc IP set is a must for all who love Verdi and *Falstaff*. Which brings us to the pair of Stabile *Falstaff* performances included on the IP release that is the subject of this review. First is an April 28, 1941 Rome radio broadcast, conducted by Tullio Serafin. It, too, is a marvelous account of *Falstaff*, and in

sound that that is comparable to fine studio recordings of the era. It seems that with such priceless historic documents, there more often than not is a "catch." In this case, it is that the surviving recording of the broadcast is missing several portions of the opera. And invariably, those portions are among the opera's finest moments. These include the better part of Falstaff's "Honor" monologue in Act I, sc. i., the introduction to the final scene of Act III (with most of Fenton's solo, "Dal labbro il canto"), and the better part of the opera's concluding measures, and its great fugue. In 2002, the Music and Arts (M&A) label provided an admirable release of both the 1941 Rome and 1952 La Scala *Falstaff* performances. M&A left the omitted portions of the 1941 *Falstaff* intact. IP has filled in the blanks with other source material featuring the same principal artists. As usual, IP has done a fine job of blending the new portions to the original. The added "Honor" monologue is from a live performance, capped by applause. IP also includes applause for the conclusions of the remaining scenes, as well as brief announcer comments, neither of which appeared in the M&A set. In the 1941 Rome *Falstaff*, Stabile is superb form, comparable to the 1937 Salzburg performance. And with the considerable improvement in sound, we are able to enjoy his singing and interpretation all the more. Chief interest among the remaining members of the cast will focus, I think, on the Ford of Tito Gobbi, and Fenton of Ferruccio Tagliavini. Gobbi was 27 at the time of the broadcast. His voice already possesses much of the characteristic Gobbi timbre, but here, it has beautiful, lyric quality not as evident in his later, more famous recordings. Even at this early stage, Gobbi was a first-rate singing actor. Gobbi's Act II, sc. I encounter with Stabile's Falstaff is a document of two performers ever attentive to the other. No doubt this was the product of intense rehearsal, but the result is a palpable and engaging spontaneity. Gobbi also rises to the occasion in the ensuing solo, "E sogno? O realta", delivering the music and text with the utmost intensity and vocal splendor. Ferruccio Tagliavini is one of the most seductive and mellifluous Fentons. We hear his voice at its absolute prime, then one of the most beautiful lyric tenors on records. Sopranos Franca Somigli (Mistress Ford) and Augustra Oltrabella (Nanetta) reprise their roles from the 1937 Salzburg performance, and to fine effect. Vittoria Palumbina is an engaging Meg. Cloë Elmo, the Quickly in both performances on this set (and the 1950 Toscanini, as well), is superb; rich of voice, and ever attentive to the dramatic situation. As such, her Quickly is an ideal foil to Stabile's Falstaff. Tullio Serafin leads a performance that combines vitality with a captivating lightness of touch and flexible phrasing. Toscanini remains for me the foremost interpreter of this score. But Serafin's account is lovely and convincing on its own merits, especially in collaboration with such a marvelous cast. The sound on the M&A issue is quite good; full-bodied with ample detail and color. But it does suffer a bit from explosiveness in the loudest passages, and the suggestion of a metallic quality surrounding the voices. Both of those issues are resolved in the IP restoration, which impresses me as warmer and better equalized overall.

The conductor for the 1952 La Scala performance is Victor de Sabata, who adopts a more propulsive and intense approach to Verdi's score. The orchestral execution is here more robust and emphatic. Nonetheless, de Sabata fully appreciates and conveys *Falstaff's* endearing humor and humanity in a performance that, like Serafin's, has an arresting ebb and flow, and space for the

vocalists to express themselves. At the time of this performance, Stabile was 64 and, to the extent he once had a vocal prime, now past it. The voice has a noticeable spread in many sustained notes. Nevertheless, Stabile does not shrink from any of the vocal challenges, and he still sings with impressive musical and dramatic authority. Once again, Stabile's interpretation is brilliant throughout, a masterful portrait. The young Renata Tebaldi is Alice Ford. While it is true that the role is not the ideal vehicle to display the rich beauty of her voice in its prime, we are certainly very much aware of that beauty, and Tebaldi proves herself a deft and engaging comedian. Rosanna Carteri is a delightful Nanetta, in gorgeous voice. Her Fenton, Cesare Valletti, was, like Tagliavini, one of the great lyric tenors of his age. Here, he is in marvelous form, singing beautifully, and with the utmost imagination. Anna Maria Canali's Meg is well sung and dramatically alert. Cloë Elmo reprises her superb Quickly. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Paolo Silveri was a baritone with a rich and attractive voice (later, some of the vocal bloom disappeared). Under the right direction, as in this *Falstaff*, Silveri could deliver thrilling performances. Silveri's Ford is beautifully sung, virile, and a marvelous "straight man" to Stabile's Falstaff. In both the Rome and La Scala performances, the comprimario roles, so important to the fabric of this work, are expertly performed. The IP restoration of the 1952 La Scala *Falstaff* represents a considerable improvement over the M&A. The latter suggests the application of artificial enhancement, with a cavernous and resonant acoustic that obscures vocal and instrumental detail and color. The IP mastering removes those flaws. The recording is still inferior to commercial recordings of the time. But it now offers sufficient clarity, equalization, and warmth to provide listening pleasure. There are brief closing broadcaster announcements at the conclusion of the performance.

As a bonus to the 1941 *Falstaff*, IP includes Cetra studio recordings of Cloë Elmo in excerpts from Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* and Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (both with soprano Gina Cigna), along with Brangäne's Watch from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (in Italian). The excerpts conclude with portions of Verdi's *Il trovatore*, from a 1948 Standard Hour broadcast (some announcer commentary is included). Tenor Charles Kullman is the Manrico. Elmo is just as effective in tragic repertoire as she is in the comic world of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Her rich and powerful voice is secure throughout the registers, and she is a fully committed performer. The *Tristan* excerpt is sung with the utmost beauty and nobility; a wonderful souvenir. Cesare Valletti is featured in the appendix to the 1952 La Scala *Falstaff*, with selections from Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz* (with Rosanna Carteri), Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto*, Bellini's *La sonnambula* (the 1955 La Scala production, with Maria Callas, conducted by Leonard Bernstein), Rodolfo's aria, "Quando le sere al placido" from Verdi's *Luisa Miller*, and Nadir's aria from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*, "Je crois entendre encore," sung in Italian. Valletti is in gorgeous voice, and his imaginative and elegant phrasing are a constant source of pleasure. A juxtaposition of the *Sonnambula* ("Prendi, l'anel ti dono") and *Luisa Miller* excerpts proves especially interesting. In both, Valletti sings with a masterful purity of line, suppleness of phrasing, and range of vocal colors and dynamics. As a result, the lineage of Verdi's operas from those of his bel canto predecessors is emphasized in a revealing and profoundly satisfying way. The accompanying booklet includes Dewey Faulkner's extended, informative, and

eloquent notes on both the featured performances and Verdi's *Falstaff*. A detailed plot synopsis accompanies artist bios, and Richard Caniell's Recording Notes. I am grateful to Music and Arts for giving me almost two decades of access to these historic and marvelous *Falstaff* performances. Nonetheless, the sound of the new Immortal Performances release constitutes a palpable improvement, especially in the 1952 La Scala performance. In addition, the IP release affords the listener the opportunity to hear the 1941 Rome broadcast without omitting portions of Verdi's score. Whether you own the prior set or not, I highly recommend the new IP release.

### **Ken Meltzer**

5 Stars: IP's superb restorations of the 1941 Rome and 1952 La Scala performances of *Falstaff*, with Mariano Stabile in the title role

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## **VERDI FALSTAFF (2 complete performances) Rome 1941 and La Scala 1952**

### **Review by Henry Fogel**

The Italian baritone Mariano Stabile was a complete musician. His voice was a rather generic baritone, pleasant and well produced but not remarkable in itself. It was the intelligence with which he used it that made him stand out. Stabile was not known for the big Verdi baritone roles but for his brilliant dramatic skills, his musicianship, and the breadth of his repertoire, which extended well beyond Italian operas. Among the roles he sang over a long career were Beckmesser, Klingsor, Barak (in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*), Hamlet (Ambroise Thomas), Father in *Louise* (Charpentier), Figaro, and Don Giovanni. Yet above all there was the title role in Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*. Chosen by Toscanini to sing Falstaff in 1937 at Salzburg, it became Stabile's calling card. He is reputed to have sung it over 1,200 times.

Both of these performances have been issued before, most notably on Music & Arts. The origin of the 1941 performance is unknown. It has been tentatively identified as an RAI broadcast and alternately as a performance at Rome's Teatro Reale, but documentation from wartime Italy is erratic, so we just don't know. There were serious gaps in the original source, which Music & Arts did not correct. Immortal Performances has restored the complete opera by editing in the same singers from other live performances and recordings. As usual with this label, the editing is masterful. The 1952 performance from La Scala also sounds more natural and better balanced here than it did on Music & Arts. In some ways, interestingly, the actual sound quality of the earlier recording is more natural.

Stabile was 53 and 64 by the time of these two performances. His voice was steadier and stronger in 1937 at Salzburg with Toscanini. By 1941 the voice was already a touch on the dry side but still steady; in 1952 it was a bit drier and occasionally (but only occasionally) unsteady. In both performances Stabile's

mastery of the role is complete. Falstaff is a difficult character to portray. One can easily go overboard with comic business. The challenge is in maintaining Verdi's exquisitely etched musical line while still creating a character, and Stabile does this to perfection. Without resorting to extra-musical explosions or shouts, there is character in every phrase. Dewey Faulkner's perceptive booklet essay singles out the "honor monologue," noting that Stabile sings the interjections of "No" with unique force while never varying from what Verdi wrote. This Falstaff is arrogant, shallow, and narcissistic, but he is always a human being, never a caricature. In addition, Stabile's musicality assures the fluency of the ensemble writing.

The only other singer common to both performances is Cloë Elmo as Mistress Quickly. Born in 1910, Elmo was in her prime for these performances. Her rich, warm voice and her keen comedic sense are important assets. It is not surprising that this was one of the roles for which she was best known.

The two tenors singing the role of Fenton, Ferruccio Tagliavini in 1941 and Cesare Valletti in 1952, do so exquisitely. Both sing with honeyed tone and seamless legato, and with character as well. This is the only recorded performance of Tagliavini in the role. Fenton's aria, "Dal labbro il canto estasiato vola," is one of the parts missing from the 1941 recording; it has been seamlessly edited in from the tenor's 1940 studio recording.

The two baritones singing Ford do not come off so equally. Paolo Silveri in 1952 is competent but in no ways memorable. Tito Gobbi, on the other hand, is magnificent in 1941 (this is the only recording of him singing the role). He and Stabile demonstrate the importance of crisp diction, which gives character and rhythmic spine to their performances. That Gobbi was only 28 at the time of this performance evidences that all the traits that made him one of the finest baritones of his era were present from the beginning.

Touching on other singers, one comes first to a young Renata Tebaldi in the 1951 La Scala performance. The beautiful glow and natural feeling for phrase-shaping that made her an international star were already present. Alice is not a role that took full advantage of Tebaldi's vocal assets. Still, it is always a pleasure to hear that sound. Rosanna Carteri's Nannetta in 1951 is another highlight. The remaining singers are all quite good in both performances. The two conductors are among the finest of the 20th century for Italian opera. Tullio Serafin was rarely interventionist in his approach. What he did bring was a complete understanding of the idiom, giving shape to both the whole and the components within that whole. Victor de Sabata could be more of a risk-taker, adding tempo adjustments and emphases of certain moments that might call attention to themselves. Frankly, I find that they add important personality to the performance and do not detract from its overall shape,

Immortal Performances does not leave unused space on its CDs, and the two bonuses here are a delight. One of the highlights is hearing Valletti sing the duet between Fritz and Suzel from Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz*. However, the great discovery for me was Cloë Elmo singing Brangäne's warning (in Italian, but gloriously) from act II of *Tristan und Isolde*.

Immortal Performances is offering these four generously-filled CDs for the price of three. The usual superb booklet with essays and photographs completes the set. It is doubtful that these two important historical performances of *Falstaff* will ever be made to sound better than they do here.

