

A Deleted Episode in Verdi's "Falstaff"

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LET us remember the situation in the second finale of Verdi's masterpiece. Falstaff's *rendezvous* with Alice has been suddenly interrupted by Ford and his friends who break in to catch the philanderer; the gallant knight has been stowed away in a laundry basket; Ford and his gang, making a tremendous row, are searching the whole house; the young lovers, Nanetta and Fenton, amongst all that turmoil, have found a peaceful refuge behind a fire-screen; they make love and are happy. A hearty kiss, resounding during a pause, draws the general attention to the screen. No doubt, it is he, the fat rogue! So with all measures of precaution necessary to be taken against such a formidable adversary, a surprise attack is prepared against the criminal behind the screen. It is a situation of high dramatic tension, asking for quick development and solution. But Verdi would not have been Verdi had he not used such a situation for inserting one of his glorious pieces of concerted music, and there is no doubt he was acting in the best tradition of Italian opera when he did so. [*Andante, pianissimo.*] It starts as a slow scherzando, with tittering triplets and nervous, sudden accents. Subsequently a broad, beautiful melody takes the lead, sung by Nanetta and Fenton, the young lovers behind the screen, who in a close embrace have forgotten everything around them. Ford and his men encouraging each other for the dangerous enterprise, the merry women choking with repressed laughter—everything *sotto voce*—give a kind of lining to it, in the well-known manner of Italian *ensemble*, as it had been already developed by Rossini. It is a delicious little oasis of rest and euphony in the frolicsome turbulence of the finale, dying away in the softest *pianissimo* and cut off finally when Ford's gang rush up and overthrow the screen. Do you remember it? No, you don't. I am afraid I am the only lover of that opera who knows this admirable little gem, a most characteristic specimen of Verdi's latest style of melody and harmony. Many years have passed, but I still remember my wrath and grief, when as a young student I first heard a performance of *Falstaff* and this episode, one of my favourites in that beloved masterpiece, was cut short. I had studied with infinite delight my vocal score, rather a torn copy I had hunted up in an antiquarian's shop. I had been looking forward to that glorious moment of beauty and loveliness, and it did not come! I think I might have killed the conductor, had I known how to get at him. But it would have been a deplorable act of youthful rashness. For some time later, when I got hold of a full score, I realised that Verdi's enemy and mine would have died guiltless. His performance was in strict accordance with the score. The cut, no doubt, was made by Verdi himself, and he must have had his reason. My vocal score, apparently, was a remainder of a first edition, printed before the first performance in Milan in 1893, and revised subsequently by the composer, as later editions show in correspondence with the full score. There is nothing uncommon in that fact, and there is another substantial alteration at the end of the first part of the last act which results in a considerable musical improvement. The first edition of an opera, printed before the crucial test of the stage, is generally restricted to a limited number of copies, as the publisher knows by experience the probability of at least some slight alterations. So this first edition is likely soon to be superseded by a new, final one.

Since then I have heard many performances of *Falstaff*, good and bad, culminating in the unforgettable perfection achieved by Toscanini at Salzburg. But I cannot help feeling the same sensation of discomfort every time at that moment, a shock of something awkward and out of proportion in the musical texture. To-day, as an experienced musician, I find no difficulty in analysing the reasons for that feeling. As a result, for the first time in my life, I have to plead against the final decision of a great composer and for the restoration of his original version.

If Verdi had simply eliminated the whole episode, one might deplore it, but one could put

up with it as with a sacrifice for higher reasons of unity and dramatic flow. But he seems to have felt the necessity for an oasis of music in that scene, as he left part of it. He replaced sixteen bars (1—16 of Example No. 1) by a new invention of six bars, which have always given me an impression of something abrupt and inconsistent in the context. [See Ex. 2.]

These six bars, though masterly and refined, have a definite defect: they do not match the following melodious appendix (bars 17—21 of Example i). The new invention starts very promisingly; a broad melody seems to unfold its wings (bars 1—4). But it does not rise; the following two bars turn round to the tonic again, as if it were not worth taking the trouble. The result is a shortwinded, incomplete period. Its deficiency is betrayed by that delightful little appendix, which also has the same harmonic object of revolving round the tonic as a melodious cadence, a typical codetta. Such a codetta has an organic, necessary function after the spacious range of harmony covered by the original tune, but it is hopelessly out of place after the shortwinded period which has replaced it. Imperfections of a similar kind are not rare in operatic music, since opera in the nineteenth century got more or less emancipated from the formal and aesthetic postulates of absolute music. But when music takes the lead in an opera—and it does so definitely wherever a lyrical invention is developing—the claims of musical architecture are pitilessly exigent, exposing the patchwork. Any musician with a sharp ear and a sense of proportion, I fancy, would feel something to be wrong here.

The question remains: why did Verdi do it? Well, I think I can give a plausible explanation. I have mentioned above the dramatic problem with which the composer was confronted. That lyric *ensemble* undoubtedly involves a kind of deadlock in the progress of the action, although standstills of that sort are inevitable within the conventions of Italian opera. Remember the great second finale in *Aida*, or the third finale in *Otello*, or the glorious quartet in *Rigoletto*. It is a problem which concerns the producer who, if he is resourceful and experienced in opera, will find a way of coping with it. In any case it can easily be imagined that the old maestro when attending a rehearsal was made nervous by the impression that something was dragging in one of the most decisive scenes of his opera. Only an amateur is sufficiently in love with his work to be easily satisfied. A master will be ten times more sensitive to any shortcoming than the most critical listener can be; and no true opera composer was ever afraid of a sacrifice of music for scenic reasons. Verdi may have found that scene somewhat lengthy. As we know from other examples, he was as callous as an experienced surgeon in cutting out whatever he found unsatisfactory. In this case, I am afraid he has gone too far in mutilating the product of his invention to quicken the dramatic flow. The cut, no doubt, has shortened the scene. But it has definitely spoiled a precious musical climax.

Here is a suggestion. It is not unlikely that the missing pages can be found in Verdi's manuscript at Ricordi's. And if not, it would be no difficult job for an able musician to orchestrate the eliminated sixteen bars with all the necessary piety and observance of style. Here is an opportunity for a conductor to acquire merit by risking a restoration! At least there could be no harm in trying it as an experiment. Sixteen bars of one of the most precious scores ever written should be worth the trouble.

1
Example 1

63 Andante (♩ = 80)

NANETTA
FENION
(soprano)

NanTut - - - to - de - li - ra,
(Fen)Fra - - - quel le ci - - - glia

NAN.
FEN.

so - - spi - roe ri - so.
ve - - do - due fa - ri

NAN.
FEN.

Sor - ri - de il vi - so e il cor so -
a me - ra vi - glia se - re - nie

NAN.
FEN.

- spi - ra. Co - me in sua
chia - ri. Boc - ca mia

NAN.
FEN.

zol - la ai chiu-deun fior. la sua co -
dol - cel pu - pil - la d'or. vo - ce che

9 10

NAN.
FEN.

dolce

- rol la svol - veil mio
mol ce co - mar - pa il

11 12

NAN.

FEN.

dolciss

cor, la sua co - rol la
cor, vo - ce che mol ce

13 14

(Pistola, Coro) *p* (Ford)

NAN. *pp* svol - ve il mio

FEN. *dolciss* co - m'ar - pa il

15 16 *dim.*

NAN. *dolciss* cor, dol - ci ri - chia - mi d'a - mor,

FEN. cor, dim - mi se m'a

17 18

NAN. Si, Ta - mo, t'a - mo, t'a - mol

FEN. - mi? Ta - mol

19 20 21

Example 2

03 *p espr.*

NANETTA
FENTON
(unial)

(Nan) Tut - to de - li - ra,
(Fen) Fra quel - le ci - glia

1 2

(Meg. Quickly)

(Male voices)

NAN
FEN.

so - spi - ro e ri - so.
ve - do due fa - ri

3 4

(etc. see Ex. 1
bars 17-21)

NAN.
FEN.

Sor - ri - de il vi - so e il cor so - spi - ra.
a me - ra - vi - glia se - re - nie chia - ri.

5 6