

# Premiere for a lost Vivaldi opera

By Alan Riding

## ROTTERDAM

Antonio Vivaldi returned to his hometown of Venice early in 1733, eager to reclaim his place as the Venetian republic's most popular composer. During his five-year absence, younger Naples-trained musicians had come to the fore with their own "dramas with music," but now, at 55, Vivaldi was ready to take them on with a daringly modern opera inspired by Hernando Cortés's conquest of the Aztecs.

How the work, "Motezuma," was received at its premiere at the Teatro di Sant'Angelo in Venice in the fall of 1733 is not known. But it can be assumed that it did not revive Vivaldi's fortunes. He wrote at least two more operas in Venice before moving to Vienna in March 1740 to seek the patronage of the Hapsburg Empire. And it was there, reportedly in a state of penury, that he died on July 28, 1741.

The existence of "Motezuma" has long been known because its libretto survived, even inspiring Alejo Carpentier's 1974 novel, "Baroque Concert." Now, thanks to the efforts of a German musicologist, Steffen Voss, its score has also finally been found. And on Saturday evening, in a concert version at De Doelen, a concert hall here, lyrics and music were heard together, perhaps for the first time since 1733.

Voss came across only about 70 percent of the score when he was looking for lost Handel cantatas in the archives of the Sing-Akademie in Berlin in February 2002. Although the score's cover page was missing, since he was familiar with the libretto of "Motezuma," he immediately recognized the names of the voice parts and felt sure he had found a missing treasure.

His initial impression was quickly confirmed by experts, including some who last year challenged the authorship of "Andromeda Liberata," initially claimed to be another lost Vivaldi opera. "Yes, it is real," Michael Talbot, a British music professor and author of two biographies of Vivaldi, said of "Motezuma." "Some of the material is common to authenticated works, like arias used in earlier operas. The stylistic parameters are also familiar. Beyond all doubt this is real."

Kees Vlaardingbroek, De Doelen's artistic director and himself a Vivaldi expert, agreed. "This is the most important Vivaldi discovery in 75 years," he said, "since Vivaldi's own archives were found in the 1920s."

Vivaldi's choice of the conquest of Mexico as his subject was unsurprising, since exotic stories set in distant lands were all the rage in 18th-century Europe. Although it is uncertain whether the libretto was by Alvise Giusti or Girolamo Giusti, Vivaldi seemed less interested in history than



René Seghers for The New York Times

Federico Sardelli conducting the *Modo Antiquo* ensemble during a rehearsal of Vivaldi's "Motezuma," and, below, the cover of the recently discovered libretto.

## MOTEZUMA

DRAMAPER MUSICA

Da rappresentarsi

NEL TEATRO

## DI SANT'ANGELO

Nell'Autunno dell'Anno 1733

IN VENEZIA,

Appresso Marino Rossetti, in Merceria  
all'Infegna della Pace.

Con Licenza de' Superiori.



in recounting a fictitious love story between the Aztec emperor's daughter, Teutile, and Cortés's brother, Ramiro. "Opera has a template," Talbot said. "Mismatched lovers at the beginning of an opera get matched by the end of the opera, and that's more important than whether it is set in Mexico or China."

Since the score for the first seven scenes is missing, Saturday's performance opened with Cortés already in control of the Aztec capital of

Tenochtitlan. Motezuma — the librettist invented this spelling over the more familiar Montezuma or the Mexican Moctezuma, perhaps for simplicity's sake — is in despair, ready to order Teutile's death for falling in love with Ramiro. But Motezuma's strong-willed wife, Mitrena, stands up to Cortés.

As was common with "opera seria," the score consists of long recitatives interspersed with arias. Of the 22 arias identified in the original libretto, 12 are in the rescued score. What gives the work its modernity, said Federico Sardelli, who conducted his Florence-based ensemble *Modo Antiquo* in a concert version of the work on Saturday, is that three recitatives are accompanied by the orchestra and that, unusually for the period, a trio provides the climax of Act II.

"The arias are also immensely difficult," Sardelli said, none more than the dizzying coloratura of Mitrena's aria closing Act I, which Vivaldi is said to have written for his protégée Anna Giro and which was performed with panache on Saturday by the Canadian alto Marie-Nicole Lemieux.

One final novelty was that Vivaldi wrote two roles for soprano castratos, though in the past he had preferred alto castratos. But in this concert version, the only male voice was that of Motezuma (Sergio Foresti). Women sang Cortés, here called Fernando (Emanuela Galli), his general Asprano (Dominique Labelle) and Ramiro (Renata Pokupic) as well as Teutile (Jeni Bern). The opera has no chorus.

The full house at the 2,300-seat concert hall Saturday reflected curiosity about what was termed "a modern-day world premiere," but it may also be a sign of new interest in the operas of Vivaldi.

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