

## *Old News, Well Delivered*

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It was heralded as a momentous event in the musical world when in 2002 the score of Vivaldi's opera *Motezuma* was found among the materials from the Berlin Sing-Akademie, which had disappeared during World War II but had recently been rediscovered in Ukrainian archives. The libretto had always existed, but now a copy of the score – at least a large portion of it – had also surfaced intact. In an admirable collaboration between musicologists and performers, the music was identified, the missing portions reconstructed, and the piece brought to its “modern-day world premiere” in 2003. This 3-CD Archiv Produktion set presents the first ever recording of the work.

Antonio Vivaldi: *Motezuma*. Vito Priante (*Motezuma*), Marijana Mijanović (*Mitrena*), Roberta Invernizzi (*Teutile*), Maite Beaumont (*Fernando*), Romina Basso (*Ramiro*), Inga Kalna (*Asprano*). Il Complesso Barocco. Alan Curtis, conductor. Marita Prohmann, executive producer. Rainer Maillard, recording producer. Bastian Schick, balance engineer. Rainer Maillard and Bastian Schick, editing. Three compact discs DDD, 195 minutes; recorded at Sala Olimpia, Palazzo Doria-Pamphili in San Martino al Cimino, Italy, november 2005. Archiv Produktion 00289 477 5996

And the recording is extremely well done. Overall, the performance is spectacular, the instrumental ensemble under Alan Curtis clear, crisp and energetic throughout, and much of the singing truly exhilarating. Vito Pirante (*Motezuma*), the only male singer in the cast (in Vivaldi's original, two of the roles were sung by soprano castrati) delivers his part with fluent agility, and the sometimes very challenging coloratura in the women's parts is mostly flawless. Roberta Invernizzi (*Teutile*), Romina Basso (*Ramiro*) and Inga Kalna (*Asprano*) are all light, brilliant and effortless, perfect for their roles; Kalna's aria in Act 2, scene 8, in which she contends with the virtuosic trumpet part, is one of the musical highlights of the whole opera. Maite Beaumont (*Fernando*) and Marijana Mijanović (*Mitrena*) have slightly heavier voices, but both also perform with energy, passion and accuracy, and *Mitrena's* aria at the end of Act 1 (scene 16), one of the most difficult coloratura moments in the work, is executed with bravura.

However, for those hoping for a spectacular operatic discovery to match the instrumental drama of Vivaldi's celebrated *Four Seasons*, the piece might fall short of their expectations. The plot is no doubt unusual, set in sixteenth-century Mexico during the Spanish invasion under Hernan Cortez (*Fernando*), and narrating the downfall of the Mexican emperor *Montezuma* (*Motezuma*). Yet despite the exotic setting, the opera's outlines are as predictable as they come: three acts consisting of lengthy stretches of recitative punctuated by a number of conventional da capo arias. The only deviations from the pattern come in form of a trio at the center of the second act (“A battaglia,” a stirring call to battle), a few

accompanied recitatives, and a two chorus movements for the finale (the one concluding the act lasting a mere 21 seconds).

Any supposed “novelty” value is further compromised by the fact that much of the music is borrowed from earlier operas by Vivaldi. This was common practice for the composer, and the modern reconstruction relies on such borrowings to provide music for those arias that are missing from the rediscovered score. Of 28 numbers, only 17 survive, and Alessandro Ciccolini’s procedures of adapting and rewriting earlier music to fill the gaps are recorded in detail in the liner notes. The missing recitatives are all newly composed, and expertly so.

Some of the arias hence certainly display Vivaldi’s typical charm and flair, but the musical characterization of the protagonists is for the most part not strong and distinctive enough to differentiate the five female soloists in their separate roles. There are only rare moments of dramatic intensification, while the majority of the numerous hostile confrontations, such as a fighting scene in Act 2, ultimately lack dramatic power (despite the metallic sounds of swords crossing inserted on the CD). Many of these shortcomings could of course be alleviated in an effective stage production, and while it is true for most opera that a DVD recording presents a more engaging option, the inclusion of the visual side seems almost indispensable for this highly conventionalized musical language. The striking scenery, exotic costumes and physical action on stage (with such memorable moments as a whole tower going up in flames) would undoubtedly have formed a major part of the attraction of this piece for its eighteenth-century audience.

But then, many people would also have come to the opera house simply to hear their favourite vocal virtuosos perform dazzling musical feats on stage. And musically dazzling this recording certainly is. It is highly praiseworthy that record companies still take on projects like this one in these times of dwindling funds. And although the thrill of novelty quickly wears thin, the gripping musical delivery makes the listening experience extremely worthwhile.