

Opera and the Conquest

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The oldest opera to take up the theme of Cortés and the Conquest seems to be *Montesuma*, written in 1733 by the celebrated cleric and renowned composer Antonio Vivaldi.

Yet Vivaldi's 38 operas never attained the level of his chamber music. His style lacked a powerful dramatic expression, making up for this with a rich musicality. His *Montesuma* debuted in Venice's San Angelo theater. Unfortunately the music was lost; all that remains is the libretto, by G. Giusti, and the opera notes.

The second composer to take up this controversial topic was Karl Heinrich Graun, who probably heard Vivaldi's opera in Venice. Only some excerpts from this opera have been recorded. Graun was born on May 7, 1704, to an aristocratic Saxon-Polish family in Wahrenbruck.

His two older brothers were also musicians. Johann Gottlieb, the middle brother, was one of the best violinists of his era, a disciple of Tartini, and concert master for Frederick the Great.

As a child, Graun had a beautiful voice; later, in 1724, he was hired as a tenor in the theater of the Brunswick court, a position he held until 1735. He was so disappointed by the first opera he sang in that he replaced the arias with his own compositions, achieving such success that he was commissioned to write his own opera, *Sancio und Sinilde*, in 1727.

This opera-writing debut was followed by *Polydorus* (1728-29), *Iphigenia in aulis* (1731), *Scipio africanus* (1732) and *Lo specchio*

The Conquest of Mexico has inspired more than a dozen operas. While these have included not only serious works but also light comedies with some musical accompaniment, this article focuses on the significant lyric dramas.

della fedeltà (1733), which was presented at the marriage of Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia, later Frederick II (the Great). This was also his first opera in Italian.

The prince was so impressed with Graun that in 1735 he took him into his service in Rheinsberg, where he remained until the coronation in 1740, when he went to Berlin as Frederick's own choirmaster.

The king was an ardent admirer of Italian music. He sent Graun to Italy to hire singers for one of his favorite projects, the construction of a new Italian opera house in Berlin. During his sojourn, Graun was warmly received as a singer in his own right for his brilliant tenor voice. After visiting Venice, Bologna, Florence, Rome and Naples, he returned to Berlin with a complete company of singers.

The theater project was so far behind schedule that Frederick constructed a temporary theater in his palace. *Rodelinda* was the first opera Graun wrote for Berlin, where it debuted. The following year, on December 7, 1742, he opened the new theater with his *Cesare e Cleopatra*. This marked a new

beginning for Graun, as a prolific composer of operas; he wrote at least one a year, and sometimes two or three.

During this period he wrote 27 operas for Berlin; *Montezuma* was the twenty-fourth, debuting in 1755. The long list of his works came to an end only with the turmoil of the Seven-Year War, the beginning of which, in 1756, shortly preceded Graun's death on August 7, 1759.

After the Seven-Year War, the Berlin opera reopened with Graun's *Merope*. In 1785 his *Orfeo* was staged—apparently the last time one of Graun's works was staged in this theater.

Graun had a special gift for melody and an exact understanding of how to write for the human voice, although only highly-skilled singers can overcome the numerous vocal difficulties his music presents. Oddly, his contemporaries, when comparing Graun to his rival Hasse, considered him more a lyricist than a dramatist, although his *Montezuma* holds together quite well dramatically. The librettist for Graun's *Montezuma* was Frederick the Great himself, who wrote the entire, magnificent libretto

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Cortés and Moctezuma (18th-century engraving by G. Gallina).

in French; it was later translated into Italian by court poet Tagliazucchi.

Six of Frederick's letters reveal his ideas regarding *Montezuma*. Writing to Count Francesco Algarotti in October of 1753, he said: "You will understand that my feelings will be on the side of Montezuma and that Cortés will be the tyrant; consequently one is able, albeit in music, to throw some darts at the Christian religion. But I forget that you are in a country which has the Inquisition. I feel sorry for you, and

hope to see you soon in a country of heretics, where opera may assist in reforming customs and destroying superstitions."

The king was also in favor of abolishing *da capo* arias in favor of the simpler *cavatina*. In 1754, he wrote to his sister, the Margravess of Bayreuth: "I am taking the liberty of putting at your feet a Mexican whose form is, as yet, not completely shaped. I have taught him to speak French; now he must learn Italian.... Most of the arias have been written to

be sung without repetitions. The only ones which have to be repeated are two arias for the emperor and two for Eupaforice."

In a later letter, also written in 1754, he added: "Repetitions are unnecessary, unless the singers know how to vary the music.... Repeating the same thing four times seems like an imposition to me."

Graun began the opera in May of 1754 and finished it at the beginning of November. It debuted on January 6, 1755; five more performances were given before the end of the winter opera season. *Montezuma* was a big success, and Frederick thought Graun had surpassed himself with this work.

The opera's recitatives are quite long. Frederick had a lot to say, and used the figure of Montezuma to express many of his own feelings. This 16th-century Hispano-Mexican story was still presented in the form of

18th-century Italian theater.

Montezuma's plot was vaguely modelled on Voltaire's *Alzire*.

Of the explorations carried out in the New World by Spanish conquistadors during the reign of King Carlos I of Spain (Charles V of Germany), those of Cortés were the most important and had the most far-reaching effects. His conquest of what is today Mexico brought about the fall of an ancient civilization, that of the Aztecs, and one of the first to suffer the consequences was the Aztec emperor.

As Frederick II saw it, Montezuma allowed the Spaniards to disembark in good faith. He realized too late that his generosity would cost him his life. The plot of the opera centered on the tragic death of this monarch, the story of his fiancée Eupaforce, queen of Tlaxcala, and the cruel behavior of the Spanish general Hernán Cortés.

Another important work from this period was the *Motuzuma* of Francisco di Majo, although the composer and his opera are little known today. Di Majo was born in Naples around 1740 and died in Rome in 1771. His *Motuzuma*, with a libretto by Vittorio Amadeo Cigna-Santi, debuted in Turin in 1765. While it achieved great popularity in Barcelona and Valencia, it never made it to Madrid.

The plot of this opera seems to have been based on *The Conquest of Mexico* by Antonio Solís, but with the usual variations and adaptations. The action begins with the Spaniards' approach to a great lake (Texcoco?), and ends, not with the complete conquest of Mexico, but with the death of Moctezuma. A number of dances composed by Francesco Guardini were added to the opera's three acts.

One of the outstanding operatic productions dealing with this theme was, without a doubt, the *Montezuma* composed by Giovanni Paisiello of Tarento, who was among the most prolific and remarkable composers of his time. Paisiello was born in 1740 in Roccaforzata and died in Naples in 1816. His *Montezuma*, the libretto for which was also written by Vittorio Amadeo Cigna-Santi, debuted in Rome in 1772.

Music history has not been kind to Paisiello—several of his operas are virtually unknown—but during his lifetime he was in the forefront of Italian and French opera, as well as achieving the distinction of being named choirmaster to Catherine II of Prussia. It was even feared that Rossini's *Barber of Seville* would flop

because of the success of Paisiello's work of the same name.

Three years after the debut of Paisiello's *Montezuma* in Rome, another *Motesuma* made its debut in London—this time by the renowned Antonio Maria Gasparo Sacchini, who was born in Florence in 1730 and died in Paris in 1786. The libretto was by Botarelli. This opera, now fallen into the most complete oblivion, enjoyed a certain prestige in its day.

With the passage of time, the theme of the Conquest continued to attract Europeans' interest. As the story was filled with myths, tragedies, adventures and mystery, even the name of the Mexican emperor changed from one work to another.

In 1781 a new *Montesuma* appeared, once again with a libretto by Vittorio Amadeo, and this time with music by Nicola Antonio Zingarelli, who was born in Naples in 1752 and died in 1837 in a town near his native city.

The high posts that Zingarelli held, such as Vatican choirmaster and director of the Naples Conservatory, give us an idea of his remarkable ability as a composer.

In 1786, Rome witnessed the debut of the Italian opera *Fernando nel Messico* (Ferdinand in Mexico), by the Neapolitan composer Giuseppe Giordani, known as Giordanello so as to distinguish him from his brother Tomasso, who was a more important composer. Giuseppe, who lived from 1753 to 1798, wrote approximately 35 operas.

While the Conquest was an attractive topic for many composers, it was never as popular as the stories of Orpheus or Mithridates, for example. European audiences found it more exotic than dramatic, and therefore less attractive.

Despite the printed narratives of the Conquest that circulated throughout Europe, librettos on the topic were scarce. The fact that the Conquest was a "Spanish event" may have led other

countries to view it with a certain disdain, albeit not with total disinterest.

Italy, for example, always displayed a certain interest in operatic productions related to the Conquest. In Venice's San Benedetto, another opera on Cortés made its debut in 1797, also with the title *Fernando in Messico*. This opera, with a libretto by Traducci, was written by the Portuguese composer Marcos Antonio Portugal, who Italianized his name as Marc'Antonio di Portogallo.

Born in Lisbon in 1762, Portogallo wrote 40 operas before his death in Rio de Janeiro in 1830. One of his works debuted in 1801 in Paris at the opening of the Italian theater, in accordance with the orders of then-consul Napoleon Bonaparte.

One of the most singular and important productions in the history of opera is Gasparo Spontini's *Hernán Cortés or the Conquest of Mexico*. Spontini was born in Maiolati on November 14, 1774, and died in the same city on January 24, 1851. The son of peasants, his talent led to a brilliant career; he was even made a member of the nobility, with the title of Count of San Andrea.

Spontini spent many years in France, where he presented his best operas: *La vestale*, *Olimpia* and *Hernán Cortés*. Private composer for the Empress Josephine and later music director for the king of Prussia, he was also a member of the Institute of France and would surely have been awarded further honors if his prickly and ill-tempered personality had not gotten in the way.

Hernán Cortés, which was dedicated to the Count of Pradel, debuted in Paris on November 28, 1809, and was an instant success. Nevertheless, the transition between scenes left much to be desired, leading the librettist Jouy (also known for his work with Rossini) to reverse the order of the acts.

In the original version, the first act was extremely vigorous and made



Moctezuma as depicted in a Colonial screen painting.

a big impact on the audience, while the following acts were less interesting. The new version of the opera made its debut on May 8, 1817, and was even more successful than the original.

Berlioz, not an easy man to please, declared that the uprising scene and the second act were so moving that when he heard them he felt overcome by emotion. Wagner praised the opera as well.

Spontini noted that "In *La vestale* I dealt with a Roman theme; in *Hernán Cortés* with a Hispano-Mexican drama; in *Olimpia* with a Greco-Macedonian legend; and in *Inés de Hohenstaufen* with a German brawl. All the rest is worthless."

England did not remain entirely aloof from the epic of Cortés. London's Convent Garden was the scene of the debut, on December 5, 1822, of an opera entitled *Cortés or the Conquest of Mexico*; the music was by Henry Rowley Bishop (1786-1855), almost universally considered the best English composer of his day. The libretto, written by Planche, was based on the work of the illustrious blind American writer Prescott.

Bishop took the post of director of Convent Garden in 1810, with a five-year contract which was renewed for another five years. He also devoted himself to teaching in Edinburgh and was so highly regarded that in 1842 Queen Victoria awarded him a noble title, a distinction which had not been given to any other musician.

The Viennese composer Ignaz Xaver Seyfried, who was born in 1776 and died in 1841, was a disciple of Mozart and Albrechtsberger and, for thirty years, director of the Schikaneder theater (named for the theater's founder, the librettist for *The magic flute*). Highly regarded in Austria and other countries, by the time of his death at the age of 65 he had received awards from the Austrian states as well as the cities of Paris, Nuremberg, Prague and Stockholm.

His renown was due in part to his famous "melodrames," a theatrical production in which the actor or actors interrupted their speeches to listen to pieces of instrumental music which expressed the feeling of the given scene. His *Montezuma* was one of his most famous "melodrames," debuting in Vienna in 1825.

Spain has not produced many operas, and few indeed on the subject of the Conquest—in part because of the popularity of the *zarzuela* (musical comedy). Still, there are a few.

On July 14, 1832, in Madrid's Príncipe Theater, an opera on the Conquest made its debut; entitled *La heroína de México* (The heroine of Mexico), it was a serious melodrama

in two acts. The libretto, by Ferretti, carried the following notation: "The plot of the melodrama is pure invention, although it rests upon a number of universally recognized historical characters. As protagonist, the author chose a Spanish hero already celebrated in other poems, and presented the fable in the way he considered most favorable for creating an illusion." The music was written by the Italian master Luigi Ricci.

The opera *Hernán Cortés o la conquista de México*, by the Spanish composer Ignacio Ovejero—who was only 18 years old—was presented for the first time in Madrid's Circus Theater, on March 18, 1848. The work was a failed attempt to combine different texts and attitudes. After this production, Ovejero devoted himself exclusively to writing *zarzuelas*.

This very brief list must necessarily include a Mexican opera which is directly related to the topic of Cortés: the symphonic drama *Tata Vasco*, by Miguel Bernal Jiménez, a composer from the state of Michoacán. The opera, with a text by Manuel Muñoz, made its debut in 1941.

Tata Vasco was composed to commemorate the fourth centenary of the arrival in Pátzcuaro of Michoacán's first bishop, Vasco de Quiroga, an illustrious figure who was made a member of the church hierarchy virtually overnight as a result of his intellectual qualities and good works on behalf of the Indians.

Also worthy of mention is a simple work entitled *Malinche*, which lasts 45 minutes and was recently presented for the first time in Great Britain. It was written by the English composer Paul Barker. The plot unfolds in 1519. The chorus sings in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, while Cortés switches back and forth between Spanish and Latin.

As background for this text, I have used José Subirá's article "Hernán Cortés in theatrical music" ❧