

TUTTO VIVALDI

The Vivaldi Edition's Susan Orlando talks to Brian Robins

There is today no more extensive or ambitious a recording project than that of Naïve to record every work of Vivaldi housed in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin. The vast collection of operas, cantatas, sacred and instrumental music represents the largest extant assemblage of manuscript works by any 18th-century composer, making the project, started at the turn of the century, one of heroic proportions. Any attempt to determine the exact number of operas Vivaldi composed is fraught with problems, as anyone who has even glanced at the worklist in *New Grove Opera* will recognize. The number of lost works, fragments and pasticcios clouds a straightforward answer. Suffice it to say that to date Naïve has issued 17 operas plus the serenata *La Senna festeggiante*, with *Il Giustino* as the latest release. *Arsilda, regina di Ponto* is the one full Vivaldi opera left to do, plus there are three pasticcios that will be recorded.

Such are the dry facts. How the Biblioteca Nazionale's collection came to Turin and the recording project was initiated is, by contrast, a tale of strange coincidences, heroic figures and more mysterious twists and turns than you will find in the *calli* of Vivaldi's native Venice. To put flesh on the story I travelled to Turin to meet Susan Orlando, the artistic director and guiding spirit of the recording project.

I wanted first to hear an account of how this massive collection had come to arrive in Turin. 'It's a long story!' Orlando replies. 'When Vivaldi died in Vienna in 1741 we know that he had debts, so the authorities immediately sealed off the family home and we have the inventory that was made. It included no musical instruments, no musical manuscripts, but there was a big, empty chinoiserie chest. It seems that Vivaldi's brother, a bit of a renegade, had got hold of the instruments and music, which he sold off to a Jacopo Soranso, a collector who sold on to another collector. Finally the music arrived with Count Durazzo, who's best remembered today as Gluck's patron. The scion of a noble family in Genoa, Durazzo was also an impresario and collector, who, having no offspring, left his huge collection of music to his family residing in the Palazzo Balbo in Genoa. In the 1890s one of his descendants split the collection into two, leaving half to one of his sons, half to another. One of the sons lived near Alessandria [near Turin] and when he died he left all

■ Antonio Vivaldi, and the opening page of his 'Il Giustino' in manuscript



this music to the Salesian College there. By all accounts they were really not very interested in this stuff, but went to pick it up in wheelbarrows, brought it back and dumped it in the courtyard of the college in the rain before it ended up in the attic.

‘In the 1920s the Salesians needed to restore their buildings, so the directors went to Luigi Torri, the director of the Biblioteca Nazionale here in Turin, asking if they would be interested in purchasing it. Torri had a friend who was a composer and was the first person to hold a university position as a musicologist in Italy. His name was Alberto Gentili—he’s really the genius in this story, and he deserves huge credit because he immediately recognized the importance of the collection. But he also realized how vital it was to keep the discovery secret, because if word got out the antiquarian booksellers would descend on it and it would be dispersed, the usual fate of such large collections. He was also aware that there were no funds available, but he found a buyer, a banker whose name was Roberto Foà, who had recently lost his young son. Foà purchased it for the Biblioteca Nazionale in memory of his child. Meanwhile, Gentili was going through the music and realized something was wrong because so many works were obviously incomplete—operas with only two acts rather than three and so on. He did some research and discovered that there was another half to the collection still in the family palazzo in Genoa. However, when approached by Gentili the family refused to sell, perhaps unhappy because the Salesians had been given the collection as a gift. It took Gentili three years, again keeping everything very hush-hush, to convince the family to sell. Then Gentili found another backer, a man called Filippo Giordano, who by coincidence also wanted to fund the purchase, in memory of a lost son. So these two men, with their magnanimous gestures, brought the collection back together, and were rewarded by having their names attached to the folios after the collection was catalogued. Regrettably, Gentili’s contribution is today largely uncelebrated. As a Jew he was forced during the war to flee Turin and go into the mountains, after which he returned a broken man, soon forgotten.’

■ *An American in Vivaldi-land: Susan Orlando*



Viewing the manuscripts themselves in the Biblioteca Nazionale is a privilege rarely granted now that they have been digitized. Neatly bound between vellum covers, they are tidily written in the hand of either Vivaldi himself or a copyist. Hatched crossings-out are relatively few; occasionally one comes across a glued-in addition. With rare exceptions, all the recitatives are written in Vivaldi’s hand, showing the importance the composer attached to recitative; other composers often farmed this out, rather like painters getting the less interesting bits done by pupils. ‘He also puts in the words himself, to ensure they’re in the right place,’ Orlando says, pointing out a place where he has added variations. How might the obvious significance of recitative to Vivaldi be equated with the fact that audiences frequently didn’t listen to

recitative—they came to hear their favourite singers in the arias? Orlando suggests that perhaps the first time people went to an opera they listened to it straight through, recitative and all, and then on subsequent occasions they just listened to the arias they liked best. ‘We have to remember that audiences went to the same operas night after night.’ She points out a sequence where a passage in Vivaldi’s hand is



■ *The Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin*

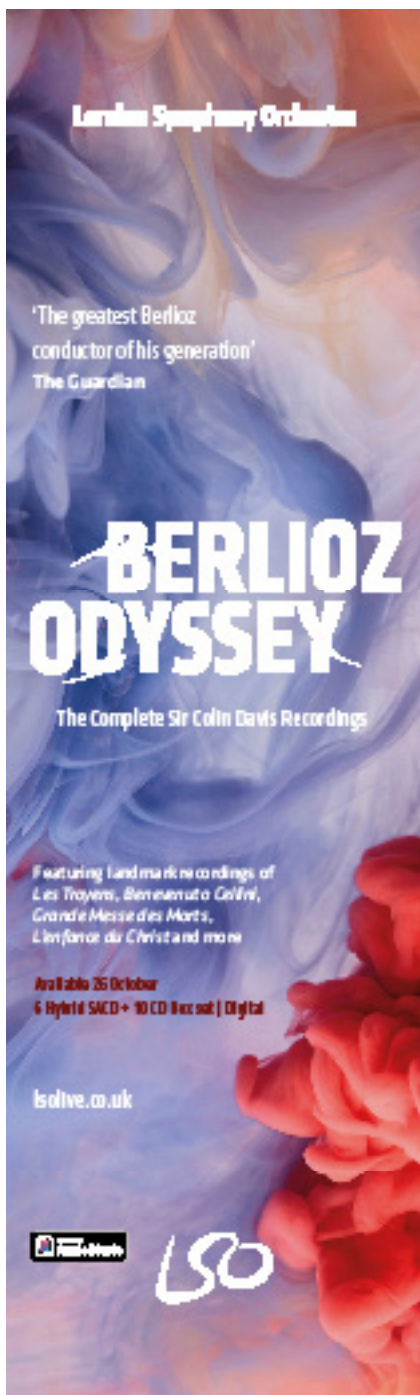
followed by an aria by Leonardo Leo in a totally different hand—but the underlay of the new text is in Vivaldi’s hand, providing a fascinating insight into one of the ways pasticcio might have worked. Among countless other valuable insights, the manuscripts also occasionally provide us with the name of a singer.

Orlando herself is a viola da gamba player, more accustomed to working with music of the 17th century than the 18th. She became involved with the Vivaldi Edition through the musicologist Alberto Basso. ‘In the 1990s he started a department under the auspices of the city of Turin and Piedmont. Its *raison d’être* was to make inventories of all the musical archives in the region, the Biblioteca Nazionale of course coming into that category. When I asked him how he had come up with the idea of recording all this music he replied that the entire time he was working on the manuscripts he kept wondering how all this music could be transmitted to the public. It was quite brilliant on Basso’s part, because when you think about it a manuscript is not really alive until it is performed, while concerts are ephemeral. But by doing recordings you’re engraving this music. A fire could destroy all these manuscripts but once they’re recorded they are here to stay.

‘I had just shown up in Turin. Alberto knew me, he knew I could organize, that I had languages and that I knew a lot of people in the music world. He asked me if I’d like to represent them for the recording project they’d launched. I said sure, as a part-time job—I wasn’t sure how long I’d do it as it didn’t fit my background. At first I thought the idea of recording absolutely everything was crazy, but as I became involved I quickly found the music extraordinary—it was unbelievable that so much of it was unknown. I also recognized how important it was to get this music to the public. At that point I decided it wasn’t a coincidence that this had fallen in my lap. It was my destiny.’

The Vivaldi Edition was initially launched by Opus 111, a small French company dedicated to Baroque repertoire and run by Yolanta Skura. Opus 111 had launched the recording careers of Fabio Biondi and Rinaldo Alessandrini. ‘So it was natural for Basso to go there with the project. Yolanta Skura was enthusiastic, as any record company offered sponsorship might have been. Then she decided to sell out to Naïve, so when I entered the scene it was just starting.’

Over the years Orlando has become fully responsible for planning the series. How does she choose the artists? ‘For vocal music I feel very strongly that for these recordings you want to get Italians or people who are fluent in Italian as often as possible. Eighteenth-century Baroque opera is a specialty and there is the particular challenge of the recitative.



You must be able to act out these parts in a very convincing way if you are to capture the interest of the public, and if it is not your language this is quite difficult to do well. There are exceptions, and the French mezzo Delphine Galou is a perfect example.’ I suggest there may be a good reason for that, since Galou is married to the Italian conductor Ottavio Dantone, now one of Orlando’s principal go-to artists. ‘But,’ she adds, ‘when you look back over the years you find there wasn’t a big enough roster of Italian singers we could use, but there were plenty of fine non-Italian singers who had the vocal agility to do the arias beautifully. It was only over the years that I began realizing the need to improve the quality of interpretation of recitatives.’ What about instrumentalists? ‘I feel the same way. While I think the French can grasp 18th-century mannerisms in music better than the Italians or English, I’m equally convinced Italian performers have this music in their blood and bring to it a little something more than someone from another culture. I’m certainly not saying nobody else should play this music—on the contrary, music is there for everyone to play. But we’re doing documentary work here, providing an example for people to follow that is interpreted by very fine musicians steeped in this repertoire. Who better to make recordings that can serve as a model? If you’re a young person just starting out in Baroque music you need that model.’

Orlando may describe her involvement with the Vivaldi Edition as her destiny, but her words suggest that it is more—that it is equally her mission to ensure for posterity the recorded documentation of a body of work that has survived the vicissitudes of history only by extraordinarily good fortune.

Ottavio Dantone’s new recording of ‘Il Giustino’, the latest volume in Naïve’s Vivaldi Edition, has just been released (OP 30571). See next month’s issue for our review.