

The priest of love

The discovery of two forgotten arias turns the spotlight back on Vivaldi - and his racy reputation.

By Jessica Duchen

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Antonio Vivaldi's blockbuster concerto series *The Four Seasons* has probably graced every TV station, shopping-mall, hotel lift and Italian restaurant in the Western world. Almost 300 years old, it remains one of the most popular pieces of classical music ever composed. But Vivaldi himself - known as the "Red Priest" of Venice and the Paganini of his day - is a figure bizarrely shrouded in mystery.

So, when an 18th-century volume of Italian arias recently turned up in the archives of Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire, and proved to contain six unknown extracts from a "lost" Vivaldi opera, *La Costanza Trionfante* (1716), it was the latest surprise piece in the jumbled-up jigsaw surrounding this Baroque master.

Marshall Marcus, chief executive of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) that will give some of these arias their first public performance at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on 25 November, describes the find as extremely rare. "It's incredibly unusual to pull out a part-book that's been sitting in an English castle for 300 years and find such things," he comments. "But then, with Vivaldi, there are so many documents that are as yet unlocated and so much music which has yet to come to light..."

Unusual it may be, but the plot has thickened still further with the discovery in a Venetian conservatoire library of yet more vanished Vivaldi, this time an "operatic serenata" entitled *Andromeda Liberate*, hitherto unperformed in modern times. This piece, which dates from 1726, emerged from its obscurity when a French musicologist, Olivier Fourés, explored the manuscript and identified one aria as identical to another acknowledged Vivaldi work. *Andromeda Liberate* is thought to have been written for celebrations at the French Embassy in Venice, marking the return from exile of a great musical patron, Cardinal Ottoboni.

The Barbican is presenting its UK premiere in December, with the Venice Baroque Orchestra, and a recording is about to be released on the Deutsche Grammophon Archiv label.

So what is going on? Why are such treasure troves still waiting to be unearthed after 275 years? According to the British researcher Micky White, who is writing a book about Vivaldi and has spent the past six years working in the archive of the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, an orphanage where Vivaldi was a teacher, there is more to discover - and not only about Vivaldi's works, but about his life as well. "Nobody had really started digging among the documents before," she says. "I decided to go back to the beginning and see the truth for myself."

Vivaldi's life history, as it is often told, would not seem out of place in the racier kind of historical novel. The red-haired son of a musician at the Basilica of San Marco, Vivaldi was among the most ground-breaking composers of his day, and an equally gifted violinist. Though an ordained priest, he was also an entrepreneur, making - and losing - a fortune across his 63 years. As music teacher at the Pietà, he famously transformed its young women into musical virtuosi. He was afflicted all his life with a peculiar ailment, thought to be a form of asthma, but travelled widely despite this; and when he met the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, it was reported that the monarch talked more to him in two weeks than to all his ministers in two years. Meanwhile Vivaldi is thought to have had a liaison with a young contralto, Anna Girò, for whom he wrote some of his most beautiful arias. And just like Mozart, he died a pauper in Vienna.

Or so the story goes. But White has become convinced that many of the more lurid suppositions about Vivaldi are far removed from the truth. The picture she paints of him is nevertheless just as extraordinary.

"What first grabbed me about him was that he had a character like John McEnroe," she declares. "He was unconventional, did his own thing and was a genius. If we were to compare him to musicians of an identical mentality, it would be The Beatles!"

Vivaldi, says White, was a passionate, intense and nervous man; vulnerable yet also tough. "He was terribly faithful. If you made a friend of him, you'd be a friend for life; if you upset him seriously, he would never forgive you. He worked incredibly hard; music just poured out of him."

But how was it possible that a man incapacitated by asthma could write, teach and perform so much? White points out that nothing presupposed about his health is definitive. "His birth certificate describes him as 'in danger of death' - but that was not unusual in those days. The diagnosis of asthma was made by musicologists."

The next myth that White bulldozes is that of Anna Girò, long assumed to have been Vivaldi's mistress. Anna came to Venice in 1725 with her mother and step-sister Paolina. "Then the mother ran away, and Vivaldi took them under his wing. Anna was his singing pupil and he probably had a 'weakness' for her. But no physical relationship took place. If he had been a priest living with two women, the Pietà would have kicked him out."

Instead, White suggests, Vivaldi's priesthood was in fact a crucial part of his psyche. Becoming a priest was an arduous 10-year process, from which many candidates dropped out. "Nobody pushed him into it," says White. "He had a vocation."

There was one more crucial presence in Vivaldi's life: his father. Vivaldi lived with his family all his life and, says White, "never took a step without his daddy behind him. His father was his prop and stay and mentor." What's more, Giovanni Battista Vivaldi was a sharp-minded businessman. Antonio learned everything he knew about business matters from him - and the composer was indeed "a clever, cunning old fox!". About Vivaldi's death in poverty in Vienna, however, White remains mysterious. "That will be revealed in my book."

What remains unquestionable is that Vivaldi's genius can be compared to only a handful of others - such as Paganini, Liszt and, indeed, The Beatles. But why, then, are only a handful of his 700-plus works heard now? His operas have vanished, suggests White, because they were designed for an operatic tradition far removed from today's: "Italian Baroque operas went on for four to six hours and you went there to do business, have a picnic or throw oranges. All this would go on through the recitatives and then people would shut up for the arias!"

Beyond opera, the popularity of *The Four Seasons* overshadows almost everything else. Nevertheless, *The Four Seasons* deserves its popularity: written as early 1718-20, it was the forerunner of the "programme music" that dominated the Romantic era more than a century later. "It's the most extraordinary work - so original," says White. "It's performed in Venice every day of the year and still draws the crowds." And now, the violinist Nigel Kennedy, whose recent recordings for EMI of *The Four Seasons* and other Vivaldi concertos with the Berlin Philharmonic have given them another high-profile boost, is touring the UK with a concert programmed called "The Vivaldi Experience", accompanied by the Irish Chamber Orchestra. A mystery Vivaldi may be, but this winter he seems to be everywhere - enabling us to appreciate the genius of a composer whose music, in the words of White, "came not out of his head, but his soul".

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1 (0870 380 0400), 25 Nov; Nigel Kennedy's "The Vivaldi Experience", Barbican, London EC2 (020-7638 4141) 30 Nov and touring to 7 Dec (www.icorch.com/calendar/kennedy04.shtml); 'Andromeda Liberate', Barbican, 10 Dec