Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) was one of the few truly universal composers of the Baroque. Wide-ranging in ambition and cosmopolitan in outlook, he could craft an opera or motet as easily as he could turn out a sonata or concerto, knowing that they would carry his name and reputation across Europe. His operas were staged throughout Italy and as far afield as Prague, Hamburg and Madrid; Georgian gentlemen on the Grand Tour hungrily collected his cantatas and sonatas; and in Germany the young Johann Sebastian Bach learned valuable lessons about the fashionable new Italian style by studying and arranging Vivaldi’s violin concertos.

But today, Vivaldi’s horizons have narrowed. Although still famous for his great productivity, his modern reputation teeters on a handful of concertos. The Four Seasons may have spearheaded his 20th-century revival, but they distract our attention from the rest of his music – much of which remains unknown. The full extent of Vivaldi’s ambition as a composer could not have been guessed at if his personal library of scores had not survived – almost perfectly intact. Owned in the late 18th century by the Genoese Ambassador and patron of Gluck, Giacomo Durazzo, the manuscripts were eventually purchased (some from Durazzo’s descendants) in the late 1920s by two wealthy families – Foa and Giordano – who gave them to the National Library of Turin in memory of their sons.

The Turin manuscripts are the key to the real Vivaldi. Long shrouded in mystery, these precious volumes have only recently begun to reveal their greatest treasures. They contain over 450 pieces – sacred and secular – most of them unique, most of them in Vivaldi’s hand, and all of them full of Vivaldi’s meticulous performing instructions – even his own breathtaking cadenzas. The Turin collection has long been a playground for scholars, but in 2000 Naive Records founded their Vivaldi Edition, an ambitious, long-term project to systematically explore and record the entire contents of the Turin collection – and do for Vivaldi what Deutsche Grammophon did for Bach’, hopes its director Susan Orlando.

While some of the Turin scores are in Vivaldi’s neatest handwriting, many are messier drafts or performing copies offering fascinating insights into his working methods and personality. We can actually witness the
Vivaldi may be best known for his concertos, but his richest music can be found in his many operas. **Simon Heighes** is granted access to the manuscripts in Turin, and reveals the craft that underpins the composer’s most ravishing masterpieces.

It's clear from his autograph scores that Vivaldi’s operas were in a constant state of flux, continually tweaked during performance and substantially revised for revivals where new casts had to be catered for. On the title page of the opera *Tito Manlio* Vivaldi may have boasted that he composed it ‘in just five days’, but this was obviously just the beginning of the process. Singers were always after new arias with which to win the adulation of the audience, and although Vivaldi often obliged, he clearly had his limits. Having wickedly typecast the tricky prima donna Margherita Gualandi as an evil sorceress in *Orlando furioso* pazze, she lived up to form and — able to ‘screach louder than an eagle’ — demanded three rewrites of her importantly placed Act III aria. Though Vivaldi later crossed it out, you can still clearly read his exasperated comment scribbled at the top of the absolutely final version: ‘If she doesn’t like this I am not writing any more music.’

After a few hours turning the leaves of these manuscripts — with their rich pasta-infused smell and ink so clear and fresh — Vivaldi himself feels close at hand. Federico Maria Sardelli and I are looking at a page with frequent changes in handwriting which conjure up a vivid picture of life in the Vivaldi household in Venice. Vivaldi himself begins writing out the opening of an aria neatly but, perhaps called to the door or the dinner table, the copying is continued by his father. Vivaldi comes back a few minutes later and writes in the words, then the two of them leave the room and the work is completed by a couple of cousins. It’s perhaps surprising to learn that for most of his adult life Vivaldi lived at home with his parents, his two unmarried sisters and a protégé or two. Together, the extended Vivaldi family formed a cottage industry, with everyone lending a hand, and everyone sharing in the rewards. The richest rewards were reaped in the theatre. Although Vivaldi is best known today for his concertos and some of his church music, the contents of the Turin collection make it clear that he devoted much of his career to opera. In fact, along with his Neapolitan contemporary Alessandro Scarlatti, Vivaldi was the most prolific opera composer of the late Baroque. This is not quite the Vivaldi we thought we knew. Between 1713 and his death in 1741 there’s firm evidence that Vivaldi set at least 49
When it came to the orchestra, Vivaldi had free rein

the leading singers, who were to be provided with a strict quota of arias relative to their fame and fee. The standard issue was the *da capo aria*, which always ended with a repeat of the opening section intensified by the singer’s own ornamentation. It was these moments of virtuosic improvisation which audiences relished most. As for the drama, for most composers it was relegated to bris, conversational recitatives - unmelodic and usually accompanied simply by the harpsichord. As one opera-lover suggested, perhaps only half in jest: ‘Chess is marvelously well adapted to filling the monotonous of the recitatives; and the arias are equally good for interrupting a too assiduous concentration on chess.’

The arias themselves were of easily recognisable types: without looking up from the chess boards or supper in their boxes, audiences could grasp the latest emotional development. Rage, jealousy, misery and love - each had its own musical clichés, and Vivaldi exploited them all. But Federico Maria Sardelli, conductor of many of Vivaldi’s operas, hears countless original touches in the music. ‘Vivaldi is more careful than many of his contemporaries in expressing shades of emotion: by making a contrast between the middle and outer sections of an aria, an angry character can briefly indulge in a moment of forgiveness before ultimately returning to their over-riding emotion.’

When it came to the orchestra, Vivaldi’s imagination had free rein. Few other composers would ever have thought of using two harpsichords in dialogue with two...
on-stage violins to evoke the gentle murmur of a breeze. 'Even with just a string orchestra, Vivaldi finds more colours than other composers,' says Sardelli. 'In Orlando furioso he writes an aria where the violins are muted, some of the bass instruments pluck and some of them bow – and the harpsichords are silenced completely.'

Tenor Topi Lehtipuu, who's just recorded the title role in Catone in Utica, reckons one of the greatest strengths of Vivaldi's operas are the highly charged recitatives. 'As a person, we get to know Catone better through his recitatives than his arias. They're full of subtle psychology and make the maximum dramatic impact in the theatre.' In Orlando furioso the eponymous hero's tragic descent into madness is charted entirely in this heightenened speech-like music – without an aria in sight.

The Turin manuscripts are full of evidence of just how seriously Vivaldi took the composition of his recitatives. In one case, after no fewer than three false starts, he was forced to rewrite the words themselves in order to achieve precisely the dramatic effect he wanted. Though not a dramatist of the rank of Monteverdi or Handel, Vivaldi clearly had finely honed theatrical instincts. It's telling that his favourite prima donna, Anna Giro, was the rarest creature of Baroque opera – a spellbinding actress rather than a first-class singer. To put on an opera without La Giro is just not possible, Vivaldi insisted.

To put on Catone in Utica without its opening act was the major challenge facing conductor Alan Curtis in the latest instalment of Naive's Vivaldi Edition. But after careful reconstruction of the missing music, a work of real stature has emerged. 'It's a great drama, and Vivaldi's recitatives are unusually good,' promises Curtis. But although he still considers Vivaldi one of the most neglected and misunderstood of the great composers, there are promising signs on the horizon. Fourteen operas from the Turin collection have now been recorded and have encouraged an increasing number of fully staged productions. In fact, Curtis predicts that Vivaldi is spearheading a more widespread revival of late Baroque opera. 'In the near future we are going to be hearing (and seeing) a lot more operas by Vivaldi's gloriously gifted competitors – Leo, Foscari and Vinci. So, Puccini, watch out!' Alan Curtis's new recording on Naive of Vivaldi's Catone in Utica is reviewed on p83.