THE KEYBOARD SONATAS OF DOMENICO SCARLATTI AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MUSICAL STYLE

W. Dean Sutcliffe investigates one of the greatest yet least understood repertories of Western keyboard music: the 555 keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. Scarlatti occupies a position of solitary splendour in musical history. The sources of his style are often obscure and his immediate influence is difficult to discern. Further, the lack of hard documentary evidence – of the sort normally taken for granted when dealing with composers of the last few hundred years – has hindered musicological activity. Dr Sutcliffe offers not just a thorough reconsideration of the historical factors that have contributed to Scarlatti's position, but also sustained engagement with the music, offering both individual readings and broader commentary of an unprecedented kind. A principal task of this book, the first in English on the sonatas for fifty years, is to remove the composer from his critical ghetto (however honourable) and redefine his image. In so doing it will reflect on the historiographical difficulties involved in understanding eighteenth-century musical style.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book deals with one of the greatest but least well understood and covered repertories of Western keyboard music, the 555 keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti.[1] Their composer occupies a position of somewhat solitary splendour in musical history. The sources of his style are often obscure, there are no contemporaries of his with whom he can be more than loosely grouped, and his immediate historical influence, with the exception of a few composers of the next generation in Spain, is difficult to discern. Yet enthusiastic testimonials on his behalf have been provided by many later musicians, whether composers, performers or writers. For all the acknowledgement of mastery, however, the fact remains that the acknowledgement is usually brief. The extreme lack of hard documentary evidence together with Scarlatti's uneasy historical position has hindered sustained musicological engagement with his music, and this has a flow-on effect into other spheres of musical life. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a wide gap between the general public's and performers' interest in the composer and the amount of writing available to answer that. Thus my principal task is to remove the composer from his critical ghetto (however honourable), redefine his image, and to place him more firmly in the context of eighteenth-century musical style. At the same time I would hope to offer some useful thoughts on just this larger context, and indeed on the concept of style as well.

An uncertain and sporadic critical tradition has determined my approach to the task. Reception history and close reading constitute the basic lines of thought. Given the lack of so many contextual and documentary resources, reception history fills the gap – not just *faute de mieux* but also as a way of investigating how one constructs a composer when so many issues are floating. Chapter 2 forms the focus for this, building on aspects outlined in Chapter 1. In view of the justified charge that Scarlattian research has been uncoordinated, I wanted here to coordinate as many views as possible, even at the risk of overloading the discussion. Further, I can hardly assume a familiarity on the part of the reader with so much far-flung literature, in many different languages. There is insufficient scholarly momentum for any views to

[1] The often quoted total number of 555 sonatas is in fact something of a fabrication on the part of Ralph Kirkpatrick. In his determination to produce a memorable figure, he numbered two sonatas K. 204a and K. 204b, for instance, and allowed to stand as authentic several works that have since been widely regarded as dubious. See Joel Sheveloff, 'Tercentenary Frustrations', *The Musical Quarterly* 71/4 (1985), 433.

be taken as read. Another way in which I have plugged the gap is by incorporating substantial discussions of recorded performances. This may be an unusual move, but performances after all represent the business end of any reception history, the ultimate engagement with the texts offered by a composer. I only regret that, perhaps inevitably, I am more likely to draw attention to readings and approaches with which I differ than those with which I am in agreement.

The case for close reading is of course more delicate nowadays. While the larger issues relating to such interpretation will be answered both by word and deed in the chapters that follow, there is a particular justification for its employment in the case of a figure like Scarlatti. It is one thing to problematize close reading when a composer's craft has been established by a long tradition – when there is, rightly or wrongly, some centred notion of 'how the music goes'. With Scarlatti, though, there has been an almost total absence of detailed analytical writing. It therefore seemed important to try to establish some credentials for his style, to gain a strong feeling for the grain of his language. Indeed, many of the most special and radical aspects of his music only seem to emerge through close attention to detail. I have certainly missed the existence of such readings that could be used as a means of sharpening the field of enquiry. In no other respect has my work felt like such a leap into the dark. And I should emphasize too that many of the readings, and the larger arguments to which they give rise, were extraordinarily hard won. They only arose after endless hours playing the sonatas (with many more dedicated to playing other keyboard music of the century) and often simply staring at the printed page, hoping for enlightenment. This process unfolded principally during the years 1993 to 1997. My study is appearing fifty years after the last book in English to be devoted principally to the Scarlatti sonatas, by Ralph Kirkpatrick. Coincidentally, as I recently discovered, Kirkpatrick's 'systematic stylistic examination' of the sonatas occupied an equivalent period fifty years ago, from 1943 to 1947. I hope this is a good omen.

The relative absence of sharpening material referred to above reflects a broader difficulty in approaching my subject – the flat critical landscape of the Scarlatti literature. There are no established leading critical issues to which one responds and which help to create a framework for interpretation, although there are certainly plenty of specifically musicological ones. By 'critical' I mean those ways of thinking that try to interpret in broad cultural and artistic terms, that are readily accessible to those who lack detailed musical knowledge. (The lack of critical engagement is evident in the new entry on Scarlatti in the recent edition of *New Grove*; it seems to me to represent a step backwards from its predecessor.) Because of this I have not specialized within my field – a flatter terrain has had to be traversed. In another world, for instance, I might have devoted the whole study to those issues of syntax and temporality that are tackled primarily in Chapter 4. On the other hand, no comprehensive survey of the output is intended. There are many areas which have been merely glanced at or for which I ran out of room. These include the history of editions, especially those in the nineteenth century, the history of

arrangements (although there is some material on Avison's concerto arrangements in Chapter 4), coverage of some of Scarlatti's very talented Iberian contemporaries, and an examination of the various 'new' sonatas that have been unearthed in the past generation.

There is an advantage, however, to this state of affairs. It has encouraged me to think big when attempting to place the composer, especially since it was not my primary concern to advance further some of the acknowledged problems of hard evidence. The generic and geographical circumstances – short keyboard sonatas written mostly on the Iberian peninsula – might not exactly encourage monumental interpretation, yet, as will I hope be shown, there is plenty to be expansive about.

Another large-scale quantity is style. In engaging with this as a central point of enquiry, I have had to dance around several nasty issues of definition. These are engaged with consistently through my text, but several ought to be signalled now. One concerns the characterization of the popular elements that loom so large in the world of the sonatas, and the appropriateness of terms such as Spanish, Portuguese, Iberian, flamenco, even Neapolitan. The other relates to those established larger points of stylistic reference, Baroque and Classical. In the first case there is the difficulty of whether such terms can be used with any precision, which is addressed particularly in Chapter 3. In the latter case, the issue concerns the utility of the terms altogether. What is perhaps most important to note at this stage is that these are just the kinds of difficulty that have discouraged scholarly endeavour, especially in relation to a figure such as Domenico Scarlatti. They prompt pangs of conscience that I too have experienced in writing my account; yet they have added to the fascination of the project.

The first chapter of my study introduces some of the issues surrounding Scarlatti and sets up some parameters for interpretation by dealing with four individual sonatas. After the focus on reception in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 ('Heteroglossia') investigates the types of material found in the sonatas, the ambiguity of their definition and the composer's relationship to them. This is followed by the longest and possibly most important chapter ('Syntax'), which deals with all the unusual patternings, shapings and treatments of repetition which promote a sense of syntactical renewal in the sonatas. Then Chapter 5 ('Irritations') reveals a number of those special details that do so much to define Scarlattian language. These include not just the well-known 'irritations' of harmony and voice leading, but also apparent inconsistencies of ornamentation and tempo designation. An examination of the peculiar character of many of Scarlatti's Andantes follows naturally from this last category. Following on from all the above is a consideration of the sources, the master category of irritation. The difficulty of the source situation will be evaluated through a number of case studies. Macario Santiago Kastner's phrase 'una genuina música de tecla' ('a genuine keyboard writing') is used as a springboard for a discussion of keyboard style in Chapter 6, isolating such characteristics as Scarlatti's use of register and doubling. I also consider the physicality of this keyboard style and how we might understand the place of 'unthinking' virtuosity. Chapter 7 ('Formal dynamic')

examines the thematic and formal properties of the sonatas, vital to an understanding of Scarlatti's historical position. The section entitled 'Dialect or idiolect?' reviews a number of the composer's fingerprints and considers their possible historical sources; this also enables us to return to the problematic notion of originality that has borne so much weight in the Scarlatti literature. 'Lyrical breakthrough' describes those moments when suddenly, and generally briefly, a sonata unveils more 'personally' inflected melodic material. The final section, although proceeding from a sceptical position, investigates possible instances of paired sonatas and considers the status of such connections.

The primary sources for the Scarlatti sonatas, those copies now held in libraries in Parma (the Conservatorio Arrigo Boito) and Venice (the Biblioteca Marciana), are sometimes referred to in the text by means of the abbreviations P and V; the same holds for the important Münster (M) and Vienna (W) collections. A comprehensive work list giving full source details for all the sonatas may be found at the end of the article on Scarlatti in the second edition of *New Grove*.[2] Pitch designations follow the Helmholtz system (c^1 = middle C) where specific pitches need to be given; otherwise a 'neutral' capital letter is employed. The sonatas themselves are referred to according to the established Kirkpatrick numbering, while the sonatas of Scarlatti's Lisbon colleague Seixas are cited according to the separate numberings given in the 1965 and 1980 Kastner editions. For the collection of thirty Scarlatti sonatas published in 1739, I have standardized the spelling to the original 'Essercizi' rather than the modern-day 'Esercizi'. All translations from the literature are mine unless otherwise attributed.

Musical examples for the sonatas are reproduced by permission of Editions Heugel et Cie., Paris/United Music Publishers Ltd. The version of the sonata K. 490 given as Plate 1 is reproduced by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. I am grateful to both. Inevitably in such a wide-ranging undertaking, not all discussions of sonatas have been illustrated with music examples. Especially with some of the works covered in greater detail, there is either no example or a partial one, for reasons of space and economy. Readers will require some access to editions of sonatas.

I would like to thank, for their help in all sorts of capacities, the following friends and colleagues: Richard Andrewes, Andrew Bennett, †Malcolm Boyd, John Butt, Jane Clark, Larry Dreyfus, Jonathan Dunsby, Ben Earle, Emilia Fadini, Kenneth Gilbert, Daniel Grimley, Fiona McAlpine, Roger Parker, Simon Phillippo, Virginia Pleasants, Linton Powell, Nils Schweckendieck, David Sutherland, Alvaro Torrente and Ben Walton. I owe a debt to the staff of the Pendlebury Library of the Faculty of Music and the University Library, Cambridge. I also learnt much from the Part II undergraduate seminar groups who took my course on Domenico Scarlatti; their enthusiasm for, and sometimes their incomprehension of, Scarlatti's

[2] Roberto Pagano, with Malcolm Boyd, '(Giuseppe) Domenico Scarlatti', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn, vol. 22, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), 398–417.

creative practices were enormously stimulating. Many thanks to Penny Souster at Cambridge University Press, for all her encouragement over the prolonged period during which I wrestled with Scarlatti's demons. Michael Downes copy-edited the typescript not only with great care but with real sympathy for the project. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of friends such as Michael Francis, Rose Melikan and Julian Philips, my partner Geoff and my parents Pat and Bill, who all put up with endless progress reports on the odyssey.

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