

BMC 8 - DOMENICO SCARLATTI (1685-1757) - *Fifteen Keyboard Sonatas*

Giuseppe Domenico Scarlatti was born in Naples on October 26th, 1685, in the same year as Bach and Handel, and the London composer John Gay (*The Beggar's Opera*). The high rank of Domenico's godparents is proof of the esteem in which his father, Alessandro Scarlatti, was held as *Maestro di Cappella* in Naples.

Domenico's musical gifts developed with an almost prodigious rapidity. At the age of sixteen he became a musician at the Chapel Royal, and two years later father and son left Naples and settled in Rome, where Domenico became the pupil of the most eminent musicians in Italy.

The originality of Bernardo Pasquini's *Inventions* and his skill in elaborating them, and Francesco Gasparini's solid science and intense vitality united to form the basis on which Domenico developed his own genius. His association with Corelli (Gasparini being a pupil of Corelli) also contributed to the evolution of his adolescent genius and soon Domenico Scarlatti became famous in his country principally as a harpsichordist.

A familiar figure at the weekly meetings of the *Accademie Poetico-Musicali* hosted by the indefatigable music-lover and entertainer Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, Scarlatti mingled and performed chamber music with some of the finest musicians in Rome.

There Scarlatti met Handel, who had been born in the same year. At the time of their meeting, in 1708, they were both twenty-three, and were prevailed upon to compete together at the instigation and under the refereeship of Ottoboni; they were adjudged equal on the harpsichord, but Handel was considered the winner on the organ. Thenceforward they held each other in that mutual respect which forms the surest basis for a life friendship.

Through Ottoboni, Scarlatti also met the Irish composer Thomas Roseingrave, who wrote of his encounter with Scarlatti: "I was requested to sit down at the harpsichord and favour the company with a toccata. Finding myself rather better in courage and finger than usual I exerted myself, and fancy by the applause I received that my performance had made some impression on the company. After a cantata had been sung, a grave young man who had stood in one corner of the room being asked to sit down to the harpsichord began to play as though ten hundred devils had been at the instrument, I never heard such passages of execution and effect before. The performance so far surpassed my own, and every degree of perfection to which I think it possible I should ever arrive, that if I had been in sight of any instrument with which to have done the deed I would have cut off my own fingers."

Roseingrave became Scarlatti's enthusiastic champion and, back in London, published the first edition of Scarlatti's *Essercizi per gravicembalo* (1738-9) from which, in turn, the Newcastle-born English composer Charles Avison drew material from at least 29 Scarlatti Sonatas to produce a set of 12 Concertos in 1744. Joseph Kelway and Thomas Arne also popularized Scarlatti's music in England.

Domenico Scarlatti served for five years (1714-19) as *Maestro di Cappella* at the Cappella Giulia in the Vatican. He composed at least one Oratorio (1709) and more than a dozen Operas for his father's Neapolitan theatre, S. Bartolomeo (1703-4), the Roman *Palazzo Zuccari* (1710-14), and *Teatro Capranica* (1715, 1718). His patrons in Rome included the Portuguese ambassador to the Vatican, the Marquis de Fontes (from 1714), who in 1720 was to succeed in winning Scarlatti for the Patriarchal Chapel in Lisbon where he remained until 1728. As a harpsichordist at Lisbon's Royal Court he was entrusted with the musical education of the Princesses.

Maintaining his connections with Italy, he journeyed to Rome in 1724 where he met Quantz, and Farinelli who himself joined the Spanish Court in 1737. In 1725 he returned, at the death of his father, to Naples where he met Johann Hasse who was later to take up an important post in Dresden. And in 1728 he again returned to Rome, where he met and married his first wife by whom he had five children.

Meanwhile Scarlatti's old pupil, the Portuguese princess, had married Ferdinand VI of Spain, and invited him to the Spanish Court. Scarlatti accepted and in 1733 after a period in Seville (from 1729-33) he went to Madrid, where he lived until his death in 1757. At 24 years this would be the longest sojourn of his life and one of the most productive.

18th Century Spain already maintained strong links with the rest of western and central Europe. The material wealth brought by Spain's American expeditions encouraged the growth of princely courts with their attendant artists and musicians, courts which resembled those of France, Austria and Germany in their glitter and grandeur. The royal residents surrounded themselves with all the pleasures which their deep treasuries could provide: endless entertainment and fetes in the gardens and great halls, firework displays, stage presentations, religious festivals, and splendid processions, demanding the presence of musicians, actors

and singers.

The *Zarzuela* had appeared: a light-hearted mixture of drama, comedy, music and folk elements; guitars and castanets were to be heard literally everywhere, along with harsh-sounding wind and bowed string instruments which had been introduced from North Africa by the Moors. With the thorough musical grounding he brought with him from Italy and his own brilliance on the harpsichord, Scarlatti immersed himself in the folk tunes and rhythms of Spain, with their distinctive Moorish/Arabic and gypsy influences. He composed more than 500 Harpsichord Sonatas, unique in their total originality, and the use of the *acciaccatura*, the 'simultaneous mordent', the 'vamp' (usually at the beginning of the second half of a sonata).

The "folk" element is constantly present throughout these works. Upon more formal occasions at court, orchestras constituted similarly to those found elsewhere in Europe were to be heard, and Scarlatti also composed at least 17 separate Sinfonias and a Harpsichord Concerto. He exerted a major influence on such Portuguese and Spanish contemporaries as Carlos de Seixas and Antonio Soler.

Scarlatti's wife died in 1739, and by 1742 he had re-married to a Spanish woman by whom he had four more children. In 1738, sponsored by King John V of Portugal, he passed secret trials to become a Knight of the Order of Santiago, and about 1740 Velasco painted his portrait, for which he wore the full regalia of the Order. He died in Madrid on July 23, 1757.

It is the never-failing invention and vitality of the music in these Sonatas that is so remarkable; all the more so when one realizes that the composer produced the great majority of these works at incredible speed in the last five years or so of his life. In these Sonatas, concentrated into the resources of one keyboard instrument, may be heard all the fire and passion of Spanish life. Not until the 20th century do we find music that so faithfully reflects the ambience of its country's folk culture.

Valda Aveling's Harpsichord was built by Thomas Goff of Pont Street, London, 1956, the design itself being based on a 1777 Kirkman Harpsichord. The case is veneered with burr walnut and inlaid with ebony and holly, and the keyboard is veneered with burr maple and inlaid with tulip wood and ebony. Two Manuals, 16', 8', 4' on the Lower, 8' leather and quilled Lute stop on the Upper, with a Manual coupler. Seven foot-Pedals to facilitate registration changes, each with a "half" position for a soft effect.

*Front cover: Portrait of Domenico Scarlatti as Knight of the Order of Santiago by Velasco, 1740. Back cover: Thomas Goff Harpsichord in the London home of the late Thomas Goff.
Recorded and produced by the Accademia Monteverdiana, Denis Stevens, Musical Director.*