

Music of Domenico Scarlatti

Innovation and Style of His Keyboard Sonatas

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ABSTRACT

Domenico Scarlatti (Naples, 26 October, 1685- Madrid, 23 July, 1757) is one of the most significant Italian music composers in the eighteenth century late Baroque period. Although he is a prolific composer who has composed a great deal of music in wide variety of forms and genres, he is best known for his 550 keyboard sonatas written mostly for the harpsichords (although they are mostly played on modern pianos these days). His keyboard sonatas are single movements, in binary or sonata allegro form, that show innovative virtuosic display on the keyboard with early classical influence. Some of his most important musical attributes of the keyboard works include the influence of Portuguese and Spanish folk music, the adoption of the early eighteenth century *Galant* style, the inspiration of guitar music by using rapid notes being played repetitively, the revolutionary harmonic devices by using unresolved dissonant chords, the usages of extreme dynamic contrasts, the technique of involving constantly hand-crossing over each other, and the complexity of finger works by applying fast running notes of arpeggios moving back and forth from extreme register of the keyboard. Except for his limited eighteenth-century English publications of his earlier sonatas and a few Continental reprints, the bulk of his keyboard music was almost unknown beyond his immediate circle and exercised little direct influence on these later generation Italian and German composers such as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788), Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), Muzio Clementi (1752-1832), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1782-1791), and Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). It was not until the edition compiled by the Italian pianist and musicologist Alessandro Longo (1864-1945) that virtually all the keyboard sonatas became available to the world. Also in 1953, the American musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick (1911-1984) provided a complete list of works and renumbered the entire sonatas in the chronological order of the printed and manuscript collections. Since almost three centuries after Scarlatti's death, his extremely large collection of high-quality keyboard sonatas have been considered one of the most important musical achievements in the history of piano literature. In this article, we will discuss the music of D. Scarlatti based on the following areas, Biography of Domenico Scarlatti, Background of His Keyboard Sonatas, The Analysis of The Sonata L.483, and The Analysis of L.23.

Keywords: *Domenenico Scarlatti, Baroque Music, Baroque Keyboard Music, Galant Style, Baroque Piano, Sonatas, Binary Form, Sonata Allegro Form, 18th Century Music.*

1. BIOGRAPHY OF DOMENICO SCARLATTI

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) was born to a music family in Naples, Kingdom of Naples, in 1685, the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) and George Frideric Handel (1685-1759). He was the sixth of ten children of the composer and teacher Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725), and his older brother Pietro Filippo (1679-1750) also became a musician. Most likely Scarlatti received his early musical trainings under his father

Alessandro. At the age of sixteen, he was holding important organ posts at the royal chapel in Naples, and in 1704, he revised Carlo Francesco Pollaroli's (1653-1723) Opera *Irene* (1694) for performance at Naples.

Later he was sent to Venice to study with Francesco Gasparini (1661-1727), and in 1709 he was in Rome, where he met G. F. Handel. The years until 1720 were spent in that city as maestro di cappella to Queen Maria Casimira of Poland (1641-1716) and later to the Vatican. By 1720, Scarlatti left Rome, took a short trip to London for a production of his opera *Narciso* at the King's

Theater. After he returned from London, he settled in Lisbon as the maestro of royal chapel and music teacher to the Portuguese Princess Maria Magdalena Barbara (1711-1758, later became Queen of Spain). When Scarlatti's royal student married the heir to the Spanish throne in 1729, he accompanied her to Madrid, where he spent the rest of his life except for two short trips to Italy.

It was for the Princess Maria Barbara that Scarlatti composed the music for which he is remembered, the more than 550 keyboard works that we know as sonatas. The first appearance of these works was a publication of thirty of them as *Essercizi Per Gravicembalo* (Exercises for Harpsichord), the only collection of thirty piano sonatas, dedicated to king John V of Portugal (1689-1750), and published in London on 3, February, 1738 during his lifetime. At this time Scarlatti was past fifty years of age, and recent research indicates that he wrote most of his keyboard works in his late sixties and early seventies [1].

2. BACKGROUND OF HIS KEYBOARD SONATAS

The 550 sonatas for solo keyboard were originally intended to be for harpsichord (although these sonatas have been played mostly on modern pianos these days), however, that a few of the works, such as K78, K81 and K88 through K91, are arranged for keyboard and a second instrument. There are no original manuscripts of these works. The most important sources, aside from the early publication, are manuscript volumes in Venice containing 469 sonatas, and fifteen of them are in Parma containing 463 sonatas [2]. Since only limited numbers of his piano sonatas were published during his lifetime, most of his sonatas were published irregularly in the three centuries since his death.

2.1. The Editions Of His Keyboard Sonatas

Various collections and reprints appeared in the nineteenth century, but it was not until 1906 that Alessandro Longo (1864-1945) edited the entire body of his keyboard works, supplementing his work with a thematic index, thus, for a time Scarlatti's sonatas were identified by L. numbers from Longo's chronological listing. Longo's catalogue originated in his landmark full publication of the works of Scarlatti in eleven volumes, grouping of 545 sonatas based on the keys but splitting up Scarlatti's sonata pairs and paying little regard to chronology and style.

In 1953, Ralph Kirkpatrick (1911-1984) published an extremely important study on the life and works of Scarlatti. Kirkpatrick established the fact that Longo's chronology was inaccurate to an extent that obscured Scarlatti's growth as a composer and compromised dull appreciation of his stature. Kirkpatrick argued that 388 of the sonatas should be grouped in pairs in the same key,

usually a slow sonata followed by a fast one. An additional 12 sonatas are to be put together in triptychs. Kirkpatrick produced a new catalogue of Scarlatti's sonatas that uses K. numbers. Longo's edition remains complete but is marred by the addition of the editor's dynamics, phrasing, and other markings. Kirkpatrick edited only sixty of the sonatas, but his work is exemplary [3].

2.2. Structure And Format of His Piano Sonatas

The majority of Scarlatti's sonatas after 1754 are arranged in pairs, each pair, in effect, a sonata of two movements, always in the same key (though one may be major and the other minor), and sometimes similar in mood, sometimes contrasted. The format of sonatas in two movements were adopted by Domenico Alberti (1710-40, the Italian composer associated with Alberti Bass) and many other Italian composers of the eighteenth century, though there is no evidence that they took the idea from Scarlatti. In fact, as Scarlatti seems to have created his own keyboard idiom without models, so he apparently had no successors, with the possible exception of a few Portuguese and Spanish composers. The *Essercizi Per Gravicembalo* of 1738 and a few other sonatas were known and admired in England in the eighteenth century, but very little of Scarlatti's music circulated in France and practically none of it was known in Germany or Italy [4].

All the Scarlatti sonatas are organized by means of tonal relationships, into the standard late Baroque and early Classical binary pattern used for dance pieces and other types of composition: two sections, each repeated, the first closing in the dominant or relative major, the second modulating further afield and then returning to tonic. This is the basic scheme that underlines much instrumental and solo vocal music in the eighteenth century. Scarlatti adopted the structure of binary form in his sonatas and gave the binary form a variety and expressive range that has made these works unique and refined. Their originality and emotional range span every mood and temperament and often require all the talent and skill the most virtuosic performer can deliver [5].

3. THE ANALYSIS OF THE SONATA L.483

This A-major sonata represents the typical late Baroque or early Classical *Galant* style, which the aesthetics of arts were based on the elegance and simplicity of the textures [6]. This sonata exhibits many of the traits of the genre, it was written within the structure of binary form with dance-like character, moderate tempo and homophonic texture. It is in two sections, each repeated, the first section has forty-four, and the second has thirty-seven measures. The opening

four-measure theme starts with three long repeated notes, accompanied by the left hand with steady and even half notes, and the bass line remains the same rhythmic pattern throughout the entire piece. The sonata demonstrates particularly strong influence of Spanish flavor in the usage of ornamentation and sometimes surprising dissonance, reminiscent of the Spanish guitar (the distinctive evidence of composer's thirty year residency in Spain). Thus, like many Scarlatti's keyboard music been re-arranged to the scores of guitar, this sonata also has a guitar edition that becomes one of the most popular works from the classical guitar repertoires.

Like most of the Baroque dance movement in binary form, the modulation takes place to the dominant before the first part ends (it wasn't until measure 11 for the E major's leading tone D sharp to be introduced by the left hand), and the second part modulates further a bit and then returns to the tonic. In this work, Scarlatti created a very unique and colorful effect by using immediate harmonic changes between major and its minor. The alternation of sonority is between E-major and e-minor in the Exposition and is between A-major and a-minor in the second part.

Compare to other composers in Baroque period such as Bach, instead of using a strict polyphonic texture, Scarlatti adopted a more simple elegant homophonic texture with the manner of motive imitation, in this specific example, the repeated notes become a center motive that occurs many times throughout the entire piece, often followed by the next motive that contains a pair of eighth notes and a quarter note. Also, Scarlatti pays close attention to the melodic details by adopting syncopated rhythms to the right hand themes, which made the music more colorful and expressive. In terms of performance tempo, although this was marked *Allegro*, in order to present the march with pastoral spirit, this should not be played too fast.

4. THE ANALYSIS OF THE SONATA L.23

This E-major sonata is one of the most popular works by Scarlatti, which is a representative of the mature style of his writings. This piece is famous for its hunting sprits or expression and was frequently performed in public by Vladimir Horowitz (1903-1989, Russian-born, one of the most prominent pianists in the twentieth century). Compare to L. 483, although this is still within the homophonic style, the texture of this sonata is much richer, and the structure is somehow more experimental and more identical to what is fashionable in Classical period. The structure whether this work is in binary or sonata allegro form can be a disputed issue. However the evidence of the materials in its dominant key being as unique and independent as the second theme of sonata allegro form is clear [7].

The motive with dotted rhythm of the first theme shows distinctive connection to military march, the type of music typically played by horns at hunting activities in the earlier European noble society [8]. The motive of the second theme contains an eighth followed by two sixteenth and two eighth notes, that is a commonly used rhythmic features in the music associated with horse-riding scenes. The first theme has very little thematic relation with the second. The first theme in E-major functioned as an introduction, is more simple and dance-like, and the contrasting second theme in its dominant key (B-major), is rhythmically more agitated and energetic.

The Development section is very short, and the main motive is derived from the second theme of the Exposition. Compare to the Exposition, the sixteen-measure developmental middle section is a short transitional passage that is harmonically richer and darker and also musically more dramatic. In the sixteen bars of the Development, the tonal key goes from the dominant (B-major) to its relative minor (c-sharp minor) and to f-sharp minor and finally arrives to the tonic key (E-major) where it skips the first and goes directly to the second theme of the Recapitulation.

The Recapitulation is basically identical to the Exposition except it stays in the tonic key E major throughout. The ending is presented by a four-bar lyrical closing theme that has rapid scales of the sixteenth on top accompanied by some steady march-like quarter notes from the lower register. If we compare the Recapitulation to the Exposition, since the Recapitulation does not have the section of first theme as Exposition does, the Recapitulation seems relatively short and that also prove the Recapitulation been treated as a sectional transition that serves the function of the modulation back to the home keys as well as the coda to finish the piece.

If we compare the length of these three sections (the Exposition has forty measures, the Development has sixteen and the Recapitulation has twenty-two), the Exposition seems much longer than the other two, but if we add the measure numbers of Development and Recapitulation together, it would come to the total of 38. That means the total length of the Development and Recapitulation (38) is pretty similar to the length of the Exposition (40). So from the perspective of the structural proportion, it seems making more sense to label this work as a binary form with two same-sized identical parts, but on the other hand, from a thematic development point of view, this work has almost all the distinctive features and elements (diverse thematic materials with modulations) to be considered as a sonata allegro structure. Therefore, the evidences indicate that this work was written in a more flexible binary form with a great deal of Classical influence.

5. CONCLUSION

Scarlatti is a historically transitional figure between late Baroque and early Classical Period. His music combines the Baroque improvisation-like, highly ornamented nature with the Classical principles in musical structure and texture. He is often compared with J.S. Bach, the German master composer of his time. Bach and Scarlatti are both extremely influential composers in the Baroque but they have very different directions in musical careers as well as compositional approaches. Bach devoted most of his life writing religious music for churches, that is more serious, harmonically complex and intelligent in its style. However, Scarlatti composed mostly secular music for his upper-class patrons, and the musical style tends to be more dramatic and expressive that requires tremendous amount of virtuosity. Scarlatti's music, compared to Bach, is more appealing and appreciable for the majority of the audiences. Also, unlike most of the Baroque partitas or suites that require at least twenty to thirty minutes to perform, most of Scarlatti sonatas are single-movement works, and can be easily selected from one to several sonatas into a program, that makes it much more convenient to be put together as a program for any musical occasions.

Although Scarlatti did not intentionally compose music for teaching purposes, his piano sonatas are extremely suitable to be used as teaching materials [9]. His sonatas are mostly short (from two to five minutes), with difficulties range from moderate to more difficult, and also with wide variety of categories or genres from simple attractive dance music, lyrical song-like movement, to more virtuosic showy pieces. In his piano writing, they are technically accessible and relatively easier to be sight-read, that attract students in various level and ages studying his music. His elegant and unique musicality also make him the most popular and admirable among Baroque composers. Although his musical contribution might be undervalued during his lifetime, his musical impact as well as his genius musical compositions have made him one of the greatest composers in the history of music [10].

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