

The Structure of Piano Techniques in Domenico Scarlatti Sonatas

The aspect of the elements of the piano technique in the sonatas of D. Scarlatti represents a world of its own. Ever since the earliest beginnings of music written for keyboard instruments there has been a need of a more selective approach towards a certain kind of technique difficulties, more or less outlined from the complex profile of a piano composition.

A direct historical line perceiving this aspect is drawn from the English virginal composers all the way to Scarlatti, that is from the ignorant steps of the very first creative school for keyboard instruments to the greatest achievements of the modern harpsichord in the mid 18th century.

In that long quest it is the development of the technique aspects that came to be the most significant mean towards the liberation of the pianistic thought and the individualization of more and more advanced forms of piano music. The results of different creative schools and distinguished individuals before Scarlatti signify different steps in the historical development of pianism.

German composers before Bach were creating in a time of great rivalry between the organ and the harpsichord style. They had to master side by side the crystallization of different musical forms and their stylistic profile. However, technical difficulties did not receive full creative attention. Even Bach in his synthesis of the baroque keyboard repertoire, solving different tasks, pointed out the didactical side of the keyboard literature primarily and only in the preludes of WTK I and II did he emphasise strictly the elements of the pianistic technique.

On the other hand, the French harpsichord school having focused their attention in a different course, dedicated most of their time to the shaping of the style of a new and elegant rococo piano piece, carefully choosing the ornaments and program elements in creating an artistic miniature.

The work of Scarlatti points to a wide spectrum of technique elements which he treats very analytically as well as from a performance perspective and shapes them out to astonishingly modern templates. Historical circumstances were obviously very favourable with him. He creates in a cross road of open paths, in a time of great stylistic turmoil and on the basis of an already independent pianistic style and repertoire.

Scarlatti humbly names his first collection of compositions "Essercizi" – exercises. However, despite their humble appearance, the beginnings of the early sonata form are clearly recognisable as well as the patterns of a new piano piece with a characteristic content. These three aspects are organically interwoven throughout Scarlatti's sonatas.

With the same creative engagement he works on the clarification, differentiation and crystallization of the elements of these problems in consideration to a certain historical level. The finalisation of these characteristics in the new forms of piano music would only be achieved with the appearance of the "piano etude" as a technically instructive piece.

The shaping of different patterns with characteristic content can be traced through Beethoven's work on his piano sonatas from all three periods especially with the birth of the romantic piano miniature as a character piece (and even in Beethoven's bagatelles).

Even then, individual examples from Scarlatti's sonatas are already clearly pointing out towards this glorious future (etude type, artistic miniature, toccata, stylistic dances etc.) which is why the studying of the typology of his sonatas is crucial and in the pianistic realm an only source of anticipation of the numerous new characters in the piano literature of the romantic age.

In reality it is Scarlatti even more than Bach or Couperin, who has contributed to the advancement of pianism with a new and unstoppable urge towards greater heights.

Despite the obvious examples of etude like type, Scarlatti developed the harpsichord problems in all of his sonatas reaching the very limits of the technical abilities of this instrument and his age, thus imposing the need for a new kind of instrument with hammers. His great obsession with these structural issues represents a likely response to the rivalling young generation of contemporary violin virtuosos.

Scarlatti does this gigantic historical task primarily as an individual. He is the first to conceive an amazingly wide spectrum of technique elements, both new and revolutionary for their time and further on. It is not just about clarification of these problems, but above all their mastering and directing towards the future. Scarlatti is in fact the founder of the modern piano technique of his age, a technique which remains attractive for many generations later, providing to this very day a rich concert and educationally instructive life for his sonatas.

The approach to Scarlatti's technique difficulties for a performer is one of the most attractive features of his music.

In this area he is superior, lucid, supremely practical as well as an academically educated teacher. It is his genuine creative and reproductive potential that is striking in this entire domain. He treated problems in such a wide manner that many of the patterns (or their countless variations) are difficult to place in an adequate schoolbook formulation. Besides he treats the technique elements of an individual sonata thoroughly and analytically through continual reappearance of a certain element, working with a group of similar elements, continuous adding of new patterns and most often combining different elements into specific interrelations thus creating numerous technique challenges.

From this point of view his work is not just a clarification of the new historical path through the events on the crossroad of stylistic directions, but also an analytical synthesis of the elements of pianistic texture, phrasing and reproductive demands.

An interpreter of his music from the mid 18th century had to pose a great independence of the fingers, a sense for precise and nuanced phrasing, a great sense of listening for jumps, fast scale passages and arpeggios, hidden melodies and above all rash and unexpected shifts, all contained in the already diverse texture.

At the same time an air of ease and lightness of sound should be achieved, as well as a splendour use of the pedal-registers, brilliance and not to mention a synthesis of the whole piece containing a characteristic and for that time a new musical content.

Interpretation requirements to such an extent are not demanded even by his most famous contemporary Bach in his keyboard music, which in a sense represents a crowning of a long tradition more than a base for the development of a modern pianism outstretched towards the future.

Scarlatti is very lucidly acquainted with the problems of interpretation and their technique so that their typology is clear at first glance. There are scaled passages and arpeggios, jumps,

crossing of the hands, movement in double notes, fast repetitions of notes, aspects of hidden melodies, rotation and semi rotation.

He makes an effortless transition from a thematic material to a passage movement, unexpectedly distributes the texture between the hands, he engages the whole performing apparatus in an unusual manner and experiments with the distribution of the material in distant registers (an effect common for the impressionists).

He is especially fond of complementary dialog of musical material and insisting upon certain rhythmical-melodic formulas, just as discovering new features (for instance a positional technique which opens the way for Chopin).

Scarlatti is able to adjust the piano texture to all the various characters of his sonatas with elegance and great ease. Therefore he is able to produce such a wide spectra of technical difficulties presented not in a serial manner but with impressive imagination. In fact he is a real master of the transcendental pianistic texture; one may even call him a "Liszt" of his age.

Here is a brief summary of all the innovations which Scarlatti promoted in his music.

Scarlatti's artistic profile was shaped under different influences as a result of his interesting life style. Borne and musically educated in Italy, son of also a known composer, the creative urge was a dominant part of his life ever since his earliest age.

Due to the developing influence of the Italian musical culture in the other European countries (of course backed by the growing influence of the Vatican) Scarlatti accepts the role of being the music teacher of the Portugal princes Maria Magdalena Barbara in 1720 who later moved to Madrid as the wife of the Spanish air to the throne. Scarlatti moves to Spain with her and remains there for the rest of his natural life (he died in Madrid in 1757).

Maria Barbara is soon crowned as the queen of Spain and during the whole time provides Scarlatti with her full trust and support. In fact it is in this last period of his life that his monumental collection of harpsichord pieces was created.

Creating his work during his stay on the Iberian Peninsula the influence of the local music tradition was inevitable.

Despite the overwhelming influence of the Italian music, especially the opera (in fact the Italian castrate Farinelli was the chief musician on the Spanish court) the Spanish traditional music left deep marks in the work of Scarlatti. As an example even authorities like Manuel de Falla acknowledge and respect the contribution that Scarlatti has made in the development of the Spanish musical culture through his authentic musical expression, much like Handel who contributed to the English musical culture.

Let us not forget that Scarlatti, Handel and Bach were all contemporaries as well as peers having been borne in the same year 1685.

Guitar music was without a doubt an element which exerted the greatest influence over Scarlatti's pianistic texture. "Rasgueado" and "punteado" are typical guitar playing manners frequently used by Scarlatti in his sonatas, of course in manner adjusted for the harpsichord.

Of course the musical drama forms like "Zarzuela" – with a worldly character, "Calderón" – with a religious character and certainly a vast selection of different dances also find their way in to the musical expression of Scarlatti.

Through an analysis of the melody, harmony and rhythm, an even deeper connection emerges between the Spanish folklore and the music of Scarlatti. We find above all the influence of the Andalusian music with its semi oriental melodies, distinct harmonic language and rhythm which moves all the typically Spanish dances like the "jota" (Scarlatti drew most of his inspiration from this dance in particular), then "la bandurrias", the Aragonese dances etc.

According to the research of R. Kirkpatrick (an American harpsichordist) the piano opus of Scarlatti numbers 566 sonatas in total. In the obscurity of biographical data a main source of information are 15 collections of manuscripts from the Marciana library in Venice where 496 of the sonatas can be found. All the collections bear the seal of the Portuguese and Spanish courts so it is assumed that they belonged to the queen Maria Barbara and were transferred to Italy by the famous Farinelli. It is also known that the first collection of 30 sonatas under the title "Essercizi" was published in London in the years 1738-39.

Clementi has also showed a great interest in Scarlatti's sonatas which he included in his editions.

It is thanks to the pedagogical work of C. Czerny that Scarlatti's music has become known to a wider audience in the 19th century and it was finally in the 20th century that Alessandro Longo completed his monumental edition of 545 sonatas.

Then there is the research work of Ralph Kirkpatrick to whom goes the credit for the restoration of a number of sonatas which leads us to the total number of 556 sonatas.

In his research Kirkpatrick came to some interesting discoveries about the instruments that Scarlatti had at his disposal. Researching the instrumental inventory of the queen Maria Barbara he discovered that besides the 7 harpsichords, 5 more instruments of the piano-forte type were in use, which leads to the conclusion that Scarlatti was well acquainted with the hammer type instruments. That discovery certainly sheds a new light over the pianistic treatment of his sonatas.

Analysing different elements of Scarlatti's manuscripts Kirkpatrick concluded that besides novelties in the rhythm, phrasing and harmony, Scarlatti was able to incorporate the virtuosity of the modulation in the overall virtuosity of the piano.

The embellishments as a characteristic feature of the style of that period are not included as complexly in Scarlatti's music as is the case with the French harpsichordists. However Scarlatti does develop some novelties like the double thrill in thirds (played with one hand) and after a long time it is finally Beethoven that uses it again in his 4th piano concerto.

That manner of thrills in thirds was adopted and further developed by Clementi and Czerny who lay the grounds for the romantics especially Chopin. Scarlatti is also the first to use a long thrill on one note encircled by a melody (played with one hand) which is found later in the finale of Beethoven's sonatas op. 53 and op. 109.

One note repetitions in Scarlatti's music are often imitations of the guitar, the mandolin or the castanets.

The evolution of the double note usage in the instrumental practise had had a great supporter in the practice of Scarlatti which resulted in tracing a clear path to the masterful and majestic achievements of Chopin and Liszt.

The distribution of the chords texture in the accompaniment is another element to which Scarlatti gave his perspective contribution. The ongoing practice of Alberti bass distributed within the range of one octave is advanced by Scarlatti who uses it in a much wider range which is a real novelty and in fact anticipates Beethoven and Chopin.

The treatment of the sound space and its maximum appliance represents a key factor in a composition for any instrument in question.

In a style dominated entirely by a two voice texture it is scales and sections of scales which play a dominant role. Scarlatti makes abundant use of the major and minor scales while the usage of chromatic passages is limited and combined with diatonic motives. Making maximum use of the sound space of the instrument, the scales in Scarlatti's music become a real virtuoso element especially when considering that according to Kirkpatrick's analysis over 400 sonatas are written in fast tempos (ranging from *allegro* to *presto quanto sia possibile*). Having a primarily instrumental character, scales are most often used to overcome large sections of the keyboard in any direction and it is Scarlatti who for the first time makes use of a glissando in his F major sonata K 379.

Arpeggios

It takes only to glaze through the contents page of his sonatas to notice the frequent usage of arpeggio chords. As well as being used to create a more dramatic effect of the harmonic progression, arpeggios are also used in the conquering of the sound space of the piano, often in the range of two to four octaves.

Crossing of the hands

Although Scarlatti is not the first to use crossing of the hands on the keyboard, he does that so often and in such an individual way that it becomes one of the most prominent features of his manuscript. A mitigating circumstance is of course the use of two manuals on the instruments of that time, but none the less that manner of playing continued to be adopted and further developed by the 19th and 20th century composers.

Jumps

The use of jumps in Scarlatti's music is surely one of the most obvious indications of his extraordinary performing skills. Using them often, he creates unexpected twists and effects, - jumps reaching as wide as three octaves are not a rare occurrence -, thus the gestures an instrumentalist performs while playing those jumps reminds us much of those of a dancer each moving through the space he is given. On many of Scarlatti's pages certain choreography is readily suggested.

In doing a cross section of the technical elements in Scarlatti's music here are a few implications of the same on the performing plane.

The role of the fingers

In the methods and the methodologies for harpsichord from the 18th century the fingers have a primordial role in the contact with the keyboard. In that sense Scarlatti's manuscript often demands great independence of the fingers; however his bold jumps and virtuous passages imply the need for the use of the entire performing apparatus. Also the use of the thumb is almost regularly required, unlike his predecessors.

Extension of the palm

Using an often wide distribution of the notes in a chord, the extension of the palm required to play them is much greater than the typical positional demands of the ongoing practices which up till then ranged within a single octave.

Use of the wrist

The frequent use of double notes (thirds, sixths, and octaves) in one hand implies the need for elastic adjustment of the wrist thus anticipating the performing practice of the 19th century.

Role of the hand

With the unusually virtuous elements abundantly distributed throughout Scarlatti's music a question of coordination of the entire performing apparatus is imposed, a question which would dominate the performing practice of the 19th century and later.

As it can be seen, the work of Scarlatti is very complex and significant especially in the aspects dealt with in this exposition.

The contribution of Scarlatti can be located exactly in the time between the achievements of the English virginal players and those of the great romantic virtuosos. Thus we have the *"Fitzwilliam Virginal Book"* written in around 1630; Scarlatti's *"Essercizi"* written in 1738 and Liszt's famous *"Transcendental Etudes"* written in the years 1837-38.

A more detailed examination of the elements of the technique difficulties in Scarlatti's sonatas is ultimately drawn to the problem of structurally-constructive layers. Having that in mind, what would the ratio be between the strictly pianistic elements as opposed to the harmonic, stylistic, the elements of the musical form, etc. remains to be determined in each case individually. Here lies the great challenge. In the midst of countless and various artistic characters portrayed in his sonatas dominates the great individuality of the bold, exploring and equilibristic spirit of Domenico Scarlatti.