

## Introducing the Area of Study: AS27 The Best Scarlatti Sonatas

### The Musical Intention

In this area of study the intention has been to identify twenty of the best of Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas and prepare them for performance on the piano.

### Historical Context

- Domenico Scarlatti (1685 – 1757) was an Italian composer who worked mainly for the Royal Courts of both Spain and Portugal.
- His musical importance arises because he composed 555 keyboard sonatas for the harpsichord although they are often played on the piano and other instruments including guitar, organ, and accordion.
- As a baroque composer his music links closely to the subsequent classical era in music history.
- Little of his music was published in his own lifetime.
- His sonatas are mostly composed in binary form (AB) whilst some are in early sonata form.
- Many of his sonatas are coloured with Spanish and Portuguese folk music and make use of a range of scales namely ionian(major) aeolian (minor) and phrygian mode (the Spanish mode).
- In Scarlatti's music it is possible to hear the sounds of the street, the countryside and the sounds of the guitar.
- The musicologist and harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick produced an edition of Scarlatti's music in 1953 and reference to K. numbers refers to the chronological list that he created.

### The types of musical score

There are four types of scores to be found on the website:

- The plain score is the music in outline with ornaments symbols indicated. This score version has minimal score detail and is characteristic of music printed and published from the baroque era.
- Edited music scores have some score detail to assist players in their performance and practice. This includes dynamics, phrase marks, slurs, some fingering and tempo markings.
- Performance scores have score detail including dynamics, articulation markings and suggested right and left hand fingering. By intention they are very detailed.  
*Tip:* Performance scores are on the busy side – in fact they can have much too much information – that distracts from the music – however they are a necessary and useful evil - discard them as soon as you are able and use a plain score.
- The realisation score has the score detail included with the ornaments written out as they are sounded in the realisation. It's intention is to assist performers with their understanding of the interpretation of the music particularly in respect to the playing of ornaments. Frequently these scores are in a reduced format. In realisations repeats are not played.

## Why Play Scarlatti Keyboard Sonatas

- Excellent for developing a range of keyboard touches and techniques (legato, staccato, staccatissimo, changing finger on a note, fingers close to the keys, left hand over right hand technique and vice versa, articulation etc.)
- There are many that are excellent pieces for developing fast playing
- They are composed in a variety of tempi, keys and have varied musical content and intention
- They are beautifully and consistently crafted works
- They are excellent and appealing performance pieces
- They transpose well from the harpsichord to other instruments including the piano, guitar, accordion and organ
- They can be explored by players of different levels of technical and musical ability
- There are plenty to choose from - in that he composed over 550
- The sonatas are very enjoyable pieces to revisit

Remember that the sonatas were originally played on the harpsichord an instrument which requires a light touch

## Performance Notes - Ornamentation

- There is great symmetry in the Scarlatti keyboard sonatas and formally they are very balanced works. Ornamentation should in the editor's view reflect these characteristics. If your fingers don't have time to play the ornaments when learning the piece leave them out and add them at a later stage.
- Ornaments need to have a clear rhythmic shape with the main ornament being the 4 note trill beginning on the upper note. There is no consistency amongst performers and music editions in terms of when and how ornaments are played. The interpretations evident in the scores on this website reflect the best of modern practice. In fast tempo works, the ornamentation is generally much more straight forward to understand and interpret. In addition, as the music is usually performed with repeats there is scope for performers to also vary the interpretation of the ornament in the repeat.
- Ornaments at cadences such as trills do tend to be more elaborate and extended particularly if this is combined with a slowing down (*ritardando/rit.*) in the music.
- A slow tempo sonata requires a different concentration in terms of the playing of the ornaments but also allows much more freedom in terms of the number of notes that can be played. In a slow movement it is often easier to play more notes in a trill to keep a balanced rhythmical shape.

In slow movements there are usually many interpretations as to how the ornaments are played and the editor suggests that it would be worthwhile to spend some time listening to different recordings of a sonata. Above all a consistent approach to the is required and when in doubt I would advise going for the simplest option. Please observe that in the prepared scores only the first two notes of four note ornaments have the fingering notated. Remember that the trill and the mordent sign mean essentially the same – if the ornament is cadential then it is likely and possible to have more notes with the *tr* sign is used. There is also scope for the confident player to add additional ornaments particularly in the playing of the repeats. There are other solutions

to playing the ornaments but the ones suggested here keep very much to contemporary performance practice. Appoggiaturas (leaning notes) and acciaccaturas (crushed notes) in slow tempo works do presents a challenge as far as the interpretation and function. Music editors do tend to show evidence of an “over” understanding the interpretation of the ornaments.

**Best advice** the playing of an ornament ultimately comes down to personal preference based on knowledge/familiarity of the musical style and works of the composer. Accept the fact that you may well change your opinion on how an ornament is played based on a “gathering information” approach. Performance practice adds a complication in that changing times quite often results in different approaches and interpretations. The best advice is to keep it simple, familiar and current – interpret the best of modern performance practice.

### **Listening Recent**

There are many excellent recent recordings that are available by:

Claire Huangci, Murray Perahia, Ivo Pogorelich, Andras Schiff, Yevgeny Sudbin, Alexandre Tharaud, Joyce Yang amongst others

### **Listening Archive**

There are also many historical recordings worthy of a listen including those by Emil Gilels, Vladimir Horowitz, Dinu Lipatti, Peter Katin, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Maria Tipo.

There is even a Jacques Loussier Trio interpretation of the Sonata in B minor K.87 and the Cuban classical guitarist, composer and conductor Leo Brouwer has also recorded an excellent album of sonatas transposed for the guitar.

### **The PlentyMusic Scarlatti Challenge**

Listen to other keyboard sonatas by the composer and nominate up to five sonatas to be added and possibly five sonatas to be removed from the current prepared list. The editor would also be very interested to receive requests for arrangements and transpositions of these some of these keyboard sonatas for instruments other than the piano/keyboard.

### **Request**

PlentyMusic would also appreciate receiving observations and constructive comments about this Area of Study to assist in future planning.