

Thoughts on Scarlatti's Essercizi per Gravicembalo

by Richard Lester

As a continuation of my previous article, I have chosen the sonatas in the *Essercizi per Gravicembalo* to establish firmer ideas related to their rustic nature. From the thirty sonatas that comprise this volume one can sense a gradual development of style which penetrated the remaining 520 sonatas — from the Italianate simplicity of sonata No. 2 in G major to the riotous Hispanism of sonata No. 26 in A major and the vulgar excitement of sonata No. 24 in A major.

The *Essercizi* were published in 1738, shortly after Scarlatti's knighthood by King Joao V. The ornate wording of dedications bears the familiar stamp of courtesy by eighteenth century composers to their royal patrons. In a far less flowery style is Scarlatti's preface to US, but still written with great modesty.

Reader,
Whether you be Dilettante or Professor, in these Compositions do not expect any profound Learning, but rather an ingenius Jestng with Art, to accommodate you to the mastery of the Harpsichord. Neither Considerations of Interest, nor Visions of Ambition, but only Obedience moved me to publish them. Perhaps they will be agreeable to you; then all the more gladly will I obey other Commands to please you in an easier and more varied style. Show yourself then more human than critical, and thereby increase your own Delight. To designate to you the position of the Hands, be advised that by D is indicated the Right, and by M the left.-Farewell

With the publication of this important volume we must remember that Scarlatti had already spent ten

years in Portugal and a further nine in Spain. I am inclined to believe that sketches, if not whole sonatas were prepared in Portugal between 1719 and 1729. The sonata No. 9 in D minor reminds me distinctly of some *Fados* I once heard. These were usually melancholy love songs accompanied by a *viola* (the ordinary Spanish guitar). Other *Fados* tell in ballad form of current happenings.

A great mind like Scarlatti's was certain to capture quickly the musical subtleties of his next environment, especially a land as steeped in tradition as Spain.

Sonata No. 1 in D minor is an excellent introduction to the *B&sercizi* as both Italian and Iberian elements are equally combined. The second half of the sonata conveys the breath and poise of the dancer, achieved by re-distribution of parts related to a previous passage. Fig. 1 and Fig. 1a. The trills should be short to allow the tied notes to act as the breath before the impact of the bass — especially in Fig. 1a.

Any performer who calculates these leaps in exact measure should re-consider as this is not the object of the exercise. The sheer excitement of this section relies on delaying the attack on the relevant bass notes, not in seeing how quickly the hand can reach its goal.

Another example of 'placing notes' is indicated in sonata No. 21 in D Major by designation of hands. At bars 19—24 shown in Fig. 1b the hands must cross to allow that section to breath. Technically it would be easier to keep the hands still, but it is



obvious that Scarlatti insists on hand crossing here for the above mentioned reason.



This sense of timing in Scarlatti is one of the most salient points and should be considered at every conceivable occurrence.

Sonata No. 2 in G major, 3 in A minor, 4 in G minor and 5 in D minor are rather Italianate in character and surely a reminder of his Neapolitan upbringing. Other sonatas in this volume which share this orthodoxy are Nos. 11 in C major and 16 in B flat. We should not dismiss these from the importance of the *Essercizi* but rather as pocket gems and a bridge between the two countries.

I do not wish to suggest that the remaining sonatas are orgies of Spanish sound, but close examination should reveal subtleties quite foreign to the Italian School.

Sonata No. 6 in F major places us back onto Spanish soil. With its abrupt pauses and uneven answering phrases it seems to have roots in the *Jota*. This dance is said to have originated in Aragon but with many offshoots in various regions. Usually the steps are extremely energetic. Speed stressed by abrupt pauses where the dancers hold themselves motionless for a time is one of the most dazzling features. This sonata plus No. 10 in D minor and No. 26 in A major are the three which most resemble this dance in the *Essercizi*. Sonata No. 26 is complete with

guitar effects and the famous *zapeteado* (stamping of the heel).

I hope my readers will forgive me at this point if I seem to be getting rather carried away, but I cannot emphasise too strongly the excitement one can create in performance if there is a close affinity with the sonata's folk origins.

In this respect a close study of guitar music both solo and in its accompanying capacity is an indispensable guide to many sonatas. 'No composer ever fell more deeply under its spell', wrote Ralph Kirkpatrick. Proof can be drawn from the numerous sonatas that lend themselves to the guitar's style and many have been transcribed for that medium.

If we look closely at the works of Luis Milan (1500 - 1561), Alonso Mudarra (1510 - 1580) and Luis de Narvaez, we can hear how music progressed culminating in a high artistic standard of which Scarlatti was well aware. Mudarra was one of the few composers of his era who emancipated the vocal style of guitar writing to a more contrapuntal level, not only with daring harmonic nuances but also with exciting rhythmic cross accents. The latter characteristic being a dominant feature of Spanish Dances for which the guitar or *vihuela de mano* as it was

known, was the major accompanying instrument.

One modern writer on the principles of guitar playing states that the 'Golden Age' of vihuela music was short lived and by the beginning of the seventeenth century, composers like Madurra, Milan and Narvaez had already been forgotten. I cannot believe this as the guitar was by far the most popular instrument and the early vihuela composer's art must have held its own well into the eighteenth century.

Caspar Sanz (1640-1710) did much to keep this school of playing alive and also improve on previous exponents. The sonatas in *Essercizi* which share the guitar's subtle qualities are Nos. 8 in G minor

(rather Handelian) 9 in D minor, 12 in G minor, 13 in G major, 15 in E minor, 17 in F major, 19 in F minor, 21 in D major, 24 in A major, 25 in F sharp minor, 26 in A major, 27 in B minor, 28 in E major and 29 in D major. These are mostly conceived in terms of the dance.

Sonatas Nos. 12, 21 25 and 27 contain a pattern very dear to Scarlatti bringing the guitar and harpsichord even more into parallel spheres. I give below four examples of what I shall refer to as suspended sequences. This 'floating' formula can be found in many Andalusian Fandangos especially in the customary introduction to these famous song-dances.

Sonata No. 12 in G Minor Bars 14 – 16



Sonata No. 21 in D Major Bars 59 – 65



Sonata No. 25 in F sharp minor Bars 30 – 35



Sonata No. 27 in B minor Bars 50 – 3



Possibly the most interesting sonata is No. 26 mentioned before. Compare the opening (Fig. 6) to the introduction of a typical *Jota* (Fig. 7)



The principal accompanying instruments for the *Jota* are the *bandurrias* (a kind of mandolin), lute and

guitar. The tension and the spirit of this piece is maintained throughout with ample opportunities for cross accents to heighten its potential.

Cross accents can effectively be injected into many sonatas in triple time and sonata No. 15 in E minor is no exception. The concluding eight bars of each half contain a recurring bass figuration shown in Fig. 9.



guitar.

The thematic comparison is slight but the spirit and excitement are surely there even in the first few bars. Later in the *Jota* there appear ascending and descending thirds which are included in the sonata. The whole piece seems to centre around the vihuela's accompanying style of this dance. In bars 37 - 40 (Fig. 8) and elsewhere, appear the familiar Scarlattian 'scrunch' which threaten to rip the strings from the guitar.

The culmination of this passage is a battery of vigorous hand crossing against an internal pedal figuration (Fig. 8a). Before acquiring the Spanish harpsichord mentioned in the last article I had shelved this particular sonata as no instrument gave me the satisfactory impact in the treble. Everything was

obliterated by the internal pedal and the bass. The percussive nature of the Spanish harpsichord



For repeats I accent the bass shown in Fig. 10, creating a hemiola:-

In this brilliant dance sonata the illusion of a triple measure melodic contour of semi-quavers is most effective against the punctuated two in the bass — and strongly reminiscent of many Spanish dances. Sonata No. 17 in F major also lends itself to similar possibilities in rhythmic excursions.

Sonata No. 20 in E major is almost unique amongst the thirty sonatas and I cannot do better than quote Kirkpatrick when he says it 'recalls the orchestras of small Spanish towns with their shrill wind instruments, breathy overblown flutes, squealing provincial oboes, and percussive basses like tight drums, or almost like cannon shots'.



obliterated by the internal pedal and the bass. The percussive nature of the Spanish harpsichord

One final quote from Kirkpatrick's book sums up the picturesque quality of the *Essercizi*.

There is no limit to the imaginary sounds evoked by Scarlatti's harpsichord. Many of them extend far beyond the domain of musical instruments into an impressionistic transcription of the sounds of daily life, of street cries, church bells, tapping of dancing feet, fireworks, artillery, in such varied and fluid form that any attempt to describe them precisely in words results in colourful and embarrassing nonsense'.

After dissecting the *Essercizi* I should like to regard the work as a whole. This volume was one of the greatest musical contributions of the eighteenth century and a significant step forward not only to remaining sonatas but as a thorough and practical basis from which future composers drew endless inspiration. Although the sonatas are essentially Italian in structure they stray from contemporary Italian thoughts with new motifs and daring harmonic freshness. They break new ground and it would not

be too presumptuous to describe them as initiating the new 'Spanish Style'. In this respect we can focus on them in an unbiased light without the frustrating restrictions of Italian ancestry.

It is curious that Scarlatti should conclude the *Essercizi* with a fugue in the Italian Style. This really is a mediocre piece in fugal terms based more on vertical harmony, although the subject is analogous of Frescobaldi's writing even if the treatment is not.

The majority of sonatas that follow in the Queen's manuscript Venice XIV and XV completely compensate and bask in the glorious Spanish sun. Returning to the preface of the *Essercizi*, (the only volume to be published) I think it is as well for us that Scarlatti did not 'obey other commands to pleas' as he may have tempered his style and not bequeathed the remainder of his genius in the form of private music for the Queen of Spain.

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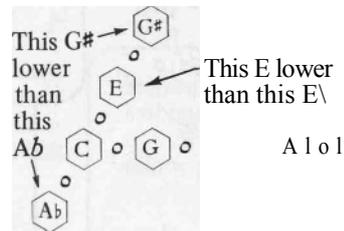
Instruments

by Mark Lindley

In the 'panorama' of historical tunings shown on the following pages, the hexagon diagrams represent spirals in which F comes after *Bb* in the horizontal sequence of Sths. likewise A after D and C sharp after F sharp. The numbers in the diagrams indicate how much each interval is tempered. A positive number means that the 4th, major 3rd or major 6th in question is tempered larger than pure; a negative number means the opposite (e.g. a 4th tempered smaller or 5th larger than pure).

The unit of measure is a tiny intervallic quantity known as the schisma, which approximates 1/100 of a whole tone and equals almost exactly 1/11 of the syntonic comma, 1/12 of the pythagorean comma, and 1/21 of the lesser diesis. These are, it may be recalled, three of the most notable 'wrinkles' among *pure* concords:

1. the syntonic comma (Sths vs 3rds): 11 schismas
2. the pythagorean comma (circle of Sths): 12 schismas
3. the lesser diesis (major 3rds vs 8ve): 21 schismas



From these diagrams one can readily estimate the rate of beating in any consonant interval in the various tunings shown (assuming that the timbre is not severely inharmonic). First, find the pitch level of the lowest unison among the harmonic partial tones of the interval:

<p>in a 5th, the second partial of the upper note makes a unison with the third partial of the lower note:</p>	<p>in a 4th, the third partial of the upper note makes a unison with the fourth partial of the lower note:</p>
<p>In a major 10th, the second partial of the upper note makes a unison with the fifth partial of the lower note:</p>	<p>in a major 3rd, the second partial of the upper note makes a unison with the fifth partial of the lower note:</p>
<p>in a major 6th, the third partial of the upper note makes a unison with the fifth partial of the lower note:</p>	<p>in a minor 3rd, the fifth partial of the upper note makes a unison with the sixth partial of the lower note:</p>

If the unison is at a 880, then the number of beats per second will be the same as the number of schismas. If the unison occurs at a higher or lower pitch level, the beats will be accordingly faster or slower. For example, if it occurs an octave below A 880, the beat rate will be half the number of schismas (because the frequency ratio for an octave is 2:1; if it occurs a 5th above A 880, the beat rate will be half again the number of schismas (because the ratio for a 5th is 3:2); and so on.