Scarlatti Sonatas – Channeling the Opera Composer Within

There are 555 sonatas for the harpsichord by Domenico Scarlatti. By my calculations, in my decade of teaching at CCM, I've taught around 180 harpsichord students. Most of them have been required to work on at least one Scarlatti sonata with me. I have by no means familiarized myself with every one of Scarlatti's pieces, and my memory for numbers is so poor that I'm unable to tell you whether I've played or taught a particular one when asked, because they're only identified by referring to their number in the Kirkpatrick index. K. 87 is the only sonata I can easily recall by 'name', because it is the most beautiful and I have worked and worked to bring its twists and turns to life, to give its lush harmonies their due. My photocopy of K. 87 is so worn, it feels like toilet paper when I remove it from one binder and put it into another. So, students and their encounters with Scarlatti.

While many of my colleagues might say that Bach is the most difficult harpsichord repertoire to disentangle from run-of-the-mill pianistic conception, I feel that Scarlatti presents many more challenges. Even in the realm of harpsichord recitals and competitions, a Scarlatti sonata is often used as a technical tour de force, pure flash and bravura. And in the piano world, this concept of their utility is 10 times more limiting. When a new student brings in a Scarlatti sonata for the first time, the performance is usually a study in what is fondly called 'bashing', and my response is a study in thinly-veiled contempt.

When I first started playing Scarlatti at the harpsichord, the musicological community was justified in thinking of Domenico Scarlatti as a frustrated opera composer, his voluminous output of solo instrumental works made small in the shadow of his father's monumental opera career. We now know more of Scarlatti as an opera composer in his own right, so perhaps those theatrical ambitions weren't as stunted as originally thought, but my belief that he channeled a great deal of his theatricality and dramatic lyricism into his sonatas holds. It's a notion that's served as my entrée to an entirely different treatment of his harpsichord works. These sonatas contain an astounding array of characteristic, pictorial, and otherwise referential material. In the early 80's, there was a young and driven

harpsichordist named Scott Ross who recorded all 555 Scarlatti sonatas before he died of AIDS at the age of 38. While I've never been entranced by his playing, the sheer magnitude of this undertaking (98 sessions, 8000 takes!) wins my great admiration. And the project's most lasting impact on me came from the 206-page booklet of notes accompanying the 34-CD set. Ross had compiled a catalogue from his analysis of each sonata and, in addition to identifying them by such basic characteristics as meter, key, and tempo, he had shown how they could be grouped according to the more evocative elements found in themes – trumpet call, bird call, Spanish guitar, rage aria, echo, pastorale, lament, marching drums.

Scarlatti was a master of stringing together disparate dramatic ideas, each with a striking profile, and they sometimes rudely interrupt, or even go to battle with one another. His penchant for immediate repetition of themes and motives is theatrical in itself, a playful insistence that requires the performer to ask what was so important that it had to, right away, be said a second, even a third, time. The first thing I require my students to do is to identify the various musical ideas that add up to a single sonata's content, and to confront each idea as though it stood alone. How do you want this to sound? What is its character and how is that character conveyed on this instrument? Then, how does it relate to, contrast with, all the other characters present and accounted for in the same piece?

This soul-searching interpretation, this effort to find within the streams of notes a compact little melodrama or commedia, will amount to nothing at all if denied one essential source of nourishment: time. The room to breathe, to shift gears, to recognize that a new character has entered from stage left, or that there's a fierce conflict developing, or that the cast's efforts to dance a simple gavotte are being repeatedly intruded upon by an impassioned flamenco dancer with castanets – all this is made impossible by the athletic moto perpetuum of the average pianist's renditions.