LESTER: Huge! All those qualities you mention can occur within a single sonata. One that springs to mind is K207 in E major, which is one of highly contrasting emotions; vocal ornamentation, surprising modulations and 'scrunching' discords. Wilfred Mellers in *The Mask of Orpheus* writes, 'The tempo is slow, the sonority plangent, twanging and whining like a street beggar's guitar … The music stops and starts, like life itself. The common man, even a gypsy beggar, finds his voice, which may be tender, pathetic, desperate, as well as aggressive.' The wailing gypsy voice is certainly present, but there's great subtlety, and we catch fleeting glimpses of modal excursions and rustic charm, which are then snatched away as if 'cleansed' by western refinement. Another is K215 in E major, where the violent discords of the second half bear no relationship to what's gone before and act as a wake-up call after the listener has been lulled into a false sense of peace. And there are many other, similar examples.

SUDBIN: When it comes to his emotional range, I often feel that while some composers speak mostly to God (Bach, Schubert and Beethoven, for instance) and some mostly to mankind (Rachmaninov and Schumann spring to mind), Scarlatti speaks to both in approximately equal measure. Especially in his poignant sonatas, I often find that the addressee, as it were, becomes indistinguishable. He's addressing us all.

JS: He was also famously original. In what ways?

DEMIDENKO: For a start, he was probably the first composer to discover that keyboard music is not two-dimensional; we therefore find a great abundance of giant (and *very* difficult!) leaps and dramatic changes of registers, such as no composer had ever previously come up with.

STAIER: There are few composers in history who created something so entirely original and as true to themselves as Scarlatti did. Amongst keyboard composers there was Chopin, of course, but I think a better, and closer, example would be Debussy, as the creator of a really new keyboard style. And not just keyboard either. The originality of Scarlatti's harmony, his rhythmic obsessiveness, with its constant repetitions, the harmony constantly changing, in weird harmonic ways – this was something which as far as I know simply didn't exist before.

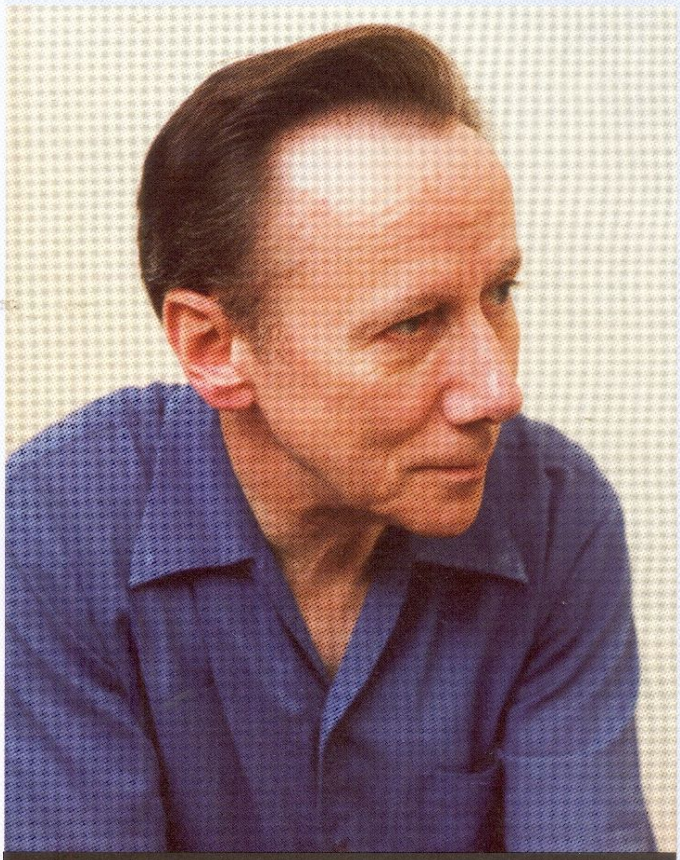
LESTER: Ralph Kirkpatrick, Scarlatti's biographer, described him as 'the most original keyboard composer of his time' His originality, as you say, is manifest on many levels, but what I find particularly fascinating is the influence of Spanish folk music and dance. Elements of the early forms of *fandango*, *bulerias*, *jota*, *seguidillas* and many others contributed their individual characteristics and expressions to enliven the character of Scarlatti's music. Vocal melismas sometimes borrowed from *cante jondo* (the 'deep song' of Andalucia) are also evident. Dean Sutcliffe in his book, *The Keyboard Sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti*, refers to 'Andalucian chromaticism' and speaks of K107 in F major as an echo of *cante jondo*: 'a composite sound picture that may be suggestive of quarter tones, of something beyond the diatonic system and its notation.' This is just one area of his originality.

STAIER: That said, there was a lot in his use of dissonance, and specifically of acciaccaturas, that derived not only from the Spanish folk tradition but, which is less often mentioned, from the Italian continuo tradition, which in fact he grew up with. But then he also *used* these in many altogether new ways. As Nikolai said, he was one of the first composers actually thinking in terms of a truly idiomatic keyboard texture. He was more than original; he was a revolutionary.

JS: One aspect of his immersion in the Spanish folk tradition is a kind of raw, passionate earthiness that I think one could fairly describe, sometimes, as violent. Would you agree?

STAIER: Yes. And his violence is not only physical, with the crunching dissonances, but psychological – the way he uses rhythmic obsessiveness to drag you, almost, to places where you don't want to go. And that doesn't only appear in fast pieces. His slow movements, too, can be frightening. And again, at this obsessional level. A good example is the first sonata of the D major trilogy K490-492.

SUDBIN: I wouldn't call it violence, I think, but he can certainly be as extreme as any. Sometimes the technical demands are overwhelming; and it's not just the dreaded hand-crossings or endless repetitions. If certain effects are to be achieved, one has to go to the limits of one's pianistic abilities.



"If one accepts that one is playing him on a modern piano, another quite different but legitimate range of styles becomes possible" *Peter Katin*

JS: And of course he was also an exquisitely *refined* composer. Actually, this combination of violence and refinement reminds me rather of Chopin – who very much admired Scarlatti.

FRITH: Yes. And he couldn't understand why his colleagues were surprised at this! Of course, the right hand melodies require the utmost in beautiful legato technique and control of the subtlest nuances; just as a lot of the quicker passages demand a terrific fleetness of touch in leggiero. And these would have been precisely the qualities on which Chopin the teacher particularly insisted on.

SUDBIN: Pianistically speaking, I find that achieving refinement in Scarlatti is one of those elusive activities which in practice are impossible to master to perfection. If a certain passage becomes too 'refined', or if you get it even slightly wrong, through inappropriate articulation or tonal colouring, the failing will be magnified due to the unforgiving qualities of the piano. When it comes to refinement, Scarlatti holds more dangers than most composers I've encountered. The texture is very transparent and there's nothing to hide behind. Some of the challenges in articulation are possibly comparable to a Mozart concerto in my mind, but the emotional demand is even more acute and intense in Scarlatti, yet the pieces are a lot shorter! The contrasts are everywhere; from almost vulgar displays of fireworks, artillery shots, foot-stamping and flamenco-like dances, one can find oneself suddenly surrounded by poignant harmony and feelings of torment. Quite incredible really! These tiny things last a few minutes, yet each sonata is an individual and complete universe. There's nothing quite like it.