Which is why 'decoding' a tempo indication needs much less consideration than, say, articulation or fingering. By 'prescribing' a tempo, a composer just gives you an idea of his own understanding of the piece and its character; your task as a performer is somehow to bring your own idea (should it be any different) into agreement with his. But as a rule it's not necessary – music by great composers is always clear in the unity of its message.

JS: After all, Bach, certainly in the keyboard music, left practically no indications of any kind, beyond the obvious implications of dance names. And Leopold Mozart used to say that you could always find at least one bar that would reveal the tempo of a movement infallibly.

FRITH: And Mendelssohn went one better than that, stating that one should be able to guess the tempo of any piece at sight. Well, so has Konstantin! But it is nice, I think, to be reassured by the composer! The difference between allegro and allegrissimo, for example, definitely has a psychological impact on the performer. While Scarlatti's prestos tend to be unashamedly virtuoso display pieces, sometimes a slower movement is simply marked 'Cantabile', which leaves us with a certain licence.

LESTER: One marking that springs to mind, and speaks for itself, is the 'Presto quanto sia possibile' which appears at the top of K427 in G major. Kirkpatrick in his book states that 'Scarlatti's directions seem to have little bearing on the actual speed at which the piece is taken; rather they serve as indications of rhythmic character'. Speed should always be decided within the context of the material; the rhythmic, harmonic and melodic content. Most sonatas need to share the dancers' innate feel for breath and poise. An interesting fact is that a Scarlatti allegro often moves no faster than an andante in reality; I do walk quite quickly, though!

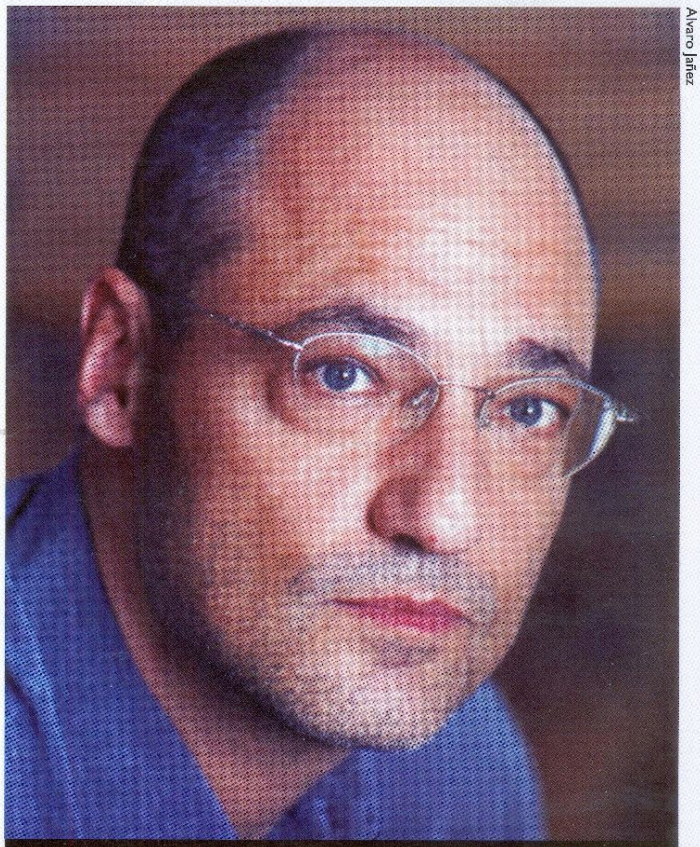
JS: In programming, do you always conform to Scarlatti's pairing (or sometimes 'tripling')? Or is that entirely conjectural?

LESTER: The 'pairwise' arrangement is now thought to be a no-no. If sonatas were conceived in pairs, why then is there no mention of the practice in this particular context, and why are separate sonatas designated 'Sonata'? Few sonatas come up with any thematic similarity except perhaps Ks 318 and 319 in their opening and closing thematic material, but even that fails to convince. K347 has a drawing of a hand at its conclusion and the note: 'Al cader dell' ultimo termino di questa sonata, atacca subbito la seguente, Come avisa la Manno', indicating that K348 should be added immediately. Ks 490, 491 and 492 do however work effectively as a triptych. K490 is often associated with the atmosphere of the Holy Week processions in Seville and other cities, where melismatic passages resemble the *saeta*. The *saeta* is a sung prayer directed at the religious images carried through the streets on enormous floats. The obsessive drum rhythm that accompanies the processions is also clearly represented. Scarlatti would have been aware of this powerful spectacle during his four years in Seville. The two sonatas that follow have elements of both *seguidillas sevillanas* and the *fandango*. This to my mind is the only really convincing case and can form an impressive part of the programme.

JS: Going by the music alone, would it be fair to describe Scarlatti as perhaps the greatest and most resourceful 'colourist' in the history of the harpsichord?

STAIER: Having freed himself so radically from polyphonic obligations and requirements, Scarlatti could use numbers of voices and parts with great spontaneity, and jump from one register to another in an 'impressionistic' way – something which Bach, in his language, would have had somehow to justify. And in a polyphonic texture that's difficult. Yes, he has themes with jumps, like the Capriccio in the C minor Partita, but that's not the same thing at all. Very occasionally, in certain dances, he does do it, but Scarlatti does it on a much larger scale, and for largely colouristic purposes. Often he seeks to imitate folk music, or percussion effects, and of course the guitar, very often. But always he composes according to the acoustic of his known keyboard instrument, no matter whether it was the piano or harpsichord. And unlike the modern piano, they have an acoustic situation where high notes are not only higher but lighter, more fragile, more flutey, and low notes are not only lower but have more weight, or are more demoniac, or whatever. I've never had anything against the modern piano *per se*, but if you listen to the differences in the instruments' registers, the modern piano is both much more powerful and much more uniform – in a way far *less* colourful than either an early fortepiano or a harpsichord. And if we talk just about matters of dynamics, the early fortepiano *had* the capacity for dynamic contrasts but at a much lower amplitude, and the colouring of 18th-century music is much less dependent on loud and soft. It relies much more on shadow and light, and heavy and less heavy, and whatever colours you might imagine. And in these respects the dynamic properties of the modern piano don't really help so much, because they add something to the music which is musically superfluous. Because the music has a *texture* which 'explains' the dynamic. It's much more manifold than just loud and soft. The modern piano was absolutely not conceived with 18th-century music in mind. And ironically, though it's louder and more 'mellow', it's actually *weaker*, in *effect*, when it comes to 18th-century music. In fact many of its most wonderful properties are actually quite useless when it comes to playing not only Bach and Scarlatti but Haydn and Mozart as well. The most 'speaking' and articulate qualities of the older pianos seems to me to be far more important for the character of the music than the sheer possibilities of being extremely loud or extremely soft. Today we tend to think that dynamic is the clue to everything, but it isn't, actually.

JS: Much of Scarlatti's harpsichord music emulates the guitar. And neither the harpsichord nor the guitar is a particularly loud instrument. Should the pianist beware of over-projecting, especially in the hall (as opposed to the intimacy of the recording studio), perhaps especially in the more intimate sonatas? Is there a level and quality of sound that inevitably distorts both the character and the clarity of the music (and I'm thinking of tone character at least as much as volume)?



Alvaro Jañez

"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" ***Andreas Staier***