

With Scarlatti at the Piano

JEREMY SIEPMANN: Of the mighty triumvirate of 1685, Bach and Handel have had their due. Domenico Scarlatti has not. He is still more known about than known – a famous ‘great composer’ most of whose epoch-making 550 keyboard sonatas remain unknown to most musicians, even most harpsichordists, and certainly most pianists. In the next few pages we join some of the most outstanding Scarlatti players of this or any other time. And even they don’t know the lot, except for Richard Lester, who has recorded them complete (most on the harpsichord, some on fortepiano and organ). But don’t rule them out. They bow to no-one in their love and admiration for the composer. All are pianists, but Andreas Staier and Richard Lester have made their biggest reputations on period instruments. And happily, for purposes of our discussion, and because diversity is to be cherished, they are, in several matters, not of one opinion. We began our exploration wondering if Scarlatti has been typecast – in particular, as a speed demon.

NIKOLAI DEMIDENKO: Oh absolutely. Yes. But apart from the admittedly very many very fast sonatas, he wrote a huge lot of slow and some very serious ones. He was actually an extremely modest person, too. He left very few traces of himself. Out of the vast quantity of his sonatas only 30 were published in his lifetime – and the only surviving signature of Scarlatti is in the Lisbon archives, on a tax form!

PETER KATIN: I must say I never thought of him as a speed demon. He only becomes one in the hands show-offs!

BENJAMIN FRITH: On a superficial level I suppose he *has* been typecast, but I think music lovers appreciate the wealth of diversity in that incredible number of sonatas. One of the most astonishing things about these is the way he employs his musical language to different effect each time. Every sonata has its own strong musical personality, regardless of tempo.

YEVGENY SUDBIN: How can you typecast a chameleon? Which is exactly what I think he becomes in the hands of a pianist. No pianist plays him the same and every one will leave an individual imprint. Given the vast range of interpretational possibilities, audiences, I’d have thought, would find it very hard to pigeon-hole him

ANDREAS STAIER: Speed demon, I don’t know – but I think he *has* been typecast as a ‘virtuoso’ composer, with the completely unjustified suggestion that he’s therefore also a superficial one. Yes, the number of fast movements is very great, though not as great as many think, but what’s unusual about that? In virtually every classical four-movement sonata, you have a ratio of three fast movements to one slow. *Most* composers have written more fast movements than slow, particularly when those composers have themselves been performers – which the overwhelming majority have been. Taking into consideration all the individual movements, the proportion of fast to slow movements in Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven is probably just the same as in Scarlatti. And as for so-called superficiality, this man composed the most heart-breaking slow and slowish movements, which are often harmonically fascinating and profound and refined. He was a truly great composer.

RICHARD LESTER: But anyway, there’s no shame in being typecast,

it seems to me, if it’s going to bring this music in front of the general public. And hopefully that logic will encourage the more adventurous and discerning listener to sample the slower and more expressive sonatas. Some players, however, do certainly take some sonatas at excessive speeds. There’s a recording of K141 in D minor where authentic harpsichord action would simply not have permitted the inordinately fast repetition of notes that dazzle the listener. I do think it’s sad when performers try and blind us with a superficially virtuoso technique to the actual quality of the music.

JS: How great would you say Scarlatti’s emotional, spiritual, dramatic range is?



“He was probably the first composer to discover that keyboard music is not two-dimensional; we therefore find a great abundance of giant leaps and dramatic changes of registers, such as no composer had ever previously come up with”

Nikolai Demidenko