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SCARLATTI SONATAS, STEP BY STEP

by Penelope Cave

Most people want to play Scarlatti – hang the difficulties! This is, after all, great harpsichord music and passion is worth building on; the Associated Board has included sonatas, as early as Grade 3 for which K.34 is currently set. Throwing oneself into the deep end may work for some but others may drown and, as a regular method, it is unlikely to promote a fine diving style! Many of Scarlatti's sonatas are daunting and to be demoralised is not nurturing to the acquisition of skills. Herewith are some thoughts on both teaching and learning Iberian sonatas. I shall start with where to begin, continue with questions to ask oneself or one's pupil, consider the formal content of a chosen piece and then pose some practical questions and give an example of practising a specific work. I assume some knowledge of chronology and style.

Where to Start:

Dr Johnson, in a 1751 edition of *The Rambler*, suggested that “a careless glance upon a favourite author...is sufficient to supply the first hint or seminal idea.” Scarlatti did much more than glance carelessly at the work of the young Seixas and recently I have thought that some judiciously chosen pieces of Seixas might well be a good introduction and one that might meet with Scarlatti's approval.¹ It is my belief that he began, as did Domenico Scarlatti, with an Italian model. He, too, was incredibly prolific but, like Scarlatti, we have no manuscripts or certainty of dates.² The advantage of this plan of action is that there are a number of easier sonatas/toccatas to choose from; they introduce some technical challenges, mostly without being too difficult, and they just may be forerunners to Scarlatti's. The minuets of Seixas fulfil a different need; they are mostly galant and charming in style and well worth learning and performing but, like fairy cakes, they may not satisfy the palette desiring the rich, regional flavour of paella!

We badly need a complete edition of this significant composer to study him properly but I might suggest no. 29 of 60 sonatas (here no. 76 in A Minor) in the *Organica Hispanica* edition³ as being a good and accessible example of an Italian sonata with an imitative opening, scalar passages, violinistic figuration, thirds, leaps and unison cadences. Another easily accessible piece is the C Major *Allegro*⁴ (here as no. 6); the 61 bars of this two-voice piece include broken chords, repeated notes, and an incursion into the minor suggesting the flavour of Iberia that will, perhaps, appease the longing for “real” Scarlatti. Needless to say, there are plenty of others that are thoroughly worth studying in their own right and there are, of course, many other interesting works to consider in the “Scarlatti idiom”, in addition to Seixas, including de Nebra, Espona, Albero and Soler. Some of the English “Scarlatti Sect” also deserve some study.⁵

Before starting work on a piece, remember to check that the compass required will fit the chosen instrument! The questions that follow should be relevant to all the above mentioned composers; I offer nothing startling or new here but they may assist in making an informed choice of the sonata for performance or in gathering more insight as a listener.

Questions to Gain Understanding of the Score

1. Is there an opening introduction or is it imitative?
2. Are the two halves of equal length and similar material or is there a developmental section in the second half?
3. Do you observe a) a free unfolding of melodic material or b) contrasting sections with defined cadences?
4. What are the main rhythmic motifs or textures?
5. Where are the important key changes; does it arrive with a perfect cadence or is it just passing through?
6. Is there an orchestral suggestion in the use of solo versus tutti? Is there a suggestion of strummed guitar?
7. Is it contrapuntal and, if so, for how long and in how many voices?
8. How is the tempo determined? Look at the harmonic fabric and underlying rhythmic currents.
9. Do you detect any Spanish dance rhythms which might affect phrasing and gesture? What is its mood?
10. Where are the hardest technical problems and how might they be practised? (See advice, below).
11. Where does it finish? Is there a run out or a repetitive codetta; is it the same or different from the first half?
12. Do any passages in other sonatas, or by other composers, throw light upon this one? Give their details.

For the more difficult sonatas I usually distribute a sheet of examples of figuration, as found in Scarlatti's *Essercizi*, to use in identifying some of the sort of textures that will need some technical work. These include broken chords, octaves and other intervals, bravura scalar passages, leaps of wide intervals, repeated notes, hand-crossing and what I call "confused hands" — shared notes between the hands in close position. These require advanced technique and will need intelligent practice to be applied specifically.

Advice to Aid Effective Practice

1. **Define the problem, or problems;** Give each problem or difficulty a name. (e.g. hesitation, fingering, rhythm, division of notes between staves, accidental/s, memorising a shape, execution of ornament/s etc.)
2. Often there is more than one contributory factor, so **divide & conquer!** Tackle each in turn.
3. **Prepare the score**, black ink and liquid paper in hand, so that the right hand notes are in the upper stave, etc.
4. Check the **fingering** works and write in the crucial ones. Never finger every note but **always obey** those fingerings that are there!
5. Watch your hands, in case you can identify a poor hand position or an unnecessary movement.
6. Separate the technical from the musical where possible in order to focus on what needs the practice.
7. Try **bracketing** - overlapping (e.g. from 1st beat of one bar to 1st of next), **isolation bars** - circular repetition of a single bar until it is easy, use different **rhythms**, and **accumulation** - adding one note at a time, as a group of notes becomes fluent (forwards or backwards) and any other ways of practising that work for you.
8. Make up an **exercise** (or more than one) to explore a difficulty and eventually iron it out. This will be of more benefit than just the piece upon which you are working.

A few years ago, I compiled the following table for a harpsichord workshop. It contains some suggestions for learning the first half of Scarlatti's Sonata K.10⁸ which may serve as an example of some of the above. Working step by step enables small achievements; each of which promotes the impetus to successfully tackle the next.

Scarlatti Sonata K10 : practice ideas to enjoy!		
Bar nos.	Technical Difficulty	Possible solutions / Practice ideas & exs.
1-4	Hand positions for chord changes. RH figuration.	Finger for RH chord shapes, practise playing them as block chords in the harmonic rhythm i.e. 3/8  and with LH as written, joining in as soon as possible.
5-8	Hand positions for LH figuration	Similar work to that for bars 1-4 with RH as written
13-17	L.H arpeggiation Hands together	Practice LH jumps without actually sounding the notes (6th to 1st semiquavers) Bracketed practice: 3 beats, hands together, to the 1st quaver of the next bar then 6 quavers to the first quaver of the next bar. Stop and if perfect, start again at that bar to the first note of the next etc. Play with these harmonies in different arrangements and perhaps compose a new RH above. Have fun!
19	RH broken 6ths	Finger, then play 6ths unbroken; when hands feel as if they know the positions, play as written but in dotted rhythms both long-short and short-long. Repetition for any tricky corners.
21	LH broken octaves	Same as for RH broken 6ths.
22, 26, 28, in particular	RH tirades – in semi-demi quavers. Some identical, and some nearly so.	Start with what lies under the hand and gradually add on notes – practising fast, and remember that the only accidental is C#. Gradually shape it as one fluent flourish.
29-31	Broken octaves incorporating 3rds.	Play RH thumb with LH as well shaped as possible and then add top notes, using the same techniques as practised in bars 19 and 21.

- 1 Don Antonio asked Scarlatti to give some lessons to his protégé, Seixas, who had arrived in Lisbon, aged sixteen, having already held the post of organist at Coimbra Cathedral for two years. According to one writer, Scarlatti was also most impressed with the young Seixas and reported back to Don Antonio, "Your Highness commanded me to examine him, but I must tell you that he is one of the best musicians I have ever heard".
- 2 Seixas worked in the Portuguese Royal Chapel with Scarlatti during the 1720s. The manuscripts are thought to have been lost in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and tsunami.
- 3 Vol. VIII ed. by Doderer pub. Muller. It is also no.76, (Kastner's numbering), in the Gulbenkian Foundation edition of 80 sonatas and page 66 in Kastner's *Cravistas Portuguezes vol II*, published by Schott.
- 4 No 6 (Kastner's numbering) in the Gulbenkian Foundation edition of 80 sonatas and page 20 in Kastner's *Cravistas Portuguezes vol I*, published by Schott. It also appears in a Ricordi volume, *Clavicembalisti Portughesi*.
- 5 See my paper, The Scarlatti Connection, in *Five Centuries of Spanish Keyboard Music*. LEAL series FIMTE. ISBN 978-84-611-8235
- 6 Kirkpatrick nos 1-30; the only sonatas to be published. (London 1738/9.)
- 7 See my *Harpsichord & Fortepiano* article on the subject.
- 8 The 10th sonata in the *Essercizi* - see footnote 6.