

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Mahan Esfahani: Scarlatti Sonatas

Friday 14 October 2022, 7.30pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form.

We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757)

Sonatas: in F, Kk.296; in F, Kk.297;
in F minor, Kk.466;
in F sharp minor, Kk.25;
in G minor, Kk.12; in C minor, Kk.11; in F, Kk.6; in F minor,
Kk.19;
in F, Kk.106; in F, Kk.107;
in D minor, Kk.552; in D minor, Kk.553;
in C minor, Kk.116;
in G, Kk.470; in G, Kk.471;
in E minor, Kk.263; in E, Kk.264;
in A, Kk.24;
in D minor, Kk.32

80'

Performers

Mahan Esfahani Harpsichord

Domenico Scarlatti was born into a musical dynasty in Naples in 1685 – in the same year as JS Bach and Handel. Scarlatti was prodigiously skilful and began his first organ apprenticeship aged 15. His composer father Alessandro could be overbearing, as suggested by a letter to Ferdinando de' Medici written in 1705: 'I have forcibly removed him from Naples where, though there was room for his talent, his talent was not for such a place. I am removing him also from Rome, because Rome has no shelter for music...' Yet Alessandro acknowledged the need to step back and allow his son to flourish, referring to him as 'an eagle whose wings are grown; he must not remain idle in the nest, and I must not hinder his flight'.

Domenico travelled to Venice, then in 1709 to Rome. He met Handel, and they were pitted against each other but became friends. Handel valued Scarlatti's character as well as his gifts: 'besides his great talents as an artist, he had the sweetest temper, and the genteest behaviour'. Scarlatti found royal patrons in Rome and Lisbon, and in 1729 moved to Spain, remaining there for the rest of his life. In 1733 he settled in Madrid, where he wrote most of his keyboard sonatas.

The music of Scarlatti's day, which falls into the Baroque period (c. 1600–1750), is often characterised by its ornate, intertwining textures and new harmonic organisation. Yet it can be too easy from a modern perspective to lump everything together into a homogeneous group, generalising about the 'Baroque style' without acknowledging the proliferation of ideas that developed during this epoch. If we absorb the language of the time, we can discern which pieces were, within those parameters, radical or unusual – and Scarlatti's sonatas were frequently both, moving away from Baroque rhetorical patterns towards something more dynamic.

The sonata as a form was yet to become the organised structure that coalesced with later Classical composers before being formalised in the 19th century. In its earliest guise, a 'sonata' indicated an instrumental rather than vocal piece; in Scarlatti's era the most popular examples were the sonata da chiesa (church sonata), sonata da camera (courtly secular pieces) and trio sonatas (two melodic instruments with continuo – often a keyboard instrument and viol). Scarlatti's championing of the solo keyboard sonata – he wrote over 550 – represented a step forwards, helping to emancipate the form.

Scarlatti's sonatas are one-movement works, often in two contrasting sections. Within this concise framework he encompassed all manner of effects, including Spanish and Portuguese idioms, guitar-like textures and remote modulations. The formal aspects of the style almost seem

necessary as a way of reining in Scarlatti's wealth of ideas – these are by no means academic exercises, despite 30 of them being published in London in 1739 as *Essercizi per il gravicembalo* (Exercises for Harpsichord). These were the only Scarlatti sonatas published with his involvement; the rest remained unpublished in his lifetime, or were issued without his permission (prompting his publisher Adam Scola to rail against the 'vile worms that gnaw the Fruit of others' ingenious Labour and Expense'). The volume is prefaced with the words:

'Reader, do not expect, whether you are a dilettante or a professor, to find in these compositions any profound intention ... No point of view or ambition guided me ... Therefore do not show yourself more judge than critic, and you will thereby grow your own pleasure... Live happily.'

In some of Scarlatti's manuscripts his sonatas are paired; where this is the case with the pieces in this concert these works are performed without breaks. The first pair comprises the Sonatas Kk.296 and Kk.297, both in F, respectively a contemplative Andante, almost Romantic in its wide-ranging, heartfelt harmonies, and a playful, spontaneous Allegro.

We turn to F minor with the soulful Sonata Kk.466, and to F sharp minor in the Sonata Kk.25 (one of the published Exercises), propelled onwards by an insistent recurring motif. Four more of the Exercises follow: an unrelenting G minor Presto, Kk.12; noble C minor Allegro, Kk.11; jaunty Allegro in F, Kk.6; and, in F minor, an introspective Andante, Kk.19.

Then comes another pair in F major: the Sonata Kk.106 is a conversational, harmonically rich Andante, answered by the witty Allegro, Kk.107, its triple-time dance potential weighed down by a heavy note in the bass.

Our next pairing, in D minor, consists of a richly-textured Allegretto, Kk.552, and an Allegro, Kk.553, that dramatically spans the range of the keyboard.

The irrepressible Sonata in C minor, Allegro, Kk.116 abounds in quirky energy, followed by a pair in G: Kk.470 seems to have a twinkle in its eye, as though mocking pomposity in its apparently formal phrases, and is the Minuet, Kk.471 truly refined, or is it laughing at attempted elegance?

In contrast, the Sonata in E minor, Kk.263 is an Andante of refreshing sincerity, its ornamentation never clouding the immediacy of the material as it passes through an array of keys, and the Sonata in E, Kk.264, is an animated Vivo. The dazzling Sonata in A, Kk.24, ripples and sparkles like a fountain in sunshine, and our programme concludes with the Sonata in D minor, Kk.32, an exquisite Aria.

Programme note © Joanna Wylid

Find out more

- ▶ [Read Mahan Esfahani's notes on Domenico Scarlatti's inner thoughts and motivations for the sonatas on our blog page](#)
- ▶ [Mahan Esfahani](#)
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

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Friday 28 October 2022, 7.30pm | Royal Festival Hall

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Emerson String Quartet: Shostakovich Cycle - Parts 4 & 5

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The Emerson Quartet continues its journey through the string quartets of Dmitry Shostakovich, works that reveal the composer's innermost secrets. The performance of Part 5 signals a last farewell to London as the legendary quartet completes its landmark Southbank Centre Shostakovich cycle before retirement.