Domenico Scarlatti: 30 Sonatas

Transcribed for the guitar by Fabio Zanon
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Domenico Scarlatti
30 Sonatas transcribed for the guitar by Fabio Zanon

This volume of thirty pieces is a souvenir of one of the happiest periods in my musical career, when I spent a year in the company of Domenico Scarlatti's 550-plus sonatas. Each one of those is testimony to his unique fecundity, to his single-minded effort to bring a piece of life to a severe form, to the unusual way he could handle the most prosaic musical material.

I first became acquainted with Scarlatti's music as a boy, when I heard the recordings of Italian harpsichordist Egida Giordani Sartori. Compared to other 18th Century composers, Scarlatti sounded, to my inexperienced ears, very appealing in its unpredictability and child-like energy. This is what still draws me so strongly to his music. He can start a piece with a rather unassuming idea, and at the snap of his fingers he can tear one inside.

When I was 13, I started to study the guitar with Antonio Guedes, who used to play K.11, K.32 and K.431 in his concerts. It was a revelation to me to learn one could play this music on the guitar. Then as today, Scarlatti was under-represented in live performances, and I had to satisfy my curiosity reading his music straight from the piano edition of Alessandro Longo, or listening to recordings by Maria Tipo, Vladimir Horowitz and Carlos Barbosa Lima.

In 1995 I attended a concert by Mikhail Pletnev in London where he played a group of Scarlatti sonatas in a very theatrical and imaginative manner. That impression stuck in my mind and I began toying with the idea of delving deeper into his music and transcribing it for the guitar. That opportunity came in 1997. I brought home all volumes of Kenneth Gilbert's edition of the sonatas and spent the most delightful months in the company of Domenico. I felt I was in the company of a privileged mind, who had something enlightening or eccentric to say about any topic in life, no matter how insignificant it might appear; a musical Montaigne. Life can be quite good when something like that happens.

At the end of that period, I had singled out about 100 sonatas I suspected might be played on the guitar. I started working on some 40 of those, and settled for six to play in the 1998 season. The good response they met and the special enthusiasm of the recording producer John Taylor encouraged me to make an all-Scarlatti recording. This is certainly the happiest recording I've made to date.

I decided to make an album of 30 pieces mirroring Scarlatti's own publication of 30 Essercizi per Gravicembalo in 1738. These include the 13 sonatas I've recorded. I hope these will bring to the listener at least a fraction of the joy they have given me.
A NOTE ABOUT THE TRANSCRIPTIONS

There are at least three different catalogue numbers appended to Scarlatti’s Exercises: those by Alessandro Longo (L.), by Ralph Kirkpatrick (K.) and the revised one by Giorgio Pestelli (P.). Kirkpatrick’s chronological order is the most often used today.

In my selection I have tried to include some perennial favourites like K. 11, K. 322 and K.380 alongside some new ones, a few of whose I believe here have been transcribed for the guitar for the first time, like K. 394 and K.404.

A transcription is an act of re-creation of a musical statement in a different set of circumstances. I see four valid reasons for a transcription to exist:

[1] To dote the guitar with a musical style absent from its original literature.

[2] To enhance or uncover latent expressive possibilities.

[3] To extend the technical and musical boundaries of the guitar.

[4] To bring to the public music that would otherwise belong only to experts.

Being faithful to the letter is, to me, rather less important than reason number [2]. I have made, obviously, no attempt to historical reconstruction. The validity of a transcription is proportional to the artistic result, not to authenticity.

Pairing

It is quite consensual today that some 400 out of Scarlatti’s 555-plus sonatas were intended to be played in pairs or even as triptychs in a few cases. Some of these paired pieces seem to complement each other in character, either by contrast or by assonance. Nevertheless some of them have been found with different pairings in different sources, keeping little in common other than the key signature.

It is possible to keep the intended pairing in quite a number of guitar transcriptions, but I have found difficult to make them work equally well on the same key. For that reason I have not attempted to keep the original pairings, with two unintentional exceptions, K.144/K.146 and K.322/K.323.

Only purism could prevent each player to create one’s own combinations, for instance K.474/K.491 or K.11/K.394.

Key choice

Although the 18th century sensitvity to the meaning of each key was probably higher than ours, that is related as much to the technical particularities of each key on a given instrument as to the individual colour they would create in a non-temperate tuning system.

When one transcribes for the modern guitar, it seems to me the overall feeling of spacial spread, the resonance, the character of each register, the placement of the musical argument on a similar geographical position and the reproduction of a certain feeling for sound, harmony, articulation and texture are more crucial to the final result than a blind adhesion to the original key.

Playing in the original key more often than not means playing the piece an octave lower, what in many cases makes the music rather heavy and congested in texture, and stuck in dull lower positions, whereas Scarlatti’s originals explore the special effects of the thin upper register and the growling lower register of the harpsichord in a most imaginative manner.

There are notable exceptions like K.391 or K.146, which sound as light and crisp an octave lower on the guitar as they do in the original key and pitch on the harpsichord. Nevertheless I’ve chosen unusual keys for a number of pieces that are already well-known in their original key, notably K.32, K.208, K.322, and K.380. That was
not for technical facility, but for the search of a sound picture closer to the overall feeling of the harpsichord original.

**Ornamentation**

Historical performance practice has a great deal to inform us on how to execute the embellishments of Scarlatti's music, as long as we admit there is more than a single way of making it right. Ornaments should be subordinated to musical logic, and often what is historically correct will not sound organic on the guitar. Scarlatti's notation of ornaments is vague comparing to his French contemporaries, and we can presume he would encourage the creativity of the player, especially in the repeats.

Most musicians today accept trills and mordents in Baroque usage always start on the upper auxiliary and are always played on the beat. However, Scarlatti often writes a grace note before a trill, usually indicating the upper auxiliary. So it has been argued that trills in Scarlatti should start on the upper auxiliary when a grace note is present, otherwise they could start either on the main note or on the upper auxiliary. Often trills have a turn at the end, otherwise they can sound rather awkward as an end of phrase.

In these 30 sonatas we have plenty of these possibilities, and my approach has accordingly varied between upper auxiliary and main note ornaments, as they suit the musical context. Ornaments should not work against melodic direction. The very first trill in the first sonata, K.11, already presents a problem. The upward motion of first motif, B-D♯-E in this transcription, is compromised by the anticipation of the note E if the trill starts on the upper auxiliary. On bar 20 of the same sonata, the necessity for increased dissonance in the fermata suggests a start on the upper auxiliary. Thus, the musical context asks for different solutions even within the same piece.

I have chosen to use a variety of techniques to execute ornaments, which are detailed in an appendix in order to avoid cluttering the musical text with footnotes. I have not detailed one and every ornament so that I can allow for each player to develop one's own ideas, which might vary in the repeats and from one performance to another. These are only the starting point for some unorthodox fingerings.

I have used both the usual left hand slurred trills and what has been called cross-string trills, that is, trills whose notes are distributed between two strings and played by different combinations of the right hand fingers. These two techniques often expose the deficiencies of each other when played side by side; for that reason I have tried to employ them in accordance with the style of each passage.

Cross-string trills, which, to the best of my knowledge, were first used in extensive manner by the Presti-Lagoya duo, have erroneously become synonym with authentic baroque practice in recent decades. In fact, their presence in plucked instruments in the 17th and 18th centuries is very rare; if anything, they emulate the sonority of the harpsichord. I am not interested in making the guitar mock a harpsichord; I find it more interesting to make the guitar sound less like a guitar. The reason for me to employ them, therefore, is their musical advantage in certain cases, that is, their crispness, their sustained energy and the possibility of dynamic modulation. One should avoid defective execution, though. First, the note overlap should be controlled, gently lifting left-hand fingers when trills are slower, and stopping the dissonant note to avoid clash at the end of a trill. Second, one should notice ornaments have a predominantly diminuendo motion from the dissonance towards its resolution; as cross-string trills often end with the heavy right-hand thumb, one should avoid an unintentional – and quite clumsy – accent on the last note.

Ornaments have different purposes: to prolong notes of low sustain (K.144, bar 2); to create dissonance (K.206, bars 29-30); to create syncopation (K.208, bar 2); to displace accent (K.64, bar 8 and similar); to create an exclamation mark at the end of a period (K.404, bar 24); to simply make a phrase more graceful (K.485, bar 1); etc. The ability to discern the function of each ornament is the key to an organic interpretation.
Distinctive features

1 – As much as any late baroque composer's, Scarlatti's music is informed by dance. In many cases that amounts to a compulsion, creating a sort of "rhythmic pedal" (K.477, for instance).

2 – Much of Scarlatti's originality derives from the Iberian flavour exuded by many of his pieces. One hears fandangos, seguidillas and zapateados in sonatas like K.380, K.239 and K.477. That is obviously enhanced by the poetic associations of the guitar. Nevertheless, Scarlatti was an Italian composer steeped in the Neapolitan and Roman schools of composition. I tend to favour a balanced view; many sonatas ask for a rigorous rendition, and some of the slower ones could have figured as oratorio arias and deserve a vocal approach. One should be specially cautious when trying to make them sound like "baroque flamenco": flamenco as we understand today was still in the process of formation in Scarlatti's time.

3 – Many sonatas present comic or perverse demands to harpsichord players: wide leaps of position, daring hand-crossings, impossible repeated notes, etc. Although many of them make similar demands on the guitarist, in a few occasions I have employed unorthodox techniques, like L.H. finger crossings in K.404, extreme extensions in K.404 and K.380, perverse bass trills in K.477 and a comic retuning halfway-through K.394.

4 – Part of the enormous variety of expression in Scarlatti can be credited to his evocative power. With some imagination one can hear mandolins, guitars, trumpets, bagpipes, drums, cannon shots, sleigh bells, folksong singing, mockery, chattering, etc. Some of my choices try to enhance the colour, for instance the choice for a higher register for K.446 or K.491 or the C-G scordatura of K.404 and K.485, that instantly produces a sonority of bass drums or bagpipe drones.

5 – Silence is part of the composition in Scarlatti and it is employed in a variety of situations to create expectation and curiosity or to represent humour, solemnity or tiredness.

Conclusion

I am not aware of guitar transcriptions of Scarlatti before Andrés Segovia and Emilio Pujol, who opened up the precedent to most people who came after them. I'd like to acknowledge the much I have learned from the work done before me by Sérgio Abreu, Carlos Barbosa Lima, Manuel Barrueco, Leo Brouwer, John Duarte, Eliot Fisk, David Russell and John Williams, who certainly share my enthusiasm for Scarlatti’s music.

As the master wrote in the preface for his 30 sonatas, I ask the reader to “show yourself more human than critical, and then your Pleasure will increase. Vivi felice.”

Fabio Zanon
Sonata
K. 32

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1987

5 = G
6 = D

Aria

\[ \text{\textcopyright 2023 by Fabio Zanon} \]
Sonata
K. 60
Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1993
Sonata
K. 77

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1999

\( \text{\textcopyright 17} \)

\( \text{Sonata} \)

\( \text{K. 77} \)

\( \text{Domenico Scarlatti} \)

\( \text{Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1999} \)

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\( \text{Sonata} \)

\( \text{K. 77} \)

\( \text{Domenico Scarlatti} \)

\( \text{Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1999} \)
Sonata
K. 144

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1992
Sonata
K. 146

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1991

Allegro

\(\text{\#}^6 = \text{D}\)
Adagio e cantabile
Sonata
K. 283

Andante allegro

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 2007

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Sonata
K. 322

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1987

Allegro
Sonata
K. 380

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1989

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Sonata
K. 391

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1996

\( \text{V} \) = G
\( \text{VI} \) = D  Allegro*

\( \text{III} \)

* Minuet (Parma)
Tune 6th string up to F

Tune 6th string back to E
Sonata
K. 404

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1999

\( \text{Andante} \)

\( \text{Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 1999} \)
Sonata
K. 446

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 2012

Pastorale - allegrissimo

\( \text{VII} \)

\( \text{II} \)

\( \text{IV} \)

\( \text{II} \)

\( \text{VII} \)
Sonata
K. 453
Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 2012

Andante
Sonata
K. 474

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 2000

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\( g = D \)
\( f = G \)

Andante e cantabile
Sonata
K. 477

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 2000

Allegrissimo
Sonata
K. 485

Domenico Scarlatti
Transcribed by Fabio Zanon, 2001

Andante e cantabile

\[ \text{\(\text{\(6\)} = \text{\(C\)}} \]
\[ \text{\(\text{\(5\)} = \text{\(G\)}} \]

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Table of Ornaments

Sonata K. 11

Bar 1

Bar 10

Bar 15

Bar 20

Sonata K. 32

Bar 5

Bar 7

Bar 16

89
Sonata K. 40
Bar 7

(Pluck with 2 finger, L.H.)

Sonata K. 60
Bar 20

Sonata K. 64
Bar 4
Bar 8

Sonata K. 77
Bar 16
Sonata K. 83
Bar 5

Sonata K. 144
Bar 2

(Pluck with 3rd finger L.H.)

Sonata K. 146
Bar 1

Bar 15
Sonata K. 283
Bar 1

Sonata K. 322
Bar 3

Bar 8
Sonata K. 380
Bar 2

Bar 6

Bar 18

Bar 26

Bar 47

Sonata K. 391
Bar 20
Sonata K. 491

Bar 1

Bar 17

Bar 31