

1. The harpsichord at the Courtauld Institute: Photo, by permission of the Courtauld Institute.

# The Performer's Approach to Scarlatti

by **Richard  
Lester**



This article is based on the discovery of a Spanish harpsichord in the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, which engenders a completely fresh approach to the performance of Spanish Baroque keyboard music.

In recent years it has become the accepted practice to perform sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century keyboard music either on authentic instruments of the period, or on faithful reproductions. Although we have acquired tremendous knowledge in respect of English, French, German and Italian music there has been a cloud of uncertainty hanging over performances of Spanish keyboard music — especially the sonatas of Scarlatti.

My interest in Scarlatti's music was awakened some eight years ago after reading Ralph Kirkpatrick's book. Since then I have been involved in extensive research into important points that hitherto have remained unexplored. In his book, Kirkpatrick laments that his hopes of finding any Spanish harpsichords were 'utterly deceived' - and it was this statement which gave me the incentive to search further in a quest for the truth.

I did not have to look far. The Courtauld Institute of Art in London unknowingly held the vital key.

They possess an instrument originally thought to be Italian - but closer examination by leading experts has determined its origin as Spanish. This is thought

to be the only known example of a late seventeenth-century Spanish harpsichord almost identical to the instruments at Scarlatti's disposal. (fig.1)

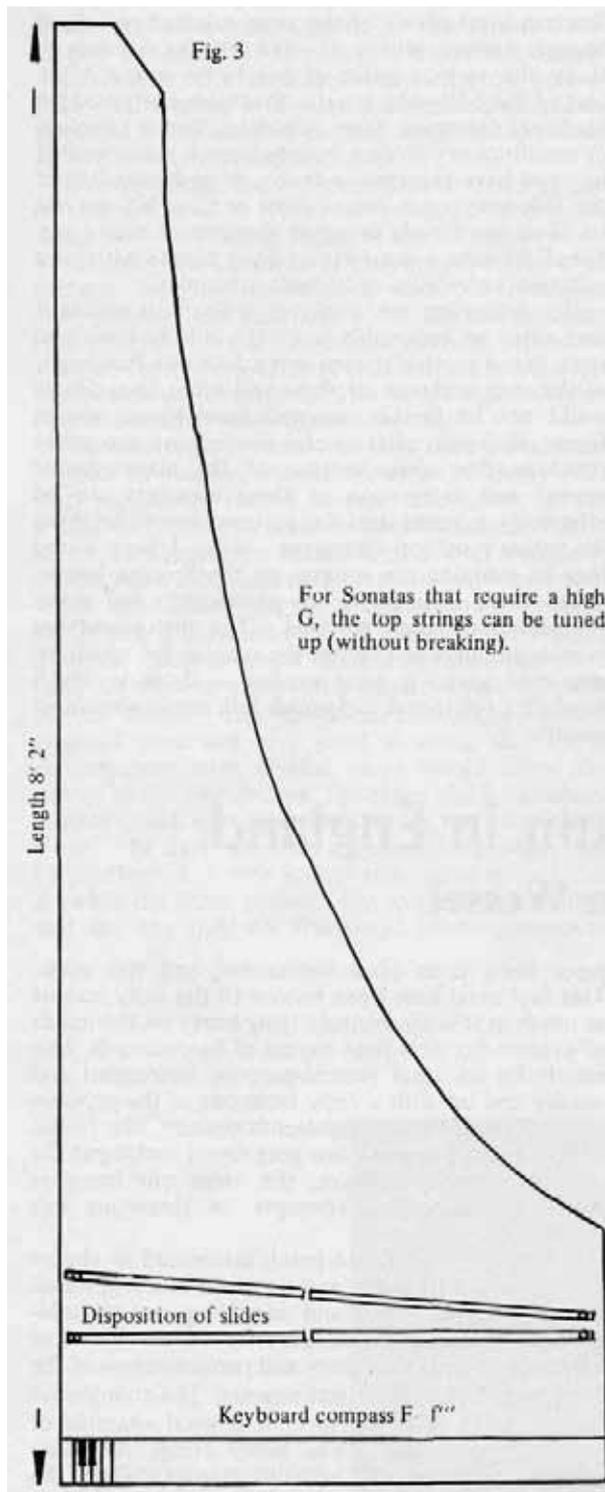
Queen Maria Barbara of Spain, Scarlatti's patroness, owned twelve keyboard instruments housed at the royal palaces of Buen Retire, Aranjuez and the Escorial. Of special interest are the three Spanish harpsichords documented in her inventory. They are described as having cedar and cypress on the interior, with two sets of strings and keys in ebony and mother of pearl. The instrument shown in the photograph (fig.2) is a faithful reproduction by Robert and Andrea Goble, of the Courtauld instrument. Certainly the superior craftsmanship throughout would have made the original a very special instrument in its own right. In the reproduction, the inner case is made of cedar with pine inner frame and soundboard. The keyboard has naturals of ebony and sharps

covered with mother of pearl. The decoration of the inner case consists chiefly of very delicately executed marquetry medallions with arabesque designs — and the soundboard rose takes the unusual shape of a six-pointed star, which is thought to have Spanish cabalistic significance.

The two eight-foot registers are separated more widely in the bass than in the treble, and the slides themselves are divided at middle B flat/B. The treble and bass of each can be operated independently which enables both stops to act as a solo accompanied by one eight foot in the tenor and bass registers or vice versa, (fig.3). This disposition is unique and closely follows the traditions of Spanish organ building. The half register system on Spanish organs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a prominent feature. Usually the early organs possessed one manual covering about four octaves with the registers



2. The reproduction by Robert & Andrea Goble.



divided into two halves with the break at middle C/Csharp. To demonstrate this device on a harpsichord one would normally need a two-manual instru-

ment, but on the Spanish harpsichord we can successfully achieve the same result.

It was the accepted practice of composers such as Francisco Correa de Arauxo to write pieces using a reed stop in the right hand accompanied by flutes and diapasons in the left or vice versa on the organ's single keyboard. On the Spanish harpsichord this solo/accompaniment idea can be practised in Scarlatti's sonatas that demand this treatment. The sonata in A major K.208 for example is almost in the bel-canto style with a graceful melody and simple crotchet accompaniment. The divided-register system is also useful as a colouring where certain sonatas require and permit changes of registration. The stops are located under the jack rail at the extreme ends of each slide, so the following combinations can be achieved.

- (1) Back eight foot alone
- (2) Front eight foot alone
- (3) Two eight foots from middle B upwards with either rank accompanying
- (4) Two eight foots from middle B flat downwards with either rank in treble
- (5) Front eight foot in treble with back eight to accompany
- (6) Back eight foot in treble with front eight to accompany
- (7) Two eight foot ranks together.

Excessive changes of registration in Scarlatti can often hide the music's natural flow. Usually the only shading that is necessary can be achieved by careful phrasing and articulation — or in a case where a definite impression is being established. For example, to emulate the stamping of the dancer's heel or the striking on the belly of the guitar are effects prevalent in many of the sonatas.

Since Spain's national instrument is the guitar, it is not surprising to find many examples in the works of Scarlatti which incorporate imitations of the instrument. From mediaeval times it had been customary to use the guitar for accompanying the singing of ballads and dances. An important treatise published in 1675 by Caspar Sanz, gave instructions for two styles of playing, — strumming and plucking, and included compositions for both styles. The guitar played a major role both as a solo instrument and in accompanying the flamenco song-dances that were to become a means of inspiration to Scarlatti.

The famous eighteenth-century musicologist, Charles Burney stated that Scarlatti, 'imitated the melody of tunes sung by carriers, muleteers and common people', and so I should like to spend a little time in this article outlining a few basic points. Spanish folk music is considered by many to be the richest in the world and forms an integral part of the country's way of life. The folk songs and dances are directly connected to ancient customs, human existence, daily and family life in village and town. The origins of this art have been handed down over

the centuries and have been faithfully preserved.

Manuel de Falla, who made an extensive study of Andalusian folk music, states three basic principles in its development. They are: the adoption of many elements of Byzantine chant by the primitive church in Spain, the Moslem invasion and occupation, and the immigration of numerous bands of gypsies most of whom settled in Andalusia. The traditional folk songs are amongst the most beautiful and interesting throughout the whole world. The dances which often accompany the songs are full of emotion combined with a dynamic and vivacious energy rarely found in any other country. Anyone who has witnessed the spectacle of the male Spanish dancer will at once know what I mean.

The main song-dances of Andalusia, — where Scarlatti spent four years with his royal patroness, and the area around Madrid — where he spent the rest of his life, are the *Sevillanas*, the *Fandango*, the *Jota* (probably the best known of all) the *Bolero* and the *Malaguena*. One of the main qualities in many dances are the complex cross rhythms. Finger snapping, clapping of the hands, and rhythmic stamping of the heels are expressions necessary in maintaining, and cross accenting the basic pulse.

The rhythmic impetus behind Scarlatti's style is a constant reminder of his sojourn in a land where rhythm is the essence of every musical impulse.

Scarlatti lived in one of the most subdued periods of Spanish history, which afforded him the freedom to study the various walks of life in his new habitat. Out of the 550—odd sonatas that were composed for his royal patroness, there is nothing that is frivolous or meaningless — in fact recent research indicates that he must have possessed a thorough understanding of the folk music that was so close to him. No-one else could so ingeniously integrate elements of such a profound art into a short binary-form sonata without a complete knowledge of its basic principles.

To determine the origin of a Scarlatti sonata is very often an impossible task. It would be foolish to state that a particular sonata is a *Jota* or a *Fandango*, as the very make-up of these and other song-dances could not be further removed from simple sonata form. However, after careful research we can safely conclude that characteristics of the many dances appear and integration of these elements can be effectively injected into the performance to heighten the music's natural character. Also, I have found that in studying the sonatas on the Spanish harpsichord there is a greater co-relationship and many problems have been resolved. The instrument has been a stimulus to explore the sonatas for which an authentic sound is most needed — those in which Scarlatti's references to Spanish folk music were most specific.

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