

DOMENICO SCARLATTI (1685-1757)

November's essay deals with the life of the composer, Domenico Scarlatti, one of the most famous Baroque composers, who spent much of his life in the service of the Portuguese and Spanish royal families. Chronologically, he is classified as a Baroque composer, although his music was influential in the development of the Classical style and he was one of the few Baroque composers able to transition into the Classical period. Like his renowned father, Alessandro Scarlatti, he composed in a variety of musical forms, although today he is known primarily for his 555 keyboard sonatas, which substantially expanded the technical and musical possibilities of the harpsichord.



*Velasco's portrait (1739)
commemorating the dubbing of Scarlatti
into the Order of Santiago on April 21, 1738
by King John V of Portugal.
He is wearing the uniform of the Order.*

Giuseppe Domenico Scarlatti was born in Naples on October 26, 1685 (this past Oct. 26 was the 331st anniversary of his birth), the same year as Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel. He was the sixth of ten children of the composer and teacher Alessandro Scarlatti. Domenico's older brother Pietro Filippo Scarlatti was also a musician.

Domenico most likely studied music first under his father. Other composers who were his early teachers were Gaetano Greco and Francesco Gasparini, both of whom influenced his musical style. In 1701, just before his 16th birthday, he was appointed composer and organist at the royal chapel in Naples where his father was *Maestro di Cappella*. In 1704, he revised Carlo Francesco Pollaro's opera *Irene* for performance at the Teatro San Bartolomeo in Naples. His father soon recognized that his son's fascination with the harpsichord would need nurturing in an artistic climate more kindly disposed towards keyboard virtuosity than late 17th-century Naples, where the organ was considered the prime instrument.

Alessandro encouraged Domenico to explore as far as Venice in search of a position that would give him the creative recognition he sought. A letter from Alessandro to Ferdinando de' Medici, Grand Prince of Tuscany, in 1705 begs the Grand Prince to consider his son when it comes to finding "opportunities...for making himself known—opportunities for which it is hopeless to wait in Rome nowadays." But there was no opening in Florence, so Domenico moved to Venice. There he had more luck, for he remained in Venice for about three years, learning much from teachers such as Francesco Gasparini and gaining the friendship of a number of young composers, including George Frideric Handel. (The two men remained in touch for the rest of their lives, and always spoke about each other's musical gifts with admiration).

Following this short sojourn in Venice, nothing is known of Scarlatti's life until 1709, when he went to Rome under the patronage of the exiled Polish queen, Marie Casimire (1709-1714). For the

queen's private theater, which had papal permission to present "decent comedies," Scarlatti composed at least one cantata, one oratorio and six operas. In 1714, he came under the patronage of the Portuguese ambassador to the Vatican, the Marquis de Fontes. The ambassador asked him to compose a piece in honor of a newborn child in the Portuguese royal family, which he accomplished to great acclaim. He was also successful in creating and composing many of his novel pieces, heavily influenced by the styles of his father and also of Vivaldi.



Marie Casimire
(Scarlatti's patroness 1709-1714)

Scarlatti was also a familiar figure at the weekly meetings of the Accademie Poetico-Musicali hosted by the indefatigable music-lover and entertainer Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, at which the finest musicians in Rome met weekly and performed chamber music. Once again in this group, Scarlatti reunited with Handel. Ottoboni prevailed upon them to compete together, with him acting as referee, to see who the best keyboardist was. The judgment on the harpsichord was "undecided," though leaning toward Scarlatti; but on the organ Handel was judged superior, even by Scarlatti. (The two had mutual admiration for each other and became lifelong friends. Later in life, Scarlatti was known



Balthasar Denner's portrait of
George Frideric Handel (1733).

to cross himself in veneration when speaking of Handel's organ skill, commenting that he had never conceived the existence of such organ playing). Through Ottoboni's Accademie, Scarlatti also formed a lifelong association with Arcangelo Corelli, who later went on to greatly influence Scarlatti's style and skills of music. He also met Thomas Roseingrave, the English harpsichordist, who became his enthusiastic champion and who, later back in London, published the first edition of Scarlatti's *Essercizi per Gravicembalo* (1738-9) from which, in turn, the Newcastle-born English composer Charles Avison drew material from at least 29 Scarlatti sonatas to produce a set of 12 concerti (1744). Joseph Kelway and Thomas Arne also helped to popularize Scarlatti's music in England.

Scarlatti served as *Maestro di Cappella* at the Cappella Giulia in the Vatican from 1715 to 1719. But in 1719, attracted by the unknown, Scarlatti abandoned his musical position and gave in to a natural curiosity and fascination for distant countries. This induced him to undertake a voyage to London, where his opera *Narciso*, performed at the King's Theater, was only moderately successful.

Then, on November 29, 1719, he arrived in Lisbon, to take up a position (in 1720) arranged by the Marquis de Fontes. Scarlatti was appointed the new *Maestro di Cappella* for the Royal Portuguese family under the rule of King John V. His duties also included the musical education of the king's talented daughter, the Infanta Maria Magdalena Barbara, and her brother Don Antonio. Scarlatti especially concentrated on the keyboard training of the Infanta, with whom he formed a lifelong musical friendship that resulted in the creation of his most important work—a body of more than 500 single-movement sonatas for unaccompanied keyboard, written between 1719 and 1757.

He left Lisbon on January 28, 1727 to return to Rome for a short period, and at age 42, he married Maria Caterina Gentili on May 6, 1728. In 1729, Scarlatti and his wife returned to Portugal from Rome in time to be taken as members of the newly-married (to Crown Prince Ferdinand of Spain) Princess Maria Barbara's entourage to her new home in Madrid. (Ferdinand became King Ferdinand VI in 1746, and Maria Barbara became Queen of Spain).

Scarlatti remained in Spain for the remaining 28 years of his life. He and Maria Caterina had six children there. In 1742, after delivering the last of her children, Maria Caterina died. Shortly later, in 1742, he married a Spaniard, Anastasia Maxarti Ximenes, and had four children by her.

Scarlatti's fidelity to the Spanish monarch was rewarded with a Spanish knighthood of the Order of Santiago in 1738. When the Queen died in 1758, she left him 2,000 doubloons as a mark of appreciation for his "great diligence and loyalty." That the Queen also frequently helped him out of financial difficulties caused by his inveterate gambling shows the broad extent of her fondness and her indulgence of him as his patron.

Like his father, Scarlatti was regarded as a modest and charming man, unlikely to resort to arrogance or displays of petulance, and this no doubt endeared him to the Queen and to other composers. That he did not have great ambition apart from creating his music is demonstrated by the fact that although he wrote nearly a dozen operas, many religious works, and over 500 harpsichord sonatas, only 30 of the sonatas were published in his lifetime (under the title [*Essercizi per Gravicembalo*](#) and dedicated to the King of Portugal) by Thomas Roseingrave in London (1738-39), a work that was enthusiastically received all over Europe. (This work consisted of thirty sonatas each making it a musical masterpiece at the time). The remainder, except for a collection of 42 suites printed under the auspices of Roseingrave, remained in the possession of the Portuguese royal family, for whose sole pleasure Scarlatti had composed them. They were kept in 15 morocco-bound gold-inlaid volumes, and comprise the heart of Scarlatti's posthumous keyboard reputation.



*Maria Barbara of Braganza
(1711–1758)*

Scarlatti lived out the rest of his life at the Spanish Court, continuing to supply new compositions until just prior to his death. Although as King and Queen, Ferdinand and Maria Barbara introduced opera into Spain's cultural life, Scarlatti did not write any for them. However, he did assist in their private musical soirées, again writing cantatas and working with various singers, especially the famous castrato Farinelli. Scarlatti also continued to teach, and, in the last six years of his life, concentrated on organizing his sonatas in manuscripts. The single-voice *Salve Regina* (1756) is generally thought to be his last composition. He died at the age of 71, on July 23, 1757; the cause of his death was unknown and is still a mystery. He was buried in the Convent of San Norberto in Madrid (although his grave no longer exists). His residence on Calle Leganitos is designated with a historical plaque, and his descendants still live in Madrid.

CONCLUSION AND INFLUENCE

Domenico Scarlatti brought an original compositional approach to his harpsichord works, which stand at the center of his artistic achievement. Apart from technical advances, such as the novel idea of crossing the hands on the keyboard (which was to be taken up by piano composers such as Franz Liszt and Felix Mendelssohn), Scarlatti used simple musical forms within which he found endless variety of expression. His harpsichord pieces, invariably short and to the point, use a vast array of rhythms and expressive devices, and range from the most formidably challenging to the simplest and purest of melodies and chord sequences. His constant search for freshness of expression led him to employ unusual and exciting harmonic patterns and voicings. Many of his figurations and dissonances are suggestive of the guitar. (One can hear the influence of Portuguese and Spanish folk tunes and dance rhythms, with their distinctive Moorish (Arabic), and later gypsy influences, in many of the works).

Although he wrote for an instrument which was later to be supplanted by the piano, the listener can feel the richness of his inspiration and the directness of his musical message whether the piece is played on a modern grand piano or on a harpsichord. Thus, he has attracted notable admirers over the centuries, including Béla Bartók, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Johannes Brahms, Frédéric Chopin, Emil Gilels, Enrique Granados, Marc-André Hamelin, Vladimir Horowitz, Franz Liszt, Ivo Pogorelić, Heinrich Schenker and Dmitri Shostakovich.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Allmusic.com website; American Ballet Theater website; Classical Net website; Baroquemusic.org; Famous People website; Colles, H.C., editor and author. Grove: A Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 4th Edition. New York: Macmillan Co., 1940; Wikipedia.



*A Unique and Highly Important
Neapolitan double-manual Cembalo-
Tiorbino (Theorbo-Harpsichord)
attributed to Gasparre Sabbatino*

Naples, Circa 1710