

### ALESSANDRO SCARLATTI (1660-1725)

*This month's essay is about one of the important composers of the Italian Baroque period—Alessandro Scarlatti. He was most famous for his operas and chamber cantatas. During his lifetime, he composed over 600 cantatas, more than 115 operas, many oratorios, serenatas, sonatas, and also many important works of sacred vocal music. Although very popular during his lifetime, his historical position declined soon after his death and his reputation was not rehabilitated until the early 20th century.*

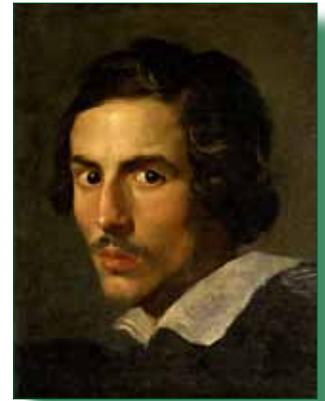
*He is considered the founder of the Neapolitan School of opera that was so influential in the development of 17th- and 18th-century opera. It rapidly improved the predominantly provincial status of music in Naples, changing it into a sophisticated and enduring tradition. (Some critics argue that modern opera as we know it begins with Scarlatti). His compositions include some of the most popular operas of his day, among them *Gli Equivoci nel Sembiante* (The Misunderstandings in the Countenance, 1679) and *La Griselda* (1721). His secular cantatas also merit recognition, as they are often considered the final flowering of that genre. In addition, he was also the father of two 18th-century composers: one of whom was the most famous keyboard composer of the 18th century, Domenico Scarlatti, (see my [previous essay](#) about him under “La Cultura Italiana” on our website) and Pietro Filippo Scarlatti.*

**PIETRO ALESSANDRO GASPARE SCARLATTI** was born in Palermo, Sicily (then known as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) on May 2, 1660 to Pietro Scarlata (an older form of the family name) and Eleonora d'Amato. The elder Pietro was a tenor, and Eleonora came from a musical family. In 1672 a devastating famine hit Palermo, and the family left for Rome. Pietro died before they left or soon thereafter, but Pietro's friend, Marc'Antonio Sportonio, offered the family support, probably finding Alessandro an instructor with whom he could continue his musical studies, which he had begun earlier.

Virtually nothing is known of Scarlatti's early musical education, though he likely became a choirboy at a local church and may have studied the rudiments of choral music with the choirmaster. After moving to Rome, he is generally said to have been a pupil of composer Giacomo Carissimi until the composer's death in 1674. Although his music does reveal some Carissimi influences, we cannot be sure who Scarlatti's teachers were.



On April 12, 1678, Scarlatti (who was almost 18 years old) married Antonia Anzalone, who would bear him 10 children, though only half would survive to adulthood. The young couple lived in the palace of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (*self-portrait at right*), the great Baroque architect and sculptor. A Cosimo Scarlatti, possibly a relative, had been working for Bernini since 1660 and may have brought Alessandro to Bernini's attention. (When Alessandro and Antonia had their first child, Pietro Filippo, on January 5, 1679, Filippo Bernini, son of Gian Lorenzo, was the godfather).



Scarlatti earned his first documented position, as *maestro di cappella* (choirmaster) at the hospital of San Giacomo degli Incurabili in Rome on December 16, 1678. In 1679, his first opera, *Gli Equivoci nel Sembiante* (*The Misunderstandings in the Countenance*) was performed privately in Domenico Filippo Contini's private theater. (Contini was the librettist of the opera). It could not be performed publicly because Pope Innocent XI had closed the Roman theaters in 1676. Nevertheless, it was successful enough to be staged in several other cities, including Vienna, Naples, and Venice.

Queen Christina of Sweden (*right*), who had abdicated her throne because she had become a Roman Catholic, was living in exile in Rome and dominated Roman cultural life since her arrival in 1655. She was so pleased with the performance of *Gli Equivoci* that she took Scarlatti under her patronage, making him her *maestro di cappella*. He remained in her service until 1684, composing for her his second opera in 1680, *L'Honestà negli Amori* (*Honesty in Loves*). From this opera comes the popular aria "Già il Sole dal Gange" ("Already the Sun from the Ganges"), which is still sung by voice students today.



These works brought him commissions for operas from Naples, and several Neapolitan nobles convinced him to leave Rome for Naples. He especially saw an opportunity to have his operas performed in public, since Naples was not under the sway of the Roman pontiff regarding its theaters. He could also aspire to become *maestro di cappella* of the Neapolitan royal chapel, since the incumbent *maestro*, Pietro Andrea Ziani, was in poor health. After Ziani died on February 12, 1684, Scarlatti was appointed *maestro di cappella* to the viceroy of Naples, Marquis del Carpio.

From the moment the composer and his family (including several of his brothers and sisters) arrived in Naples, they faced problems. Neapolitan musicians were jealous of the newcomer who had won the best musical job in the city. Some of them alleged that one of Scarlatti's

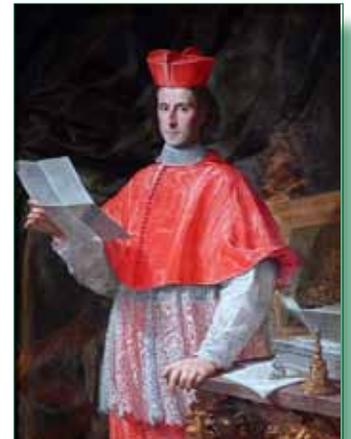
sisters, an opera singer, had had an affair with a member of the Viceroy's court, a rumor which may have forced her to retreat to a convent for a short period of time.

Scarlatti nonetheless enjoyed great success, musically speaking, but he also endured some financial difficulties. His operas were performed both at the royal palace and at the Teatro San Bartolomeo, and his cantatas were in demand. He commanded large fees but quickly found them to be insufficient since he and Antonia had another 5 children while they were in Naples. An additional problem was that Scarlatti's salary as *maestro di cappella* was reduced when a new viceroy, the Marchese di Villena, arrived. To make matters worse, his fees were often paid late.

By the 1690s, Scarlatti was writing operas and serenatas at a prolific pace, owing mainly to the requirements of his position. One of his most successful large works during this decade was his opera *Il Pirro e Demetrio* (*Pirro and Demetrius*, 1694), which was performed throughout Italy and elsewhere in Europe to critical and public acclaim.

He remained in Naples until 1702, writing more than 40 operas and musical entertainments for the court and its circle. His works at the time were considered remarkable chiefly for their fluency and expressiveness.

Scarlatti had visited Rome occasionally during his time in Naples. When Pope Innocent XI died in 1689 and Pope Alexander VIII was installed, Scarlatti found the situation in the papal city to be somewhat more welcoming. Queen Christina had also died in 1689, forcing Scarlatti to cultivate new patrons, the most important of whom was Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni (*right*), the grandnephew of Pope Alexander.



Growing frustrated with Naples, and perhaps also feeling threatened by the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1701, Scarlatti decided to undertake a trip to Florence and Rome, partly so that he himself could find a new position and partly so that his children could find patrons. Because the new king of Spain, Philip V, was about to visit Naples, however, the viceroy would not allow them to leave. When the king visited in early 1702, Scarlatti entertained him with a serenata, *Clori, Dorino e Amore* (*Chloris, Dorino, and Love*) and an opera, *Tiberio Imperatore d'Oriente* (*Tiberius, Emperor of the East*).

Scarlatti finally left Naples in June 1702, and traveled to Florence with his son, Domenico, who was beginning to exhibit his own musical talents. The elder Scarlatti had hoped for a



permanent post with Prince Ferdinando III de' Medici (*left*), crown prince of Tuscany, who in 1688 had sent him a libretto he had written and Scarlatti had set to music. The prince was pleased with the results, but did not offer Scarlatti the permanent post he had wanted. However, Scarlatti wrote a considerable amount of music for Ferdinando in the two years he was under his patronage, including four operas that were performed in the prince's private theater. These have since been lost.

Rome seemed more promising, and Scarlatti decided to move there even without a guaranteed income. He wrote to Naples to resign his post, but the viceroy refused, allowing him instead to stay away for two months more. Scarlatti did not respond to this message; however, the viceroy waited another seven months before deciding to replace his absentee *maestro di cappella*.

Unfortunately, Scarlatti had misjudged Rome. Pope Clement XI, who had become Pope in 1700, did not allow opera to be performed in public theaters, like some of his predecessors. Scarlatti could only win a modest position as assistant to the *maestro di cappella* at the Congregazione dell'Oratorio di San Filippo Neri. This position began on January 9, 1703. At the end of that year, he also became the assistant to the *maestro di cappella* at Santa Maria Maggiore. Scarlatti seems not to have been happy in either post, performing his duties to the minimum extent possible. This attitude led to an ultimatum from Cardinal Ottoboni, who had helped win Scarlatti the jobs, and Scarlatti decided to resign from San Filippo Neri in May of 1705.

While Scarlatti was unable to write operas for Rome, he did produce several for Ferdinando in Florence between 1702 and 1706. Ferdinando, however, wanted the operas to be in a more "cheerful," popular style since they were for his public theater rather than courtly entertainments. Scarlatti said that he was willing to rewrite the operas to please his patron, but the prince ultimately decided not to award Scarlatti the commission for 1707.

A bright spot for Scarlatti at this time was his election, in 1706, to the influential Arcadian Academy as a musician and poet. This was partly the result of a nomination by a founding member of the Academy, Silvio Stampiglia, who was the librettist for several of his operas.

At about the same time, Scarlatti wrote two operas on a larger scale: *Il Trionfo della Libertà* (*The Triumph of Freedom*) and *Il Mitridate Eupatore* for production during the carnival in Venice in early 1707. With the help of his patron Cardinal Ottoboni, whose family was from

Venice, Scarlatti managed to have both operas staged at the theater of San Giovanni Grisostomo. They were both failures at their premieres; *Mitridate* was even scathingly ridiculed. (However, in time, *Il Mitridate Eupatore* came to be considered one of his finest works). Scarlatti had decided to take a leave from Santa Maria Maggiore, and had traveled to Venice to supervise the performances. He was the conductor at the premieres of both productions.

Having failed in the most important city for opera in Italy, and perhaps in Europe at the time, Scarlatti set off for Rome once again, stopping at Urbino to visit his son Pietro. While he was in Urbino, he asked Ferdinando for help once more. According to his letter, his financial situation was desperate. Ferdinando offered sympathy but no concrete assistance.

While Scarlatti was staying in Urbino, Antonio Foggia, the *maestro di cappella* at Santa Maria Maggiore, died, giving Scarlatti the opportunity for advancement. However, Scarlatti's previous laxity in performing his duties worried the chaplains of the church, and they were unwilling to promote him. It was only because of the intercession of Cardinal Ottoboni that Scarlatti was eventually granted the post. He returned to Rome in December 1707 as the new *maestro di cappella* at Santa Maria Maggiore.

But, once again, Scarlatti found himself disappointed by the opportunities available in the city and by the ban of performances in the theaters of Rome. He had a few private commissions and his position at Santa Maria Maggiore, but the income was nowhere near sufficient for his needs. He was in desperate straits when a fortuitous circumstance offered him the possibility of relief.



Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani (*left*), Austrian ambassador to the Vatican, had enabled Austria to take over Naples from Spain through diplomacy rather than war on July 7, 1708. Three months later, Scarlatti wrote to him, claiming that he had abandoned the royal chapel position in Naples because of threats against his life. Grimani, who was a music lover, was eager to outdo the Roman nobility in support of the arts. He seized the opportunity to welcome Scarlatti back to Naples.

Grimani granted Scarlatti a salary equivalent to what he had earned under the first viceroy, and also found a position as an organist for his composer-son, Pietro Scarlatti. Even though Scarlatti had only been away from Naples for five years, the musical atmosphere had changed. Comic operas in Neapolitan dialect, not the serious operas in which Scarlatti specialized, were all the rage. For the next ten years,

Scarlatti did not attempt to keep up with this trend. He remained highly productive, composing many serious operas—among them *Giunio Bruto* (1710) and the highly successful *Il Tigrane* (1715)—serenatas, and cantatas. He also continued to write sacred music.

In 1718, however, he decided to try comic opera, although not in the Neapolitan dialect. For the Teatro dei Fiorentini, he wrote *Il Trionfo dell'Onore* (*The Triumph of Honor*), which was musically similar to his serious operas. The following year, in 1719, he wrote his last opera for Naples, *Il Cambise* (*The Cambyses*).

After 1719, Scarlatti continued to spend most of his time in Rome, composing serenatas, cantatas, and sacred music. However, except for *Il Cambise*, he wrote all of his final operas for performance at the Teatro Capranica in Rome since the papacy no longer frowned on public performance of opera. (In fact, Pope Clement XI even awarded Scarlatti the title of “Cavaliere” (Knight) in 1716). These final Roman operas are considered some of his finest works. They include *Il Telemaco* (1718), *Marco Attilio Regolo* (1719), and his final opera, *La Griselda* (1721).

Among his last works, in addition to *La Griselda*, were several important pieces of church music, including his great Mass for chorus and orchestra, composed in honor of Saint Cecilia for Cardinal Acquaviva in 1721. This is one of the first attempts at the style which reached its zenith in the great Masses of Johann Sebastian Bach and Beethoven. His last composition on a large scale appears to have been the unfinished serenata for the marriage of the Prince of Stigliano in 1723. That year he returned to Naples, and seems to have gone into retirement.

Scarlatti had written about 115 operas, at least 600 cantatas, and many important works of sacred vocal music. Even though he had achieved fame and respect through his musical output, his last years were marked by financial difficulties. Ten days before he died, he wrote to the viceroy and begged him to pay his salary, which had been withheld for four months. The viceroy never responded to his request. He died in Naples on October 22, 1725, leaving his family in poverty. He is entombed at the church of Santa Maria di Montesanto in Naples (*right*).



## ASSESSMENT

Alessandro Scarlatti is noted for his thematic development and chromatic harmony, which he used with great mastery and in a way that anticipates the work of much later composers, among them Mozart and Franz Schubert. He is chiefly remembered for his operas, in which he established the form of the Italian overture (i.e., the opera overture in three sections: *allegro-adagio-allegro*), which was a forerunner of the classical symphony. His chamber music is equally characteristic and shows that he had a commanding conception of this form. He did not write much orchestral music, but he contributed to the development of the opera orchestra. In his youth, the strings had been used mainly to play introductions and *ritornelli* (instrumental interludes). Scarlatti placed more emphasis on the orchestral accompaniment to the voices. His use of wind instruments was also novel: flutes, oboes, and bassoons were used for particular effects; and horns, especially trumpets, were introduced into the opera orchestra.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Balthazar, Scott L. Historical Dictionary of Opera. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013; Cummings, Robert. "Alessandro Scarlatti." Allmusic website; Encyclopedia Britannica website; Music Academy Online website; Study.com website; and Wikipedia.*

