



(LEMS 8043)

## **THE CAT'S FUGUE** **DOMENICO SCARLATTI** **& Sonatas for Solo Harpsichord**

ELAINE COMPARONE, HARPSICHORDIST

### PROGRAM NOTES

“If originality were the only criterion of genius, and if it were to be measured by the ability and readiness of a composer to seek out new techniques, to keep abreast of changing aesthetics and to bend accepted rules and conventions to his own ends, then Scarlatti would have to be judged a greater figure than either Bach or Handel.”

Malcolm Boyde: Domenico Scarlatti, Master of Music, Macmillan, 1987.

(Giuseppe) Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757), like Handel and the Bachs, drew praise from his contemporaries as much for his keyboard improvisations as for his compositions. Son of Alessandro Scarlatti, the renowned Neapolitan opera composer, Domenico was born in Naples on October 26th, 1685. Although no written records of his formal music study survive, we can safely assume that he not only learned, but absorbed, music from his composer/father, three uncles, an aunt, a brother and a sister – all of whom sang, played or composed. At age 16 Domenico was appointed organist and composer at the royal chapel at Naples, where Alessandro served as a maestro. Like his father, Domenico composed music for Neapolitan opera.

In 1709 Domenico entered the service of Polish Queen Maria Casimira, who was exiled in Rome. There he composed at least six operas, a cantata and an oratorio. At the Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni's house, he attended weekly chamber music concerts, where he met Corelli, Handel and Thomas Roseingrave, an English musician who became Scarlatti's enthusiastic fan. Roseingrave helped to disseminate Scarlatti's music throughout the British Isles.

After Maria Casimira left Rome in 1714 Domenico's involvement with Portuguese nobility began: he entered the service of the Marquis de Fontes, Portuguese ambassador to the Vatican. In 1719 Domenico left Rome to become maestro of the patriarchal chapel in Lisbon. His duties included teaching keyboard and composition to the budding virtuosa, Princess Maria Barbara. When she married Crown Prince Ferdinand of Spain and moved to Madrid, the Scarlatti family went as well. During his years with Maria Barbara, Scarlatti wrote 500 or so harpsichord sonatas, his most significant and best-remembered works.

When Ferdinand VI and Maria Barbara succeeded Philip V and Elisabetta Farnese to the Spanish throne, the flamboyant castrato Farinelli, who had entertained Philip during his notorious bouts of depression, became director of the royal operas. Scarlatti seems to have been little involved in the court's musical/theatrical activities, concentrating on his duties as musico de clavicordia y compositor. While Farinelli held the courtly limelight, Scarlatti, in the background could develop his improvising and composing. Mutual admiration and respect, however, led to a life-long friendship between the two (When Queen Maria Barbara died in 1758, a little more a year after Scarlatti, she bequeathed Farinelli a generous pension, harpsichords and two sets of the collected keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti.)

Two months after the birth of Scarlatti's second daughter, his *Essercizi per gravi cembalo*, a collection of 30 harpsichord sonatas, appeared in London. Scarlatti, with the help of Farinelli's circle in London, dedicated the volume to King John of Portugal, Maria Barbara's father, who had knighted the composer in 1738. His 1739 dedication praises the glories of father and daughter in the self-effacing style peculiar to 18th century musicians allied with royalty: Do not despise, most clement King, this trifling tribute from a humble servant. They are compositions born under Your Majesty's highest auspices and in the service of your deservedly fortunate daughter, the Princess of the Asturias...But how could I possibly express my gratitude for the immortal honour done to me by your royal command to follow this incomparable Princess? The splendor of her perfections...reflects that of the great monarch her father; but a humble servant plays his part, too, through the mastery of playing and composing with which she, to the astonishment and admiration of the most excellent masters, delights princes and monarchs.

In the preface, the composer then cautions the "amateur or professional" who acquires his

Essercizi not to expect...any profound intention in these compositions, but rather an ingenious jesting with art by means of which you may attain freedom in harpsichord playing.

The Scarlatti aficionado gains little insight into the composer's personality and character from his correspondences, since only one letter has survived. In that letter of 1752, Scarlatti responds to a request from Don Fernando, Duke of Alba, for a setting of two 16th century hymns: I have been awaiting your happy return in order to pledge my obedience to you, not only in sending the enclosed manuscripts, but also in any other command Your Excellency may care to make...I cannot leave my house Your Excellency is great, strong, magnanimous and in good health. Why, then, don't you come and console me with a visit? Perhaps because I am unworthy? That is true, but where do the virtues reside, if not in the hearts of the great?

Furthermore, we have no first-hand accounts or memoirs from Scarlatti's friends or colleagues in the Spanish court. Dr. Charles Burney, who documented 18th century musical life, drew a picture of the composer from his own conversations with Farinelli. Burney describes a fun-loving, irresponsible gambler, who like many men of genius and talent, was so inattentive to common concerns, and so much addicted to lay, that he was frequently distressed in his circumstances...and as frequently relieved in his distress by the Queen of Spain, who was constant in her admiration of his original genius and incomparable talent. (Article on Scarlatti in A. Rees: The Cyclopaedia, xxxi; London, 1819) Burney reports that Scarlatti's death left his wife and daughters in poverty, but inventories of the composer's estate do not support this claim. All sources agree, however, that the Queen granted the bereft Scarlatti family a generous pension. Burney, interestingly, draws a parallel between Scarlatti and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: Both were sons of great and popular composers, regarded as standards of perfection by all their contemporaries except their own children, who dared to explore new ways to fame. Domenico Scarlatti...hazarded notes of taste and effect, at which other musicians have but just arrived, and to which the public is but lately reconciled; Emanuel Bach, in like manner, seems to have outstript his age. (P. Scholes, ed.: Dr. Burney's Musical Tours; London, 1959.)

Both composers had to shed the influence of strong fathers before they could fully realize their talent. Harpsichordist and musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick used this particular psychological approach to build a theory of the chronology of Scarlatti's compositions. While none of Scarlatti's nine children displayed an interest or aptitude in music, his musical legacy inspired a younger generation: Spanish composers Antonio Soler, who studied with him, and Sebastian Albero and the Italians Domenico Paradisi and Muzio Clementi, who lived in England and came to know his music there. (From Spain, word of Scarlatti's music had spread first to England, largely through the efforts of Thomas Roseingrave, whose 1739 edition of 42 Scarlatti sonatas aroused enthusiasm among British music lovers.)

No evidence exists of interest in Scarlatti's music among 18th century Italians or

Germans, but the Viennese took to his music with enthusiasm. The interest lasted through the 19th century, in spite of Robert Schumann's negative review of Carl Czerny's edition of 200 Scarlatti sonatas in 1839. Schumann's opinion of Scarlatti did not deter his concert-pianist wife, Clara Wieck, from playing his sonatas (She is said to have almost fallen from her stool in the midst of grappling with a particularly athletic hand-crossing passage!) Brahms genuinely understood and appreciated Scarlatti and treasured the Scarlatti manuscripts in his collection. He quoted Scarlatti in the introduction of his setting of a humorous Goethe poem, working the fragment into the vocal line as well. Chopin assigned Scarlatti to his piano students while Liszt programmed Scarlatti's sonatas in his recitals.

A revival of interest in the harpsichord coupled with Spanish nationalism brought Scarlatti's music to the forefront early in the 20th century. Both Manuel de Falla and Joaquin Nin claimed him as a Spanish composer, while the music of Albeniz and Granads reflects the Andalusian qualities they perceived in Scarlatti's music.

We don't know if Scarlatti was a cat owner, but Muzio Clementi must have been. It was Clementi who dubbed the last piece in Scarlatti's *Essercizi* the "Cat's Fugue." The fugal subject, composed of wide, rather surprising intervals, gave rise to the image of a cat picking its way along a harpsichord keyboard.

-- Written by Elaine Comparone

#### TRACKS AND TIMES:

1. Sonata for keyboard in F minor, K. 239 (L. 281) - 3:26
2. Sonata for keyboard in F minor, K. 187 (L. 285) - 5:20
3. Sonata for keyboard in F minor, K. 183 (L. 473) - 4:23
4. Sonata for keyboard in B minor, K. 27 (L. 449) - 3:41
5. Sonata for keyboard in B minor, K. 197 (L. 147) - 5:10
6. Sonata for keyboard in B minor, K. 409 (L. 150) - 4:29
7. Sonata for keyboard in F sharp minor, K. 25 (L. 481) - 3:45
8. Sonata for keyboard in D major, K. 45 (L. 265) - 3:13
9. Sonata for keyboard in D major, K. 118 (L. 122) - 6:11
10. Fugue in G minor, K. 30 (L. 499) "The Cat's Fugue" - 3:40
11. Sonata for keyboard in G minor, K. 12 (L. 489) - 4:43
12. Sonata for keyboard in C major, K. 340 (L. 105) - 4:34
13. Sonata for keyboard in G major, K. 201 (L. 129) - 4:01
14. Sonata for keyboard in E minor, K. 233 (L. 467) - 4:58
15. Sonata for keyboard in B flat major, K. 545 (L. 500) - 3:41
16. Sonata for keyboard in D minor, K. 213 (L. 108) "The Lover" - 5:16
17. Sonata for keyboard in D minor, K. 517 (L. 266) - 3:09

ELAINE COMPARONE, harpsichord

Since her acclaimed New York recital debut as a Concert Artists Guild award winner, harpsichordist Elaine Comparone has maintained a multi-faceted career as a soloist with orchestra and on the recital stage, chamber musician, recording artist, impresaria, choral director, teacher, arranger, and collaborator with choreographers, poets and video artists.

“Elaine Comparone Plays Red-Blooded Harpsichord” headlined The New York Times review of her debut and Pulitzer Prize-winner Donal Henahan (also in the Times) called her a “harpsichordist wit few equals...”

Born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, into a family of musicians, she began piano studies with her mother at age four. As a child she played violin, flute (with her father as teacher) and pipe organ. Her success at Brandeis University with the harpsichord resulted in a Fulbright Fellowship to study with harpsichordist Isolde Ahlgrimm at the Academy of Music in Vienna.

A recipient of Solo Recitalist and Recording Grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Elaine has given solo recitals at Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, Merkin Hall, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie, the 92nd Street Y, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dayton Art Institute and the Library of Congress, to name a few. Since 1974, when she won an unprecedented grant for the purchase of a van from the Rockefeller Fund for Music, she has taken her harpsichords to performances in every state of the continental U.S. – as solo recitalist, artist-in-residence and founder/member of The Queen’s Chamber Band, Trio Bell’Arte and Bach With Pluck.

Founder/director of Harpsichord Unlimited (a non-profit organization dedicated to stimulating interest in the harpsichord and teaching audiences about the instrument, its history, and its music), she directs and performs in an annual series of chamber music concerts in New York City.

For this recording, Elaine Comparone plays a Frank Hubbard replica, built for her in 1972, of a 1646 Ruckers harpsichord enlarged in 1780 by Pascal Taskin. This Franco-Flemish hybrid combined the skills of Andreas Ruckers the Younger whose work was highly prized in 18th century France, with those of Taskin, the most famous Parisian harpsichord builder. This double-manual harpsichord has 60 notes on each keyboard (FF-e’”), with a disposition of two sets of 8’ strings, one set of 4’ strings and a buff (lute) stop.

Elaine Comparone enjoys standing at the harpsichord to play. Under her direction, Hendrick Broekman of Hubbard Harpsichords, Inc. designed and built a tall oak stand that elevates her instrument. As inspiration she cites Vermeer, along with the fact that she is a member of the rock and roll generation.

## CREDITS

Recorded August 27, 28, 1992 at Christ Church, Oyster Bay, NY; Norman Greenspan, engineer; Tatyana Liberman, LRP Digital, New York; Elaine Comparone for Harpsichord Unlimited, producer.



### The Lyrichord Early Music Series

PO Box 1977 Old Chelsea Station  
New York, NY 10011 Ph: 212 404 8290 Fax: 212 404 8291  
email: [nick@lyrichord.com](mailto:nick@lyrichord.com) Web: [www.lyrichord.com](http://www.lyrichord.com)

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