

New perspectives on Spanish keyboard music

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The Italian composer, Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757), spent most of his creative life in Spain as music master to the royal family. Besides tutoring the Spanish Queen, Maria Barbara, he wrote over 500 sonatas for the keyboard. These sonatas contain some of the most original writing of the eighteenth century. Scarlatti borrowed elements of harmony, rhythm, and instrumental effects that he heard in the music of the court and in the streets of his adopted country, creating a fascinating body of work quite unlike anything else being written in Europe at the time.

The harpsichord was the dominant stringed keyboard instrument of Scarlatti's day, and his music has traditionally been associated with it. He was a virtuoso player of the instrument, and his royal employer was herself a fine harpsichordist. Changes were in the air in the early eighteenth century, however. The piano (or fortepiano, the name given to distinguish the early instrument from the modern one), invented around 1700 by the Italian Bartolomeo Cristofori, soon found its way to the courts of both Spain and Portugal. The inventory of Maria Barbara's instrument collection shows that in addition to harpsichords, she owned a number of fortepianos.

The invention of the fortepiano, with hammers that struck the strings instead of plucking them, provided the opportunity to create new expressive effects such as *crescendo* and *decrescendo*, and gradations of volume that were impossible on the harpsichord. However, the early piano's tone was very soft, unlike the orchestral brilliance of the harpsichord, and the new instrument may not have been eagerly embraced in musical circles. It did not become competitive with the harpsichord until 1760-1770. Its preferred use was probably as an accompanying instrument for vocal performance.



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Cantabile – Domenico Scarlatti. Luisa Morales, clave-fortepiano Giovanni Ferrini, 1746. Domenico Scarlatti. Sonata K.132 Cantabile (Venezia, 1749); Sonata K.208 Adagio e Cantabile (Venezia, 1752); Sonata K.209 (Venezia, 1752); Sonata K.213 Andante (Venezia, 1753); Sonata K.234 Andante (Venezia, 1753); Sonata K.384 Cantabile andante (Venezia, 1754). Antonio Soler: Sonata R.49 Andantino (MAM15 Montserrat, 1786). Ingeniero de sonido: Stefano Albarello. Masterización: Stefano Albarello & Ricardo Andrés Barreto. Edición: Stefano Albarello & Luisa Morales. Álbum de 41' minutos de duración, grabado el 23 de abril de 2018 en el Museo San Colombano, Bologna. Reference FIMTE 2021 - 3237816 Records DK. Disponible en las plataformas de streaming.

Perhaps in an effort to combine the best of the two worlds in one instrument, some makers experimented with combinations of the two. In 1746 Giovanni Ferrini, the heir to Cristofori's workshop, built an instrument with harpsichord action on the lower keyboard and a simple piano action on the upper keyboard. Astonishingly, this instrument, found in the Tagliavini Collection at the Museo San Colombano in Bologna, Italy, has been well-preserved and restored to playing condition.

Harpsichordist Luisa Morales has just released the first full-length recording on the Ferrini instrument to date. One of the current leading performers and scholars of Spanish keyboard music, Dr. Morales is noted for her stylistic and virtuosic performances, as well as her original research. For this recording, aptly named *Cantabile*, Dr. Morales has chosen six sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (K. 132, K. 208, K. 209, K. 213, K. 234, and K. 384) and one by Fr. Antonio Soler (R. 49) that showcase the expressive qualities of the Ferrini. She utilizes the harpsichord and piano in different combinations: as soloists, as accompanist for the other keyboard, or as an echo effect. The harpsichord usually presents the opening material of each sonata, often accompanied by the delicate voice of the piano; it lends brilliance to dance-like passages and Scarlatti's pungent harmonies. Dr. Morales' sensitivity to harmonic color is evident in her thoughtful registrations of the musical material. Her articulation on both keyboards is crystal clear; her ornamentation is always tasteful and in service to the musical context.

This recording proves that the fortepiano is more than a nuanced accompanist for the solo harpsichord, however. In Dr. Morales' interpretations, the fortepiano becomes a new color to echo the harpsichord's material; a surprising showcase for pungent harmonies; a dramatic timbre in the change of major to minor modes; an equal partner in the dialogue between the two keyboards. Ferrini's combined harpsichord-piano is a perfect vehicle for the sonatas in slower tempos, but it is also effective for the one *Allegro* work on the recording, K. 209. Both halves of the sonata are mostly presented on the harpsichord manual, but in the repetitions, Dr. Morales uses the piano manual as a colorful contrast for the minor sections.

Scarlatti probably never gave up the harpsichord in favor of the fortepiano, but since the latter instrument was available to him at the Spanish court, it is tempting to think he may have experimented with it. There are some sonatas in his output that Ralph Kirkpatrick believes may have been attempts to write for the early piano.* As one of the most original musical talents of his time, it is difficult to believe that he wouldn't have had more than a passing interest in a new invention that presented so many expressive capabilities, and even more so if that invention was paired with the instrument with which he was most familiar.

In an article written for *Early Music* in August, 1991, Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini describes the Ferrini combination instrument. He concludes the with these observations:

The importance of putting this instrument in playing order and retrieving its sound is undisputed. As a piano-forte it is one of the best preserved and most complete from the first half of the 18th century, and besides being the only harpsichord-pianoforte preserved from that period, restoring it to playing order may open new perspectives in keyboard practice of the period. Furthermore, the fact that instruments by Ferrini, probably including combination instruments of this type were known to have been used at the Madrid court, presents the fascinating possibility of a connection with the

Dr. Morales has opened new perspectives on Spanish keyboard music with her prior recordings on historical instruments and her pairing of Scarlatti sonatas with dance performances. With this latest recording, she has made a convincing argument for the connection between Scarlatti and his contemporaries and the new keyboard instruments that were appearing during their lifetimes.

Notas

1. Ralph Kirkpatrick, «Domenico Scarlatti», Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1953, p 184. ISBN 978-0691027081
2. Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini and John Henry van der Meer, "Giovanni Ferrini and His Harpsichord 'a penne e a martelletti'", «Early Music», Vol. 19, No. 3 (Aug. 1991), pp 398-408.