

scarlatti domenico



Longhi - Concertino 1746

chronology

The biggest hurdle to dating Scarlatti's sonatas is the presence of late dates on most of the collections in which the sonatas are found. If Scarlatti composed at least 555 sonatas throughout his lifetime (according to the numbering system in *Kirkpatrick's* antiquated Catalogue of Scarlatti sonatas, p442-456) why do only 138 show up in sources which can be dated before 1750? And why do many of these earlier collections select from among this same group of 138 if most or all of the others were already in existence?

One answer, "the chronology of the principal sources... roughly corresponds, after 1752, to the probable chronology of composition" is stated by *Kirkpatrick* 1953, p440 and retained in his introduction to the Johnson reprint volumes, 1972 (full references in [Citations](#)) . As many commentators have pointed out, this goes against common sense: the composer was 67 years old and had five years to live in 1752, the majority of the sonatas, early or late, seem to be teaching pieces rather than performance pieces, and the composer's chief pupil and collector of his sonatas, Maria Barbara, had been his pupil for thirty years and was now queen of Spain with a variety of other musical entertainments at her command. It also goes against the practice of just about every known composer in the 18th century and earlier, who, when they compiled several works into volumes for

publication, selected works composed over a wide period, which they had had time to reconsider and revise.

A different answer to these questions: Scarlatti composed most of his sonatas much earlier than 1750. Since they were for his own use and those of his royal patrons, only a small number of them, usually the more conservative ones, but often also the more technically demanding ones, found their way out to the public. At the end of his life he was either inspired or induced to organize them into collections for specific music lovers and fellow teachers, in addition to his royal patrons. He took advantage of the opportunity to revise the works, usually small details (no examples of complete rewrites exist) As the revisions progressed, more and more of the sonatas were gradually released into these collections. He was probably inspired as well to write new sonatas, but that must be considered later, not assumed before starting the investigation.

Chronological catalogues are fictions. When composers date their own compositions, they generally choose a completion date. Even then the work may go through further major revisions. I think dates are more useful which also identify the date a work was begun. Although Scarlatti's sonatas are relatively short, some of them show evidence of a complex history of revision. The date of the source collection for a sonata is the door nearest us, opening into a corridor going back in time to another door at the far end, when the external and internal conditions were in place for the conception of the work to enter into the composer's mind. Somewhere along the length of that corridor is a point where the work was put on paper with most of its essential features. The only way to determine that point is to find a side door or window into the corridor (a dated letter or record of a performance for example). Otherwise we should be satisfied with the doors at either end of the corridor, or with internal evidence (each corridor contains features which are similar to those in other corridors, creating a common language of style or fashion, which becomes more convincing as more and more common features can be pointed out between parallel corridors).

Some problems which might prevent accurate dating:

- Scarlatti composed sonatas for at least three players: himself, Maria Barbara, and a third player or pupil with limited skills (Fernando, Antonio, and the young Maria Barbara); if the sonata was intended for any one of these players it might differ considerably from others composed at the same time.
- The sonatas collected in the late libri could contain substantial revisions (although most of the known cases of variant versions show revisions of details, rather than long passages being completely rewritten)
- Parts of sonatas from different periods might be spliced together to make a new sonata (Parma 14:30 C a possible example)
- Scarlatti predicted future trends; he didn't predict them in the order they would happen (Parma 1:12 C and Parma 13:27 f, among others: both have restatements of the first theme in the home key after it has been developed, but they seem to be early works predicting the practice which prevailed after his death).
- Scarlatti may have purposely imitated earlier styles, or have been inspired to compose in earlier styles when he revised early works late in life. See end of the [Characteristics](#) file for *Pestelli*'s "reviviscenza della toccata" etc.
- Certain stylistic characteristics might have continued throughout Scarlatti's sonata-writing career, while others are clustered in more restricted time periods.
- Ideally there should be a single line of progress from simple to complex, but in reality there will be many factors bending this line from its most direct course. See *Tristram Shandy* volume 6, chapter 40. And "complex" can involve an ideal of simplicity achieved by complex means (P10:19 and 20 in b may be examples of this,

dated 1754 in one source but having characteristics of sonatas being written elsewhere in Europe in the 1720's)

- Sonatas in specific genres, such as minuets or fugues, might have formal characteristics appropriate to the genre which seem to be unrelated to a time of composition (there are only a limited number of these however)
- Sonatas in the same key may have characteristics which the composer repeats when he reuses that key signature on widely separated occasions. *Boyd* p169 [move from major to mediant minor at central cadence occurs most often in F major and Bb major sonatas]; *Sutcliffe* p374: "...the reuse of certain keys may bring back old expressive associations..."

Why even try to date the sonatas? Because they can be understood better if they are seen and heard developing over time. Because sonatas which are like each other shed light on each other. Because there are so many. And because people will be dating them anyway in spite of all the difficulties: so it better be done with care.

Methods other than primary sources for dating the sonatas

I have decided to pursue the line started by *Pestelli* and investigate what internal evidence there might be for earlier dates for some or all of the sonatas. I have assumed that all of Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas *could* already have been composed when the 15 Parma libri and the 13 numbered Venezia libri began to be copied (1751 or 1752) if not even earlier. I don't say they all *were* composed earlier, just that they *might* have been. 138 of the total appeared in editions and manuscripts with dates from 1738 to 1749, and 50 of those reappeared in the Parma libri. Dates on a few of the remaining 417 Kirkpatrick-accepted sonatas in other sources (see Münster and Wien Q in *Collections*) indicate that they may have been composed between 1752 and 1757 (but the dates could refer solely to the date of copying). But there are good reasons to doubt that the bulk of this remainder was composed after 1750, chiefly the unlikelihood that Scarlatti would be composing elementary or even advanced studies for his royal pupils after they became queen and king of Spain in 1746. He certainly could have been composing the sonatas of a more expressive nature for them and for himself until the end of his life, as well as studies which employ newly discovered techniques or take advantage of new instruments owned by his patrons. A parallel case might be the 126 divertimenti with baryton which Haydn composed for Nicholas Esterhazy between 1766 and 1778 and which were collected into five books. Note that Haydn was 34 to 46 in those years, about the same age as Scarlatti when he served João 5 of Portugal and composed the Essercizi under his auspices, as Scarlatti says in his dedication of that publication to the king.

I don't discount the possibility that Scarlatti could have been composing elementary studies again at the end of his life for new pupils such as his own children, or producing study pieces for the general public in view of publication. But there is the existence of several variant versions of some of these "late" sonatas to be accounted for: how did the early versions make their way across Europe if they had been composed at most a few months before their final versions? There are also recent discoveries of small and large collections which cannot have been copied from the Parma and Venezia libri, and some of which may antedate them. The solution that answers the most puzzles is that after 1752 Scarlatti continued to produce collections which contain a mixture of older and newer sonatas, like the earlier Essercizi, Venezia 1742, and the more recent Parma 1, 2, & 3 (to mention the usually undisputed cases).

My goal is to find if there are reasonable ways of dating the sonatas other than the dates of their earliest known sources and their keyboard ranges (see further down this page for reasons I reject keyboard range as a useful benchmark for dates). I haven't tried to go much beyond a very general sort of dating related somewhat to Scarlatti's known activities as a musician (see the *Curriculum* file). And I don't try to establish a numerical order for the sonatas, but retain the numbering systems used to order the contents of the primary sources by their compilers: the dates don't travel with the sonatas but remain in the catalogue for those who want to make use of them. I treat the collections as if they were opus numbers with a date of publication attached, the contents of the

collections presumed to have been composed at a variety of earlier dates.

Numbering systems like the Köchel catalogue of Mozart's works (with its various revisions) are misleading and cumbersome. All of Mozart's works can be identified by the title of the work and the year of completion (even if the year is a conjecture); adding the key, instruments or genre if needed to distinguish one work from another. For a very few works a further breakdown might be necessary (Mozart's two piano concertos in Bb from 1784 for example: the month for each could be added since that is known: March and September). Works with different versions should be identified by the year of the version being performed or discussed.. This method works for most composers with large catalogues who didn't provide opus numbers. The year is useful information and is worth remembering. Assigning years helps to relate a composer's works to those of other composers, writers, artists and to the course of history in general. Mozart wrote symphonies in g minor in 1773 and 1788, Haydn in 1765 and 1785, Mozart and Haydn both wrote symphonies in C major and E flat major in 1788; assigning arbitrary numbers to these works obscures those relationships.

Composers' rights to organize and order their own works should be respected. The order of sonatas within Parma is satisfying in many ways, as is the order within other collections (Münster and Lisboa are particularly enlightening when the sonatas are played in order); if any numbers need to be attached to the sonatas and remembered, these original numbers are the useful ones. Do we really need separate Schmieder or BWV numbers attached to each individual piece in Bach's Wohltemperirte Clavier? Isn't WTC 1, Fuga 24 in b what we need to know, not BWV 869,2? (I use this example because one of its themes also appears in Scarlatti's Parma 10:8 in d) Scholars have a duty to enlighten the public, not confuse it with self-serving obfuscation.

I discuss *Flannery's* chronology a bit in [Collections](#): Parma. I think Flannery has unintentionally but convincingly shown that Parma is a compilation by the composer. But there are too many reasons, given throughout my *Catalogue*, that Parma cannot have been compiled at the same time the sonatas were being composed, handed one by one to the scribe fresh from the composer's desk, even from Parma 10 through 15 (which are more or less in Flannery's order; Venezia 8 through 13 have practically the same contents but in Kirkpatrick's very similar order) when the Kirkpatrick and Flannery numbers become more convincing stylistically (taken as a whole, but falling apart when considered one by one in order).

There are also all the other collections to consider. When he began a compilation, the composer must have had a large stock of sonatas already completed from which to choose the ones he needed so that he could make groupings by technical difficulty, similarity of keys, contrast of keys, similarities or contrasts of rhythms or meters, restricted or expanded keyboard ranges. Statistical trends are meaningful in Scarlatti's case only if spread out over his entire lifetime, not suddenly changing from year to year or month to month in the last five years of his life. An example: *Flannery's* central gap (p135 and frequently elsewhere; see Gap in his index), which is an important part of his statistical arguments, occurs from P7 through P9, the last two books of 1753 and the first one of 1754. To me this implies that there are a larger number of sonatas than usual out of place chronologically in these books, not that Scarlatti suddenly changed all his composing habits, then resumed the same earlier habits a year later. Parma libri 7-9 contain more easy sonatas than the earlier or later libri: I think Scarlatti composed many of the easy sonatas when Maria Barbara and her uncle Antonio were beginning as his pupils, probably 1720-1725. He may have brought them together in 1752-3 for Fernando's use, along with some newer easy ones, and some very difficult ones for Maria Barbara that also appear in the same libri.

My method is not a particularly scientific one. I play the sonatas in the order found in various sources such as Parma, Münster and Lisboa, or in the order devised in Pestelli, or sorted by computer according to their key and theme structures (the numerical lines for these two formal features listed in the notes to my [Catalogue](#) and summarized in words in the [Characteristics](#) file). If I am convinced that nearby sonatas in these sorted lists have something in common, I try to identify the similar features and make an entry for them in the computer files for each sonata. I then produce new lists by a gradual sifting process. This is all very time-consuming, but there is

the great pleasure of playing and hearing the music to make it all worthwhile.

I have become most convinced by sonatas with similar key structures (the pattern of keys a sonata passes through from beginning to end). Very few sonatas have exactly the same key structure, but certain common features show up. Examples:

- the first step the sonata takes after the opening: to the dominant, the mediant, a minor mode, etc;
- the other steps, if any, it passes through to reach the dominant or mediant (usually) at the end of the first part;
- whether or not the first part ends and the second part begins in the same key or not

A large number of sonatas have key structures for either their first or second parts which can also be found in *Essercizi*: this could mean many were composed somewhere in the period from about 1715 to 1735, based on Scarlatti's own statement that he composed the *Essercizi* under the auspices of João 5, in the service of the king's daughter and brother; interpreted strictly this would have to be 1720 to 1729 (see *Essercizi in Collections*).

I also find it illuminating to play the sonatas in the same key together; similarities are often more obvious between sonatas in the same key. I am not offering a theory that Scarlatti moved from simple key structures to more complex ones or that he composed in G major one week and f minor the next (although it sometimes seems that way). I am just reporting what I find among sonatas in which different patterns or types recur: similarity of key structure seems to be one of the most common features which link sonatas with other similarities.

Scarlatti could have used similar key structures as a way of unifying the separate movements of suites. See the *Chart of sonatas by date...* for many convincing groupings of sonatas in the same key which also have similar internal key structures (whether or not my "about" dates are the correct ones). This implies that he composed several sonatas in the same key at the same time. At the end of his career, in compiling collections in the 1750's, he broke the components of the suites apart into smaller units, primarily pairs. Sonatas from different composing periods were mixed together: the composer strove for contrast rather than similarity in his newer groupings.

If the key structures are correlated with the degree of technical mastery required to play the sonatas, another pattern emerges: the sonatas with the simplest first part key structures (all tonic and dominant, or perhaps one other key such as the supertonic, subdominant, or mediant) are usually the ones which focus on technical problems, rather than the pieces with excursions to distant keys and contrast of thematic material, as if the composer were also providing simpler compositional models for Maria Barbara. These can be arranged progressively over time: in other words, easy, moderate and difficult sonatas can all have simple key structures, but be similar to sonatas with more complex structures, presumably composed during approximately the same time period but placing less emphasis on technique and composition.

Several authors (for example Carl Sloane, *Algunas nuevas reflexiones sobre las sonatas de Domenico Scarlatti*, *Revista de musicología*, vol.24:1-2, 2001, p107-113, text in English; and *Flannery* p110-113) attempt to prove with statistics that the sonatas in the *Venezia libri* from 1749 to 1757 were composed later than those in *Essercizi* 1739 and *Venezia* 1742 because of the increased numbers of major-key sonatas in the later ones. There seems to be an underlying assumption by many writers that the sonatas were chosen at random for the compiled sources without any particular plan that might have skewed the statistical results. But the composer made personal choices when he decided to start a sonata in a major or minor key and when he chose what was appropriate in compiling the *libri*. The obvious answer is that since only 30% of the entire corpus of sonatas are in minor keys, the compiler of *Venezia* (and *Parma*) used up most of the minor-key sonatas available to him in trying to balance major and minor in the lower-numbered *libri* and had mostly major-key sonatas left to fill the higher-numbered ones.

Such theories also neglect the internal proportions of these modes, for example in P2:22 Ab, which is mostly in minor keys, or P5:1 E, which even ends in minor. In Maria Barbara's training program, Scarlatti preferred major key sonatas for the easier ones and minor keys for the difficult ones as she matured. Thus the high proportion of minor key sonatas in Essercizi results from the volume being difficult throughout.

Several authors also assume that the sonatas with wide ranges were necessarily composed late because they do not appear in the Venezia (and Parma) libri until 1754: but the limited ranges in Essercizi could have resulted from the demands of publication for a potential greater audience with limited instruments and those in Venezia and Parma from the lower numbered libri being compiled for patrons with shorter-range instruments.

See the table of key structures in the [Characteristics](#) file for my own percentages for major and minor openings in different periods. I have the sonatas being composed much earlier than their compilations: major key beginnings dominate in 1715-25 (including most of the very easy sonatas), then minor comes to the fore in 1725-30, major almost completely takes over 1730-35 (more sonatas than any other period, most of the technical problem study type), then minor has a strong comeback 1735-40 (the so-called flamboyant, very difficult ones), while major wins out in the last years, 1740-55, when Scarlatti had retired from his teaching duties and was free to write what he wanted. All composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had similar changes of mind about their preferences for major or minor modes; they were not just obeying dictates of fashion or decrees of authority: think of Haydn's Sturm-und-Drang period in the late 1760's, to name just one famous example. Sloane's table of percentages on p112-3 shows the ratio of major keys not increasing steadily but rising and falling after Venezia 1749, which like Essercizi has a large number of difficult sonatas: 56% for Venezia 2 in 1752, 70% (the average for Scarlatti's total sonata output) for Venezia 3, rising to 93% with Venezia 7 (primarily easy sonatas), dropping suddenly to 63% for Venezia 8 (difficult ones, with wide ranges for the first time, 1754) then up and down until Venezia 13 in 1757, 83%. The Lisboa libro, which cannot be earlier than 1751, also conforms to the average of 70% major-key beginnings and contains several wide-range sonatas which don't appear in Venezia until libri 10&11, 1755-56. Over-simplifying the pattern of percentages leads to a simple-minded conclusion: that Scarlatti switched from writing primarily minor-key sonatas to primarily major-key ones. This just doesn't work, and doesn't provide a workable method for dating any of the sonatas.

See *form* in the introduction to the [Catalogue](#) for more about the structure of the sonatas. I have not found a simple correlation between the thematic structure (number of themes, how they are associated and developed, whether or not they recur later in the work) and the key structure, but undoubtedly my dissecting tools are not sharp enough. But the *theme structure* section of the [Characteristics](#) file does reflect that I have been influenced by an overall progression from simple (fewer themes, ones based on common elements or cells) to complex (more themes and more contrasts between them) in dating the sonatas.

I have not neglected other features, some of which are listed in tables in the [Characteristics](#) file, and I have been careful to respect the actual or potential dates of the sources. Some other features, dear to many writers on Scarlatti, such as the ranges of the keyboard instruments required to play the sonatas, I have paid little attention to, for the reasons I state in the [Cogito](#) file, *instruments* section; briefly: we don't know what instruments Scarlatti himself may have owned, we don't know that he wrote all the sonatas exclusively for Maria Barbara, we don't know what instruments she used at various periods of her life nor which were kept in which palaces, we do know that he changed the range requirements in different versions of the same sonata, and we do know that he provided sonatas with wide ranges in several collections which can reasonably be dated before the 1754 Parma and Venezia libri in which they first appear (indicating that he purposely held back compiling sonatas which he had already composed for those libri)

The results may seem somewhat crude, rather as if a Scarlatti-robot had been put through experiments in a

laboratory. Perhaps there are some factors which could make the laboratory environment more realistic, such as more knowledge and better dating of the keyboard works of Scarlatti's contemporaries, and more thorough comparisons with Scarlatti's vocal music than have been attempted so far.

See the [Cogito](#) file, *dates* section, for some more thoughts on this subject.

Christopher Hail

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