

Domenico  
**SCARLATTI**

**Complete Keyboard Sonatas Vol. 28**

Sang Woo Kang, Piano



## Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757) Complete Sonatas Vol. 28

It would take over two days of constant playing to accommodate a complete performance of Domenico Scarlatti's 555 keyboard sonatas. One hopes that Scarlatti's patron (and, it might reasonably be assumed by an objective observer, his muse) Princess Maria Barbara of Portugal, for whom it is likely the entire collection was written, was suitably appreciative of this extraordinary gift from her teacher and friend.

Domenico Scarlatti was born in Naples in 1685, the same year as both Bach and Handel (what a time to be alive!), and indeed Scarlatti and Handel were well acquainted with each other's work. It is reported that, whenever speaking of his German colleague, Scarlatti would cast his gaze aloft and cross himself in veneration. Whether he knew the music of the much less widely travelled Bach is considerably more doubtful.

Scarlatti was born into a musical family headed by his father, Alessandro, who is now perhaps best known for his cantatas and operas. Domenico enjoyed periods living and working in Naples, Venice, Rome and at the Vatican. In 1719, he moved to the court of John V of Portugal where he would meet Princess Maria, whom he followed to Madrid on her marriage into the Spanish royal family in 1733. Much of the detail of his life, and indeed of the sonatas in particular, is frustratingly lacking; only one letter in his own hand survives, and not a single one of the sonatas exists in manuscript form.

This dearth of source material means that one of many open questions is the exact instrument for which Scarlatti wrote the sonatas. Maria Barbara's extensive collection included harpsichords of all descriptions (including those with extra registers controlled by an elaborate sequence of pedals) as well as early fortepianos. Whether written for plucked instruments (of however many registers and keyboards) or hammered instruments or a combination of both, scholars may never agree. What is surely beyond doubt is that these extraordinarily colourful pieces travel with great success to the modern pianoforte used for this album, which presents some of the lesser-known sonatas from the collection.

The sonatas are typically in binary form – two related (and usually similar length) sections, each repeated, with a first half ending in a related tonality and a second half that works its way back to the home key. Despite this almost entirely uniform approach to structure, Scarlatti's skill in evoking different moods, characters, musical styles and even different instruments is hugely inventive. As Harriet Smith puts it: 'by turn the music struts, it cajoles, it sings, it giggles, it implores, it dances. And all this is achieved by a pair of hands at a keyboard.'

Only the first 30 sonatas (as numbered by the catalogue constructed by American harpsichordist and musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick) were published during Scarlatti's lifetime. He originally entitled this initial set *Essercizi* ('Exercises'), suggesting they were written for teaching purposes, though even a cursory hearing will show their sound and affect to be far more involved than mere technical exercises, as exemplified by the spritely dance that is the *Sonata in A minor, K. 7*; alternating imitative counterpoint with more straightforward but highly decorated textures, the presence of the pitch A1 (that is, A below the bass clef) indicates the size of the instrument with which Scarlatti was working – certainly five octaves, rather than the four of most precursors.

The remainder of the 555 sonatas have been passed down to us thanks to the famous castrato and friend of the composer, Farinelli, who transported copies back to Italy from Spain. The next 70 or so sonatas in the collection are very much in the Italian style of keyboard writing, whether in the guise of the gruff chordal material punctuated by higher register passagework and characterful use of rapidly repeating notes that we hear in the *Sonata in G minor, K. 31*, or the energetic triple-time romp that is the *Sonata in G major, K. 55*, or the charming and lyrically ornamented *Sonata in*

*E flat major*, K. 68. Of particular interest in the Italian-style examples from the collection are the *Sonata in G major*, K. 80 and the *Sonata in D minor*, K. 89, both of which were originally conceived as works for solo instrument with basso continuo – indeed the scores include figured bass to guide the full harmonisation of the accompaniment (this solo performance presents simply the two-part melody and bass line).

The next two hundred or so sonatas in the collection owe much of their style to the influence of the Spanish folk music with which Scarlatti would have been surrounded in Madrid. Frequent trills and grace notes are a common feature of these sonatas, surely influenced by the famous flamenco style of guitar playing, and of which the *Sonata in F sharp minor*, K. 142 is an evocative example. Virtuosity is another increasingly common feature in this area of the collection, with left-hand octaves and frequent hand crossing employed by the *Sonata in G minor*, K. 108 and the *Sonata in C minor*, K. 174 in particular. Further guitar-inspired writing can be found in the *Sonata in G minor*, K. 121, both in the scalic flourishes that punctuate the opening phrases of the second half, and the notably athletic leaps in the right-hand of the first half; frequent trills and grace notes give this sonata a particularly vibrant Mediterranean flare. Equally colourful are the light-hearted, birdsong-like right-hand ornaments that follow the bright Bachian counterpoint of the *Sonata in C major*, K. 156. The *Sonata in D minor*, K. 191 and the *Sonata in G minor*, K. 234 are prime examples of Scarlatti's penchant for swapping material between the two hands which he does on an almost bar-by-bar basis here (also of note are the jazzy, syncopated chords in the first half of the D minor sonata which seem more suited to a *tablaó* than the royal court). The influence of folk music is also clear in the *Sonata in A major*, K. 219 with its snappy Lombardic (short-long) rhythms, with the Moorish influence on Spanish culture coming through clearly in the haunting sounds of the slightly jarring interval of the augmented second used in the melodic lines of the *Sonata in D major*, K. 258.

Given how little is known of the nature of the precise instrument for which these sonatas were written, it is thus unsurprising that equally little is known about the tuning system Scarlatti might have employed, but the keys of K. 239 (with its charming castanet-like alternating octaves) and K. 245 in particular – F minor and B major – are surely proof enough that he was using a more developed system than the 'quarter-comma meantone' temperament common at the time – a method of tuning keyboard instruments that meant such relatively distant keys (four flats and five sharps respectively) would sound unusual at best, and in the case of the elegantly lilting B major sonata, horribly dissonant. In a similar manner to J.S. Bach's 48 preludes and fugues, it seems plausible, therefore, that Scarlatti was also demonstrating a tuning system whereby even keys such as these sounded pleasing to the ear.

In a contemporary musical diet, Scarlatti sonatas are usually most likely to appear in a small group perhaps to start a recital programme or act as something of a musical 'sorbet' between more substantial pieces. Harpsichordist and passionate Scarlatti advocate Mahan Esfahani estimates that as many as ninety per cent of the sonatas remain largely unknown to all but the most avid of Scarlatti enthusiasts. To write such original, imaginative and colourful music is a work of a genius in its own right; to do so over more than five hundred examples is little short of miraculous. Perhaps Scarlatti's most important message to us with this life-enhancing music is delivered at the end of his preface to those first 30 published works, where he writes, simply, *Vivi felice* ('Live happily')!

**Peter Siepmann**



### **Sang Woo Kang**

Sang Woo Kang enjoys an active career across 30 countries, having appeared in Asia, Scandinavia, Europe and Central and South America. In addition, he also directs the Atlantic Music Festival Piano Institute and Seminar. Kang successfully balances his performing career as a solo, orchestral and chamber musician with teaching at Providence College, where he is a professor within the music department. He is also on the teaching faculty of Brown University and has held visiting positions at Seoul National University and Sungshin University, Korea. He is a graduate of The Juilliard School and the Eastman School of Music, where he received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree. Kang's recording of Mozart's piano pieces, including unperformed fragments, was released in December 2014 on Naxos (8573114), and he has also previously recorded for the EMI (Korea) label.

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*Photo © Dae Yeon Lee (Edward)*

A complete performance of Domenico Scarlatti's 555 keyboard sonatas would take over two days of continuous playing, and the majority are still little-known today. This 28th volume features a wide selection of these original, imaginative and colourful works. It includes spritely dances (K.7), an energetic triple-time romp (K.55) and a Spanish influenced evocation of flamenco (K.142) – among many other examples of Scarlatti's seemingly limitless musical invention.

**Domenico  
SCARLATTI**  
(1685–1757)

**Complete Keyboard Sonatas Vol. 28**

<b>1</b> Sonata in A minor, K.7/L.379/P.63	4:12
<b>2</b> Sonata in G minor, K.31/L.231/P.19	4:35
<b>3</b> Sonata in G major, K.55/L.335/P.117	3:11
<b>4</b> Sonata in E flat major, K.68/L.114/P.7	4:19
<b>5</b> Sonata in G major, K.80/P.28	1:39
<b>6</b> Sonata in D minor, K.89/L.211/P.12	5:43
<b>7</b> Sonata in G minor, K.108/L.249/P.92	3:19
<b>8</b> Sonata in G minor, K.121/L.181/P.93	4:32
<b>9</b> Sonata in F sharp minor, K.142/P.240	4:20
<b>10</b> Sonata in C major, K.156/L.101/P.248	3:50
<b>11</b> Sonata in C minor, K.174/L.410/P.149	4:41
<b>12</b> Sonata in D minor, K.191/L.207/P.18	3:37
<b>13</b> Sonata in A major, K.219/L.393/P.278	5:35
<b>14</b> Sonata in G minor, K.234/L.49/P.286	4:32
<b>15</b> Sonata in F minor, K.239/L.281/P.56	3:31
<b>16</b> Sonata in B major, K.245/L.450/P.299	4:19
<b>17</b> Sonata in D major, K.258/L.178/P.494	5:43

**Sang Woo Kang, Piano**

Recorded: 1 **9**–**12** and 2 **13**–**17** August 2019 and 20 **1** **2**, 21 **3** **4** and 24 **5**–**8** August 2022 at Patrych Sound Studios, New York, USA • Producer and engineer: Joseph Patrych • Editor: Ruoting Li  
Booklet notes: Peter Siepmann • Publisher: Heugel, Paris (urtext editions) • Cover photo: Grounds of Royal Palace of La Granja de San Ildefonso, Segovia, Spain © bimserd / Dreamstime.com