

Domenico  
**SCARLATTI**

**Complete Keyboard Sonatas Vol. 31**

**Martin Cousin, Piano**



## **Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757)**

### **Complete Sonatas Vol. 31**

A true musical disrupter of the 18th century, Domenico Scarlatti redefined the limits of contemporary keyboard writing, forging a legacy that bridged Baroque complexity with Classical innovation. Born in Naples into a distinguished musical lineage – his father, Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725), a seminal figure in Baroque opera – Domenico was well-positioned to inherit and perpetrate the traditions of the Neapolitan school. Yet rather than adhering to the prevailing conventions of his milieu, he charted a markedly individual path, characterised by formal innovation, harmonic audacity, and an idiomatic brilliance that set his keyboard works apart from those of his peers.

Scarlatti's early life unfolds as a study in contrasts: steeped in rigorous classical training and bound by familial expectations, yet propelled by an insistent desire to transcend aesthetic boundaries. Though he held posts in Naples, Rome and Venice, it was during his years at the Portuguese and Spanish courts that his most distinctive musical voice emerged. In these aristocratic environs, he found patronage and artistic freedom, though the details of his personal life remain tantalisingly obscure. Hints of relationships, rivalries, and ambition surface only faintly, much like the elusive spirit that animates his music.

In the vibrant cities of Lisbon and Madrid, Scarlatti took his harpsichord, and later the fortepiano, and pushed them to their limits, creating his most enterprising and innovative compositions: the 555 sonatas that would forever transform the landscape of keyboard music. Exemplified by bold harmonic explorations, intricate counterpoint, and a salient rhythmic freedom that sets them apart from the more conservative keyboard works of his artistic counterparts, the sonatas capture a pivotal transitional moment in the history of Western classical music. Scarlatti's synthesis of Italian refinement with the rhythmic verve of the Iberian vernacular imbue his keyboard works with their idiosyncratic character: cosmopolitan yet rooted, formally sophisticated yet grounded in regional colour.

From a performance perspective, Scarlatti's sonatas often require a level of virtuosity and precision that was ahead of its time. Hand crossings, rapid note repetitions and ornate embellishments demand a technical facility that tests even the most accomplished pianists and harpsichordists. Scarlatti's writing for the keyboard was not just a reflection of the instrument's possibilities at the time; it was a visionary exploration of its expressive potential – from delicate, lyrical phrases to explosive, almost percussive flourishes. Despite their crafted brevity, each sonata is a self-contained narrative, reflecting the intimate, courtly settings in which they were composed and frequently performed for the upper echelons of society.

However, understanding the broader trajectory of Scarlatti's output is complicated by the lack of an authoritative chronological record. The absence of a comprehensive cataloguing system during his lifetime has left scholars with significant obstacles in reconstructing the evolution of his style. Posthumous publications and scattered manuscripts have only added to the uncertainty. Ralph Kirkpatrick's mid-20th-century classification system, which assigns K-numbers based on his own catalogued ordering rather than compositional chronology, remains the most widely accepted framework. While invaluable, it offers only a partial glimpse into the developmental arc of Scarlatti's *oeuvre*.

In light of these challenges, Martin Cousin's thoughtful selection of sonatas on this album offers more than a mere compilation of works – it provides a multifaceted portrait of Scarlatti's creative range. This carefully curated collection encapsulates the breadth of his contribution to the keyboard genre: a synthesis of virtuosity, formal innovation, and stylistic plurality that is both deeply rooted in its time and strikingly prescient.

Opening with *K.218 in A minor (Vivo)*, we are immediately immersed in Scarlatti's characteristic brightness and rhythmic energy. The lively 6/8 metre, playful syncopations, teasing chromatic thirds, and dancing left-hand octaves propel the music forward with an unstoppable momentum. This infectious drive yields to a more reserved tone in *K.115 in C minor (Allegro)*, where Scarlatti's harmonic daring takes centre stage. The sonata navigates through chromatic passages, shifting between

moments of introspective uncertainty and sudden, sharp resolutions. Here, a more erudite and musically stylish sonata emerges in its exploration of tonality, ornamentation, hand-crossing and melodic interplay between the hands.

The buoyant energy returns in *K.255 in C major (Allegro)*. Punctuated by a yearning call-and-answer motif between the hands, chromaticism subtly enhances the tension within this dialogue. This extroverted charm contrasts with the lyrical beauty and pensive energy of *K.302 in C minor (Andante)*. Swift modulations and elaborate ornamentation heighten the sharp contrasts in mood, capturing the emotional volatility that lies at the heart of Scarlatti's musical language.

The Baroque spirit shines throughout *K.237 in D major (Allegro)* with its swift scalic runs, extended trills, percussive octaves and broken chords that leap across the registers. Yet, it also anticipates the more fluid, expressive elements of the Classical period. In a similarly forward-looking vein, *K.75 (Allegro)* explores a delicately adventurous harmonic soundscape. Though grounded in the brightness of G major, Scarlatti introduces brief excursions into the parallel minor, secondary dominants and diminished harmonies, creating moments of harmonic tension and contrast. These layered detours add depth and emotional colour to an otherwise elegant and poised structure.

The impish, almost improvisatory character of *K.145 in D major* (no tempo given) lends the piece its whimsical, engaging quality. Brisk hand alternations, sudden modulations and chromatic shifts, create a dynamic tone, balancing technical virtuosity with expressive finesse. The notion of mischievousness continues in *K.138 in D minor (Allegro)*, where Scarlatti masterfully blends refined melodic contouring with percussive fun, foreshadowing the lively, rhythmic energy later seen in Haydn's works.

*K.370 in E flat major (Allegro)* is a vibrant fusion of *cantabile* lines, contrasting staccato and repeated-note figures, ascending and descending thirds, syncopated rhythms, measured flourishes and triumphant octaves, all within a carefully balanced, yet captivating narrative of light and shade. This dynamic and varied atmosphere gives way to one of a more fluid, poetic nature where flowing two-note figures, broken thirds and repeated octaves chronicle the storyline of *K.345 in D major (Allegro)*.

Scarlatti's openness to individuality in performance is reflected in the quirky and piquant *K.332 in B flat major (Allegro)* where suggestions to slow down the tempo invite the performer to exercise freedom. In such moments, articulation and nuance become vital emotional tools, allowing the music to come alive with personal character. Conversely, the majestic design and courtly grace of the *K.94 in F major (Minuet)* exudes an airier, more considered character, occasionally offset by subtle, unexpected dissonances that hint at Scarlatti's spirited inventiveness.

Part of the seminal *Essercizi per Gravicembalo*, the only collection of Scarlatti's sonatas published during his lifetime (1738), *K.5 in D minor (Allegro)* reveals his early mastery of keyboard idioms and bold expressive vision. With tightly constructed motifs and agile figuration, the sonata employs arresting contrasts in dynamics and articulation, drawing the listener into a meticulously crafted musical landscape charged with dramatic intensity.

Returning to the world of the minuet, *K.393 in B flat major* conveys a sense of noble deportment, while its lyrical phrasing and gently flowing lines offer an absorbing sense of melodic allure.

The musical flavours of Spain are vividly reflected in *K.122 in D major (Allegro)*, with contrasting shifts between triple and compound metres, off-beat accents, rhythmic push and pull, and expressive melodic decoration, evocative of dance traditions such as the fandango and flamenco.

*K.272 in B flat major (Allegro)* opens with an air of vitality, driven by rhythmic clarity and nimble figurations that bound across the keyboard with confidence and flair. The texture is sparkling and transparent, balanced by moments of style and composure, giving the music a conversational, almost theatrical quality.

A bright, light-hearted theme opens *K.195 in F major (Vivo)* with a sense of mechanical grace, offering space to focus on technical clarity, evenness and touch. This sentiment of simplicity and structural elegance carries through *K.16 in B flat major (Presto)*. As one of the earlier entries in the *Essercizi*, it offers a glimpse of Scarlatti's developing style – less concerned

with drama and display, and more with symmetry, flow and refinement. The balance between formality and expressive clarity epitomises the final work, *K.287 in D major (Andante Allegro; Per Organo)*. Its intellectual sophistication and contrapuntal intricacy make it a compelling and resonant piece of musical craftsmanship.

In these works, Scarlatti reveals his unique ability to blend virtuosity with precision, creating a body of music that remains both technically demanding and artistically profound, bridging the Baroque tradition with the emerging Classical style.

**Emer Nestor**



### **Martin Cousin**

Martin Cousin is regarded as one of the most exceptional pianists of his generation, having been awarded First Prize at the 2005 Ettore Pozzoli International Piano Competition and the Gold Medal at the 2003 Royal Over-Seas League Annual Music Competition. He has regularly appeared at major British music venues since graduating from the Royal College of Music, and has performed as concerto soloist with the London Philharmonic, Hallé, Royal Philharmonic, Philharmonia and BBC Concert orchestras. The 2024/25 season has included solo performances in Het Concertgebouw, Philharmonie Luxembourg, Casa da Música and Konzerthaus Dortmund. In 2006 the release of his debut album of Rachmaninov's *Sonata No.1* and *Morceaux de salon* (SOMM Recordings) was selected as Classical CD of the Week by the *Daily Telegraph*, and his 2014 release of Rachmaninov's *Études-tableaux* was acclaimed by *The Observer*, receiving a five-star review. For Naxos, he has released two albums featuring works by Anton Rubinstein (8.574426 and 8.574427), and Volumes 61 and 62 in the Complete Piano Music of Liszt series (8.574545 and 8.574546), all to critical acclaim. Cousin is also a member of the Aquinas Piano Trio, and his hands were featured in the Oscar-winning film *Shine*. [www.martincousin.com](http://www.martincousin.com)

*Photo © Benjamin Ealovega*

No one redefined the limits of contemporary keyboard writing in the 18th century more radically than Domenico Scarlatti, whose formal innovation, harmonic daring and virtuosic brilliance set him apart from his contemporaries. In this selection of sonatas Martin Cousin presents a multifaceted portrait of Scarlatti's full creative range. Along with scalic runs, extended trills, dramatic dynamics and playful syncopations, we also meet the impish, quasi-improvisational and introspective composer capable of great nobility and lyrical beauty, one who bridged Baroque traditions with the new Classical style.

## Domenico SCARLATTI (1685–1757)

1	Keyboard Sonata in A minor, K.218/L.392/P.237	3:09
2	Keyboard Sonata in C minor, K.115/L.407/P.100	6:03
3	Keyboard Sonata in C major, K.255/L.439/P.226	4:03
4	Keyboard Sonata in C minor, K.302/L.7/P.279	6:50
5	Keyboard Sonata in D major, K.237/L.308/P.446	3:10
6	Keyboard Sonata in G major, K.75/L.53/P.23	2:12
7	Keyboard Sonata in D major, K.145/L.369/P.105	4:22
8	Keyboard Sonata in D minor, K.138/L.464/P.95	3:51
9	Keyboard Sonata in E flat major, K.370/L.316/P.346	3:39
10	Keyboard Sonata in D major, K.345/L.306/P.342	4:45
11	Keyboard Sonata in B flat major, K.332/L.141/P.519	4:22
12	Keyboard Sonata in F major, K.94/P.27	1:23
13	Keyboard Sonata in D minor, K.5/L.367/P.61	3:11
14	Keyboard Sonata in B flat major, K.393/L.74/P.326	3:48
15	Keyboard Sonata in D major, K.122/L.334/P.118	4:36
16	Keyboard Sonata in B flat major, K.272/L.145/P.518	3:50
17	Keyboard Sonata in F major, K.195/L.S18/P.185	4:41
18	Keyboard Sonata in B flat major, K.16/L.397/P.72	5:23
19	Keyboard Sonata in D major, K.287/L.S9/P.310	1:56

## Martin Cousin, Piano

Recorded: 29–30 October 2024 at Trinity Concert Hall, Trinity School, Croydon, UK  
Producer, engineer and editor: Jim Unwin • Booklet notes: Emer Nestor • Publisher: Éditions Heugel  
Cover photo: Fountain, Palace of La Granja de San Ildefonso, Segovia, Spain © bimserd / Dreamstime.com