

Domenico Scarlatti: The Mirror of Human Frailty

Start time: 2pm

Approximate end time: 7.30pm including 3 intervals

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Domenico Scarlatti a selection of sonatas

2pm Part 1 – Mahan Esfahani

K 109, 57, 84

K 211, 212

K 296, 297

K 213, 214

K 420, 421

K 52

K 516, 517

3.15pm interval

3.30pm Professor Sir Barry Ife

4pm Part 2 – Aline Zylberajch

K 277, 45

K 234, 226, 386

K 544, 107

K 215, 220, 216

K 213, 60, 43

K 132, 103, 282

5pm interval

5.30pm panel discussion

6.15pm interval

6.30pm Part 3 – Daria van den Bercken

K 183, 54, 519

K 27, 230, 212

Enrique Granados Piano Sonata No 11 (arr of Domenico Scarlatti K 110)

Piano Sonata No 8 (arr Domenico Scarlatti K 546)

'Andaluza' from *12 Spanish Dances*

Domenico Scarlatti K 32, 544, 531, 492

Domenico Scarlatti is one of those figures all keyboard players want to claim as their own, writes Harriet Smith, including star harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, who's put together today's celebration.

What's the secret behind his allure? Perhaps the story itself of Scarlatti's life is a good starting point. He was born the same year as J S Bach and Handel – 1685 – and wrote over 555 sonatas (many of which were not catalogued). Common to virtually all of them is a liking for simple two-part structures and a compactness that proves, just as much as Anton Webern and György Kurtág were to do in later centuries, that impact and size have little to do with one another.

barbican

That in itself is remarkable enough, but then factor in the notion that, as far as we know, these works date from the last two decades of Scarlatti's life and their existence seems all the more remarkable. We have Princess Maria Barbara to thank for their inspiration; she was Scarlatti's pupil and patroness at the Portuguese court and, when she subsequently became Queen of Spain, Scarlatti followed her first to Seville and later to Madrid. That she was a sensational player is abundantly evident, Scarlatti allowing his imagination free rein in pieces that can be hugely virtuosic but which above all set out to create vibrant pictures in the mind, drawing on all manner of musical influences in the process. But what's also truly amazing is the consistency of the invention – are there any duff ones among them? If so, I've yet to encounter them.

The sheer aural spectacle of his music is certainly second to none – Mahan Esfahani observes: 'In this sense, Domenico Scarlatti is a highly confrontational composer. He experiments with sound within full view of his spectators. Moreover, he uses material that still bears the odour of the soil whence it came. But none of this makes his philosophy any less profound than that of, say, J S Bach. JSB's esoteric speculations emerge from his quiet contemplation of the mystical relations between the notes. Scarlatti's role, on the other hand, is rather that of a guide to his own life. If we often see it as playful or superficial it is perhaps because we find it too real to the point of being vulgar. And if we can only see Bach on a pedestal, it is because we find it easier to speak of virtue in the abstract as a way of avoiding reality.'

And that brings us to another extraordinary aspect of this music: Scarlatti's ability to conjure descriptive music, whether it's a pair of hunting horns leading us galloping into the forest, of a courtly dance, the sound of bells, a flamenco guitar or the strumming of a mandolin or even an entire orchestra. 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. Goethe summed matter up when he observed that 'it is when working within limits that genius declares itself'. While tone-painting in music was a popular pastime in the Baroque, many other composers look pale and polite compared to Domenico Scarlatti. And it's perhaps because the harpsichord (or piano) can only hint at the timbres implied in the sonatas that it gives us as listeners the opportunity to let our imaginations run free.

And there's a sense, too, that, whoever interprets Scarlatti's music today – whether on a period-appropriate harpsichord or in an act of borrowing via the piano – they are in effect offering transcriptions or reimaginings of these pieces. In the hands of truly creative artists this music offers an irresistible challenge to make their own.

But what's also inescapable – as much today as when the ink was still wet on the page – is how individual and ground-breaking Scarlatti was. As Mahan Esfahani puts it: 'With each phrase of this truly original music, he surprises us anew with his humour and his empathy with his fellow humans, and ultimately reveals us to ourselves.'

© Harriet Smith

Performers

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Aline Zylberajch fortepiano

Daria van den Bercken piano

Professor Sir Barry Ife speaker

Kerstin Schwarz panellist

Produced by the Barbican



The City of London Corporation is the founder and principal funder of the Barbican Centre