

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 15 October 2025
7.30pm

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

Sonata in A minor K3
Sonata in G minor K234
Sonata in G minor K450

Sonata in C K460 & Sonata in C K461
Sonata in C minor K99
Sonata in C minor K37
Sonata in C K72

Sonata in E minor K15
Sonata in B K261

Sonata in D minor K417
Sonata in D K443 & Sonata in D minor K444

Sonata in E minor K402 & Sonata in E K403
Sonata in G K454 & Sonata in G K455

Sonata in D minor K9
Sonata in D minor K18

Sonata in F minor K184
Sonata in F K524 & Sonata in F K525
Sonata in G minor K8



UNDER 35S

Supported by the AKO Foundation
Media partner Classic FM



Help us raise £125,000
for 125 years of music

To find out more visit wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate



Join & Support
Donations

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management. In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions. Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141. Wigmore Hall is equipped with a loop to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

One of the many difficulties in understanding Scarlatti's artistic development is that a complete lack of autograph sources for the keyboard music precludes a reliable chronology. Even the publication date for the *Essercizi* (1738) – the only pieces published directly by Scarlatti in his lifetime – is barely helpful in establishing actual compositional dates as opposed to that of mere printing. In the flowery dedication to John V, the composer describes the sonatas as 'compositions born under your Majesty's auspices.' Does he mean that the sonatas were written necessarily in Portugal? Scarlatti's having received a knighthood in 1738 from the Portuguese monarch would seem to indicate that he still somehow saw himself under the aegis of King John. And indeed the 30 sonatas in the *Essercizi* are in what can be described as a 'Portuguese' style, characterised by light dance rhythms and the traditions of keyboard improvisation from one or two motivic kernels as in the manner of preluding at the instrument. The overall impression is one of a charming ephemerality as the sonatas are a succession of pleasantly surprising moments.

In this particular programme I have included only five of these early works (K3, 8, 9, 15 and 18); of these, K9 in D minor is the most archaic in form, recalling the light two-voice structures found in the forgettable keyboard music of late 17th-century composers from the Italian peninsula. The seamless continuity of narrative in K18, on the other hand, foreshadows the essential surrealism of Scarlatti's mature style, wherein the natural processes of the inner life of the artistic soul take precedence over principles of balance between light and darkness that had come to define the central European musical language of Classicism. In this sonata, the harpsichord takes multiple roles, evoking the jangly tambourine of the countryside while bringing to life the impressive sweep of an entire string orchestra, and in equal measure painting through sound the image of a crooner accompanying himself on a mandolin. Scarlatti shows that the 'natural' is nonetheless wholly symbolic, and that those symbols represent both *everything* in the images they potentially conjure and *nothing* in that the only apparent logic exists between the notes themselves.

By way of contrast, the 13 volumes of sonatas copied out by command of Maria Barbara (by then Queen of Spain) between 1752 and 1757 represent a later stage of Scarlatti's artistic development. The order in which these sonatas are included in this collection – now known as the Venice MS – is the basis for the Kirkpatrick (K) numbering system published in 1953. For whatever reason, to this series were also appended two volumes bearing the dates of 1742 and 1749 and bound in the same opulent style as the other volumes; thus: the *Essercizi*, two or three contemporary publications of sonatas not supervised

by Scarlatti but emanating from contemporary manuscripts that he shared privately with enthusiasts, and Venice 1742 and 1749 represent the first 176 sonatas in Kirkpatrick's catalogue, and have relatively reliable dating attached to them. A number of factors might likewise lead one to imagine a chronological basis for at least the second half of the Venice collection. Firstly, the ranges of the sonatas get much wider in the last 150 or so pieces. Secondly, the Venice manuscripts (and their companion source copied in the exact same period, possibly for the Infante Don Felipe, Duke of Parma) cut off in 1757, the year of the composer's death. It of course could be that the Queen thought to have clean presentation copies of sonatas composed over decades before just as her teacher was obviously entering the autumn of life, or it could be – and I stress that this is what the documentary evidence shows – that Scarlatti composed the bulk of his sonatas in the last seven years of his life.

What caused a transformation in the 36-year-old Scarlatti was surely the artistic autarky of Spain relative to virtually any other place in Western Europe. The gradual influence of local musical flavour on his compositions is again one of those matters which leads one to believe that the order of the sonatas in the Venice MS must at least in the latter volumes be roughly chronological. The triptych of sonatas in the tonality of C (Kk 99, 37 and 72) calls to mind the Italian influences of the first half of the composer's life, particularly with respect to the sonic environment of the four-part string orchestra. This is particularly apparent in K37, which we know to be at least concurrent with the *Essercizi* as it appears in another volume, not supervised directly by Scarlatti, published in London in 1739; here, the unison textures of the orchestra contrast with soloist in moments of virtuosity. In K72, found in Venice 1742, the acrobatics and fireworks found in the earlier *Essercizi* are now applied to greatly humorous effect, perhaps bringing to mind a group of street entertainers from Scarlatti's Neapolitan youth.

Compare these sonatas to the ones copied out later in the Venice collection, e.g. Kk 450 or 443/444, where the Spanish flavour is unmistakable. In K450, the dactylic meter of the accompaniment and predilection for the interval of a minor second brings to mind the *paso doble* and *bolero*. In this and other sonatas copied out in roughly the same period, Scarlatti now juxtaposes the singing and operatic quality of the harpsichord with the instrument's strongly rhythmic character. The essentially two-voiced structure of roughly contemporary Italian keyboard music has been supplanted by an approach to the instrument that is vastly more dramatic and symphonic.

© Mahan Esfahani 2025

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.