

## Seattle Baroque Orchestra Program Notes SeattleBaroque.org

### ***Scarlatti in Madrid***

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By Ingrid Matthews

This program centers around the figure of **Domenico Scarlatti** (1685-1757) and his associates. The son of Alessandro Scarlatti, Domenico was born in Naples, and worked there, as well as in Venice and Rome, early in his career. In Rome, one of his patrons was Cardinal Antonio Ottoboni, an important champion of the arts, through whom he met Handel, Corelli and others. Another was the exiled Polish Queen Maria Casimira, for whom he wrote numerous operas. But the connection which would have the most lasting impact on his life and career was with Maria Barbara, Princess of Portugal. Maria Barbara passionately loved music and Scarlatti was employed as her harpsichord teacher. When she married the Spanish crown prince Fernando, Scarlatti followed them to Madrid and remained there after they ascended to the throne. Scarlatti spent the last 28 years of his life at the Spanish court. Musical life was thriving and extravagant, due in large part to the presence of the celebrated castrato Farinelli. It was here that Scarlatti enjoyed the artistic freedom to experiment in depth with the single-movement, binary-form keyboard sonata, which would become his extraordinary contribution to the canon of western music. Scarlatti wrote over 500 of these sonatas, three of which are included on this program.

We begin, however, with an example of his few surviving instrumental works. These are generally more conservative than his later keyboard sonatas. The opening *Sinfonia* is a short but festive work in which the influence of his father, Alessandro Scarlatti, can clearly be traced.

**Carlos de Seixas** (1704-42) was one of the leading Portuguese musicians of the 18th century. He was appointed organist for the royal chapel in Lisbon when he was only sixteen, and retained that post all his life. Many 18th-century references to Seixas attest to his renown as a harpsichord virtuoso as well as a prolific composer; unfortunately most of his works have been lost, probably due to a massive earthquake in 1755. At the Lisbon court, Seixas overlapped with Domenico Scarlatti for nine years, and the two are reported to have enjoyed a deep mutual respect although their styles are very different. While Scarlatti was wringing every expressive and virtuosic possibility from the old-fashioned binary form, Seixas's keyboard writing is more modern, hinting at the transition from baroque to classical style. The concerto on this program demonstrates the sparkling appeal of this little-known composer.

Scarlatti's D minor violin sonata is one of only eight known pieces he composed for solo instrument with continuo. The incisive rhythms of the opening *Grave*, more idiomatic to the harpsichord than the violin, indeed bear a striking resemblance to

Scarlatti's keyboard writing and lend an unmistakable Spanish flavor. The subsequent three, quick movements combine violinistic fire with a buoyant good humor.

Lucas Ruiz de Ribayez, Diego Fernandez de Huete and Santiago de Murcia are among many Spanish guitarists and harpists who penned collections which might function either to instruct the beginner or to provide the performer with a starting point for his own improvisation. This set of grounds, the *Marionas*, *Españoletas*, *Marizápalos* and *Canarios*, is compiled from such sources, demonstrating examples of *diferencias*, or divisions over repeating bass patterns.

We close the first half of this program with three of Domenico Scarlatti's harpsichord sonatas. Each is a concise, well-developed miniature, displaying the individuality and wit of both composer and performer. It is easy to see why Scarlatti described his efforts with these pieces as "an ingenious jesting with art." They demonstrate the virtuosic writing typical of Scarlatti, and also the influence of Spanish folk music. Domenico Scarlatti was fascinated with the traditional music of the Iberian peninsula and its spirit

permeates much of his music. This is particularly evident in the F minor Sonata, with its castanet-style rhythms. The *Pastorale* is apt for the season, as it weaves Italian Christmas tunes into its texture.

**Santiago de Murcia** (1682-1740), a native of Madrid, was a guitarist, composer and theorist who served as the music teacher to Queen Maria Luisa Gabriela, wife of Felipe V, before traveling to Mexico sometime in the 1720s. He died there in 1740. The pieces on this program are from the *Saldivar Codex no. 4*, which a 20th-century Mexican musicologist, Dr. Gabriel Saldivar y Silva, purchased for 200 pesos from an antique shop. The *Grabe* uses Corellian chains of suspensions; the *Allegro* shows strongly the influence of Domenico Scarlatti, with its stinging mordents and shocking dissonance.

**Alessandro Scarlatti** (1660-1725), Domenico's father, worked in Rome and was one of the most important Italian opera composers of his generation. During Pope Innocent XI's reign, when opera was banned from Rome for almost three decades, he produced instead a wealth of sacred oratorios and cantatas. The Christmas Cantata on this program (*Cantata Pastorale per la Natività di Nostro Signore Gesu Cristo*) is built around three arias, preceded by an overture and woven together with the tuneful recitatives typical of Alessandro Scarlatti. The text was written by the same Cardinal Ottoboni who was one of Rome's leading patrons of the arts. The first aria, telling of the promise of salvation, is really a duet between soprano and violin; the second becomes a trio as the violas join in, in a tender depiction of the pastoral scene. With the final aria, listeners may be reminded of the *Pifa* from Handel's *Messiah*. The full orchestral texture unfolds as the soprano sings of the shepherds' joy at witnessing Christ's miraculous birth.