

*Scarlatti and the Spanish Body:  
On National Influence in the Keyboard Works of Domenico Scarlatti*

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Modern scholars, lacking biographic details and autograph sources, know relatively little about Domenico Scarlatti and the background of his works for keyboard. This absence of information often results in contradictory accounts and even myths in musicological scholarship on the composer.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1685 in Naples, Scarlatti spent nearly half of his life in Italy composing opera and half of his life writing keyboard works on the Iberian Peninsula, working as a keyboard teacher and composer for Doña María Bárbara de Braganza (first a Princess of Portugal and later, Queen of Spain). Given the composer's bipartite life, Scarlatti is claimed at once by Italian musicologists as an integral figure in the canon of Italian musicians,<sup>2</sup> while Spaniards, including the composer Manuel de Falla, have placed Scarlatti instead within a long lineage of Spanish composers and performers. It would appear, however, that despite nationalist boundaries and historical vagaries that frustrate the present field, all Scarlatti scholars find themselves in agreement upon one point: that he was among the finest keyboard composer-virtuosos of the era, a status owing entirely to Scarlatti's seemingly

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<sup>1</sup> Little biographical detail remains from either his life in Italy or on the Iberian peninsula and earnest searches have, as yet, failed to uncover any original manuscripts or autographs of the keyboard sonatas that comprise the vast majority of Scarlatti's work.

<sup>2</sup> Gian Francisco Malipiero names Scarlatti the "last heir in the great Italian school issuing from Palestrina, Gesualdo da Venosa, Girolamo Frescobaldi, and Claudio Monteverdi" in "Domenico Scarlatti," *The Musical Quarterly* 13 (1927): 485. Also Massimo Bogianckino, *The Harpsichord Music of Domenico Scarlatti*, trans. John Tickner (Rome: Edizioni de Santis, 1967).

idiosyncratic and novel approach to harpsichord technique.<sup>3</sup> In all of the discussions concerning the proper place of Scarlatti, the unique matter of his remarkable technique remains somehow above debates of national influence. Using the sonatas themselves as primary evidence—most expressly the technical demands they make of the performing body—and the cultural context from which they arose, we may theorize about the possible origin and meaning of this seemingly unclassifiable virtuosity. Rather than transcending national borders, I argue, the physicality inherent in the virtuoso gestures of the keyboard works of Scarlatti can be seen to exhibit an inherent “Spanishness” that relates to the social climate of eighteenth-century Spain and specifically to native attempts at self-definition through the kinesthetic and visual spectacle of native Spanish dance.

During Scarlatti’s lifetime, a conflict along cultural borders not so dissimilar from present musicological disputes raged in Spain between the Bourbon monarchy and the native Spaniards over whom they ruled. The end of the Spanish Hapsburg line and the War of Spanish Succession put Philip V, French-Bourbon grandson of Louis XIV, on the throne. This wholly foreign monarchical line brought a strong French presence to the country, not only in terms of politics, but also in culture, fashion, music, dance and theater. Philip’s queen, Isabel Farnese from Parma, also set a vogue for Italian music—especially opera—that persisted into the reign of Scarlatti’s student and patron María Bárbara. Foreign influences spread quickly through urban Spain, “breeding” a new social group of “*petitmetres*,” from the French for “little master,” a group that preoccupied itself

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, many also compare Scarlatti’s revolutionary contribution to keyboard technique to Frederic Chopin’s innovative pianism in the nineteenth century.

with the emulation of the new French court in costume, dance, and comportment. Charles Kany writes of the *petimetra* and her French minuet,

[T]o dance it well was considered a sign of gentility. Though charming and graceful, the minuet deployed much of the artificiality and haughty affection of the century, the mincing steps corresponding to the prim gait of the *petimetre*, and the courtesy of the *petimetra* giving full play to her arrogant self-complacency.<sup>4</sup>

Many resident Spaniards met aspects of this new regime with resistance, reflecting a somewhat endemic “Francophobia” and the perception of a growing threat of foreign aristocrats competing for power and privilege. Kany explains, “When the government attempted to Galliardize Spain, to centralize and standardize, it was obstinately opposed by that individuality and independence which are knit into the very fiber of the Spaniard’s being. That inveterate *españolismo*, that stubborn resistance to foreign influence, acted as a serious deterrent to French reform, at least among the masses.”<sup>5</sup> While Kany may romanticize “inveterate *españolismo*,” Spaniards themselves set the precedent for this characterization with cultural roles that evolved over the course of the eighteenth century. Self-definition against foreigners became crucial, and coalesced around Spanish national styles of costume, music, and dance. Drawing on folk traditions provided Spaniards with the means to define themselves in opposition to the newcomers who sought to displace them. From the beginning of the century onward, “traditional” Spanish dances existed side by side in dance treatises with imported French courtly dance, and at times even infiltrated the “foreign camp” with *minuetos*

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Kany, *Life and Manners in Madrid 1750-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932), 275.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

*afandangados*.<sup>6</sup> By the second half of the century, these nationalist trends coalesced into *majismo*, the cultural investment in the Spanish *majo*, or peasant, as emblematic of native Spanish culture defined in opposition to the foreign courtier. Among the upper classes divided over the emulation of French tastes, *majismo* encouraged the adoption, or appropriation, of traditional Spanish costume and a renewed interest in native culture. Julian Marías explains of the period from 1714-1788, “For the first time in her history, Spain became a project of herself.”<sup>7</sup>

The dancing body served as a crucial site of self-definition, as native dance developed a cultural position in conscious contrast to French courtly dance. For perhaps the first time, Spanish dancers of the eighteenth century took an interest in the marked national characteristics that distinguished their native dances.<sup>8</sup> In the early part of the century, the *fandango* rose to prominence as the most popular and emblematic dance of Spain. Though its form varies from region to region, the *fandango* is generally a lively partner dance in triple meter (or 6/8) accompanied by the guitar and castanets. The *fandango* dancers never touch, despite the lascivious reputation earned by the dance in the estimation of its observers. In the words of dance scholar Anna Ivanova, “The dance is transformed into a kaleidoscope of movement and color as, at the climax, everything appears to be moving; staccato beats of the feet, play of the castanets, continuous manipulation of the head, body and arms. . . . The movement seems to travel into space,

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Alvarez Cañibano, “The Company of the Lefebre Family in Seville,” trans. Lynn Garafola, *Studies in Dance History: The Origins of the Bolero School* 4/1 (1993): 27.

<sup>7</sup> Julian Marías, *Understanding Spain*, trans. Frances López-Morillas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 276.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Ivanova, *The Dance in Spain* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 6.

right through the wrists and fingers.”<sup>9</sup> Though the entire body is engaged in the dance, demanding freedom of movement throughout, the dancer simultaneously exerts a sometimes rigorous control. Much of the thrill of the fandango lies in this tension between release and control and the enticing danger of the forbidden touch between partners. As French diplomat and author of an 1808 travel guide to Spain, Jean-François Bourgoing wrote, “to see them provoke one another, by turns retreating to a distance, and advancing closely again . . . you cannot help observing, with a blush.”<sup>10</sup>

As with the *minuets afandangados*, composers appropriated the fandango and other popular dances into more acceptable cultural forms and milieus by which Spanish aristocrats could explore and express their “roots.” In art music, appropriations of Spanish dance led to keyboard fandangos and, I argue, innovations in harpsichord technique pioneered by Scarlatti. Virtuoso episodes from Scarlatti’s sonatas similarly engage the entire body in a new approach to the keyboard that differed significantly from a general focus on finger technique common to most eighteenth-century keyboard practices. Likely written for the performing pleasure of María Bárbara, the sonatas seem an unexpected choice for a royal lady of the new Bourbon court, though they certainly seem to reflect the contentious cultural atmosphere of the land over which she ruled.

Throughout his extensive collection of keyboard sonatas, Scarlatti introduces a number of challenges that demand not only extreme dexterity of the fingers, but also engage the body in larger physical motion. Extended arpeggios, scales, and wide leaps necessitate a novel use of lateral motion with pivots from the elbow and lift in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Bourgoing, *Modern state of Spain*, trans. anon. (London: J. Stockdale, 1808), 301.

shoulder to propel the hands across the keyboard. Handcrossing commands a similar involvement of the whole body, engaging not only the fingers but also arms, shoulders, and upper back to move the hands rapidly to new positions. Such shifts in body position transfer even to the torso and pelvis of the performer as she leans in the direction of extreme registers, bringing focus to this forbidden region of the body just as in the characteristic stance of the *maja* depicted in Goya's portrait of the Duchess of Alba in black—a hand on the waist, boldly accentuating the hips.

In Sonata K. 113, the keyboardist spends a full one-third of the work with hands crossed in rapid sequences of flying leaps. The most extended of these occurs towards the end of the sonata (mm. 95-102) in a chain of ten sequential leaps, over two octaves in length, that send the left hand over the right hand as both descend down the keyboard. In order to execute this gesture, the keyboardist must rely on larger muscles than are typically engaged in finger technique, though the smaller muscles of the right hand do toil away in the interior of Scarlatti's voice leading. The motion in the left hand emanates out from the left shoulder, which elevates the arm and hand in order to leap over the right. The left elbow acts as a pivot from which the wrist moves back and forth in an arc-like gesture. The left hand and fingers remain relatively stationary, with fifth and second finger extended, ready to touch down and immediately spring away. The episode demands the utmost concentration, but the action takes place at such a pace that the ultimate accuracy of the passage remains dangerously tenuous, thus evoking the bold brinkmanship of the fandango. Therein lies the thrill of performing Scarlatti.

In a passage from Sonata K. 21, right and left hand verge towards each other with arpeggios in contrary motion to cross hands (mm. 19-21). This dance between hands

replicates the intricate partnering of the fandango, in which dancers intertwine but never touch. Scarlatti takes this dance to extremes in Sonata K. 29 (mm. 22-28); in this sonata, the extensive handcrossing seems to surely be a misprint. Not all of Scarlatti's leaps, however, occur with crossed hands, though they are hardly less of a feat. Measures 50-57 from Sonata K. 157 epitomize a favorite gesture in which a sequence of intervals continuously expands such that one voice becomes two and the hand divides between registral extremes. As Ralph Kirkpatrick poetically describes the effect, "one half remains stationary while the other half moves away from it like a dancer measuring off the space of a stage against the stationary spinning of his partner in the middle."<sup>11</sup> In Sonata K. 299, like proud dancers relishing the moment of display, the right and left hands exchange virtuoso "solos" that seek to outdo each other in difficulty (mm. 1-12). It seems no wonder that so many modern performers begin harpsichord recitals with Scarlatti as "warm up," for no other repertoire engages the whole body in such a manner.

Scarlatti's technique reveals a very different style and agenda from that of his French peer François Couperin, whose gestures arguably also derive from dance, though they seem rather to emulate the composure, grace, and effortlessness of French dance. The intimacy and delicacy of Couperin's miniatures, replete with *agréments*, or detailed ornamentation, depart significantly from Scarlatti's relatively bombastic manner. The majority of Couperin's music operates through gentle touch to convey, through understatement, a more mannered and decorative style. He advises, "One must always

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Kirkpatrick, *Domenico Scarlatti* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 156.

play very delicately on the keyboard,”<sup>12</sup> an effect achieved with a concentration on smaller muscles. Eighteenth-century Spaniards evidently found French music “languid and monotonous,” likely because of this very contrast between the vivacious physicality exploited by Scarlatti and the more minute refinement of French music and dance.

Not only do the sonatas provide performers with the possibility of exploring new experiences of the body at the keyboard, but they also provide a dazzling spectacle for onlookers. Spectatorship of native *majo* dance was an important part of upper class self-identification with native Spanish culture. Kany describes events such as the *bailes de candil* as both for the lower class *and* adventurous aristocrats and nobility,

Here the door was usually open to anyone who wished to enter and give vent to the fury and ardor that seized him on hearing the strumming of guitars. . . . Many a *petimetra*, tired of the imported Italian music and French dances, and yearning to satisfy the urge of her Spanish blood, would eagerly persuade her *cortejo* [male companion] to escort her to one of these lusty gatherings in order to watch the gay dancing of the *majos* and *majas*, ‘who without ever having studied’ pranced about with the utmost freedom and confidence, while the *petimetra* spent more money and time studying the dance than men did to graduate from the University of Salamanca.<sup>13</sup>

Like the visual emblems of *majo* dress, dance spectatorship carried with it significant cultural value. In a similar description of the invigorating effect of Spanish dance practices, Bourgoing writes, “As soon as the *fandango* is struck up by the musicians at a

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Kroll quotes Couperin from *L’Art de toucher le clavecin*, ed. and trans. Margery Halford (CITY: Alfred, 1974), in “French Masters,” *Eighteenth-Century Keyboard Music*, ed. Robert L. Marshall (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 140.

<sup>13</sup> Kany, *Life and Manners*, 279.

ball, all faces begin to be animated, and the spectators, if even their age condemns them to a state of immobility, have great difficulty to keep from falling in.”<sup>14</sup>

Performances of Scarlatti’s works similarly stimulate the audience to partake of the excitement, and even the physicality, of the technical choreography both as listener *and* spectator. The visual spectacle of the sonatas draws in the audience, just as even the most infirm of fandango spectators felt themselves carried away by the dance. Watching hands fly up and down the keyboard in rapid leaps and acrobatic crossings, and trying to catch a glimpse of fingers traveling at seemingly impossible speeds, engages the audience as much, if not more, as the aural experience of the work. The spectator whose palms regularly sweat in empathy for the trials of performance likely feels as much relief as the performer when the recital ends with a clean run. The virtuosity must have been all the more thrilling for eighteenth-century performers and spectators generally unaccustomed to such keyboard comportment that so resembled choreographies of native dance. The intrinsic importance of the visual component of performance in Scarlatti provides compelling links with the emphasis on visual expression and experience of this early nationalism (and *majismo*), particularly as it relates to national dance.

Thus the physicality of Scarlatti’s keyboard technique seems to participate in the national self-definition that marked eighteenth-century Spanish society. The bodily gesture and general abandon that accompany the performance of Scarlatti’s sonatas may be understood as akin to the lustiness, “freedom and confidence” that Kany’s adventurous *petimetra* observed in the peasant dances of the *majos*. Both in the embodied experience of the sonatas and the visual spectacle they engender, Scarlatti’s virtuosity seems firmly

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<sup>14</sup> Bourgoing, *Modern state of Spain*, 299.

grounded in the eighteenth-century formation of “Spain.” Arguably, though, the cultural symbols embraced by this early surge of national fervor were problematic stereotypes originating from upper classes at quite a remove from Spanish *majos*, and, in the case of Scarlatti, these images were even created by non-Spaniards. The “Spain” produced in the eighteenth century was most popular, perhaps, in the imagination of foreign travelers and immigrants. Travel accounts, dance troupes, and musical publications exported this new Spain throughout Europe, helping to create an image of the nation and its “fiery” inhabitants that predated the exoticism of Spain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The vital need for self-definition in the face of ostensible foreign occupation led Spaniards to fashion and maintain these symbols, furthering what might best be described as auto-exoticism. Despite, or perhaps because of, the problems of class divide and exoticism, such symbols of the Spanish nation, especially Scarlatti’s virtuoso gestures, best reflect the hybrid multi-cultural life of eighteenth-century cosmopolitan Spain. Scarlatti and his keyboard technique provide a new and important window through which to view a dynamic era of cultural and political history and the early formation by Spain of a musical identity that persists to the present day.