

FRIENDS OF THE NORTH EAST OF SCOTLAND MUSIC SCHOOL

VIRTUALLY SCARLATTI:

***A live talk about composer DOMÉNICO SCARLATTI featuring Dr ROGER B. WILLIAMS
and NESMS piano student SCOTT MANSON.***

Sunday 30th January, 2022 at 2:30pm

The continuing Covid pandemic means that close gatherings of people are still difficult. The Friends of the North East of Scotland Music School who would normally programme events like today's talk about the composer Domenico Scarlatti with a live audience in the Main Studio at NESMS, followed possibly by refreshments and a social get-together, could not take place. However, nothing daunted, with Colin Brockie managing sound and camera, we were able to experience the whole event on Zoom. We enjoyed a fascinating talk on Scarlatti and his music given by Dr Roger B. Williams and two of the composer's Sonatas were played with considerable élan and, especially in the D Major Sonata, with sizzling virtuosity, by NESMS piano student Scott Manson, a pupil of Nigel Clayton and current holder of the Tom and Cath Johnston Scholarship.

The Scarlatti in question was Domenico (October 1685 – July 1757) son of Alessandro. Roger Williams began by reminding us that Domenico Scarlatti shared the tercentenary of his birth in 1985 with those of J. S. Bach and G. F. Handel. He told us that Bach and Handel are both better known and far more frequently performed than Scarlatti. Does Scarlatti deserve to be as well-known as the other two?

I did not know until Sunday that Scarlatti had composed a grand total of no fewer than 555 keyboard sonatas. (According to Britannica 10 are for violin and keyboard, 3 for organ and the rest for harpsichord). However as Roger told us, Scarlatti had met the creator of the piano, Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655- 1731) and probably played many of his sonatas on the new instrument which had a span of around five octaves, fewer than today's concert grands. Roger drew our attention to the fact that these instruments were not tuned to modern equal temperament which would alter some of the impact of the music. Roger is himself an expert on different tunings. Today Scarlatti's sonatas are played on harpsichord, modern upright pianos, concert grands and no doubt on many of the earlier fortepianos which still exist today or have been recreated by experts. Many of the older instruments exist in St Cecilia's Hall, part of Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments.

Roger gave us a detailed description of the first piece that was about to be performed by Scott Manson. He took it apart nicely for us. This was the Sonata L 9 in d minor. Scott gave us a nice clean and clear performance and later both he and Roger discussed the important use of the sustain pedal in performing the music. Performances on the early instruments required different techniques of bringing out certain notes. The second part of the sonata with its melodic content had an almost romantic quality in Scott's performance. I thought it was delightful.

Later on Scott performed the Sonata in D Major L492 composed much later than than the d minor if the arrangements of the sonatas in order of composition are correct.

This was an astonishing Sonata and a fabulously virtuosic performance by Scott. I thought that with a few months of practice and probably quite a bit of swearing I might just be able to plonk my way through the d minor Sonata – but the D Major, definitely no way! Scott mentioned that this Sonata had considerable Spanish influence and he was dead right. With his whole arm sent flying in the air, in some passages, it made me think of the Flamenco with its stamping feet and rattling castanets. There were other rapid runs of notes on the piano which made me think of the flamenco guitars.

Roger described the huge range of music throughout the 555 Scarlatti Sonatas, melancholy, fun-filled even sly apparently. The two very different Sonatas we heard today certainly proved Dr Williams's assertion that Scarlatti is a wonderful 'gutsy' composer and his music is tightly packed with interest and is always full of character. Sunday's special NESMS event certainly whetted my appetite.

ALAN COOPER