



Iberian Flavours Emerging from Domenico Scarlatti's and Carlos Seixas' Harpsichord Sonatas

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Scarlatti on the Iberian Peninsula

The keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti have long been among the favorite of repertoire choices of both harpsichordists and pianists. His music is not only appreciated due to the virtuosic challenges placed upon the interpreter, but also due to the many expressive pages found in the slower works, particularly stimulating to explore with the immense potential offered by the modern piano. Among the characteristics frequently associated with Scarlatti's musical language is a recurring mention of the Spanish influences, especially his frequent use of Phrygian elements.

One such example comes from W. Dean Sutcliffe, who, in his book *The Keyboard Sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti and Eighteenth-Century Musical Style*, refers to “[...] the harmonic feature traditionally taken as axiomatic to Scarlatti's representations of the Spanish: the Phrygian progression or cadence” (Sutcliffe 2003, p. 116). Later in the same text, and referring to the second subject of the Sonata in E-flat Major (K. 474), the author describes it as sounding “very Spanish, with its turn to minor, Phrygian inflections” (idem, p. 332).



Domenico Scarlatti in 1738. Portrait by Domingo Antonio Velasco.

The persistent association of Scarlatti with a Spanish influence is easily explainable: the Neapolitan composer lived in Spain from 1729, when he first went to Seville for a period of three years, subsequently moving to Madrid, where he remained until his death in 1757. However, the period Scarlatti spent in Portugal as Kapellmeister and harpsichord tutor to the Portuguese Royal Family is often underestimated. Although the date of the composer's arrival in Lisbon had been, until recently, unknown but generally estimated to have occurred somewhere between 1720 and 1721, it is possible today to affirm that Scarlatti arrived in Lisbon by land on the 29th of November 1719 (Doderer 2014, p. 148). This

means that Scarlatti stayed in Lisbon for over seven years prior to his Spanish period, and this fact should, according to Doderer, “impose upon Scarlattian researchers deepened studies”, notably in view of the fact that “important guidelines of the evolutionary phenomenon ‘Harpsichord – Fortepiano’ were interconnecting in Lisbon during the first half of the eighteenth century” (Doderer 2014, p. 152). I would certainly add to this perspective the pertinence of conducting an extended analysis on the possible influence of Portuguese music and culture on the Italian composer’s musical style.



Scarlatti and Seixas in Portugal

In fact, Scarlatti’s music is inevitably linked to one of the most prolific and remarkable Portuguese composers of all time: José António Carlos de Seixas, or simply Carlos Seixas, as he has become known to posterity. Born in Coimbra in 1704, Seixas learned music from his father, Francisco Vaz, an organist at the New Coimbra Cathedral, having been appointed to substitute him in 1718 at the young age of fourteen. Sometime between 1720 and 1722 he moved to Lisbon, where he taught harpsichord at houses of the Court, later becoming an organist at the Holy Patriarchal Basilica. This means that the interaction between Seixas and Scarlatti at the Portuguese Court would have taken place, and, if one cannot avoid making the assumption that the young Portuguese had much to learn from the celebrated ‘foreign’ musician nineteen years his elder, the personality displayed by Seixas in his works and the admiration Scarlatti nurtured for his young colleague also tend to lead to the conclusion that, at least in a later period of their relationship, the association between the two musicians would have been a mutually-beneficial one.

According to an account made by José Mazza in his *Biographical Dictionary of Portuguese Musicians*, the Italian expressly acknowledged the talent of the young musician in an encounter promoted by Prince Anthony, who “wished that the great Scarlatti, since he was in Lisbon at the same time, would give [Seixas] a lesson, starting from the erroneous idea that the Portuguese, much as they try, will never get to achieve what the foreigners do”, and “as he merely saw him place the hands on the harpsichord, knowing the Giant by his finger, he said: It is your excellency who could well give me lessons”, later telling the Prince: “Your Highness wished me to conduct an examination: know then that this fellow is one of the greatest masters I have ever heard” (Mazza 1945, p. 32).

Although this episode relates mainly to Scarlatti’s assessment of Seixas’ keyboard skills, Mazza also mentions the Portuguese as having composed seven-hundred harpsichord sonatas. This quantity would be absolutely astonishing, given the fact that Seixas died at only 38 in 1742. Although it is not possible to confirm this number, as today there are slightly more than one-hundred sonatas that can be unequivocally attributed to Seixas, this relatively low surviving number has been repeatedly related to the loss that followed the massively destructive Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Nevertheless, these remaining sonatas provide enough evidence of his compositional genius and individuality.

Seixas and the Lusitanian ‘soul’

Those who come in touch with Seixas’ music do not remain indifferent to its richness and originality. Barnett (2012) relates his experience of the first contact

with the composer's keyboard sonatas: "Like so many keyboardists before me, I was swept off my feet at having encountered so many remarkable works of a single composer from Portugal during the first half of the eighteenth century" (Barnett 2012, p. 1). This author also believes that "Seixas, though influenced in degrees by foreign influences, was nonetheless intrinsically Portuguese in his musical style, life, and compositions" (idem, p. 2). Barnett also repeatedly associates with Seixas' expression the idea of 'saudade', a Portuguese word that expresses, in a deep and particular manner, the sensation of nostalgia.

José Eduardo Martins, who has recorded 23 Sonatas by Seixas on the modern piano (see Martins no date), emphasizes the typical aspects of his works, "ranging from the inherent talent of the composer to the geographical aspect, including, in this, aspects that could be linked to Lusitanian nature." For this Brazilian pianist and scholar, Seixas has a "personal technical-keyboard idiom which is inherent only to him" (Martins 2004, p. 63).

British musicologist Macario Santiago Kastner, undeniably the figure who took Seixas off the shelves through his research and editorial work on Portuguese manuscripts, underlines, in the introductory volume of the *Portugaliae Musica* edition of Seixas' eighty keyboard sonatas, the idea that "one of the most attractive features of [Seixas'] personality lies on his Lusitanian genuineness in all its advantages and defaults" (Kastner 1965, p. XII). Already in 1935, Kastner, in the Schott Edition preface to the first volume of *Cravistas Portugueses* (Portuguese Harpsichordists), had stressed that the music of Seixas "acts as an expression of an accented personality, genuinely Portuguese" (Kastner 1935, p. 9).

Some fifteen years later, in the second volume of the collection, Kastner makes

it a point to emphasize "how strongly [Seixas] remained attached to the Portuguese identity and character, in spite of the Italian influence, and most in particular the one of D. Scarlatti, and in which in no way he allowed himself to follow blindly the steps of the Neapolitan" (Kastner, 1950, p. 1).

Nancy Lee Harper, American pianist and harpsichordist and former EPTA-Portugal president, had already realized the importance of the Portuguese period and its impact on Scarlatti's music when she elaborated on the existence of Iberian elements in Scarlatti's sonatas (Harper 2002). Having lived in Portugal for an extended period, Harper was able to



Carlos Seixas. Engraving by John Daulle after a portrait by Francisco Vieira.

consult directly with Portuguese musical sources and scholarship, which inspired her to publish a comprehensive book on Portuguese piano music, in which the figures of Seixas and Scarlatti (specifically his works related to the Portuguese period) are given particular prominence (Harper 2013).



Concluding remarks: Phrygian inflections as a common Iberian element

At this point, I would like to reiterate the relevance of Sutcliffe’s association of the Phrygian progression or cadence with “Scarlatti’s representations of the Spanish” (Sutcliffe 2003, p. 116) and bring that in connection with the words of one of Portugal’s most reputed of Seixas scholars, João Pedro d’Alvarenga, who claims that the so-called Phrygian progression identified by Sutcliffe, although “used by Domenico Scarlatti, Antonio Soler and occasionally by some other 6 Portuguese composers”, is employed by Seixas “with such consistency in movements of so different nature that it became a formula and a major characteristic of his style” (Alvarenga 2012, pp. 5-6). In fact, these kind of Phrygian movements can be easily perceived in Seixas’ music, as for example in the sequence between bars 6 to 9 of Seixas’ C Major Sonata No. 5 (Fig. 1). A similar harmonic movement is traceable in the beginning of section B of Scarlatti’s C Major Sonata (K. 159) (fig. 2), a sonata that is part of the Fundação do Conde de Redondo manuscript collection of the Lisbon National Library, and which was most likely composed during his Portuguese period (Harper 2013, p. 28; see also Harper 2002, p. 18).

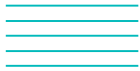


1. Carlos Seixas, Sonata in C Major, No. 5¹, mm. 6-9.



2. Domenico Scarlatti, Sonata in C Major, K. 159, mm. 25-7.

No doubt, many of these Phrygian elements can be discovered in many of Scarlatti’s sonatas, and he undeniably reinforced the use of this idiomatic characteristic in his years in Spain, particularly in Seville, with all the richness and exoticism of the Andalusian atmosphere. But definitely, the prior years spent in Lisbon, together with his contact with the Portuguese folk traditions, notably the Fado, a typically Lisbon song, must have certainly had a decisive influence on the Italian composer. As Seixas reportedly never left his native country, and the individuality of his language is widely recognized as portraying a Portuguese identity (see fig. 3 on page 10), and if the Phrygian elements are a consistent part of his idiom, I consider it only fair to acknowledge the decisive influence of the Portuguese period on Scarlatti and refer to the reported Phrygian flavors as Iberian rather than merely Spanish.



Sonata
do menor - c moll

(Moderato, in tempo di Siciliano) Carlos Seixas

3. Carlos Seixas, Sonata in C Minor, No. 102, mm. 1-10: the characteristic interval VIb-V repeated in the expressively ornamented right-hand sequence of bars 7 and 8 provides an example of Lusitanian nostalgia in which the Phrygian element emphasizes the manifestation of 'saudade'.

Born in Figueira da Foz, Portugal, **Luís Pipa** carried out his musical studies in the Conservatoires of Braga and Porto, where he graduated in 1982 with distinction. He then attended the concert class of Noel Flores at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts of Vienna and later obtained the degrees of Master of Music in Performance Studies and PhD in Performance from the British Universities of Reading and Leeds, respectively.

As a pianist he has premiered numerous works, having also composed pieces for piano and chamber music, including some songs. He is regularly invited to give Master Classes and to serve as a juror of different musical competitions in several countries.

He has recorded various CDs for different labels, including repertoire from Bach



Photo Emil Golshani.

to the twentieth century. Tracks from his latest CD Portugal have been selected to feature in the official musical selection of the Portuguese Airline Company TAP, including sonatas by Carlos Seixas and 'My Beautiful Blue Country', his acclaimed introspective solo piano version of the Portuguese National Anthem.

He is the current President of EPTA Portugal and professor of piano and chamber music at the University of Minho, Portugal.

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Notes:

- ¹ *Cravistas Portugueses*, vol. I. Edition Schott, no. 2382.
- ² *Cravistas Portugueses*, vol. II. Edition Schott, no. 4050.