

Scarlatti's Steinways at Melbourne



Ian Holtham, Piano

23 Sonatas recorded on the four Concert Grands of
The University of Melbourne Conservatorium of Music
Double CD set

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CD 1

Group One : C major and a minor

Prudence Myer Studio Steinway Number 4

- 1 Sonata in C Major, K. 420: *Allegro* 4'47
- 2 Sonata in C Major, K. 132: *Cantabile* 7'00
- 3 Sonata in a minor, K. 54: *Allegro* 4'09
- 4 Sonata in C Major, K. 159: *Allegro* 2'27
- 5 Sonata in C Major, K. 461: *Allegro* 3'53

Group Two: minor tonalities up to 4 flats

Kenneth Myer Auditorium Steinway Number 2

- 6 Sonata in a minor, K. 7: *Presto* 4'47
- 7 Sonata in e minor, K. 263: *Andante* 5'07
- 8 Sonata in d minor, K. 517: *Prestissimo* 3'28
- 9 Sonata in g minor, K. 426: *Andante* 6'18
- 10 Sonata in c minor, K. 84 3'02
- 11 Sonata in f minor, K. 239: *Allegro* 2'59

CD 2

Group Three: Major tonalities up to four sharps

Hanson Dyer Hall Steinway Number 3

- 1 Sonata in F Major, K. 366: *Allegro* 4'26
- 2 Sonata in B flat Major, K. 545: *Prestissimo* 3'16
- 3 Sonata in G Major, K. 14: *Presto* 2'48
- 4 Sonata in A Major, K. 209: *Allegro* 4'15
- 5 Sonata in D Major, K. 492: *Presto* 4'11
- 6 Sonata in E Major, K. 216: *Allegro* 6'09

Group Four: D Major and b minor

Hanson Dyer Hall Steinway Number 1

- 7 Sonata in D Major, K. 490: *Cantabile* 8'16
- 8 Sonata in b minor, K. 87 4'57
- 9 Sonata in D Major, K. 119: *Allegro* 5'52
- 10 Sonata in b minor, K. 27: *Allegro* 3'45
- 11 Sonata in D Major, K. 96: *Allegrissimo* 5'18

Envoi

- 12 Sonata in D Major, K. 435: *Allegro* 3'17

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The remarkable output of 555 Keyboard Sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) remains one of the most original compositional contributions in Western Art Music. For pianists in the 21st century, the performance models for these astonishingly original works follow a bifurcated path: the considerable developments of historical performance practice on the one hand, which is the more recent area of knowledge, and the long tradition of Romantic pianistic practice on the other, which stretches well back into the pre-recording area. Some of the very greatest pianists of the 20th century made Scarlatti a pianistic beacon: Horowitz, Haskil, Lipatti to name a few. This double performance practice inheritance is also evident in the range of editions available to the modern pianist – ranging from the sparse scholastic approach of Ralph Kirkpatrick himself, itself derived from original sources, to the florid, lavish but amendment-prone editions of which Alessandro Longo remains the chief originator.

The Sonatas contained in this unique CD explore the nexus between some of the oldest, most venerated repertoire and some of the newest piano technology housed in Australia at the time of recording. The 22-plus-one Sonatas selected for the CD have been carefully organised into Key relationships, eschewing in this instance the standard Kirkpatrick catalogue pairing in favour of a key-centred taxonomy that reveals hitherto unexplored links between

compositional textures such as metre, character, tempo, tonality and other musical features, and the modern instruments on which they are played.

The Sonatas are further gathered into four baroque tonal groupings. The CD opens with five Sonatas around the parallel tonic C/a; then six Sonatas around related minor tonalities up to four flats; followed by six Sonatas around related major tonalities up to four sharps; concluding with five Sonatas (plus one *envoi*) around the parallel tonic D/b, arguably Scarlatti's most expressive and varied tonal area. These four groupings are then assigned to a separate Steinway concert grand corresponding to the tonal and voicing attributes of the four Melbourne Conservatorium Steinway Model Ds in ways which most suit the musical characteristics of the four groupings of the Sonatas. These four instruments are the ones in current concert usage in the various performance locations around the stunning Conservatorium building that was opened in 2019.

The core number of Sonatas also has a personal resonance. The 22 Sonatas in the main group correspond to the same number of years that I led the piano area of the Conservatorium before both the 2020 pandemic and my own succession plans led to a different leadership model. The addition of the fiendish but dazzling D major *envoi*, very rarely played, is a personal indulgence I could not resist.

Group One: C major and a minor Prudence Myer Studio Steinway Number 4

K. 420	C Major	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 132	C Major	<i>Cantabile</i>
K. 54	a minor	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 159	C Major	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 461	C Major	<i>Allegro</i>

The Number 4 Piano is the only instrument which was selected in Australia, as all the other Conservatorium concert grands were chosen at the Steinway Factory in Hamburg from 1999 to 2018. Though it is unlikely to be because of geographical provenance, this is a piano of warm, sunny tones having an openness of sound that is ideally suited to the first group of Sonatas from one of Scarlatti's most frequently deployed tonal areas, C major and a minor.

Effectively the five opening Sonatas are arranged as if they were a five-movement suite – or possibly larger sonata structure – rather along the lines that that composer's first major editor, Alessandro Longo, set out in his formative edition. All the Sonatas are binary form with repeats (AABB).

The first Sonata, K. 420 acts as the confident opening movement. The tapping repeated notes give a sonic vibrancy that is particularly effective, and which is put to a variety of expressive uses. What follows are essentially two slow movements: one *Cantabile* Sonata in C Major, K. 132 with its alternating involuted arpeggios landing on expressive trills; and the a minor Sonata, K. 54 in a beguiling dance-like 12/8 metre

enriched with a plethora of trills and swirling octaves. One of the most famous of all C Major Scarlatti Sonatas, K. 159 acts as the scherzo of the group with its lightheaded charm whilst the finale, K. 461 uses a disguised ternary structure to introduce one of the most remarkable 'middle sections' of any of Scarlatti's output with its energised, if haunting, references to the music of the Iberian Peninsula, which was indeed where Scarlatti wrote many of these concentrated masterpieces.

**Group Two: minor tonalities up to 4 flats
Kenneth Myer Auditorium Steinway
Number 2**

K. 7	a minor	<i>Presto</i>
K. 263	e minor	<i>Andante</i>
K. 517	d minor	<i>Prestissimo</i>
K. 426	g minor	<i>Andante</i>
K. 84	c minor	
K. 239	f minor	<i>Allegro</i>

The Number 2 Steinway D, normally housed in the Kenneth Myer Auditorium, is an extremely svelte piano in terms of tone quality. Akin to acoustic bitter dark chocolate, the instrument's colours and range make it especially suited to a set of Sonatas with tonic minor tonalities. Selected in Hamburg in 2018, this piano has a somewhat rasping quality in stronger dynamics that lends it an especially dramatic presence, ideally suited to the six Sonatas collectively presented on this CD.

Each one of the Sonatas in this group

begins canonically, lending a special contrapuntal power to this group, tonally reinforced by their tonic minor tonality. The opening Sonata K.7 is dance-like yet tinged with a whiff of something darker that its occasional incursions into various other keys, including major keys, cannot dispel. The following e minor Sonata,

K. 263, is darkly processional though frequently breaking out into flurries of complex semiquavers – themselves shared canonically between the hands – which come to dominate the compositional texture. So far these two Sonatas belong to the sharp-key family and the transition to flat-key tonalities is made with the sheer virtuosic display of the next Sonata in d minor, K.517: d minor being the minor dominant key of the relative major of e minor. This remarkable Sonata, marked *Prestissimo* in most original sources, swirls around the keyboard with relentless dexterity; fully embracing the expressive power later so frequently associated with d minor.

A significant break of mood comes with the next Sonata in g minor, K. 426, effectively dividing the group of six pieces in two. This Sonata is deeply expressive and personally reflective, well-suited to the tonal qualities of this instrument. The minor tonality group concludes with a demonic-like c minor scherzo, K. 84 (tempo unmarked) – perhaps the Janus of K. 159 in the first group – and then an astonishing keyboard display rendered by the rhythmic vigour and gymnastic coruscations of the f minor Sonata, K.239.

**Group Three:
Major tonalities up to four sharps
Hanson Dyer Hall Steinway Number 3**

K. 366	F Major	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 545	B flat Major	<i>Prestissimo</i>
K. 14	G Major	<i>Presto</i>
K. 209	A Major	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 492	D Major	<i>Presto</i>
K. 216	E Major	<i>Allegro</i>

Of the two Steinway Ds housed in the Melbourne Conservatorium's main auditorium, Hanson Dyer Hall, the Number 3 piano is the most frequently played in concerts, student classes, recital examinations and the like. Selected in Hamburg in 2018, it is an instrument of great tonal adaptability. The piano possesses a genial tonal openness, something like an acoustic smile, which renders it ideal for the dashing virtuosity redolent of so much of the musical character of this group of six sonatas.

The group of Major key sonatas is the only set which contains no slower-paced work. Major key tonalities did not always equate to vivacious speeds for Scarlatti, but they often did. The Major keys also often involved considerable technical dexterity and innovation that ensured the composer a place amongst piano, not just keyboard, composers engaged with the development of significant technical prowess, centred on the physicality of the keyboard itself. The first sonata of the group, K. 366, is a prime example. Riddled with complex repeated

notes, and knotty, coruscating double-note runs this sonata is more proto-étude than its binary form declares. The remarkable Sonata K. 545 is a study in motivic miniature formalism unfolding at a dashing pace, utterly appropriate for one of the last Sonatas Scarlatti ever wrote.

The B flat Major tonality then twists to the Major key of its relative minor, in a shift similar to that adopted in the second group between e minor and d minor. The ensuing Sonata, K.14, is one of the most buoyant and beloved, something of a companion in compositional style to K. 159 from the first group. This buoyancy is largely maintained in the following Sonata K. 209, though this work is especially interesting though the appearance of something which sounds and functions much like a second subject: something Scarlatti frequently does though not quite so overtly as in this beguiling piece. The Sonata K. 492 firmly lands us again on the Iberian Peninsula, with a strong sense of guitar and flamenco in unbridled, almost improvisatory, dazzle. The final Sonata of the group, K. 216 in the shining key of E Major, brings this set to an elegant and resplendent close.

Group Four: D Major and b minor Hanson Dyer Hall Steinway Number 1

K. 490	D Major	<i>Cantabile</i>
K. 87	b min	
K. 119	D Major	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 27	b min	<i>Allegro</i>
K. 96	D Major	<i>Allegrissimo</i>

<i>Envoi</i>		
K. 435	D Major	<i>Allegro</i>

The Number 1 Steinway is currently the least heard of the Conservatorium's instruments, a position exacerbated by the 2020-2021 pandemic period, during which this CD was conceived and recorded. First described by me in Hamburg as an 'Emperor of Pianos', the instrument possesses superb tonal range and an abiding expressive adaptability that render it the most suitable for the concluding D Major/ b minor group keys which Scarlatti used for both his grandest and his most intimate compositions. This piano is capable of capturing full orchestral qualities and gentle, plaintive intimacy; ideal for the qualities of the five-plus-one sonatas which conclude the recording.

The opening Sonata of the group, K. 490 is a remarkable creation. With its repeats, it is one of the longest Sonatas Scarlatti ever wrote, equal in length to some classical first Sonata-form movements. The work is part solemn French Overture, part fanfare and part lament – all achieved within a strict metrical and motivic underlay. The following b minor Sonata K. 87, tempo

unmarked but often ascribed *Andante*, is one of the composer's most beautiful and personal works. Its consistent imitative counterpoint, underpinned by considerable deftness of voicing, is possibly unique in Scarlatti's keyboard output, and there is a strong flavour of homage to J.S. Bach in the overall effect. The ensuing D Major display lands us firmly once again on Iberian shores and the strong flamenco flavour of K. 119 is enriched by the complex keyboard gymnastics: intricate trills, repeated notes, wild hand crossing and surging leaps to name but a few of Scarlatti's trademarks. The plaintive beauty of the famous b minor Sonata K. 27, which belies its *Allegro* marking, has a hypnotic quality before ushering in one of Scarlatti's most stunning creations, the splendid Sonata K.96. Alfred Cortot, based on his Chopin taxonomy, might have described this work as an example of 'complete technique': complex trills, rapid repeated notes, scarifying leaps and hand crossing, and involved octave passages all contribute to the sheer magnificence of what was originally intended as the concluding work of the recording.

The addition of what I have called the *envoi*, the rarely performed D Major K.435, is a personal indulgence. This amazing creation Cortot would have certainly labelled 'applied technique' – in this case a stunning array of repeated notes which basically run in both hands from beginning to end of the Sonata. I learnt this extraordinary piece as a young professional

pianist in Europe many decades ago and, at the time, I was able to capture the attention of a number of renowned pianists when I performed it, including the redoubtable Lili Haskil, elder sister of the legendary Clara who also played and recorded it. I played the Sonata as a teenager to Mme Haskil in the mid-seventies in a private hearing in Switzerland and she was, to my relief, most impressed; perhaps not so much with me as with the teaching capabilities of the remarkable Peter Feuchtwanger who painstakingly revealed the techniques to me by which so apparently unplayable a creation could at least be approached. I should add that Maestro Feuchtwanger also inspired my enduring love of Scarlatti and hence the genesis of this entire project.

*Ian Holtham
Melbourne
April and June 2021*

Ian Holtham playing to Lili Haskil (top) and Mme Haskil playing to Ian Holtham and Maestro Peter Feuchtwanger (bottom); taken in Lutry, Canton de Vaud, Switzerland, c.1974



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Pianos:

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