

Musicology Today

Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest

Volume 7 Issue 1 (25) January-March 2016

Title: *Domenico Scarlatti între Baroc, Clasicism și Modern* [Domenico Scarlatti between Baroque, Classicism and Modernism], by Dan Buciu

Author: Alexandru Leahu

E-mail: saleahu@yahoo.com

Source: Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest / Volume 7 / Issue 1 (25) / January-March 2016, pp 79-81

Link to this article: musicologytoday.ro/25/MT25bookreviewsBuciuLeahu.pdf

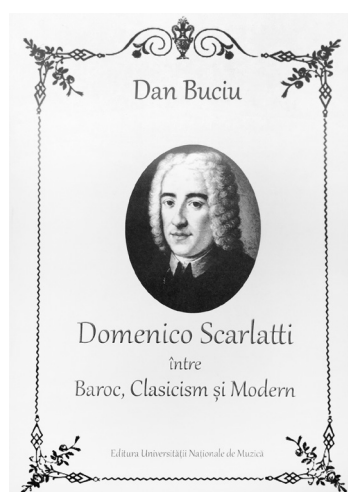
How to cite this article: Alexandru Leahu, Rev. of *Domenico Scarlatti între Baroc, Clasicism și Modern* [Domenico Scarlatti between Baroque, Classicism and Modernism], by Dan Buciu, *Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest*, 7/1 (25) (2016), 79-81.

Published by: Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică București

Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest is indexed by EBSCO, RILM, and ERIH PLUS

Domenico Scarlatti între Baroc, Clasicism și Modern [Domenico Scarlatti between Baroque, Classicism and Modernism]
by Dan Buciu

Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică București, 2015



It is a great achievement in itself to bring together in a single volume the musical arguments through which the contemporary of Bach and Handel (both born in the same year, 1685) clearly transcended his own age, and to extract from the 555 *Exercises for the Harpsichord* a great number of amazing “acts of daring”. Dan Buciu’s book and the stages in which he situates Domenico Scarlatti’s creativity create an image of an extraordinarily well thought-out musical poetics – an answer to what the author refers to as “art’s ingenious joke”. It required a theoretician’s competence and a composer’s refined taste to unearth this spectacular layer of innovation,

through which Scarlatti endlessly varies a discourse that is maintained within an invariable schema of development.

Domenico Scarlatti was trained in the opera company of his father, Alessandro, often called “the father of *bel canto*”. Many other family members were part of the company and their musical specializations were diverse. Domenico gained in these years of apprenticeship all the skills necessary to be able to compose music for the Church, the opera houses and the princely courts. His compositions from this period demonstrate an exemplary ability to write music in different styles and manners. It was a great opportunity for

him to be employed by the daughter of the king of Portugal as a harpsichord teacher, the instrument for which he had already become famous as a peerless virtuoso. He was thus able to give up the burdensome religious or opera commissions and dedicate himself exclusively to writing for the harpsichord, in its most barren form – that of the “exercise”.

In Scarlatti’s age, two significant understandings of the practice overlapped: the spontaneous, improvisational performance, called *alla mente*, and the written composition – *res facta* – which would gain substantial ground in the following decades. A performer’s whimsy and freedom of expression were very highly regarded by audiences, because of their surprising choices and effects, which did not shy away from polyphonic improvisation.

The second practice forced composers to employ typical sequential formulas – the so-called *maniere del sinfoneggiare* – which marred a composer’s originality. Today, for instance, it is impossible to determine if the composer of a concerto for oboe was Bach, Vivaldi, Benedetto Marcello or his brother, Alessandro; in the end the author has been called “the anonymous Venetian”. Domenico Scarlatti would have likewise been an “anonymous Iberian”, if he hadn’t been able to find an antidote to the methodical barrenness of the “exercises”, and to the isolation and loneliness which his austere life at the Spanish court provided, after he had moved there to accompany his patron, Maria Barbara, following her marriage to the Spanish heir.

Scarlatti’s eagerness for music and for exhilarating sensations allowed him to capture the echoes of any piece of music. “Scarlatti finds inspiration in the songs of coachmen and mule guards” – wrote Charles Burney. His exercises evince, though, an incomparably larger palette and a fitting ability to stylise and miniaturise. We can recognise in his work the echoes of courtly brass bands or royal hunters, of the guitar or the mandolin, of the flamenco, but also of passionate dances, of the old motets and even the ceremonious *concerti grossi*. In 1966, I published a monograph, *Domenico Scarlatti*, in which I showed the role of Iberian folklore – and the abovementioned influences – in his creation of an incredibly innovative instrumental style. A book by Roland Manuel offers us a pithy description of Scarlatti’s modernism: “This Neapolitan Devil lived to anticipate all modern musical adventures. He dreams like Schumann, juggles like Ravel, modulates like Fauré and heats up like Stravinsky.” This quote, chosen as a motto in Dan Buciu’s book, seems to serve as the impetus for the fervent admirer and commentator of the “sonatas” to attempt to prove the truthfulness of the enthusiastic appraisals through compelling examples.

Several features give Dan Buciu’s book a unique value: his placement of Scarlatti’s innovations in the context of baroque, classical and modernist

models – which the composer either modified or anticipated – as well as his meticulous description of details regarding the composer’s chordal or melodic formulas and his architectonic patterns.

Beyond the eloquence of the musical quotations and the liveliness of the commentaries, which underline a linguistic refinement, the text abounds in comparisons and references to Scarlatti’s contemporaries, predecessors and successors, weaving together a transhistorical panorama that encompasses diverse aspects musical culture. The book does not shy away from details regarding the editing of the “sonatas”, interventions that sometimes altered the unusual character of its music in an attempt at tempering the “emancipation of dissonances” that was already becoming apparent in that harpsichordal context.

If the theoreticians of the style understand the metaphoric expressions as “deviations from the norm”, Dan Buciu convinces us that the metaphors of Scarlatti’s harpsichord works are largely “anticipations of norms” and that the substance of his discourse is, following Lucian Blaga’s understanding of the poetic character of language, “entirely metaphoric”.

The world of Scarlatti’s 555 *Exercises* is thus a true “garden of miracles”, as I wrote in the preface, from which Dan Buciu was able to extract the most attractive and amazing “musical flowers”. As a whole, they reveal the fascinating aspects of Scarlatti’s genius and creative process, which would have remained, according to Honegger, forever “mysterious and intransmissible”.

Alexandru Leahu
National University of Music Bucharest

English version by Dragoş Manea