



Federico Colli

Having recorded a debut album of Scarlatti for Chandos Records, the former Leeds winner talks to **Peter Quantrill** about life after competitions

Isn't it increasingly unusual to record Scarlatti on a modern piano?

Many pianists such as Ivo Pogorelich and Mikhail Pletnev recorded great interpretations of Scarlatti 20 or 30 years ago. I think we are seeing a renaissance in playing Baroque music on the piano – think of Pavel Kolesnikov playing Couperin, or Alexandre Tharaud playing Rameau. We have such marvellous pianos nowadays. I have a good relationship with Paolo Fazioli – his factory is near my home town of Brescia – and he is always developing technology to improve the instrument.

Our challenge as modern pianists is to play a full range of colours and dynamics, to create a great interpretation on the pianos we now have, while taking care of what the composer had in mind. But I don't think we have to change our mentality when addressing Bach or Scarlatti only because they were composing for a different instrument. We can use all the power that we have under our fingers.

So a 'Scarlatti piano' doesn't need setting up differently to a 'Beethoven piano'?

A piano should be mechanically perfect: the repetition, the escapement,

the hammers, the tuning. When a pianist has under his hands a perfect instrument, it becomes the pianist's challenge to change the sound and change the interpretation when playing composers from different eras. It's not a matter of setting up the piano. It's a matter of setting up the pianist's soul, and putting on a different mask according to the composer you're playing.

What is the mask you put on when you play Scarlatti?

I don't think one mask is enough! What I discovered in Scarlatti is that he is a many-sided personality, very charismatic and full of opposites. So I have to change my own mind-set all the time when playing his music. Even when he uses a very simple form, we can find a great range of emotions. There can be great sadness in his sonatas, then joy, then nostalgia, and then a great hope for the future.

Your album of sonatas is structured in four chapters.

They reflect different sides of his personality. We begin with sonatas that express to me the power of illusion, which preserves us from the

hostile and bitter aspects of everyday life. Then we pass suddenly into joy, and then return to form and order, and then to holiness and prayer. This concept is very Baroque. Baroque is originally a Portuguese word, meaning irregular. To create what is unexpected is the performer's duty in this music.

You don't feel wary of anachronism here, of imposing a modern sensibility.

No, I studied his music and his personality a lot. He worked during a period when instrumental music was less important than opera. He moved from Italy to Spain just as Chopin moved from Poland to Paris or Rachmaninov from Russia to the US: these are journeys that make composers more complex. One tradition of Scarlatti performance says that he is a simple composer writing in a simple form, so we should play him in a simple way, not putting so much emotion into it, very brilliant, with a sharp sound. But that's not true. It's not enough. Where is the melancholy, where is the voice of Farinelli singing in the slow sonatas? Where is the great joy, where is the onomatopoeia of flamenco?

Scarlatti is not considered a 'great' composer like Beethoven or Rachmaninov, but that is unfair. He was in a philosophical way a Romantic composer, because the content of his music is more important than its form. This is a Romantic view of the world.

Isn't there a tradition of Italian philosopher-pianists, stretching back from Busoni through Ciani to Pollini?

In fact it's Michelangeli who is my mentor and my ideal. Another Italian pianist, Maria Tipo, recorded many Scarlatti sonatas. But this Italian 'school' always took a very rational approach to Baroque music – not 'philosophic' at all. Michelangeli was a pianist through and through; he could barely talk properly in his own language, he spent 99.99 per cent of his time at the keyboard. But I don't think that's the kind of pianist that our own time needs. We need not only a musician but a thinker, a 360-degree artist. I see what happened before me as a glorious tradition, but I have to move forward – not because I want to be new or to refresh the music and play it bizarrely.

We all need freedom, and we musicians can only become free after gaining deep consciousness of what we are playing. After studying Scarlatti, spending eight hours in a day in front of a trill or a melody, trying to play it in ten, twenty, a hundred different ways – after that we can be free.

It's commonly said that competitions have bred a culture of performance in which it's very hard to be free.

When I was preparing for Leeds in 2012, I was studying Beethoven with Boris Petrushansky, I played a couple of bars in an unorthodox way, maybe with a lot of rubato. Petrushansky stopped me and said, 'Very good – but you are preparing for a competition.



Leave that kind of thing for the gala concert.' I think that competitions play a vital part in a musician's career. But you are in front of, say, 15 musicians on the jury, and each of them will have their own idea of the music. So you have to be so convinced by your own idea that you can persuade the jury that you have something to say for yourself. And you have to play in a particular way.

The day after you win a major competition is a new chapter. After Leeds I spent six months by myself before playing a note in public. I was approached to do many recitals and concerts, and I said no. I stayed in standby mode, learning. I studied quite a lot of Mozart, and concertos by Rachmaninov and Brahms. I was scared – I am still scared, all pianists are – by the Brahms concertos. I sat down and thought, I need to have him as though he was a friend. I studied the Ballade Op 10, the Piano Pieces Op 118 and the First Concerto, though I have never played them in public – they are still too difficult for me to get my head around them.

But it wasn't only a matter of studying in front of the piano. I read a lot of philosophy and history, Saint Augustine and Nietzsche. I spent a lot of time in nature. I grew up in that six months not only as a pianist but as a man. This kind of cultural breadth makes the difference between one pianist and another. You can hear it.

Are there composers writing music today that you respond to?

I don't know. That's a big problem. I am not so optimistic. If art is eternal and if humans are not eternal, we need to remain in a relationship with something that makes art eternal. Whatever it is, we give it the name of God. I don't know many composers who think in this way. The Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin is one example, and his piano concertos are marvellous; they are true, they express

something infinite. But this isn't so much a musical problem as a problem of society, of understanding what's really important in life.

In fact you've spent a lot of time with Russian music lately, not only Rachmaninov.

I have talked with Ralph Couzens of Chandos about how to move on. I have recorded a Bach album, and then there will be a second volume of Scarlatti. Then we need to move forward to concertos; in 2019 I will play the First Concerto of Tchaikovsky a lot. My teacher Petrushansky is a genius in this piece. And I found real inspiration in reading Pushkin's poem of *Eugene Onegin*. The second theme of the first movement contains the soul of Tatyana, her sweetness and her delicacy. Especially in Russian music we have to have images: the landscape stretching from the Pacific to the Baltic, a kind of solidarity between people that is foreign to German culture. Tolstoy and Pushkin and Chekhov expressed all these things.

The original version of the First Concerto is very interesting, not only because the piano doesn't play that first famous set of arpeggios but because it shows that the opening does not express a man crying out against fate. Tchaikovsky is a very sweet soul. How can the pianist play *fortissimo* when the orchestra has only a warm *mezzo-forte*? It's intimate, like closing the window and telling your lover something special from your heart. Almost everyone plays the finale as if it was the Seventh Sonata of Prokofiev, like a warlike march. But there is always a fall of sadness in the downward shape of the figurations: I hear in it a frustration and a melancholy here that is so characteristic of Russian composers. ■

Federico Colli's album of Scarlatti sonatas, volume 1, is available from Chandos Records (CHAN10988)