

HAROLD FROMM

Michael Phelps, Domenico Scarlatti, and Scott Ross

TWO HIGHLY GENERATIVE EVENTS TOOK PLACE during the course of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, one for the world and another for me: Michael Phelps won eight gold medals in competitive swimming, and I was finally driven to buy the complete set of 555 Scarlatti harpsichord sonatas played by Scott Ross on thirty-four compact discs. I had been eying this miraculous box for some time, owned the one-disk sampler, and then started to listen to the complete set borrowed from a musical friend. In the midst of all this, light bulbs flashed as the Michael Phelps hoopla escalated. Eight gold medals? I was goaded into action. The complete Ross set might soon be out of print, and for a mere hundred fifty dollars it was a steal.

Competitive swimming, after all, is basically an abstraction, like the Tour de France. Feats of this sort end up in the *Guinness Book of Records*¹ as simply bloodless statistics with no material body. Phelps's shaving seconds off previous records was little more than a splash moving across a pool of water, essentially invisible, immediately transformed into a number with no sensuous reality. Nor were Lance Armstrong's heroic cycling victories ever actually visible except as brief video clips, never as a whole event, no matter how closely the TV cameras followed along. More than such ghostly disembodiment can be achieved by avowedly *performative* sports such as diving, gymnastics, even baseball: these are visible from first to last, with a certain aesthetic quality and longevity susceptible to multiple reviews. But think of poor obsolete Mark Spitz: a mere seven gold medals (now, who cares?) and a famous pinup that falls far short of today's hunkier standards. (*Sic transit gloria mundi!*) Though Michael Phelps was characterized as a physical marvel who ingested 12000 calories a day during his strenuous workouts, consider Scott Ross, not just recording but *learning* 555 Scarlatti harpsichord sonatas in the course of one year (1984–85), with 98 recording sessions and eight thousand takes. Far beyond Phelps's calories and workouts, Ross's achievement will be giving me pleasure until I am doddering and dotty, like the 1930s recordings by Bruno Walter, Lotte Lehmann, and Lauritz Melchior (from 78 rpms, no less) of half of *Die Walküre*, in their latest reincarnations still causing the hairs on my arms to stand up in ecstasy.

¹ More officially but less popularly known as *Guinness World Records*.

And even Wanda Landowska's Scarlatti, also from 78s made in the 1930s and '40s, no less remarkable seventy-five years later. What could turn them into merely obsolete abstractions?² So for Ross, at least nine medals, please, if not ten or twenty. But who needs medals anyhow? The legacy is more tangible than gold or silver: thirty-four compact disks are their own medals.

If J. S. Bach is almost a cipher as far as knowledge of a flesh and blood man is concerned, Domenico Scarlatti can be said not to have existed at all, except as a few historical traces, a few words prefacing some of his music, and one autograph letter. There isn't even a single surviving autograph manuscript score, as far as we can tell. Ralph Kirkpatrick, whose *Domenico Scarlatti* of 1953 remains definitive,³ remarks that "the known examples of Scarlatti's handwriting are extremely rare, hardly sufficient even to form an adequate basis for comparison in identifying possible autographs." Kirkpatrick, one of the most notable and scholarly harpsichordists of the twentieth century, followed Scarlatti's footprints throughout Italy, Portugal, and Spain to collect every trace he could find. Yet even he confesses in his introduction to this weighty book that it cannot really be said to be a biographical portrait or even a definitive musical account, and Barry Ife in 2007 writes that "Kirkpatrick's classic study of 1953 invents as much as it documents; others, such as Malcolm Boyd (1986), are open and honest about the limits of our knowledge and try to fill the void apophatically, by writing about something else: about Alessandro Scarlatti, or the court of King John V, or Philip V's manic depression."⁴

Born in 1685, the same year as J. S. Bach, Scarlatti lived until 1757, seven years longer. His father, Alessandro, was a famous opera composer and, at first, Domenico also wrote operas, now rarely if ever performed. Although he served at age sixteen as organist and composer in the royal chapel in Naples, his birthplace, he left Italy for Portugal, perhaps around 1720, where he acquired musical duties at the royal court in Lisbon and gave music instruction to the king's daughter, Maria Barbara, a connection that grew as he followed her to Spain when she became queen. Today, we think of him—and experience him—as a Spanish composer with an Italian name.

² Before wrapping up this account after many drafts, I decided to listen again to a few of Landowska's old recordings, with the constricted wow and fluttery sound of those 78 rpm disks from 1934, reissued on LP years ago and then recently transferred by me to homemade CDs. I was enchanted by the sheer magic of her playing of K462 (known to her as L438). Scott Ross does this sonata with his customary expertise but with nothing like Landowska's hauntingly measured execution. And when frenzy was needed, as in so many of the sonatas, even in the prehistory of 1934 she was up to every challenge. I remain unimpressed by the current fashion of badmouthing her genius.

³ Princeton University Press, 1953, with several updated reprintings and then final comments by the author in 1982, two years before his death. W. Dean Sutcliffe's 2003 scholarly study, *The Keyboard Sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti and Eighteenth-Century Musical Style*, sometimes quarrels with Kirkpatrick but largely accepts his groundwork in an arena in which speculation is the chief heuristic.

⁴ *Music and Letters*, Vol. 88, No. 4, pp. 655–658.

Scarlatti's prolific output for the keyboard did not begin until he was almost fifty, erupting most intensely from 1752–57, but his early harpsichord sonatas (and the only ones published in his lifetime), the thirty *Essercizi* of 1738, were perhaps the ones best known until the outpouring of recordings over the last century. Even in the absence of autograph manuscripts, scholars seem to think that a majority of the sonatas have been preserved in the copies known today as the Parma and the Venice collections, though there are other lesser assemblages. The standard printed edition of the twentieth century was Alessandro Longo's ten volumes of 545 sonatas (1906). Kirkpatrick regarded Longo's arrangement of the sonatas into suites as spurious orderings, which he himself radically revised in 1953. He believed many of the sonatas were intended to be played in pairs, which he arranged in putatively chronological order in his own edition of sixty sonatas, published in two volumes in 1953 by G. Schirmer. He then recorded his own performances of the sixty in 1955 for Columbia Records, with a reissue by Odyssey in 1967–68. Today, Scarlatti's re-ordered sonatas (all 555 in a modern edition by Kenneth Gilbert) are identified by prefatory Ks, sometimes preceded by the old Longo numbers in brackets. Unlike Longo, who edited the scores for piano performance, Kirkpatrick introduced very few editorial interventions into his two volumes. Indeed, he writes that "the dynamic indications of Longo's edition, while effective in terms of pianism and by no means unusual in terms of nineteenth-century *chiaroscuro* dynamics, have little in common with Scarlatti's practice, and frequently end by pulling Scarlatti's musical structure ruthlessly apart." Moreover, "Scarlatti's harpsichord writing is so idiomatic, so intimately connected with the essential fabric of his music, that the relation of his music to harpsichord sound very much needs to be borne in mind by those who play the sonatas on the modern piano." Although I have ruffled a few feathers with my sour remarks about pianos as a bad choice for the music of Bach,⁵ I venture here to ruffle even more by writing off modern pianoforte performances of Scarlatti altogether as ruinously unidiomatic and, too often, precious and trivial. On the other hand, what we now call the *fortepiano*—the precursor of today's grand concert instrument—is believed to have been sometimes used by Scarlatti. The dry and constricted sound of the *fortepiano* would seem not altogether unsuited to some of the sonatas but hardly as exciting as the harpsichord, with its lute and guitar affiliations of timbre.

In his tours of Portugal and Spain and their courts, Kirkpatrick was studious to examine as many of the surviving harpsichords as possible. He concluded that the typical instrument even Scarlatti himself must have played had only a single manual with one or two sets of strings. Since the addition of pedals was a later development, the hand-pulled stops of the eighteenth century made it almost impossible to change

⁵ See "J. S. Bach in the Twenty-First Century: The Chapel Becomes a Larder," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. LX, No. 4 (Winter 2008), pp. 543–62.

timbres in performance, unless there was sufficient pause for a quick yank. As a result, the dynamics were built into the scores, even more than in Bach. Because individual notes on the harpsichord (and organ) cannot be modulated by touch as on a piano, it's a case of all or nothing, pluck or no pluck, though a negligible amount of sound alteration can be teased out of the keyboard by a very artful player.

The 555 sonatas almost always make use of a so-called binary form, which boils down to two halves of roughly equal length, the second of which makes varied use of thematic and rhythmic materials from the first. If each half is played twice, as is the custom, a typical sonata takes about five minutes.

It is hard to believe that Scarlatti was a contemporary of Bach. His music seems almost from another planet, wilder, more fantastical, very Mediterranean, teasing, and sultry. Not a trace of Lutheran seriousness (though admittedly Bach's secular cantatas could verge on slapstick). Rather, a seriousness of the evolved human body expressing itself. Kirkpatrick writes, "Those elements of French and North German style which the young Handel brought to his encounter with Scarlatti in Italy, and the works of other visiting German composers, seem to have left no impression whatever on Domenico's music," whose style Kirkpatrick derives from Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish popular music, from opera, dance, guitar, flamenco and small Spanish village instrumental combos. The harpsichord, with its clicking jacks and sharp nasal metallic transients, conveys the feel of Hispanic guitar and flamenco far beyond anything achievable on a piano.

Although I eventually acquired Kirkpatrick's four LPs of sixty sonatas in their reissued form in the 1960s, for me the Scarlattian Big Bang took place in 1953 when the pioneering Westminster Records issued the first LP of sonatas played by Fernando Valenti on his Challis harpsichord. It is hard to overstate the stunning effect of these furious performances, soon followed by subsequent volumes until more than three hundred of the sonatas had been recorded on disks of twelve each. Although I eventually gave out after about fifteen of the LPs as the performances became more perfunctory, the initial impact was so great that as a callow college junior I wrote a gushing letter to the president of Westminster Records to express my euphoria. To my surprise, Henry Gage replied to inform me that he had passed along the letter to Valenti himself. So in August of 1953 I received the following manna from heaven:

Dear Mr. Fromm,

Mr. Henry Gage, one of the Westminster executives, forwarded to me the very generous and glowing letter they received from you in which you discuss my Scarlatti records.

I wanted to write you personally to thank you for your very complimentary remarks about them, but, to tell the truth, I completely forgot whether or not I had already done so from South America and did not wish to risk a redundancy by writing you another. The long

and hectic tour south of the border was accompanied by unusual confusion, as such ambitious trips often are and I am just now beginning to get my bearings.

I wish I had a responsible opinion that I could exchange with yours on the subject of my recordings, but, as a matter of fact, I myself do not own a record player and can truthfully make the eminently ridiculous claim that I have never heard my own records in my own house. I agree that such a situation is utterly laughable and I make up my mind at least three times a week that I am going to go out and remedy it, but I have never gotten around to it yet. For all I know, the whole business comes from some kind of mental block or something. Nevertheless, I am exceedingly pleased and flattered that you think so much of the results so far of my Scarlatti marathon.

I would like it very much if you would give me a ring sometime when you are in Manhattan and come up for a drink. Almost any late afternoon should be quite simple and I shall guarantee the presence of some record player or other to help me convince you that I am not as eccentric as this letter makes me sound.

Thanking you once more, I remain very cordially yours,

FERNANDO VALENTI

As a provincial and inexperienced undergraduate, I was floored. But I lost little time arranging an afternoon visit to Valenti's Upper East Side apartment, a visit filled with contretemps, but enlightening. It has been fifty-five years since that event and memories are notoriously fragile, but I recall a small living room, Valenti's then current wife (I have since learned that there were several) seated on the sofa, and maybe even a little dog, though I can't be sure. The harpsichord was in a small room to itself off the living room. My greatest hope was for a private performance by the dazzling virtuoso, just for me. Ever since my life-changing introduction to the harpsichord in the late '40s and early '50s by means of Landowska's monumental LPs of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, I had been secretly yearning to acquire an instrument of my own. But I had never before been within twenty yards of one and now I was confronted by this mammoth Challis. Shock Number One was that Valenti refused to play even a single note! Instead, he invited me to give it a try. Though I had been playing the piano for several years and had gravitated more and more to Bach, I was in no way prepared to play anything, let alone a strange new instrument. Cautiously sticking out my right index finger as if I were about to rouse a wild animal from its sleep, I ventured to press one of the keys—and voilà: Silence!

So this is a good moment to say a bit about the Challis, a twentieth-century attempt to produce an instrument large and powerful enough to project its sound throughout a concert hall (though Landowska's Pleyel was a first). John Challis, starting out as instrument maker in Ypsilanti and later moving his workshop to Detroit, produced harpsichords using non-canonical materials such as metal and Bakelite, a

precursor to plastic, in addition to the traditional wood. His concert instruments had two manuals and four or five sets of strings controlled by a surprising number of pedals. As I recall, these pedals slid from side to side rather than being depressed and as they did so they would move the plucking jacks in and out, producing gradations in volume depending on how much of the plectra's length extended under the strings. Thus the resources were great.

But why couldn't I effectively sound even a single key on my first attempt? Valenti had not only refused to give me a demonstration but had coupled the two manuals and left all the sets of strings in play at once. The sheer resistance to be overcome as a jack forces its way upwards past the plectrum's pluck-point when a key is depressed was now multiplied by four or five. All I had been able to do was to cause the strings to be stretched but not to be plucked. My touch was totally wrong. Valenti then showed me the "biceps" (his word) of his fingers to indicate the strength he had built up over the years and the proper hand position required to play, with fingers bent into little jabbing pistons to jolt the plectra over the strings with a brisk pluck. He described how the pedal-controlled stops made it possible to add and subtract sets of strings during performance and, moreover, how he was able to cheat by sliding the pedals from side to side gradually, to achieve crescendos and diminuendos. The impact of his virtuosity was powerfully audible on that sensational first disk in the Westminster series, which has not lost its force even after fifty-plus years. I have recently assured the preservation of several of the early volumes by copying them to CDs.

For me the prognosis was only too apparent: I needed somehow to acquire a modest little harpsichord. By 1955 I was a grad student with a major in English living in one of the dorms at Columbia University. Vying with the stimulations of Trilling, Van Doren, Nicolson and all the rest was the pressing need to explore the terra incognita of harpsichord makers, especially any who might have a soft spot for penurious students. But where did you find a harpsichord maker at all in 1955, a Google-free era at the start of the Early Music renaissance? (Now there are so many makers and instruments online that one can hardly review them all.)

Ransacking every edition of the *New York Times'* classified ads for musical instruments, I eventually hit pay dirt: a young harpsichord maker had placed a little ad for his workshop on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village where he was in the process of building his second instrument: Wallace Zuckerman, years later to be catapulted into fame and riches as Wolfgang Zuckerman, maker of both finished harpsichords and do-it-yourself kits. (Today still alive and well in Avignon running a "Shakespeare bookstore.") Drunk with possibilities, I commissioned Wolfgang to build his third instrument for me (inscribed with "1956" near the sounding board), and since it had only one keyboard and one so-called eight-foot set of strings (far short of eight feet

but corresponding in pitch to the real eight-foot organ pipes that produce the central tones of a keyboard), I wanted two pedals: one to slide the jacks in and out for volume changes and the other a buff stop (felts that deadened the resonances of the strings) to produce a lute effect, which he normally installed only as hand pulls.

With instructions from Zuckerman, I became fairly expert in tuning the instrument myself, sufficiently able to hear the “beats” that guide you in mistuning the pitches enough to produce the compromise that enables play in all keys. I was taught how to cut the leather plectra with an Exacto knife that sometimes came close to cutting off my fingertips altogether, a hateful task. Improperly cut, each plectrum would produce a different volume and a different timbre, so they had to be shaped as uniformly as possible. And they didn’t stay usable indefinitely because the leather would begin to pill and hang up, dysfunctional, on the strings as the jacks tried to fall down after plucking. Today, besides the use of the plastic called Delrin for plectra, any tone-deaf numbskull can tune an instrument with digital equipment involving a stethoscopic suction cup attached to the piano or harpsichord’s cabinet that signals when it’s spot-on in whatever system of tuning one desires.

As an avowed amateur, for twenty years (until about 1975), I built a repertoire, mastered note by note, of Bach, Scarlatti, Handel, Telemann, the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, Rameau and whatnot. With dogged perseverance I learned to play about half a dozen Scarlattis of moderate but not pyrotechnical difficulty, which usually took a few months each to master. I know what it’s like to learn those splendid sonatas when your talent is limited.

By 1998, not having played for twenty years, with the harpsichord in abysmal condition, untuned and unvoiced, and the prospect of a move to Tucson where the dry climate might finish it off altogether, I regretfully donated it to a music museum in Georgia where they completely refurbished it with today’s non-wooden jacks and plastic plectra, to be used as a teaching instrument.

And now we come full circle, to Scott Ross, Michael Phelps, and the endeavors of art. Ross was dead of AIDS at 38 in 1989. Phelps is today a pitchman hawking products on TV as a result of his fifteen minutes or days (or seconds?) of fame. Thirty-four CDs with 555 sonatas are housed in a beautiful box, heavily annotated, from Warner Classics.⁶ Ross reported that when “I suggested this marathon undertaking to Erato and Radio France, I simply did not know most of the 555 sonatas. I had to work like a madman [indeed!]. . . . It is very likely that all the sonatas were written quickly. . . . They were probably not reworked, so

⁶ Since Scott Ross’s achievement in 1985, Brilliant Classics has produced its own cumulative boxed set of complete Scarlatti (recorded from 2000–07) by the excellent Pieter-Jan Belder. Richard Lester has also gradually recorded a complete set of the sonatas in seven volumes for Nimbus, adding several “recently discovered” sonatas as well. He plays a minority of the sonatas on a fortepiano, a more tolerable alternative (which Scarlatti himself could have used) than a pianoforte but mainly sticks to the harpsichord.

what we have are the first sketches. What an extraordinarily gifted man Scarlatti must have been! I'm sure that if we had to contend with the first drafts of Couperin's or Rameau's pieces, there would be far more of them hardly worth looking at." No complete recording of the sonatas had ever been made by any single player, but for this radical adventure, 555 sonatas learned in about one year, Ross decided that to avoid monotony a variety of harpsichords had to be used, copies of old ones as well as newer adaptations by American and French makers who aimed for some degree of "authenticity," although Ross was not a fanatic about old instruments. His supple and vital performances are their own justification, a beguiling reservoir of pleasure for cognoscenti.

Shakespeare believed neither marble nor gilded monuments would outlive his rhymes, but today's print media are nervous about survival and the sales of compact disks are in decline (though not because of classical music buyers, who are not about to download *The Ring of the Nibelung* onto iPods). Recordings from close to a hundred years ago have hardly disappeared, as older media are converted to newer. And scratchy 78s (not to mention piano rolls by the famous) and clicky LPs are reborn in digital form with hiss and clicks reduced. So this monumental achievement by Scott Ross will be around for some time, when Michael Phelps is just a name in the *Guinness Book of Records* or a faded photo of a mere eight-medalist on some empty old cereal boxes found in a dusty attic.

*

After completing this essay, I stumbled upon the Rhapsody website, a variant of iTunes, on which you can listen to and buy MP3 files to download. I discovered that EMI had produced a compact disk in the 1990s (now out of print) of a digitally remastered set of 24 of the 40 sonatas that Landowska had recorded in the thirties and forties, mentioned in my narrative above. The cleanup of the original disks and their LP progeny is simply astonishing. Most surface noise is gone, the wow and flutter greatly reduced, and the sound bright and clean. I converted my downloaded MP3 file to audio wav files for burning to a CD. Of the more than a thousand Scarlatti sonatas and performances in my collection, this is the very best single disk I know. It is also available on special order from Arkiv Music (www.arkivmusic.com/classical/main.jsp). The performances are unmatched, meditative and ferocious as required. Since they can be heard free of charge on the Rhapsody website (www.rhapsody.com/wanda-landowska/d-scarlatti-keyboard-sonatas), I strongly recommend a visit, an ideal audible illustration of my subject.

Copyright of Hudson Review is the property of Hudson Review Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.