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Turning Scarlatti on his head

by Michael Johnson

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You would have to be quite a sure-footed composer to believe you could improve on something as perfect as the harpsichord sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. These intensely vital pieces were crafted meticulously with beginnings, middles and ends, combining melody and harmony with the occasional daring touch of dissonance. Some 300 years after Scarlatti wrote his incredible 555 sonatas, most of them are still fresh and exciting.

Yet Scarlatti considered these works to be mere light-hearted entertainment, “jesting with art”, in his words. He urged listeners to be “more human than critical”.

In modern performances, Ivo Pogorelich and Vladimir Horowitz have set the bar high for piano versions, and other pianists must strive to reach their standards.

So it was with some skepticism that I switched on the new CD *Scarlatti Recreated* (Musical Concepts, MC149), which for the first time pulls together 19 examples of Scarlatti “recreations” – rewritings of some of the favorite sonatas. Purists can yelp and cry foul; I found real music of a similar yet different texture in these works.

Sicilian pianist Sando Russo has the skills, sensitivity and respect for Scarlatti required for navigating these reworkings, most of them more demanding pianistically than the originals.

He has collected a diverse selection of Scarlattish sonatas, some of which have appeared on other CDs, some of which are encore-type recital offerings, and two of which are getting their world premiere as recordings here.

Transcriptions in classical music are nothing new, but Russo’s picks are mostly purposeful – the 19th century transcribers sought to inject expanded pianoforte dynamics to the one-dimensional harpsichord sound, and in most cases update the music with contemporary ideas. Call them pastiches, homages or imitations, they all bring the familiar originals to mind but with a twist. None quite overflow into caricature.

Intentionally or not, Russo’s ordering of the pieces builds slowly from minor tinkering such as Carl Tausig’s up-tempo renderings of the E Major K. 20 and the C Major K. 487 to more personal expressions of Marc-André Hamelin and the delightful Jean Françaix, to the very contemporary (and my favorite) piece by the American Michael Habermann.

Attentive listeners will wonder what the excitement is all about through the first 12 pieces, then come the real departures. First, Ignaz Friedman with his melodic Pastorale, followed by his bouncy Gigue. And Hamelin’s version, described in the program notes as a “purely affectionate tribute”, although he admits the sonatas are “very easy to make fun of”.

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And the CD reaches a climax with Habermann's *Homage*, a strongly contemporary refitting of the original sonata L. 104. Habermann, a professor at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University, is known for his scholarly work on Sorabji and his interpretations of contemporary works. He clearly enjoyed himself in this *Homage*. A sample is available here:

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00F0AIHS2/ref=dm_ws_sp_tlw_trk1_B00F0AIHS2



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