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SOLE R KEYBOARD SONATAS

JANOS SEBESTYEN

PATRIMONIO UC



PADRE ANTONIO SOLER: KEYBOARD SONATAS

JANOS SEBESTYEN, HARPSICHORDIST



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SOLER: KEYBOARD SONATAS

Side I — 22:30

1. in F Major (3:25)
2. in C Minor (4:26)
3. in F-sharp Minor (4:16)
4. in C-sharp Minor (6:21)
5. in D Major (3:38)

SOLER: KEYBOARD SONATAS

Side II — 27:15 Min.

1. in G Minor (4:15)
2. in A Minor (4:39)
3. in D Major (2:30)
4. Sonata two times two:
in E Minor
in G Major (8:48)
5. Sonata two times two:
in B-flat Major
in B-flat Major (6:37)

Through Spain's famous painters Ribera, Zurbaran, or Goya, and indeed, because of the country's very landscape, we think of Spain as a country drenched in sunlight but full of dark shadows in which mysterious, half-seen figures are ceaselessly occupied with we know not what, only to appear suddenly in the glaring light to amaze us with the result of their activity in the deep shadows.

Only a very few years ago, the name of Antonio Soler was completely unknown not only to music lovers, but to music historians, as well — except to a handful of persons familiar with the archives of the Escorial, or with the private library of Lord Fitzwilliam in Cambridge. But once Soler's unknown manuscripts were pulled out of the deep shadows of those archives by relentless musicologists, he stood there in the glaring light of the Spanish sun, revealed as an outstanding master.

Antonio Soler was born in the Catalonian village of Olot de Porrera, in 1729, the year in which Domenico Scarlatti was hired by the King of Spain to serve at the Spanish court as music master to his daughters. Soler studied at the Escalonia of Montserrat. The Bishop of Urgel asked him one day whether he knew of a young organist for the monastery of the Escorial. Soler suggested himself and got the job. He continued his studies, now with Scarlatti, who came to the Escorial every autumn with the royal family until his death in 1757. Soler took Holy Orders in 1752, a year after his arrival, and never left the Escorial. He died in 1783. During all those years in the deep shadows of that huge and austere block of buildings, he kept on composing. One would imagine that, as

an organist and choirmaster at a monastery church in very Catholic Spain, he composed sacred music in an unending stream. Nothing is farther from the truth. When his music, buried in the shadowy archives for two centuries, came into the glaring light, it was revealed as in the main gay, even frivolous music. For the royal family — though it went frequently to church — and even strange to say, the seminarists as well, were fond of amusement: operas, serenades, dances and concerts. And Padre Soler followed in the footsteps of his great predecessor and teacher Scarlatti in providing music for these occasions.

Thus, Soler composed not only a large quantity of religious music, including a Requiem, *autos sacramentales*, and organ music for liturgical use, but also six concertos for organ, six quintets with organ (or harpsichord) obligato, and much secular dramatic music, such as for plays by Calderón and other 17th-century poet-librettists, *entremeses* (intermezzi), *tonadillas* (opera buffa for a few singers), and *sainetes* (another kind of musical comedy). The seminarists in the Royal College of the Escorial had regular classes in the Fine Arts, in drama and music; and secular music — even of the gayest — was performed by and for them. The royal family was no doubt frequently present at these performances.

Antonio Soler followed in the footsteps of Scarlatti mainly in continuing the latter's endeavor's to enrich the literature of the harpsichord by what Scarlatti called *esercizi*, and what we today call, less than precisely, *sonata* — perhaps because it became one of the models taken as a point of departure by Northern composers for their enlarged sonatas, out of which the classical sonata form evolved.

Seventy-five of these are preserved, and twenty-seven of them are in the Fitzwilliam archives in Cambridge.

In his sonatas, Soler shows that he explored the keyboard works of earlier, 16th-century composers, that is, the contrapuntal style; but he experimented also with the modulatory possibilities of the tonal system — ahead of his time. A byproduct of these experiments was a theoretical work Soler published in Madrid in 1762: *Llave de la modulación*. In this work, he explains his method underlying the modulations, seemingly extravagant in his time, which he employs in his sonatas.

Soler's very name having been unknown outside a small circle until recently, no more than perhaps a dozen or so of these harpsichord pieces have found a publisher, and the accuracy of these editions — their fidelity to Soler's manuscripts — is not always up to scholarly expectations. Fortunately, a contemporary successor of Soler at the Escorial, Padre Samuel Rubio, undertook the task of editing Soler's sonatas, and a Madrid publisher had sufficient enterprising spirit to print a complete edition in six volumes, in 1957. We are thus able to follow Soler's experiments; see his fertile imagination unfold in the kaleidoscopic succession of the pieces, and be surprised and fascinated by the manifold solutions of similar problems.

This complete edition was of course unknown even to Manfred Bukofzer when he prepared his comprehensive

work on the music of the baroque era, the first and still unique book in English in the field (1947), in which Soler's name does not appear. The Spanish musicologist, Macario Santiago Kastner, however, seems to have had access to Soler's manuscripts, and he aptly characterized Soler's Sonatas when he stated that Soler was not just a follower of Domenico Scarlatti; that Scarlatti — contrary to general belief — was not the originator of the species, as Pasquini's similar but earlier sonatas were already known in Spain in Scarlatti's time, and that Soler's music frequently shows his indebtedness to native Spanish music, especially to songs accompanied by guitar. Kastner also noted that Soler had a preference for very short musical phrases and for repeating groups of motifs, producing a less consistent structure and less ample melodies than Scarlatti, but more inclining to the grace and concision of Spanish dances — an important source of inspiration for Soler. And being a conservative, Soler played no role in the evolution of the sonata-form, but succeeded within the tradition of Spanish music in creating an enchanting musical language in secular style that is typically representative of the Spanish rococo.

In Soler's lifetime none of these pieces were published, and Padre Rubio relied on manuscripts found in the Escorial, and in Madrid, in private possession. They all seem to be copies — not autograph. Nor did Padre Rubio mention the manuscripts in Cambridge, or their edition printed in London. It is not surprising therefore that the recording artist's version — he used a modern edition of four sonatas published by Schott & Co., and a French edition of 12 sonatas, which do not identify their sources — does not tally with Padre Rubio's edition of the nearly 100 sonatas, found in Spain.

If the present annotator, then, regrets that he cannot describe the individual sonatas with the desired scholarly precision, he nevertheless finds them thoroughly enjoyable and illuminating.

They are both. On the first count for their great variety and riches of sonority; on the second for the many devices Soler employed in them. Thus, Soler uses single patterns (Side 1, Band 1), or several patterns (Side 2, Band 3), with a long fantasy-like interpolation before a return to the second subject (same band); an invention-type texture interspersed with a figure in thirds, and a repeated faint echo of reminiscences of Spanish vocal music (Side 1, Band 2) and chromaticism foreshadowing Mozart's piano sonatas; dramatically contrasted themes and key areas (Side 2, Band 3); interpolation of new material after the repeat sign in the middle (Side 1, Band 5); sequential expansion (Side 1, Band 1 and Band 5); an incipient harmonic development in the second part (Side 1, Band 5), concerto grosso-style and *acciaccatura*, or "crush" chords, in many sonatas.

Soler's harpsichord sonatas are not yet generally known, and it will take some time before they will be part of our listening repertory. The present recording will play an important role in their dissemination.

Egon F. Kenton