

Rediscovering Soler's Sonatas for Keyboard Instruments

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Abstract. Nowadays, we are still experimenting a safe return to the values of early music, still rediscovering a distant period in musical history, to which composer Soler belongs with his vast and inspired creation, especially dedicated to keyboard instruments. He is mainly known through his sonatas which close maximum diversity in a concise expression. Contemporary musicologists started to revive interest in Soler's sonatas in the XXth century, hence the full editing of these attracting interpreters worldwide to reveal them to the public.

Keywords: Padre Antonio Soler, sonatas, keyboard instruments, Spanish, Scarlatti

1. Introduction

Year 2013 marks the 230 years since the disappearance of Padre Antonio Soler (1729-1783), and the international music world honours this exceptional Spanish musician whose extremely valuable and extensive creation has been kept out of reach in the shadow of monasteries, churches and private collections. This is also possible due to the fact that the XXth century, with a constantly increasing interest in early music, occasioned the actual return of many musical events that were considered to be long gone.

Various experiments of contemporary music have sparked a return to the safe values of early music, triggering a true interpretative effervescence in the sound illustration of a distant period in music history.

2. Padre Antonio Soler (1729-1783)

In our time, a quarter of a millenium from the extinction of the last representatives of European Baroque, Bach and Scarlatti, their compositions are always present in concert halls around the world, both performers and audience continuing to listen to them and cherish them, seemingly more than ever.

Contemporary with Domenico Scarlatti, whose influence on Iberian clavecinismis huge, Antonio Francisco Javier José Soler Ramos (known today as Padre Antonio Soler), although not knowing the universal glory and recognition enjoyed by the first, through his vast and inspired creation (especially the one dedicated to keyboard instruments) and through his complex personality, he imposes himself as one of the most important Spanish musicians of the XVIIIth century.

In an era of apparent regression of Spanish music, a cheerful and solitary priest [Encyclopaedia Universalis], Antonio Soler (composer, organist, teacher, mathematician, inventor, writer) succeeds through his work to restore Spanish music to the shine of its previous centuries.

3. Redescoving Soler's sonata

Like Domenico Scarlatti, Padre Soler is known almost exclusively through his sonatas for keyboard instruments. There are in total 120 sonatas (compared to the 555 ones by Scarlatti) [Larousse]. Under the generic title *Sonatas*, as well as Scarlatti's corresponding ones, these miniatures depict a polychrome sound universe, closing maximum diversity in a concise expression.

For Soler, the sonata is the first kind for the growth of instrumental technique, which emerges from reflecting more closely on the subtitle - "for keyboard instruments" - a reference with direct address. Also starting from a careful analysis of the subtitle, knowing the stylistic diversity of his sonatas and the fact that many of the late ones have three or four movements, sometimes with a fugue, rondo or minuet, and using less *acciaccatura* in the writing, instead quite often using Alberti basses [Larousse], we believe they were written for different keyboard instruments, popular and spread across Spain: harpsichord and clavichord. They are joined by the pianoforte, built at the beginning of the XVIIIth century by Bartolomeo Cristofori, an instrument that we believe that Soler knew, at the Escorial also existing this new instrument: not long ago, it was discovered that Domenico Scarlatti, (hence Soler, we note) had at his disposal, in the palaces of Aranjuez and Escorial, some types of pianos and therefore it is possible that some of his sonatas were written for this particular instrument, more modern than the harpsichord [Brumaru A.].

With the revival of the interest in Soler's sonatas, it was natural for the XXth century to occasion the rediscovery and full editing of those, through the interest and intense research activity of leading figures of modern musicology such as Joaquin Nin, Roberto Gerhard, Frederick Marvin, Santiago Kastner and especially Samuel Rubio.

Publishing all Soler's harpsichord sonatas was an event of the XXth century Spanish musical life (and not only), the more so as none of these works had been published during the composer's life. The only known publication of his sonatas before the XXth century is that of the London editor Robert Birchell who, around 1796, prints 27 of the composer's sonatas [Rubio P.S.].

The original edition, on which the respective publication was based, is found in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. That publication was owned by Viscount Richard Fitzwilliam (1745-1816), the eminent collector and music lover meeting Soler in 1772, during a visit to Spain.

Particularly interesting is the specification disclosed by the cover page of the manuscript: These harpsichord lessons were given to Lord Fitzwilliam in a manuscript form in February 1772 by the author, Priest Soler of the Order of Ieronimo's monks, at the palace of Escorial [Gilbert K.].

In the XXth century, Joaquin Nin y Castellano (1879 – 1949), Cuban pianist, composer and musicologist, and Roberto Gerhard (1896 – 1970), Spanish composer of Swiss origin, rekindled interest in Soler's music, which led to the publication of his work for harpsichord, almost entirely.

The complete edition of Soler's sonatas was published in Madrid, between 1957-1972, under the care of Padre (Father) Samuel Rubio(1912-1986) - *Sonatas para instrumentos de tecla* - in 7 volumes. These sonatas can be grouped as follows:

1. One-party sonatas, influenced by Scarlatti- Ed. Samuel Rubio, volumes I, II, III, V, VII;
2. Multiparty sonatas (subject to other influences, distinct from Scarlatti's world) - Ed. Samuel Rubio, volumes IV, VI, which can be subdivided:
 - 2.1 . Sonatas in three parts, on the model *da chiesa* (vol.IV almost entirely);
 - 2.2 . Sonatas in four parts, on the model *da camera* (vol.IV partially and vol.VI entirely).

3.1. Features of Soler's sonata

The characteristics identified after analyzing the stylistic particularities of Soler's sonata [Soler P.A.] are summarized in the following aspects:

1. Stylistic unity due to consistently maintaining the principles of creation;
2. Didactic role, contributing to the development of instrumental technique through innovative methods of that time: scales, arpeggios, octaves, big leaps, crossed hands, ornaments, etc;
3. Openings towards programatism in music;
4. Anticipations regarding the exploitation of folklore, before the formation of national schools.

Conclusions

But all this musicological effervescence around Soler could have probably remained sterile if the beauty, value and originality of Soler's sonatas would not have attracted and continue to attract performers from around the world, wishing to interpret and reveal them to the public.

Retrieving the complex personality of Antonio Soler, which manifests itself in the XXIst century, is a natural continuation for artists who want to give life to a priceless musical treasure.

The numerous editions of his work, the interest in his theoretical works, the ever more extensive discography, as well as the more and more frequent presence of his compositions in the repertoire of performers worldwide reinforces our belief that now, in the anniversary year, his music, hiding priceless treasures, has finally found way to light.

(English version: Gilda Cristina Marinescu)

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