

# From “Sonate a quattro” to “Concertos in Seven Parts”

## The Acclimatization of Two Compositions by Francesco Scarlatti

---

MICHAEL TALBOT

Among the musicians of the Scarlatti family Francesco (1666-1741 or later) has never enjoyed the highest reputation. Malcolm Boyd dismissed him as “third-rate”,<sup>1</sup> and although recordings of some of his sacred vocal works have done a little to improve his standing, he remains a highly marginal figure. His biography marks him out as an abject failure in comparison with his elder brother Alessandro and his nephew Domenico. Like Alessandro born in Palermo, he studied in Naples in the early 1670s and in 1684 joined the viceregal court there as a violinist. In 1691 he returned to Sicily, where he remained until at least 1715, in which year he made an unsuccessful application to become *Vice-Capellmeister* at the imperial court. In 1719 he tried his luck in Britain, very possibly arriving there in the company of Domenico, whose long-doubted visit to London seems actually to have occurred in that year.<sup>2</sup> Turning down the offer of a position with the Duke of Chandos in 1720, Francesco remained in London, coming to public notice only rarely. It is very possible that in the period that followed he lived and worked for a while in the English provinces, to which the less successful among Italian immigrant musicians were apt sooner or later to gravitate. In 1733 he moved finally to

---

1 BOYD, 1986, p. 31.

2 *IBID.*, pp. 28-31.

Dublin in Ireland, where he remained in obscure poverty until his death. He was indeed a rolling stone that gathered no moss.

Francesco's known compositions are relatively few. Most are vocal works, comprising four oratorios, one opera, one serenata, one Mass, three psalms, and perhaps a dozen chamber cantatas. His known instrumental output consists merely of a set of eleven sonatas for four-part strings discovered as recently as 2000.<sup>3</sup> These sonatas, the subject of this paper, were copied, probably during the late 1730s, into what has become known as "Workbook I" of the energetic Newcastle musician Charles Avison and are written entirely in his hand.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that some if not most of the sonatas were composed after Francesco left Italy, since they collectively display *galant* characteristics that in 1719 were simply not yet current.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it appears probable that Francesco brought with him to England several of his own compositions with the hope of making use of them later. As many as 16 of his vocal works are preserved in British sources, 14 of which are unique and four (the Mass and psalms) autograph. In addition, Francesco

---

3 On the discovery of the sonatas and of Avison's two workbooks, see KROLL, 2005. Kroll is also the editor of *Francesco Scarlatti: Six Concerti Grossi*, Middleton 2010. The eleven sonatas by Francesco occupy folios 2r-28r of "Workbook I".

4 "Workbook I" and its continuation, "Workbook II", are both preserved without shelfmark in GB-NTp. In his article Kroll, following the earlier conclusion of Grace White, accepted the hand that copied out Francesco's sonatas as Charles Avison's, but he revised his opinion in the preface to the edition. However, since the same hand was responsible for notating what is indisputably a composition draft of Avison's Concerto in E minor, Op. 6 no. 8, there is no reason to doubt the original identification. How Francesco's sonatas reached Avison is unclear, but an anonymous early nineteenth-century annotation on the contents page of "Workbook I" stating that the works by Francesco and "Stephani" (to be mentioned shortly) Scarlatti were "no doubt from the MSS in Geminiani's possession" is at least plausible, given Avison's friendship with Geminiani and the latter's residence during much of the 1730s in the same city (Dublin) as Francesco Scarlatti.

5 These *galant* features embrace cadence forms, styles of melodic elaboration and ornamentation, dynamic contrasts and patterns of phrase structure. One also notes a high incidence of rounded binary form (featuring a tonic reprise of the opening theme mid-way through the second section) in preference to the simple binary form more common at the start of the eighteenth century.

seems to have brought to Britain various compositions by his brother and nephew with which he later parted, perhaps out of financial necessity. These may have included the well-known autograph set of twelve *Sinfonie di concerto grosso* composed by Alessandro in 1715-1716<sup>6</sup> and a group of twelve early keyboard sonatas by Domenico (K31-42) that later passed to Johann Christoph Pepusch and were sold by him to the publisher Benjamin Cooke, who in 1740 mixed them together with 30 sonatas pirated from the *Essercizi per gravicembalo* to create the strangely titled *XLII Suites de pièces pour le clavecin*.<sup>7</sup> Francesco could also have brought the autograph manuscript, or at least a copy, of the four *Sonate* (or *Sinfonie*) *a quattro senza cembalo* by Alessandro, with which his own sonatas display a degree of similarity, and on which they may even partly be modelled.<sup>8</sup> Avison’s “Workbook I” likewise contains his copy of Alessandro’s set,<sup>9</sup> their authorship disguised by the naming of the composer as the non-existent “Stephani Scarlatti” – partly, one suspects, as a ruse to keep the identity of the real composer hidden from other users of the volume, thus discouraging wider circulation of the sonatas, but also in playful allusion to the composer Steffani (his name often spelt “Stephani” in Britain), whose learnedly contrapuntal and consciously “antique” style Alessandro often parallels in these sonatas.<sup>10</sup>

- 6 GB-Lbl, R.M.21.b.14. The giga-like theme opening Francesco’s eighth sonata is strikingly reminiscent of that opening Alessandro’s first sinfonia, suggesting first-hand acquaintance.
- 7 On Cooke’s acquisition of the Domenico Scarlatti sonatas and other works, see HALTON/TALBOT, 2015.
- 8 The sonatas are published as *Alessandro Scarlatti: Four “Sonate a quattro”*, ed. by ROSALIND HALTON, Launton, Edition HH, 2014. The earliest discussion of them in musicological literature is DENT, 1903. To Dent belongs the credit for discovering that the sonatas were in large part concordant with four of the *VI Concertos* published by Cooke. That an early source for the sonatas – possibly autograph, but at all events closely related to Scarlatti’s original – had reached England is shown by a surviving copy of the set in GB-Lbl, R.M. 24.i.13.(1.), which was prepared around 1750-1760 by an unidentified Italian (his national origin emerges from various notational features) working in the orbit of the Academy of Ancient Music; this source largely corresponds textually to the early copy possibly by Cosimo Serio today in D-MÜs, Hs. 3957/1.
- 9 GB-NTp, “Workbook I”, ff. 74r-81v.
- 10 Avison uses the Latinized name “Symphonia” in preference to “Sonata”, a

This set of *Sonate a quattro* by Alessandro conforms to a basic formal template shared by other Neapolitan composers of the time (including notably his colleague Francesco Mancini) and embracing both quartet sonatas with a wind instrument added to the two violins and bass (such as found in Alessandro's twelve *Sinfonie di concerto grosso*) and ones including a viola instead. This design has three cardinal features:

1. The movements number at least four, generally five.
2. There is at least one regular fugue (often titled "Fuga") in moderate or quick tempo.
3. The last movement is brief, in binary form, and styled as a dance.

How well Francesco's sonatas conform to this template can be seen from Table 1, which gives basic data for his eleven sonatas. Their character is mixed: they show clearly both Francesco's indebtedness to his Neapolitan inheritance and his success at absorbing not only elements of the Roman and north-Italian traditions as represented by Corelli and Albinoni, among others, but also the new, *galant* incarnation of the Neapolitan style as cultivated by the generation around Leo, Porpora and Vinci, including a willingness to use the viola on occasion to reinforce the bass at the unison or upper octave (something that Alessandro's contrapuntally more rigorous quartet sonatas never do). The two five-movement sonatas, nos. 1 and 8, conform to the traditional Neapolitan plan; the eight four-movement sonatas resemble formally to a striking degree the six *Sonate* (or *Sinfonie*) *a cinque* of Albinoni's Op. 2 (1700), while the three-movement final sonata is an outlier. One also observes in the ninth sonata a composite opening movement wherein slow and fast tempos alternate on the pattern of the first sonata of Corelli's Op. 5. Since the eleven sonatas duplicate no key, one has good reason to suppose that they were conceived as a set. Perhaps a twelfth work (in G major or A major?) was omitted by Avison or never reached him.

The sonatas display great vigor and invention. If they have a weakness, it is that the writing of the inner parts, and particularly of the viola,

---

nomenclature probably taken over from his copy text. Although most other early sources of these compositions go under the title "Sonata", the parts for the last three in F-Pc (D-9171, D-9172, D-8967) have "Sinfonia". The Paris parts are interesting also for describing the works as "al tavolino senza cimbalò" (the first term denoting performance in the manner of Renaissance madrigals without keyboard continuo) and for mentioning lute or harp as alternatives to cello.

frequently runs into solecisms such as parallel fifths or octaves. Avison, who had an eye for such things, made many attempts to improve such passages, inking in new versions over the old, but not always with a successful outcome.

It appears that Avison tried out certain of the sonatas with local musicians, or at least brought them to the notice of others, since some of the scores have markings indicating where the breaks between systems should occur in a prospective fair copy. However, by the 1730s there was really no longer any market in Britain for sonatas employing an ensemble larger than a trio. Almost by definition, instrumental works in Italian style employing a viola had to be packaged as concertos or sinfonias. And in England – uniquely in Europe by this time – concertos for strings alone were customarily laid out neither in four parts (as *concerti a quattro*) nor in five parts (as *concerti a cinque*, with the addition of a principal violin), but in seven parts (with differentiated concertino and ripieno parts for both violins and a cello part distinct from the ripieno bass).

This situation had not always been so. Up to the time of the first publication of Corelli’s *Concerti grossi* in 1714, England had become familiar first with Albinoni’s *Concerti a cinque* (in Opp. 2 and 5), followed by those of Vivaldi and Giuseppe Matteo Alberti. Even after Corelli’s concertos had won a huge following in England, no one thought initially to imitate their Roman-style orchestral layout in seven parts. Things started to change, however, in 1726, when the rising publisher Benjamin Cooke (d. 1743) advertised Francesco Geminiani’s concerto arrangements of the first six violin sonatas in Corelli’s Op. 5. In 1732 Geminiani published his own Opp. 2 and 3, which employed the same orchestral layout, whereupon the floodgates opened. Between 1734 (Michael Festing’s Op. 3) and 1785 (a concerto by Charles Wesley) at least 25 concerto publications “in seven parts” for strings alone were issued in England, and all other species of string concerto, so far as one can tell, went into terminal decline.<sup>11</sup> As if to symbolize the change, William Corbett’s collection of concertos entitled *Universal bizzaries*, which as originally published in 1728 had no concertino-

---

11 This is not to say that no such concertos were produced in manuscript in England before 1726 – Peter Holman has pointed out to me in correspondence the existence of specimens by Pepusch and Prellieur that may be earlier – but published works have special significance, since they were intended for general circulation.

ripieno differentiation, acquired extra partbooks for ripieno players when a second edition came out in 1742.

The rationale behind the insistence on a basic group of seven parts, to which extra obbligato parts for instruments other than violin could be added if desired, was a peculiarly British variation on the original Roman rationale. In the princely courts of Rome in Corelli's day the concertino-ripieno distinction generally coincided with that between a small group of salaried house musicians (a trio sonata ensemble, effectively) and the numerous professional musicians brought in from outside to swell the numbers and augment the splendor of an occasion. In British conditions, particularly within the music societies that were springing up everywhere, this very commonly transmuted into a distinction between paid professional musicians and the rank-and-file made up by amateur players, who would usually be glad to have less challenging and prominent parts to play. So the same layout was retained, but with a changed social meaning. It is a remarkable fact that no string concertos employing the traditional "Roman" layout seem to have been published on the continent after the appearance of the six concertos in Pietro Antonio Locatelli's Op. 4 of 1736 – at which point the baton passed, as it were, into the hands of the British.

Of course, not every movement or, indeed, every piece had to employ separate ripieno instruments. The options always existed to "double up" ripieno and concertino for the second or even both violin parts and to yoke together the cello and continuo bass. So we find a *de facto* ripieno concerto such as Handel's Op. 6 no. 7 (1740) masquerading as a "grand concerto", while the idea of doubling concertino and ripieno second violins while keeping the two first violin parts separate, thereby obtaining the texture of a solo concerto, has a pedigree stretching right back to Corelli's Op. 6.<sup>12</sup> Having seven parts to play with conferred maximum flexibility at the small cost of occasional wastefulness.

At some point, Avison conceived the plan of publishing the four Alessandro Scarlatti sonatas in his possession with the assistance of his old associate Cooke, who had already published his Op. 1 trio sonatas (c.1737), and would shortly become the London stockist of his Op. 2, the *Six Concertos in Seven Parts* (1740). The story has been told elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> and only the bare outlines will be given here. To convert

---

12 The second movement of Corelli's Op. 6 no. 12 is a perfect case in point.

13 In HALTON/TALBOT, 2015.

the original sonatas into the required concertos Avison needed to do little other than:

(i) remove the penultimate movement in 3/4 meter (perhaps thought redundant as there were already two quick movements) from each of the sonatas in C, G and D minor (nos. 2-4);

(ii) compose a new, slightly weightier finale (in a most un-Scarlattian mixture of binary and rondeau form) for the C minor work, using some of Scarlatti’s original thematic elements;

(iii) provide a complete set of bass figures (thereby abandoning the original “senza cembalo” concept); and – very important –

(iv) momentarily reinforce the viola part with the cello or a violin whenever it became too exposed. As we know from his famous *Essay on Musical Expression*,<sup>14</sup> Avison was resigned to a common situation in eighteenth-century Britain where the viola part was assigned to the weakest player or players and therefore risked not being heard. Corelli had done something similar in his Op. 6 concertos as published, but there the motivation was very different: to make the pieces playable by concertino alone.

But four works were not enough to make up the six that were normally regarded as the minimum number of concertos in a properly constituted set. Moreover, Alessandro’s cycle of four austere minor-key concertos progressing through the circle of fifths from F minor to D minor needed a measure of leavening, and also the provision of a few opportunities for solo display by the principal violinist and some solo-tutti contrast. Avison’s solution, as inspired as it was also dishonest (for the concertos were marketed as works by “Alexander Scarlatti” *tout court*), was to coopt the first and eighth of Francesco’s sonatas, the most “Neapolitan” in overall character, as the sixth and third concertos of the set, retaining Alessandro’s works in their original sequence as Concertos I-II and IV-V. Francesco’s two pieces required little reinforcement of the viola part, which was less prominent than in his brother’s sonatas, but much more editorial work with regard to the finer details.

The resulting *VI Concertos in Seven Parts* enjoyed a measure of success when they appeared from Cooke in 1740, and the first two concertos were even published separately in France.<sup>15</sup> True, in modern times they

---

14 AVISON, 1752, p. 19.

15 Concerto I, engraved and published by Louis Hue, was advertised as “Un Concerto Primo del Signor Scarlatti” in the *Mercure de France*, February 1742, p. 355; Concerto II followed at some point no later than 1745.

have sometimes been regarded, not without good reason, as spurious<sup>16</sup> – which in a sense they undeniably are (even disregarding Francesco’s silent contribution) by virtue of appearing in a concerto rather than a sonata format. But only now have the specific roles played by Francesco Scarlatti and Charles Avison come to be recognized. Fortunately, the understanding of their complex origin is unlikely to dent their modern popularity, and may even do something for Francesco’s reputation, not to mention Avison’s (since his substituted movement is very attractive).<sup>17</sup>

In their own way, which is exceptional in its details but not in the wider circumstances to which they responded, these six sonatas by two different Scarlattis, skilfully transformed into concertos by a master *bricoleur*, Avison, and cunningly published by Cooke under the aegis of a royal privilege originally taken out on behalf of keyboard sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, embody perfectly the idea that the migration of music and musicians from one local or national culture and milieu to another always entails the possibility of radical and unexpected change. Sometimes the outward form changes in order to preserve the meaning. Sometimes the meaning changes as the price of retaining the outward form. In the present case, what I have called in my title the “acclimatization” of the music has resulted in changes to both form and meaning via a complex and only partially reconstructable series of decisions and personal interactions. And the kind of synthesis that we have observed here is replicated countless times in the encounter of Italian music or musicians and the British marketplace during the eighteenth century.

---

16 For example, by Peter Holman in his review of a recording of the concertos in *Early Music Review* 81 (June, 2002), pp. 17f.

17 Avison went on to introduce surreptitiously many movements of his own composition in his published arrangements (as concertos) of keyboard sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (1744).

*Table 1: Plan of the eleven sonatas by Francesco Scarlatti in Avison's "Workbook I"*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Key</b>	<b>Tempo, Meter</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1	E	Allegro, C	Imitative
		[Allegro], 4/2	Fugue
		Largo e puntato, 3/2	Through-composed, imitative, ends on V of c#
		[Allegro], C	Accompanied fugue
2	c	Affettuoso, 3/8	Binary form, minuet rhythm, solo-tutti contrast
		[Largo], C	Contrapuntal, ends on V of c
		Andante, C	Fugue on two subjects
		Grave, C	Starts in g. Homophonic, ends on V of c
3	a	[Allegro], 3/8	Fugue
		Allegro, C	Imitative, ends on V
		Andante, C	Fugue
		[Largo], 3/2	Homophonic, then contrapuntal, ends on V
4	e	[Allegro], 2/2	Fugue
		Largo→Andante, C	Contrapuntal, ends on V
		Allegro, C	Fugue
		Largo, 3/4	Starts in b. Homophonic, ends on V of e
5	b	[Allegro], 2/2	Fugue
		Larghetto, C	Fugue
		Largo, 3/4	Starts in D. Imitative, ends on V of b
		Allegro, 2/2	Imitative
6	C	Allegro, 3/4	Homophonic, ends on V
		Allegro, 4/2	Fugue

		Largo, 3/2 Allegro non presto, 3/8	Starts in a. Ends on V of a Fugue
7	Bb	Grave, C [Allegro], C Largo, 3/2 Allegro, 2/2	Imitative Accompanied fugue Starts in g. Ends on V of g Binary form, gavotta rhythm, solo-tutti contrast
8	F	Allegro, C Largo, 3/4 [Allegro], [C] Largo, 3/2 Allegro, 12/8	Imitative Starts in d. Ends on V of d Fugue with solos for Violin 1 Starts in a. Ends on V of d Binary form, giga rhythm
9	D	Grave, C→Presto, 3/4→Largo, 3/4→Presto, 3/4→Largo, 3/4 Larghetto, C Largo, 3/4 Presto, 12/8	Composite form, with solos for Violin 1 Fugue, with inversion of the sub- ject in the second part Starts in b. Ends on V of D Fugue in giga rhythm
10	g	Grave, C Allegro, 3/2 Siciliano, 6/8 Allegro, 12/8	Imitative Accompanied fugue Ends on V of g Accompanied fugue, with solos for Violin 1
11	d	[Adagio], C Largo e come sta, C Allegro, 3/4	Contrapuntal Starts in a. Ends on V of d, very brief Fugue

Note: Solo-tutti alternations marked in the score that are inessential to the structure and may have been inserted independently by Avison are ignored in the table above.

## Literature

- AVISON, CHARLES, *An Essay on Musical Expression*, London 1752.
- BOYD, MALCOLM, *Domenico Scarlatti: Master of Music*, London 1986.
- DENT, EDWARD J., The Earliest String Quartets, in: *The Monthly Musical Record* 33 (November 1903), pp. 202-204.
- HALTON, ROSALIND/TALBOT, MICHAEL, "Choice Things of Value": The Mysterious Genesis and Character of the VI Concertos in Seven Parts attributed to Alessandro Scarlatti, in: *Eighteenth-Century Music* 12/1 (2015), pp. 9-32.
- KROLL, MARK, Two Important New Sources for the Music of Charles Avison, in: *Music & Letters* 86, 3 (2005), pp. 414-431.

