H. Diack Johnstone & Richard Platt (eds.)

*Thomas Roseingrave: Complete Keyboard Music*

Musica Britannica LXXXIV.


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The current publication may well be the first and last publication dedicated to the works of Thomas Roseingrave (c.1690–1766), whose travels in Italy as the young companion and devotee of Domenico Scarlatti gave an unusual setting to the career of a British musician, even—as Kirkpatrick put it—"an eccentric Irish musician."

Inevitably one looks eagerly for evidence of the Scarlattian impact, but the Voluntaries, Fugues and Suites that make up by far the greatest part of his published music show little trace of Roseingrave's Italian experience (c.1709–13). Published in two main collections in 1728 and 1750, these pieces show flashes of originality and interest for today's keyboard player, but their dense textures and often unpunctuated formal designs are inescapable: any Scarlattian influence seems to have been buried, even consciously suppressed. Hawkins' description of these compositions as 'void of eloquence and variety' (to quote only the gentlest of his criticisms) sums up the later eighteenth-century view of Roseingrave, a view formed in light of the composer's mental illness which persisted for much of his career, leading to his dismissal from the prestigious post of organist of St George's Hanover Square in 1744. Even without the stigma of his 'inability to support himself', it might have been difficult for Roseingrave to make an impression on posterity. In a musical environment where the logic and clarity of Handel's music was the yardstick, it must be admitted that Roseingrave's published compositions would make a strange impression among the styles and genres wherein Handel excelled.

The sporadic creative activity of Roseingrave was punctuated by efforts on behalf of the music of his great mentor, Domenico Scarlatti. Though there seems to be no documented evidence of their continued contact, Roseingrave undertook two major projects that identified him as the foremost advocate of Scarlatti's music: the 1720 production of the opera *Narciso* (based on a previous work performed in 1714), and in 1739, apparently stung into action by the appearance of a rival edition of the *Esercizi* Sonatas, the publication of forty-two Sonatas of Scarlatti from his own collection. Roberto Pagano unravels the process by which Roseingrave sought to stamp on his edition the status of his personal acquaintance with Scarlatti, which enabled him to offer '14 pieces more than any other Edition hitherto extant', and the fact that his edition was '... Carefully revised & corrected from the Errors of the Press'.

Though he seems to have avoided emulating Scarlatti in his own keyboard compositions, at least one piece, provided in the Appendix to the Musica Britannica volume, gives a glimpse into Roseingrave's activity as performer of the Sonatas. A 'Celebrated Lesson for the Harpsicord, with M' Roseingrave's Additions' is the Sonata K. 37 in C minor—conjecturally performed in Dublin in 1753. The additions consist of two chunks, one of ten bars in the first section.

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which introduces material appearing only in the second section in Scarlatti’s piece (K. 37, bars 49–56); and in the second section, an addition of nineteen bars long, largely reiterating tonic harmony. These two insertions have the effect of rearranging the tonal proportions and thematic structure of the piece. The idea of introducing the second section material already in the first section brings an effect of recapitulation to the second section absent from the original, while the cadenza-like flourishes of the new closing section lead to an impressive dominant pedal—one of the hallmarks of Roseingrave’s Fugues, containing newly composed figurations. Again we must be satisfied with conjecture, but it is appealing to imagine the Irish keyboard virtuoso reliving his Italian years at the harpsichord, and improvising as he played the sonatas in the search to keep alive, inwardly, the dialogue that he had enjoyed with Domenico Scarlatti. Returning to London before Scarlatti had embarked on the Iberian development of his life and musical identity, Roseingrave was presumably to remain unfamiliar with the subsequent fusion of Italian and Spanish elements for which Scarlatti is now so renowned.

Just a few of the other pieces in this splendid Musica Britannica edition by H. Diack Johnstone and Richard Platt show signs of a Scarlattian touch. The editors find ‘strikingly Scarlattian’ elements in the ‘Celebrated Concerto for the Harpsicord’, published posthumously by C. and S. Thompson, and suggest that it was composed ‘many years earlier, and is quite possibly one of the first British keyboard concertos ever written’. Though it survives as a solo keyboard part without orchestral parts (which are given in a version by Peter Holman), it clearly divides into tutti and solo passages, with enough flavour of figurations, textures and major/minor nuances to give an impression of how a concerto in the style of Scarlatti could be constructed.

Of the 1728 ‘Sets’ or Suites, I find the Sarabandes and Gigues most original and rewarding, while the Allemandes are discursive, indeed rambling. One of the most interesting of these is the Allemanda in B flat (No. 30)—a single piece, not one of the published collections but surviving only in a manuscript owned by Viscount Fitzwilliam. It ranges freely over the keyboard sampling a number of textures and touching on the element of phrase repetition for which Scarlatti is famous. The frequent changes in harmonic direction and hand position make this unpredictable music unexpectedly awkward to perform. At his most characteristic, Roseingrave is least Scarlattian: his harmonies elusive, his phrasing marked by overlaps, elisions, extensions, and very few punctuating rests; his chord voicings carefully chosen and sometimes exquisitely transparent. Voluntary No. 4 (1728) exhibits all these qualities, as well as being uncharacteristically concise, suggesting the brilliant improviser and speculative harmonist who alternately impressed and puzzled the London musical scene in the 1720s.

Within this unconventional approach to writing counterpoint, the editors have quite a bit of work to do: according to the Editorial Notes, ‘the original editions are anything but easy to read’, particularly in view of individual stemming, a feature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century keyboard notation that is next to impossible to reproduce in a modern printed edition, and particularly in a style as densely voiced as Roseingrave’s. While this aspect of the edition is handled effectively, I feel that the method adopted of showing editorial accidentals in small print makes it difficult to keep track of them as much as one would wish. The problem is simply that the difference of size is not great between the normal size accidentals, especially the naturals, and the editorial small print ones. In the F

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major Sarabande of the Fourth Suit, for example, a passage of minor inflections is cancelled a few bars before the end of the piece: Johnstone and Platt cancel the minor mode on the fourth last bar with an editorial ‘natural. Equally workable could be a flat in the melodic line, with a major resolution in the following bar, but it is not at once apparent that the natural is part of the ‘small print’ editorial type. Elsewhere the editors admit the existence of ‘. . . problems of harmonic impropriety . . . beyond the reach of textual criticism proper’—a cautious phrase that catches the meaning if not the spirit of the more damning eighteenth-century criticisms of Roseingrave’s unapologetically impenetrable style.

The volume is, as one would expect from Musica Britannica, handsomely produced, with useful facsimile pages from the various sources, and adequately furnished with an historical Introduction on the chronically tormented composer’s life, Editorial Notes and Textual Commentary. On a practical note, one needs a substantial music stand to accommodate such an impressive publication, but the compensating features are easily legible spacing of the music text, and whenever possible, avoidance of inconvenient page-turns: features that should encourage organists and harpsichordists to discover the unique sound world and occasional great beauty of this long buried music.

Rosalind Halton

Rosalind Halton is a harpsichordist and researcher whose major work is promoting the revival of Alessandro Scarlatti’s cantatas through editing and performance. She has directed a 3-CD set of Scarlatti’s music, as well as releasing award-winning discs of French harpsichord music. She traces her love of performing newly rediscovered music to her studies at the University of Otago and subsequent performances of her editions at Oxford. She is Music Research Convenor at the University of Newcastle.

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