Narrative Archetypes in the Biography of Domenico Scarlatti

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In October 1983 I was invited to contribute a volume on Scarlatti to Novello's series of Short Biographies.[1] I had never written a biography before, and I knew very little about Scarlatti, so naturally I said yes. It is axiomatic in the academic world that the only way to learn anything is to write about it; books thrive infinitely better on curiosity than omniscience. In fact, writing Scarlatti's biography turned out to be even more instructive than I had expected, but there was not the scope in the popular format of the Novello series for reflecting on the experience. In any case, readers do not always want to be reminded of the unreliability of what they are reading. This article is intended, in part, to supply that missing commentary. It is more a cautionary tale than an essay in metabiography, but I hope it will air some problems more explicitly than they have been hitherto.

I began then, as biographers do, by complaining about the lack of reliable information about Scarlatti's life. I am not going to repeat those complaints here. Indeed, by some standards, parts of Scarlatti's early life are really quite well documented, and if the archives are virtually silent about huge tracts of his life in Spain, that is attributable as much to the ravages of civil commotion and planned neglect on Spanish libraries in general, as to any alleged reticence in Scarlatti's own character. No, what is at issue is not so much the amount or the quality of information available to the biographer, though that is important, as the construction put upon it in the practice of biography itself. For biography is not the simple enumeration of facts. When the biographer comes to tell his story—for that is what he is, a narrator, a teller of tales—he has to join up the dots of fact with a line that is rational and logical, plausible and persuasive. He cannot escape the requirements of narrative, the ground-rules of storytelling, and there is a danger that the inviting coherence of the picture he produces will owe more to art than to life.

Let me illustrate this point with one of the most well-known of the small handful of anecdotes about Scarlatti. It is recounted by Burney in his *General History of Music* and tells of Scarlatti's first encounter with his future champion, Thomas Roseingrave. The passage is a celebrated one but I need to quote it here in some detail. Roseingrave is in Italy on a scholarship 'to enable him to travel for improvement'. In Venice he is invited 'as a stranger and a virtuoso' to an *accademia* at the house of a nobleman, where, Burney recounts:

> among others, he was requested to sit down to the harpsichord and favour the company with a toccata, as a specimen *della sua virtù*. And, says he, 'finding myself rather better in courage and finger than usual, I exerted myself, my dear friend, and fancied, by the applause I received, that my performance had made some impression on

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[1] B. W. Ife, *Domenico Scarlatti*, London: Novello, 1985.

> the company.' After a cantata had been sung by a scholar of Fr. Gasparini, who was there to accompany her, a grave young man dressed in black and in a black wig, who had stood in one corner of the room, very quiet and attentive while Roseingrave played, being asked to sit down to the harpsichord, when he began to play, Rosy said, he thought ten hundred d___ls had been at the instrument; he never had heard such passages of execution and effect before. The performance so far surpassed his own, and every degree of perfection to which he thought it possible he should ever arrive, that, if he had been in sight of any instrument with which to have done the deed, he should have cut off his own fingers. Upon enquiring the name of this extraordinary performer, he was told that it was Domenico Scarlatti, son of the celebrated Cavalier Alessandro Scarlatti. Roseingrave declared he did not touch an instrument himself for a month; after this rencontre, however, he became very intimate with the young Scarlatti, followed him to Rome and Naples, and hardly ever quitted him while he remained in Italy.[2]

No historian worth the name could fail to treat an account like this with suspicion. Burney was writing many years, perhaps as many as eighty years, after the event: Scarlatti must have met Roseingrave before 1709, the year Scarlatti left Venice for Rome. Yet Burney's *History* did not appear until 1789, when Roseingrave (1688-1766) had been dead for over twenty years. In spite of the inclusion of words directly and indirectly attributed to Roseingrave, the evidence is clearly hearsay. There must also be some doubt about Roseingrave's reliability as a witness. The meeting with Scarlatti had taken place nearly twenty years before Burney was born, and probably forty years before he told Burney about it. How good was Roseingrave's memory at that remove, and, more to the point, how many times had the story been told in the meantime, and how much had it changed?

Then there is Burney himself to consider. How critical was his handling of the evidence? Roseingrave was, after all, nearly 40 years older than Burney, half-Irish and a colourful, flamboyant character given to fanciful behaviour and to intermittent bouts of insanity in later life. Burney, recognising this weakness[3] says nevertheless that he liked visiting Roseingrave because, among other things, ‘his conversation was very entertaining’ (II, 706). Can we be sure that he did not simply fall for a plausible old raconteur? How much did Burney know about blarney?

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[2] Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, ed. by F. Mercer (London, 1952), vol. II, p. 704.

[3] 'I prevailed on him once to touch an organ at Byfield's the organ-builder, but his nerves were then so unstrung that he could execute but few of the learned ideas which his mental disorder had left him... In his younger days, when he enjoyed the *mens sana in corpore sano*, he was regarded as having a power of seizing the parts and spirit of a score and executing the most difficult Music at sight beyond any musician in Europe' (II, 705-6). Burney dates Roseingraye's ‘occasional insanity' from about 1737 when he was relieved of his post at St. George's.

These are purely historiographical objections made on external criteria and any writer who has repeated Burney's story has been properly hesitant about accepting it as fact even though it is too good to discard completely. But the story is also fishy for internal reasons that have to do with its narrative structure. Put simply, Burney's account has a strong affinity with a number of legends and folk-tales, so strong, indeed, that it seems almost to have been purposely constructed out of a combination of folk motifs and narrative archetypes.

The setting alone helps to establish a link with a legendary world. The atmosphere is one of joust or tournament, and the *accademia* becomes a stage for one of those duels of musical ability in which folklore abounds.[4] In the early Irish cycle of Diarmait, for example, Marbán, come to avenge the death of his pet boar, enters the poets' house and challenges them to a contest of minstrelsy. He chooses for the contest the most difficult and most exhausting form of humming, the *crónán snagach*. 'The hummers, twenty-seven in number, were brought before Marbán, and were soon prostrate.'[5] In an Indian legend, Faizī and Birjū Banrā sing so well that 'all the wild beasts of the forests, —the deer, the hares, the jackals and so forth— came to listen ... with their eyes closed in ecstasy, and utterly devoid of consciousness.' But then Tān-sēn begins to sing the Melody of Illumination, a rāg which, when properly sung causes the lamps to light of their own accord. So well does Tān-sēn sing that not only do all the lamps light up spontaneously, but he himself bursts into flames and falls down dead.[6]

As these two examples illustrate, mystery and exaggeration are essential ingredients of legendary accounts of musical duels, and they are prominent in Burney's own. Roseingrave, a stranger and a 'virtuoso', plays well and fancies that his performance has made some impression on the company. But from a corner of the room emerges another stranger, 'a grave young man dressed in black and in a black wig', who proceeds to play like the very devil. Only upon subsequent enquiry does it emerge that the mysterious victor is the young Scarlatti, Domenico, 'son of the, celebrated Cavalier Alessandro Scarlatti', as the quasi-epic formula has it. Roseingrave, worsted in battle, admits defeat and declares his intention—mercifully thwarted by lack of ready means—to cut off his own fingers.

Burney has, however, cleverly exploited the element of mystery in his account in order to graft on to the duel another powerfully suggestive motif, that of the task and its performance by the mysterious stranger (H950, 976). In Irish legend Cuchulainn orders Mac Engé on pain of death to make him a shield that should not contain any carved device found on any other shield. Mac Engé is in despair until he sees a man advancing towards him. The stranger imparts the secret of the unique design.[7] In the cycle of Mongán, Fiachna is about to fight single-handedly a flock of venomous sheep that have killed 300 men each day for three days. As he is about to take his

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[4] Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955-58), section H503. Hereinafter, references to Stith Thompson are included in parentheses in the text.
[5] Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings*, (Oxford, 1946), p. 94,
[6] G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, (Calcutta, 1904), vol. VI, pp. 48-49.
[7] Eugene O'Curry, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, (Dublin, 1873), vol. II, p. 329.

weapons, a tall warrior approaches him offering assistance in the shape of a fierce dog who will kill the sheep in exchange for a certain favour. The unknown warrior is described as wearing 'a green cloak with a brooch of silver, a circlet of gold on his head, and golden sandals.[8]

Burney is not quite so fanciful, but the parallel is clear: a demanding task satisfactorily performed by a stranger characterised by his striking costume. Like any stranger, Roseingrave is put to the test: he is required to play, he does not volunteer. His task is 'to sit down to the harpsichord and favour the company with a toccata, as a specimen *della sua virtù*'. By himself attempting the task and outdoing his rival, Scarlatti becomes the means by which the motifs of the task and the duel are succinctly combined. But there is an important trick of narrative perspective at work in the account, which enables Burney to portray both men as anonymous: Roseingrave is a true stranger in a foreign land, but because the scene is ostensibly recounted from Roseingrave's point of view, Scarlatti, unknown to Roseingrave at that point, is also shown to be a stranger in spite of his father's evident celebrity. Roseingrave has no option but to describe Scarlatti in terms of his costume, but the combination of first impression and poetic licence enables Burney to suggest, with the black dress and black wig, one of those mysterious interventions in medieval romance by knights whose monochrome costume—black, white or green in particular—gives them a supernatural air.

The supernatural is, of course, the ultimate destination of this piece of hagiography. If Scarlatti outperforms Roseingrave in their musical task, it is only, Rosy suggests, because 'ten hundred devils had been at the instrument'. Supernatural assistance in the performance of tasks is another common feature of folk-tales from Iceland to India (G303.22, N810). Sometimes the helpers are benign spirits who are repaying a debt or responding to prayer, or rendering purely disinterested assistance. Sometimes a penalty is exacted. The devil is always ready to lend a hand in return for an arm and a leg (M210-211). Artists have traditionally been portrayed as particularly vulnerable in this regard and it is not difficult to see why. If art is divine madness[9] attributable to the inspiration of a muse or other supernatural agent, exceptional technical skill or dexterity can easily strike mere mortals as having been acquired on the black market at a price that is unacceptably high. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that myth and folklore often associate music with magic, either through the motif of inspired performance (Orpheus) or by a variety of magic instruments from Papageno's flute to Sparky's piano (D1210, 1233).

As a biographical tool, then, Burney's account of Scarlatti's encounter with Roseingrave is of limited usefulness: though it may seem harmless enough, it is in fact rich with associations drawn from other narrative genres and its historical reliability is inevitably called into question by this mythopoeic resonance. I have drawn some deliberately far-fetched parallels to illustrate the universality of particular motifs, but the reader will be able to supply many other examples from nearer home, from Greco-Roman mythology or the work of Richard Wagner. The image of Scarlatti that emerges from Burney's text is less a credible historical personality—a shy man

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[8] Dillon, *Cycles*, p. 50.

[9] *Theia mania*, Plato's description in *Phaedrus* 245a.

who could play well—than a mysterious heroic figure possessed of supernatural powers at the keyboard. It is an image that owes a great deal to Roseingrave's hero worship and has much to tell us about the nature of the relationship between the two men. Curiously, this too is incorporated into the mythical sub-structure of the anecdote. After the duel is fought and Roseingrave retires to lick his wounds and contemplate the folly of his own temerity, the two men become very close, as Burney says: 'after this rencontre ... he [Roseingrave] became very intimate with the young Scarlatti, followed him to Rome and Naples, and hardly ever quitted him while he remained in Italy.' As we know, Roseingrave became the great champion of Scarlatti's music in England, and the erstwhile combatants resolved their rivalry in true friendship, just as they invariably do in the world of folklore (P310.5, 311.1, R74.1).[10]

A curious gloss on Burney's account is provided by another commonplace of Scarlatti biography, the account given by Handel's biographer, John Mainwaring, of the contest of skill alleged to have taken place between Scarlatti and Handel at Cardinal Ottoboni's salon in Rome. Here again, I give the text in full in order to underline the parallels between the two accounts:

> As he [Scarlatti] was an exquisite player on the harpsichord, the Cardinal was resolved to bring him and Handel together for a trial of skill. The issue of the trial on the harpsichord hath been differently reported. It has been said that some gave the preference to Scarlatti. However, when they came to the Organ there was not the least pretence for doubting to which of them it belonged. Scarlatti himself declared the superiority of his antagonist, and owned ingenuously, that till he had heard him upon this instrument, he had no conception of its powers. So greatly was he struck with his peculiar method of playing, that he followed him all over Italy, and was never so happy as when he was with him.
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> Handel used often to speak of this person with great satisfaction; and indeed there was reason for it; for besides his great talents as an artist, he had the sweetest temper, and the genteelest behaviour. On the other hand, it was mentioned but lately by the two Plas [the famous Hautbois] who came from Madrid, that Scarlatti, as oft as he was admired for his great execution, would mention Handel, and cross himself in token of veneration.
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> Though no two persons ever arrived at such perfection on their respective instruments, yet it is remarkable that there was a total difference in their manner. The characteristic excellence of Scarlatti seems to have consisted in a certain elegance and delicacy of expression. Handel had an uncommon brilliancy and command of finger: but what

[10] I. M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, (Copenhagen, 1966), p. 214 records 38 examples of this motif in Icelandic literature alone.

> distinguished him from all other players who possessed these same qualities, was that amazing fulness, force, and energy, which he joined with them.[11]

Since Mainwaring is Handel's biographer, not Scarlatti's, it is not surprising that, though Scarlatti's excellence and celebrity are given due weight, it is Handel's qualities that prevail. There is no mystery here but Mainwaring is careful, like Burney, to emphasize that the victory is gained at the expense of a worthy opponent. The defeated man is, again, more than ready to acknowledge the superiority of his antagonist, though Scarlatti's compliment that until he had heard Handel play the organ he had no conception of its powers, is suspiciously reminiscent of, say, Brahms's remark about the Dvorák cello concerto. Scarlatti does not quite attribute Handel's victory to diabolical intervention, though crossing himself on mentioning Handel's name was likely to be misinterpreted, and only a few pages earlier (51-52) Mainwaring has Scarlatti refer to Handel as 'the famous Saxon, or the devil' on account of his outstanding playing, Most striking, however, is the degree of emphasis put on the way the adversaries are reconciled. Scarlatti follows Handel all over Italy, presumably with Roseingrave in attendance, 'and was never so happy as when he was with him'.

It is interesting to see so many of the motifs in Burney's account also appearing in Mainwaring, and the conclusions hardly need to be drawn. There is a distinct repertoire of things that writers like to say about their subjects. They like to flatter them by having them appear more than a match for the greatest players of their time. Burney varies the archetype by showing that in Roseingrave's case it is no disgrace to be outplayed by a genius. The two texts show how writers, like audiences, project comparisons onto the artists themselves and turn rivalry into battle royal; how skill and achievement can attract suspicion as well as admiration; how easy it is to fall back on the supernatural to account for the gifted but mortal; and how we fondly imagine that those on whom we have thrust heroism will be magnanimous in victory and dispassionate in defeat.

I have given so much attention to Burney and Mainwaring not because I wish to call into question facts which are in any case of limited importance or interest. There is nothing inherently unlikely in a man's dressing in black or playing the harpsichord better than a visiting Irishman or behaving in any of the ways that either Scarlatti or Roseingrave are said to have behaved. What I do wish to emphasize is that no narrative is free from certain fundamental constraints or from the requirement that it should be clearly focussed, coherent, intelligible, interesting and so on. In order to ensure that his narrative has these qualitie, a writer will often use certain narrative devices, motifs or archetypes as a conceptual grid within which information can be organised, presented and understood. In doing this he is doing nothing more sinister than any speaker or writer does when he uses the grammatical structure of a language as a way of organising its vocabulary. But it is important that both biographer and

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[11] John Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel*, (London, 1760), pp. 59-62. The passage is transcribed complete in Ralph Kirkpatrick, *Domenico Scarlatti*, (Princeton, 1953), pp. 33.

reader are aware that this subtle process of selection and interpretation is going on. In this respect, Burney's anecdote is an example in miniature of the problematic aspects of biography in general.

I would like to move away from particular anecdotes towards a broader consideration of biographical interpretations of Scarlatti's career as a whole. I will use as my hinge, however, one further story which is told about Scarlatti, and which, though it has not received the attention given to Burney's and Mainwaring's anecdotes, incorporates a narrative archetype which has, indirectly, been a powerful influence on the shape of Scarlatti biography. The story is told by the late eighteenth-century Portuguese writer José Mazza in his biographical dictionary of Portuguese musicians which remained unpublished until 1944-45. The story concerns the Portuguese keyboard composer Carlos Seixas, who was sent by the King's younger brother, don Antonio, to Scarlatti for some lessons while Scarlatti was in Lisbon. Mazza comments that don Antonio, himself a pupil of Scarlatti, was guided by 'the erroneous idea that whatever the Portuguese do they cannot equal foreigners'. He goes on:

> Hardly did Scarlatti see Seixas put his hands to the keyboard but he recognised the giant by the finger, so to speak, and said to him, '*You* are the one who could give *me* lessons'.

Later, Scarlatti is alleged to have told don Antonio that Seixas was one of the best musicians he had ever heard.[12]

Here again there is much to be suspicious of: Mazza is telling the story to show that Portuguese musicians are as good as any foreigners (something that they are quick to acknowledge), and Mazza's account makes no allowance for Scarlatti's sensitivity to his position—he was a relatively humble employee and Seixas had been introduced by one of Scarlatti's royal patrons. Neither does it take account of Scarlatti's reputation for good manners: the dedication of the *Essercizi* shows that Scarlatti knew the right things to say where his royal pupils were concerned. Above all, however, we should beware the presence of a narrative archetype: 'Pupil surpasses master' (L142, P340, 342). It is curious how often the successful adult is found to have been a child prodigy, and how often that early promise is supposed to have been recognised by a teacher, a learned, respected and established figure, who confesses in despair that he has taught the child all he knows and can teach him no more. The motif is there in the Bible—the young Christ disputing with the doctors in the temple (Luke 2.46-47)—and it is there in the worst kind of Hollywood movie.

'Pupil surpasses master' is a popular archetype in biography because it suits the exceptional nature of any figure singled out for biographical treatment. Such an individual is by definition an exception to a rule: his surpassing his master prefigures an exceptional future and reverses the established order of values by virtue of which the older generation is always senior to the

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[12] José Mazza, *Diconário biográfico de músicos portugueses*, (Lisbon, 1944-45), p. 32. Cited by Kirkpatrick, *Domenico Scarlatti*, p. 73.

younger. In the case of Scarlatti, the archetype is particularly appropriate because it frequently correlates with the mythical struggle of father and son (L.142.3, N731.2), and because the two Scarlattis were also, by the nature of their trade, master and pupil for a number of years.

In myth, as in life, the story of the way in which the dominant parent is opposed and eventually deposed by the offspring is perpetually fascinating and compelling. Scarlatti's relationship with his own successful father has received a good deal of attention from biographers, for a number of reasons. Almost all the documentary evidence about Domenico's life raises more questions than it answers. There is, first of all, that famous letter of 1705 from Alessandro to Ferdinando de' Medici in which he describes his son as an 'eagle whose wings are grown'. On the face of it this is a curious description of a son whom, he suggests elsewhere in the letter, he has had to boot out of the nest. Then there is the fact that Alessandro had already, in 1701, secured his son his first employment in Naples as organist and composer in the viceregal chapel. Later, Alessandro created a further vacancy for his son in Rome at the court of Maria Casimira of Poland, and in 1713 Domenico succeeded his father as maestro of the Cappella Giulia at St. Peter's. Finally, there is that extraordinary document of 1717 in which Alessandro grants his son, who was by then 32 years old, emancipation from his protection.

All this, and much other incidental evidence such as Scarlatti's rather late marriage at the age of 42, a marriage which seems to have been arranged for him, has helped to create the impression of the young Scarlatti as a weak, dependant figure, lacking in initiative or drive, a man who relied on his father to do everything for him. This impression is confirmed by what seems to be a marked difference in the quantity and quality of the musical output of the two men. Alessandro was a successful composer of prodigious energy. During his seventeen years at Naples alone he wrote more than 40 operas and 65 cantatas. Domenico's lifetime output of operas, intermezzi, oratorios and cantatas comes to a mere 22 works, of which 15 are wholly or substantially lost. Far from surpassing his master, this pupil seems to have been entirely overshadowed by him.

This powerful interpretation has grown up in the face of some other considerations of equal validity. In the matter of appointments, there is nothing unusual, in the context of professional music in the eighteenth century, in sons succeeding their fathers, often to the extent of occupying the same post. Musical families, that is, families of professional musicians, were like any other family business which took then and still takes pride in the fact that successive generations of servants have served successive generations of masters. It made as much sense to keep the posts as to keep the skills in the family—for financial security if for no other reason.

Furthermore, it may not make sense to compare the output of the father with that of the son. Alessandro sent Domenico away from Naples precisely because he recognised that his 'was not the talent for such a place'. We cannot be sure what he meant by this, but Alessandro seems to recognise a difference between his own talent and that of his son, and to recognise that the latter required a different setting. If Alessandro saw his son primarily as, say, an instrumentalist, this would lend weight to the view that the careers of the two men are not comparable. Professional musicians did what was required of them, and only in the service of Maria Casimira can we be sure that Domenico was required to compose the kind of opera at which his father

excelled. During his five years at the Palazzo Zuccari Domenico produced seven such operas, a perfectly respectable rate of production which might conceivably have been higher if Maria Casimira had not suffered from the financial difficulties which forced her to leave Rome in 1714. The poor survival rate of Scarlatti's operas is also unremarkable in an age which took a more routine and less reverent view of the production of music for domestic consumption than we do today. Survival—the physical survival of hastily scribbled parts or scores, and the artistic survival ensured by repeated performance—is the more remarkable phenomenon that requires explanation and study. As for Domenico's attachment to his family, the apparent lateness of his emancipation and his marriage, the biographer would need to show, in order to attach significance to these things, how they differed from a norm and how a modern preference for the independent self-made man is inherently more valuable than what we tend to think of as older, more Mediterranean, values built on family solidarity.

Nevertheless, the few facts we have of Domenico's early life, coupled with what appear to be a rather meagre output of musical compositions, have come to be viewed as reinforcing each other and pointing to a deeper significance. As Ralph Kirkpatrick has put it:

> The mysteries of Domenico's early life and his obvious domination by his father, both personal and musical, tempt interpretation in terms of modern psychology. (p. 76)

I would suggest, rather, the existence of an equally powerful temptation, the lure of the narrative archetype: 'Difficulties of being the son of a famous father'. Adversity in early life can always be made to enhance later achievement, but if the subject of the biography comes from a supportive background, his successes can appear less triumphant than is proper in the heroic biography. If the advantages of his early life can be made to seem oppressive then the hero will emerge all the more triumphant.

For this reversal of fortune to take place a turning point is required and in this regard, Scarlatti's biographers are fortunate indeed, because exactly half-way through his life, at some time between 1719 and 1721 Scarlatti left Italy and went to work in Portugal and Spain. This chronological and geographical coincidence is too good to let pass. From now on the hero can be shown to triumph over the adversity of his early life, can slough off the dominating shadow of his father and can give full reign to his talents. He can stop writing run-of-the-mill operas and start writing brilliantly original keyboard sonatas. Unfortunately, once again, there are other considerations which undermine this scenario. A move from Italy to Portugal may seem like a radical change to us, but in the context of Western Mediterranean culture and politics of the time such a move was hardly different in kind from the many moves Scarlatti had already been obliged to make within Italy in search of secure employment. When he eventually did find a secure post with Maria Bárbara he not suprisingly hung on to it, and it was only then that he could contemplate the kind of marriage which required some capital and prospects.

Furthermore, the idea that Iberia is exotic and peripheral is essentially a post-Romantic one. We may think of Scarlatti's move to Lisbon as a kind of sacrificial abandonment of civilised values, a sudden desperate bid to achieve authenticity in the outback, but Scarlatti was doing what any journeyman does; he went where there was money and where there was work. Leaving Italy for Portugal meant leaving a waning power for a burgeoning one, and, as is often

the case, an emergent nation was keen to adopt the fashionable culture of one in decline. Scarlatti was fortunate that in that respect his musical background and his talent was an easily marketable commodity, in fact more marketable abroad than at home.

Continuities, however, are notoriously less photogenic than new departures. It is not actually very interesting to have to say that our hero continued to do much the same as he had done in Italy, that is, struggle to make a living. Still less interesting is it to say that the nature of his job, exporting Italian culture to foreign courts rich enough to be able to pay for it, actually required him to go on doing much the same thing as he had done before. Nevertheless, our hero is not our hero for nothing. He has achieved something or we would not be writing his biography. His achievements are, for us, his keyboard sonatas, and his keyboard sonatas appear to have been written in Portugal and Spain. Something, then, must have happened to make him a success. What was it that allowed him to snatch triumph from adversity?

At this point the biographer finds himself in even more difficulty than he has been hitherto. Just when he is preparing to put his subject's rather humdrum, lacklustre past behind him and to embark on a success-story, he is faced with the least documented part of Scarlatti's life. The years in Portugal, and, worse still, the 28 years he lived in Spain, throw up scarcely more than a handful of mentions of the emergent genius. We have very little idea of what he did, beyond the bare outlines of his life—his appointments, marriages, the births of his children, his death. Of the inner man weknow nothing; we have no memoires or letters, no record of any impression he may have left on friends or contemporaries. Beyond the bare facts and figures, he seems to have lived and died without trace. Had it not been for the *Essercizi* and the great collections of sonatas that passed from Maria Bárbara's library to Farinelli's, there is no doubt that Scarlatti's brief sojourn on this earth would hardly have been worth a moment's notice.

Now there is, of course, nothing unusual in a man's life passing unnoticed. It happens to most of us. Indeed, the well-documented life and above all the well-documented personality, is always exceptional. But this will not do at all for the biographer. For no very good reason we expect Scarlatti's personal life to justify our interest in his music, and the biographer is under an unspoken obligation to find something of interest to say about him. Surely such an exceptional musician cannot have made so little impression in his day? At this point the biographer has several options open to him. He can try to make a virtue of his subject's low profile, make him pale and interesting, make his silence eloquent, make him an unobtrusive and self-effacing servant of his art, modestly working away in some quiet backwater, shunning publicity and the cult of personality. Or we can turn the principles of the heroic biography upside-down and make him an anti-hero: the man's genius may be beyond dispute, but his life is a sad commentary on the mortal inadequacy of man. There have, in fact, been suggestions that Scarlatti's domestic life was marred by gambling and debt. Or we could make him a tragic hero, neglected in his own day but redeemed by posterity, a dark horse made good.

One narrative strategy, however, has predominated in the highly influential biography of Ralph Kirkpatrick, the motif of the 'Late-flowering genius'. Kirkpatrick was driven into the arms of this narrative strategy by one indisputable fact about Scarlatti: that the majority of the sonatas as we have them survive in manuscript collections which date from the last five years of Scarlatti's

life. Here, in contrast to the lack of any great sign of compositional activity for most of the time he spent in the peninsula, is incontravertible proof of a sustained effort of composition in documents with dates clearly written on them. ‘The very productivity of his ‘Last five years’, writes Kirkpatrick, ‘was like that of a man who has found himself very late and who is racing against time’ (p. 127).

This is a potent image and an understandable one in spite of the inherent unlikelihood that a professional musician, engaged in teaching and playing his instrument for half a century, will crown a lifetime of relative inactivity with a last dash to meet his own deadline. As a narrative structure, 'Late-flowering genius' solves many of the biographer's problems at a stroke. It makes everything about the man that seems superficially uninteresting into something of genuine interest. It enables us to see all that inactivity as a long period of gestation, and it enhances the status of the end-product by drawing on common prejudices about chronology: ‘early’ period is promising but immature, ‘middle’ period is for consolidation, but we save the best till last. With Scarlatti, the genius is a long time coming, but the best is worth waiting for.

Kirkpatrick's use of this motif may be and has been challenged for a number of reasons. He begs important questions about how we judge quality in an output as varied as Scarlatti’s was, and, crucially, he was too ready to accept chronological evidence at its face value, too ready, perhaps, to embrace something that looked like fact in a sea of uncertainty. But there is no denying the efficacy and attractiveness of the archetype of ‘Late-flowering genius’ as a narrative technique. It gives such random scraps of information as we have a coherence and a unity, and it satisfies our need to find something of the dramatic and the mysterious in the life of an artist whose work we admire. Only a significant new documentary find will enable us to judge which, if any, of the archetypes I have discussed best fits Scarlatti the man. But until we are more aware of the patterns we customarily impose on the evidence, and why, we are unlikely to make any real progress towards understanding the ordinary man that lies hidden behind those extraordinary sonatas.