

Scarlatti's Wealth at Death: some thoughts on the Inventory of 24 July 1757

Barry Ife. April 2026

Luisa Morales's masterly analysis of the inventory of Scarlatti's belongings drawn up directly after his death (Morales 2009b and Discussion item B3) shows a total valuation of 372,956 *reales de vellón*. This prompts the obvious question: is that a big number? What did that number represent in mid-eighteenth century terms and, more to the point, what does it amount to in today's money?

There are two main routes to an answer, in cash terms and in terms of value. In cash terms we can do a simple piece of arithmetic: change the *real de vellón* into sterling at contemporary exchange rates, multiply the result by 372,956 and apply the Bank of England inflator to give the present-day cash value of the Scarlatti estate.

The *real de vellón* was a copper/silver alloy coin of relatively low value. Contemporary exchange rates varied between three farthings and a penny sterling. As a cross check, the silver real (*real de plata*) was worth eight *reales de vellón* and varied between sixpence and sixpence halfpenny (i.e. between 24 and 26 farthings). As there were two sixpences to a shilling and twenty shillings to a pound, there were approximately $8 \times 40 = 320$ *reales de vellón* to a pound sterling.

If we divide 372,956 by 320 the result is £1,165.50 pounds sterling. At the time of writing, the Bank of England inflation calculator gives a current value of £183,263.86. Most musicians today would regard that as a decent sum.

However, working entirely in cash terms takes no account of the relative value of several of the items in the inventory. Another way of approaching this question is to apply a form of 'purchasing power parity' (PPP). This method assumes that, all other things being equal, a basket of goods in one country will cost the same in another country. If it does not —and it rarely does— the resulting differences can be used as a corrective to the official exchange rate. PPP is normally used to compare wages, or the prices of staples, like bread. The *Economist* newspaper uses the Big Mac to compare prices and exchange rates in different parts of the world, and publishes a 'Big Mac Index' that it updates on a regular basis. A form of PPP can also be used to compare prices across historical time periods.

Fortunately for us, there are at least three items in the Scarlatti inventory that could potentially help us to understand the present-day value of his possessions: his harpsichord and two English timepieces — a pocket watch and a table clock.

No maker is given for the harpsichord, but since Diego Fernández was appointed as valuer (*tasador*) for the instruments, and since he had made at least three instruments for Queen Maria Bárbara, it is not impossible that Scarlatti's instrument had also been made by him: he certifies that he knew the instrument because he had taken care of it (if 'cuidado' here may be understood as 'maintained'). The Queen's instruments cost 2,100 *reales* in 1749 and 4,800 *reales* in 1757, so Fernández's valuation of Scarlatti's instrument, acquired between 1740 and 1742, suggests that it was a good one: 3,000 *reales* was a decent price for a

second-hand instrument. By way of comparison, at the time of writing, the renowned harpsichord-maker David Rubio's own personal instrument —a top of the range, second-hand instrument with a similarly notable pedigree— is for sale in the Early Music Shop at Snape Maltings in Suffolk at a price of just under £20,000.

The other two items of note in the inventory are a pocket watch by George Graham (1673-1751), valued at 3,300 *reales de vellón*. Graham was the most prestigious watchmaker in England at the time, and arguably in the world. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society, had been Master of the Clockmakers' Company, and his watches were considered the pinnacle of English horology. He invented the deadbeat escapement and the cylinder escapement for watches, and his instruments were used for serious scientific work as well as by wealthy clients.

Based on contemporary trade records and auction accounts, a standard-quality Graham pocket watch in the 1740s–50s would typically cost in the range of £15 to £25; and a finer or more elaborately cased example could reach £30 to £50 or more. At 320 *reales de vellón* to the pound sterling, the *tasador's* valuation of 3,300 *reales* (just over £10) looks rather low. In December 2015, a Graham pocket watch was sold by the auction house Bonhams for £37,500, an exceptional price for an extremely rare item.

For comparison, £25 in 1750 was roughly equivalent to a skilled craftsman's entire annual wage, so Scarlatti's pocket watch was a luxury item, the kind of thing owned by wealthy aristocrats, senior clergy or prosperous merchants. The fact that Scarlatti owned one suggests either considerable personal wealth, a generous patron (the Portuguese or Spanish court), or possibly a gift.

The third item in our basket of luxury goods is a table clock by the London-based Huguenot clockmaker David Hubert (1685-1755), valued at 3,000 *reales de vellón*. Hubert was born in Rouen but settled in London in 1708 and went on to become Master of the Clockmakers' Company in 1743. He was a highly respected maker but not quite in George Graham's league, as is reflected in the slightly lower valuation in the inventory. Nevertheless, a good-quality table clock by a maker of Hubert's standing in the 1740s–50s would have cost somewhere in the £10–£20 range in London. In July 2005, a burr walnut Hubert table clock sold at Christies for £18,000.

It is striking that Scarlatti owned two significant English timepieces. England was acknowledged across Europe as the leader in precision clock-making at this time, and owning English clocks and watches was very much a mark of sophistication and wealth among continental elites. It is tempting to speculate whether he acquired the Graham watch and the Hubert clock when he was in London.

The high purchase prices and valuations put on these two items and the harpsichord would have a significant effect on the exchange rates for the *real de vellón* mentioned earlier. These three items have a combined valuation of 9,300 *reales* and a net present value of some £75,500. On this basis, the *real de vellón* would be worth $65000/9300 = £8.20$ at today's prices. If we then applied this exchange rate to the whole inventory, less the

amount owed by the Portuguese crown, the result would be $(372,956-145,671)*8.20 = \text{£}1,863,737$.

Clearly, the two methods produce widely differing values, and the reality is likely to be somewhere in between. But whether we choose to think of Scarlatti as a millionaire or merely comfortably-off, the range and quality of his possessions suggests a man with a *goût de luxe*, someone who enjoyed a very comfortable lifestyle. Two other features of the inventory are also worthy of note: his generous annual salary (62,363 *reales de vellón*, Morales 2009b, Table 3); and the fact that he kept the equivalent of a year's salary (64,912 *reales*, Table 2) in cash. All of which helps to explain why Scarlatti chose to stay with Maria Bárbara at the Spanish court for more than half his working life. The pay was good; the weather was good; surely only a curmudgeon would begrudge him that.