

Scarlatti and the dissemination of variants: the exemplary case of the 'Essercizi'

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How did Domenico Scarlatti compose? Were the texts of his Sonatas a record of performance practice? Were there various and different versions of the Sonatas? Did Scarlatti write them 'off the cuff'? Or was composition for him a slower and more thoughtful process, such as to make him return to what he had written in order to correct or perfect it? Are there traces of a compositional process in the manuscript and printed sources of the eighteenth century? Can philology, with its systematic critical comparison between witnesses, help us understand how Scarlatti conceived the Sonatas as a way of writing for the harpsichord?

These are some of the questions that Scarlatti performers and scholars have asked themselves many times, and whose answers or solutions always seem very difficult. The obstacles to understanding also lie in the well-known scarcity of autograph sources: we have little, very little 'decisive' evidence of the composer's working methods. However, some answers can be gleaned from the many non-autograph witnesses: in the folds of the many variants, in the details of the numerous copies with their slight differences, important, illuminating details are sometimes hidden, details that can offer a glimpse of Scarlatti's compositional process, his way of constructing the Sonatas, or *tout court*, his way of thinking about music.

In Scarlatti's *Essercizi per gravicembalo*¹ (datable to the end of the 1730s) there are certainly various traces and clues of primary importance. It should be remembered that the *Essercizi* are a collection of fundamental importance, the only one published during the composer's lifetime that was, in all probability, edited under his control and supervision. For Scarlatti it is a central and truly important collection, with the characteristics of an exemplary and authoritative text, somewhat like Bach's *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*. For once in Scarlatti one glimpses an intention to synthesise, a desire to summarise the essential characteristics of his style, condensed into thirty pieces that best exemplify his 'state of the art' at the height of the 1730s.² The *Essercizi* are also at the centre of a philological question of great importance: the thirty Sonatas that make up the collection appear in an enormous number of manuscripts and publications of the eighteenth century, often with many variants of different typologies. Careful evaluation of these variants is fundamental to understanding Scarlatti's compositional process. In this brief article I will examine some exemplary cases of variants, in order of increasing complexity. In particular, two different typologies of variants will be examined here.

¹ A terminological curiosity: in itself, *Essercizi* is an incorrect Italian word, having one 's' too many; it is not, as has been thought, an archaic term. The correct spelling is *Esercizi*. The double 's' reflects the southern Italian pronunciation, and could testify to the anomalous pronunciation of the author himself: indeed, Scarlatti was Neapolitan.

² I have developed this point in detail in my essay '*Essercizi* di riscrittura: il laboratorio creativo di Scarlatti / Rewriting the 'Essercizi': Scarlatti's Creative Workshop', in Domenico Scarlatti, *Sonate per clavicembalo*, vol. 10, Ricordi, Milan 2021, pp. xiii-liii.

At a simpler level—but not easy to interpret—are the variants that I would call **accidental**. These are variants that apparently do not have great relevance to the compositional style; they are superficial variants, such as slight rhythmic changes, individual melodic details, features that seem to have little bearing on the composition (at least at first sight). However, this type of variant can prove to be significant and symptomatic: it could reveal a corrective will, a general tendency, a way of proceeding. An example of this can be found in the famous ‘Cat’s Fugue’ (K30), the last of the *Essercizi*. In the sources I list here, all of which are authoritative and of primary importance, there are many of these variants which we can also define as ‘non-structural’: they do not alter the fundamental structure of the music but mainly affect its ‘surface’. It is a very varied and complex case study. Meanwhile one can note that between *Essercizi*, *Boivin 1*, *Roseingrave*, *Bologna 1*, *Bologna 2* and *Barcelona Orfeo* there are, for example, many different tempo indications:

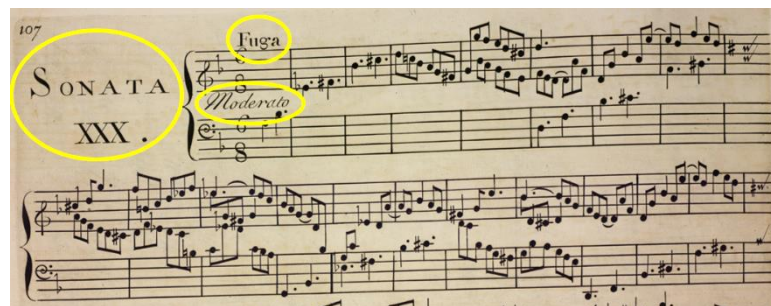


Figure 1: Sonata K30, incipit in *Essercizi*



Figure 2: Sonata K30, incipit in *Boivin 1*

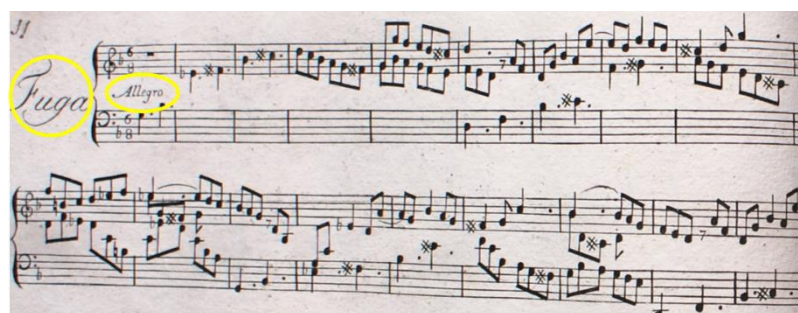


Figure 3: Sonata K30, incipit in *Roseingrave*



Figure 4: Sonata K30, incipit in *Bologna 1*



Figure 5: Sonata K30, incipit in *Bologna 2*

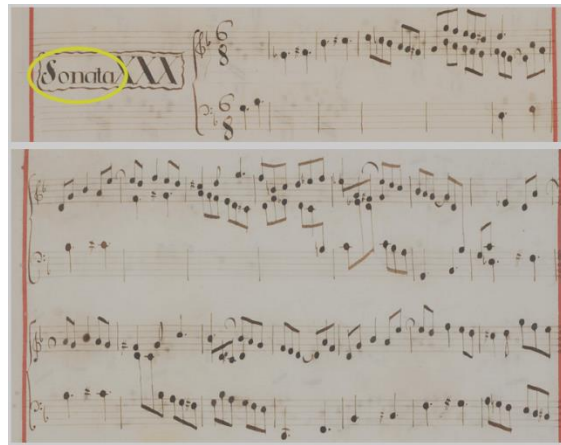


Figure 6: Sonata K30, incipit in *Barcelona Orfeo*

Based on the presumed dating of these sources, it can be assumed that Scarlatti initially called this piece simply 'Fuga' (in the 1720s?); this first stage of the compositional process is evidenced in the Bologna sources. Later (in the 1730s?) Scarlatti might have decided to add the indication 'Allegro' (or did the copyists decide?); this second stage can be seen in Boivin and Roseingrave. Still later, for the official edition of the *Essercizi*, the composer might have opted for a 'Moderato' that seems almost to dampen or temper the previous, more radical agogic indication. But here the indication 'Sonata', not previously found, also appears to mark its inclusion within the thirty Sonatas of the *Essercizi*. So here, in the official edition of the *Essercizi*, Scarlatti gives us three different pieces of information regarding the title: the piece is a *Fuga* (in terms of form and compositional style), but also a *Sonata* (as a typology of a 'short piece') and also an *Esercizio* (as part of a larger collection). At that point (late 1730s/early 1740s) the Barcelona Orfeo source seems to certify above all the typology of the 'short piece', leaving only the indication *Sonata* and nothing more. All this could constitute an important first clue to Scarlatti's fluctuating compositional choices: in K30 he seems to demonstrate a desire to modify the very title of his piece (unless such variants are to be attributed to other agents: to copyists, for example).

In the excerpts shown, however, differences in small details of writing should also be observed. I will mention just one of many: in bars 6 and 12 only Boivin and Roseingrave have a quaver rest instead of a tie. In my 'Critical Apparatus' to volume 10 of the Ricordi edition, I report all these minute variants, of which there are very many. In summary, it can be said that in the eighteenth-century sources of K30 at least two different lines of writing can be discerned: the first tends to simplify and lighten the contrapuntal texture, while the second tends to complicate it, adding greater detail and making it denser.

There is no conclusive evidence in this regard, but all this seems to point to the composer's will, as he appears to have revised his G minor Fugue several times, adding or removing compositional elements concerning rhythm, contrapuntal conduct, the relationship between the voices, and different polyphonic density. Even if these are minor details, which ultimately do not affect the structure of the composition, Scarlatti's corrective will is evident: this is enough to make us understand the presence of a compositional process consisting of various phases, with retouching, adjustments and various modifications. We could also say that here Scarlatti shows himself to be meticulous, as if he had particular attention for the smallest details; a 'chiselling' Scarlatti, in search of a better focus or definition of the smallest features.

Very different is the case of the variants found in other Sonatas, for example in the Sonata in A major K24. Here the greater level of complexity seems evident in the presence of variants that can be defined as **structural**, that is, capable of altering and modifying the very structure of the piece, its overall shape. A representative selection of manuscript sources and editions, also from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, allows us in this case to discern some difficulties in the very reconstruction of the musical text. The *Essercizi* has a notable case of a presumed error here, a bar that seems wrong, unduly long:

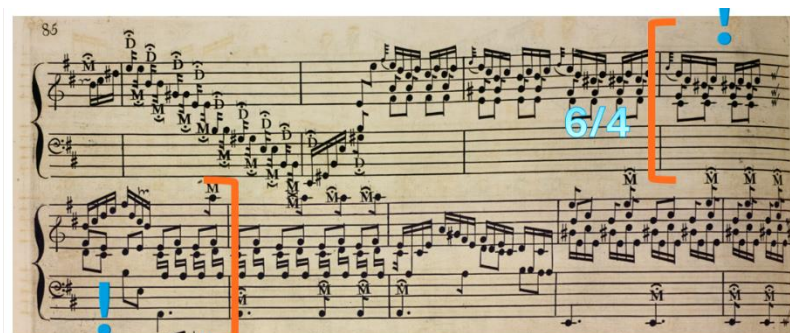


Figure 7: Sonata K24, bars 37-43 in *Essercizi*

Is this really an error? At first sight, one would say so. In a Sonata in 4/4, this is the only bar in 6/4: it is an incongruity that at first glance would appear to be caused by the line break. Passing from one system to another, the engraver would have temporarily lost track of the exact number of beats and placed the first bar line of the second system two crotchets later. However, this 'simple' interpretation does not seem to stand up to scrutiny. If the editor and engraver of the *Essercizi* were working on Scarlatti's manuscripts, how could they not have noticed that from that point on the bar lines in the manuscripts were *all* mis-aligned? Indeed, if one assumes that the composer placed the bar lines 'correctly', always in 4/4, from that point on the bar lines would all have appeared in different places from those in the engraving of *Essercizi*.

Much more plausible, then, is that the incongruity (whether or not it is a real error) was present in the Scarlatti manuscripts themselves, and that the engraving of the *Essercizi* certifies such original

writing. Could Scarlatti not have noticed that he had placed many bar lines in the wrong position? I think it is rather a different case, namely a 'false' 4/4 bar and an 'actual' 2/4 bar: whether the bar lines are moved half a bar forward or backward, the substance of the writing does not change. This also seems entirely plausible based on a phraseological comparison between the first and second parts of the Sonata itself.

But by far the most interesting aspect here are the 'reactions' of the various copyists and editors in the other manuscript and printed sources of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is truly surprising to see that many have literally 'reacted' to Scarlatti's presumed error, seeking different possible solutions. Münster has, so to speak, put the bar lines back in place, but in doing so the ending is not compatible with a three-beat bar suitable for the ritornello:



Figure 8: Sonata K24, bars 37-42 in *Münster*

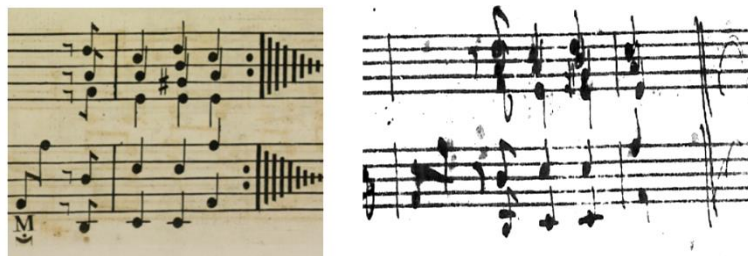


Figure 9: Sonata K24, final bars in *Essercizi* (left) and in *Münster*

Roseingrave may have devised a decidedly more ingenious solution: after also moving the bar lines, he seems to have actually invented an additional half bar, consisting of a pure and simple repetition of the musical material (highlighted in blue in Figure 10 below); in this way, he may have thought he had remedied a possible metrical error (such as the one present in Münster) and had made the metrical 'numbers add up' at the end:



Figure 10: Sonata K24, bars 37-44 in *Roseingrave*

Witvogel also addressed the problem, and resolved it in a similar way by adding a half bar of repetition right from the start:

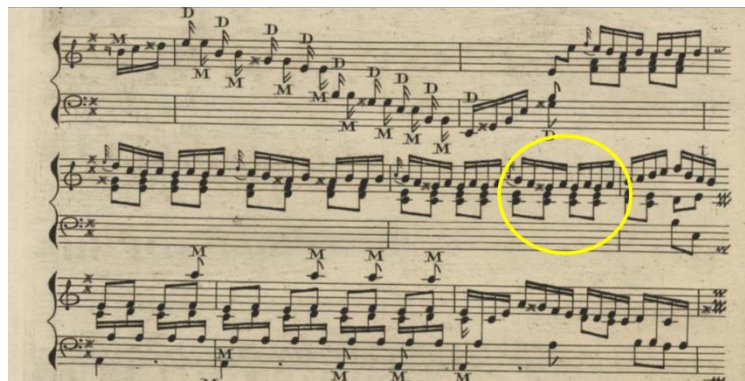


Figure 11: Sonata K24, bars 37-43 in *Witvogel*

The Czerny edition, in the nineteenth century, does the same as Witvogel but first invents a half bar in a different style:



Figure 12: Sonata K24, bars 37-42 in Czerny's edition

But a higher (more serious, one might say) degree of tampering is achieved by Alessandro Longo at the beginning of the twentieth century. Longo invents a completely new half bar out of thin air:



Figure 13: Sonata K24, bars 37-42 in Longo's edition

This is certainly the least acceptable solution, the most forced, so it is surprising to find that even Gilbert, at the end of the twentieth century, adopted Longo's solution!



Figure 14: Sonata K24, bars 37-42 in Gilbert's edition

The case of Sonata K24 is very instructive: it shows that in reading and interpreting musical texts one must never take anything for granted. It also teaches us that eighteenth-century sources are very inconsistent, and that behind small variants there may lie complex reasoning, particular interpretations, and personal choices. It teaches us, moreover, to handle the various editions with care and consider them with caution, as they may contain incongruities, oversights or decisions that are not always entirely acceptable. But returning to the question of variants: K24 contains, in the eighteenth-century sources, a macroscopic case of a *structural* variant, which seems to raise profound questions about how to conceive the musical phrase in Scarlatti. Possibly, this case could also indicate a certain indifference or Scarlattian 'lightness' regarding the metrical consistency of a bar of music.

There are many other examples, but they all raise the same question: how did Scarlatti work? How did he conceive musical writing? When, how and why did he make changes to the texts of the Sonatas? I believe that the many variants observable in the eighteenth-century sources of the *Essercizi* provide valuable clues, if not to answer such difficult questions, at least to give us a general sense of his *modus operandi*. What seems to emerge (as in the case of K30, but one could also cite K4, K8, K9, K11 and others) is the presence of a complex creative workshop, which includes a clear will to return to the musical texts and to rewrite them, retouch them, redefine them with slight additions or modifications that are significant for us: not marginal in the slightest. On the other hand, there also seems to emerge an attitude to composition that is casual or at least eccentric, as the case of Sonata K24 would suggest. In short, the in-depth study of variants serves to open interpretative perspectives on Scarlatti's conception of music itself.

Is the text of the *Essercizi* linked to the two closest sources (Boivin 1 and Roseingrave) in a direct and logical way? What relationships are there between them? While not forgetting the presence of older sources (Bologna, Turin), the bi-univocal relationship between the sources must be emphasised: they certainly influence each other, in a convoluted, non-linear way. Furthermore, there are other factors that make the eventual map more complex and not straightforward. What is certain is that one cannot think in terms of a true, classic 'stemma', of a straight and consequential line of copying, but instead we must think of more divergent and disordered relationships, which form 'galaxies' of textual interconnections.