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Scarlatti and Kurtág: A Case Study in Creative Programming

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Abstract

This research paper explores developing trends in programming recitals by way of a case study that juxtaposes keyboard works of composers Domenico Scarlatti (1685 – 1757) and György Kurtág (b.1926). It studies the preparation and performance of a recital of works by these two composers within the context of similar performances by artists of international standing.

This paper places the piano recital within an historical context and explores some of the changes that have occurred in the presentation of instrumental music to the present day, including the growing trend towards concerts that alternate elements in order to create links between them.

Research into possible links between Domenico Scarlatti and György Kurtág covers both biographical information and compositional techniques used in the works being examined. The paper documents the process of developing a programme which specifically seeks to establish audible connections between juxtaposed works by the two composers and details both subjective and external responses to the performance.

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Prologue

A personal experience

In May 1995 I gave a piano recital in the *Kisterem* (Small Concert Hall) of the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest. On the suggestion of Rita Wágner, Professor of Piano at the Academy, the first half of the programme alternated between keyboard sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (1685 – 1757) and short pieces by Hungarian composer György Kurtág (b.1926).

At the time I was particularly intrigued by the world of Scarlatti while also working on pieces by other composers including Kurtág, who I had recently seen teaching at the Bartók Seminar in Szombathely, Hungary. I wanted to include both these composers, as well as works by J.S. Bach, Schumann and Granados, in a solo recital and began sketching a programme that moved in a 'normal' manner from one composer to another. In the course of discussing the programme order, Rita Wágner suggested putting the Kurtág pieces in between the Scarlatti works and extending the selection to cover the entire first half of the concert without any break for applause between the individual pieces. We hadn't discussed the concert as an opportunity to experiment with innovative programming (and at that stage I was unaware of similar programmes such as those discussed later in this report) but we both felt instinctively that this combination would work well. I toyed with this idea in a number of permutations and settled on an approximately 50-minute selection of Scarlatti/Kurtág, followed after an interval by the Bach, Schumann and Granados works.

The first half of the concert was surprisingly effective. As a performer, I found the transitions between Scarlatti and Kurtág both refreshing and helpful for my concentration and I felt inspired to approach the individual pieces differently from the way I had experimented with them in isolation. The audience feedback was also positive about the combination, with many

comments to the effect that something new and different was audible in the sonatas when heard in this way, and that each composer seemed to shed new light on the other.

The rewarding experience of putting together and performing this programme, combined with my continuing affection for these particular composers, remained in the back of my mind. We had stumbled on this idea more-or-less by accident but I felt convinced that it was an interesting and worthwhile experiment, both in itself, and as a possible trial for other combinations. I decided to take the opportunity to trial this alternation of Scarlatti and Kurtág once again as part of a solo recital for the Wellington Chamber Music Society Sunday Series in 2001 (which was also assessed as part of a Master of Music degree). The programme that resulted, and the processes involved in its creation, form the main focus of this report.

For the 2001 concert I needed to serve both the interests of my experiment and those of the promoter of the series. Once again I developed a Scarlatti/Kurtág selection for the first half of the concert but with the addition of two pieces by Isaac Albéniz before the interval. As well as being popular pieces with an audience, I wanted to see if the juxtaposition of *Evocación* and *El Puerto* from Albéniz's *Iberia* cycle with the Scarlatti sonatas could draw attention to the presence of Iberian folk elements in Scarlatti. To maintain the unity of the Scarlatti/Kurtág selection I decided to leave the stage before performing the Albéniz. I felt, however, that the inclusion of the Spanish pieces continued and complemented the idea of juxtaposition being explored in the preceding section. Following the interval, the programme continued with the *Sonata in A D 959* by Franz Schubert, in keeping with the promoter's request for a single extended work to balance the many shorter pieces.

In recreating the initial 1995 experiment, by developing another programme involving Scarlatti and Kurtág, I sought to clarify some of the factors

involved in making such a programme successful. I wanted to look at recital programming to see if other performers had experimented with similar concepts and whether this was a new idea or part of a developing trend. My intention was to look generally at the backgrounds and musical languages of both composers and to examine any possible links between the two that might help explain their compatibility. I also wanted to document the process of designing an alternating programme that was well balanced, containing enough variety to maintain audience interest and sufficient continuity to avoid fragmented concentration. By working through some of the factors involved in assembling a cohesive whole out of disparate parts, such as key relationships and mood changes, I hoped to become more aware of the creative possibilities of links between pieces in programmes generally. My final intention was to detail some of the feedback I received about the worth, or otherwise, of this particular concept of alternating Scarlatti and Kurtág, and to draw any relevant conclusions about the wider possibilities of programming in this way.