

A Case for Sitwell's Genius Manqué

It seems necessary to give some account of this musician, who was an enthusiastic, ingenious, and worthy man, of considerable eminence in his youth for his performance on the harpsichord and organ, both as a sight's-man and voluntary player; and his intellects being a little deranged in the latter part of his life, rendered him so whimsical and eccentric a character, that he is too prominent to be over-looked. (Burney 703)

The reputation of the English composer Thomas Roseingrave, as observed by Dr. Charles Burney, has not withstood the test of time. Once praised as an eminent figure of 18th-century English music, Roseingrave's name has come to be known only through its association with the famous Italian composer, Domenico Scarlatti. This brief companionship catapulted Scarlatti to fame in England, and initiated the consignment of his works to posterity, but did not hold the same fate for the Englishman. Although Roseingrave revered his relationship with the Italian master, history has shown it to be quite detrimental to the appreciation of his highly original compositions. In order to determine Roseingrave's true historical importance, his name must be emancipated from that of his more established Italian contemporary, as only under such circumstances can his output be evaluated objectively. The achievement of this goal relies on two important factors: the addressing of some common misconceptions concerning the extent of the composers' relationship with one another, and a differentiation between the respective compositional practices of each composer. Only once this has been achieved can one investigate Roseingrave's music in order to establish its independent merit. While a full study of Roseingrave's compositions is beyond the scope of

this paper, hopefully the few examples selected to demonstrate his unusually rich contrapuntal style, and his innovative harmonic language will inspire a more detailed investigation.

In the year 1709, Thomas Roseingrave first made the acquaintance of Domenico Scarlatti in Venice, where both had been invited to a nobleman's house in order to favour the guests with performances upon the harpsichord. Roseingrave would later describe his first impression of the Italian virtuoso to Burney, who recorded the account:

...when he began to play, Rosy [Roseingrave] said, he thought ten hundred d---ls had been at the instrument; he had never 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. (Burney 704)

Following this meeting, it is said that Roseingrave accompanied Scarlatti to Rome and Naples, during which time he rarely left the virtuoso's side until 1713 (Pagano). No documented evidence has yet come to light confirming Roseingrave's presence in Italy during the four years in question; however, his detailed description certainly suggests that he admired and was deeply influenced by Scarlatti as a performer.

His association with the Italian master would resume in 1720, when he was involved in the London performance of the opera *Narciso*. It had long been thought that Scarlatti was

present at the performance on May 30 of the same year, but it has since been suggested that Scarlatti was most likely in Lisbon at the time of the production (Kirkpatrick 64).

Regardless, Roseingrave continued to advocate Scarlatti's works throughout London, and would reach the height of his involvement when he edited and published a pirated edition of "XLII Suites de Pièces Pour le Clavçin. En deux Volumes. Composées par Domenico Scarlatti" in 1739 (Newton 139).

It cannot be contested that Roseingrave was largely responsible for Scarlatti's overwhelming popularity in England, but this should not overshadow his significance as a composer in his own right. After all, the two seem to have been in contact only once during their lifetimes, which hardly constitutes the grounds for a profound artistic influence to have developed. In fact, such an influence would have been impossible, since by the time Roseingrave edited Scarlatti's *Essercizi* in 1739, he had already composed most of his known keyboard works (Pagano). Furthermore, even though Roseingrave was a great admirer of Scarlatti's virtuosity at the keyboard during his younger years, nothing indicates that the Italian had a lasting influence on the Englishman's compositional style.

In 1986, Malcolm Boyd explicitly denied any significant similarities between the keyboard works of these two composers. Boyd does note a slight resemblance between their respective works in a small number of passages containing syncopation, but concludes that Handel had the greatest influence on Roseingrave (Boyd 213). Nevertheless, having been influenced by Handel does not necessarily take away from the uniqueness of Roseingrave's style. Certain qualities that contribute to his originality as a composer will be investigated

later on, but first the characteristics of Scarlatti and Roseingrave's music must be contrasted and differentiated beyond the brief comment made by Boyd.

The most obvious difference between the respective styles of these two composers lies in their use of fugal writing. A demonstration through the use of examples would prove to be trivial, simply because Scarlatti wrote only a handful of fugues, and a significant portion of Roseingrave's output embodies this contrapuntal method. Roseingrave's superiority in this medium is reinforced by an account of his audition at St. George's church in London, in which he improvised masterfully on several fugal subjects, and prevailed victorious over six other candidates (Butcher 281).¹ Burney's account of this competition reveals Roseingrave's style to have been "too crude and learned for the generality of the hearers," but redeems the newly appointed organist by commenting admirably on his scientific and dexterous treatment of the given subjects through inversion, augmentation, diminution, the introduction of counter-subjects, and other methods of thematic development (703). This seemingly paradoxical statement by Burney is easily clarified by establishing the exact meaning of the two contradictory terms: crude and learned. The word "crude" surely relates to Roseingrave's liberal use of dissonance, which the English traveler noted in his evaluation of the composer's voluntaries (706), and the term "learned" refers to the fugal texture. As the German's very academic tradition of fugal writing was already seen as being severely complicated for the average listener, Roseingrave's enhancement of it through the

¹ Several different accounts concerning the number of competitors for the position were made in various media sources following the event. Vernon Butcher reasons that the article in the St. James's Evening Post, which notes seven competitors in all, is the most reliable.

use of an unusually dense texture would have increased the “learned” sound of the work. The “crude” use of dissonance alone surely does not distinguish the music of Roseingrave from that of Scarlatti, but the method in which it is used constitutes an important difference between the composers’ respective styles.

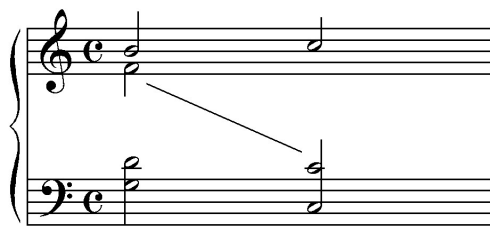
Ralph Kirkpatrick points out that dissonance in Scarlatti’s music often results from the superposition of sub-dominant and dominant harmonies (Kirkpatrick 229). Although dissonance results under other circumstances, none prove to be as prominent in Scarlatti’s keyboard works as the latter.² In order to contrast this method of achieving dissonance with those used by Roseingrave, an investigation concerning the resolution of the dominant seventh chord should suffice.

Scarlatti’s peculiar method of resolving the dominant seventh chord to an open octave on the tonic scale degree can be explained by the principle of superposition described by Kirkpatrick. For Scarlatti, the seventh chord is nothing more than a compression of the sub-dominant and dominant harmonies into one (Kirkpatrick 216). As a result, the theoretical seventh of the dominant chord, which in this case represents the root of the sub-dominant chord, resolves quite naturally down a fourth to the tonic. (Example 1) This leaves the impression of an unresolved seventh, which is never approached similarly in the music of Roseingrave. In fact, the Englishman never resolves a dominant seventh chord to an open octave, but rather resolves the chord in the conventional manner or introduces unusual dissonances that lead the resolution astray. Furthermore, Roseingrave uses the dominant seventh chord quite regularly at final cadences, something that is avoided by Scarlatti

² A complete discussion of these aspects of Scarlatti’s harmonic style may be found in chapter ten of Kirkpatrick’s book.

(Kirkpatrick 216). Having already established that Roseingrave had composed the majority of his keyboard music prior to becoming acquainted with Scarlatti's *Essercizi*, the fact that the composers' respective methods of creating and resolving dissonances differ so significantly, further reduces the likelihood that Roseingrave owes any significant part of his compositional craft to Scarlatti. The unique style of this relatively unknown Englishman's music is further substantiated by his frequent use of unconventional voice leading, colourful melodic writing, and distant modulations.

Example 1: Scarlatti's Typical Resolution of the V⁷ Chord



In his *A General History of Music*, Charles Burney comments on these features of Roseingrave's writing:

The harmony in the voluntaries, which Roseingrave published, is rendered intolerably harsh and ungrateful by a licentious and extravagant modulation, and a more frequent use of the sharp third and flat sixth, than any composer with whose works I am at all acquainted, not excepting Dr. Blow; and his double fugues are so confused by the too close succession of unmarked subjects, that it is impossible, at the end of the performance, to remember what they are. (Burney 706)

This reaction of a well-respected musician seems to discredit any case for Roseingrave as “the most conspicuous instance of ‘genius manqué’ in the history of English music” as suggested by Sacheverell Sitwell (56); however, is it not often the case that the most forward-looking ideas are rarely appreciated or understood during the generation in which they are conceived? I should emphasize that my goal is not to unveil Roseingrave as a “genius manqué,” but the elements of the music that irritated Burney over two centuries ago, retrospectively translate into a very original, and colourful harmony by modern standards.

Example 2: Roseingrave, Fugue I (mm. 15-16)

The image shows a musical score for two staves, treble and bass clef, in 3/4 time. The key signature has two flats. The treble staff contains a complex melodic line with many accidentals. The bass staff contains a simpler line. A bracket above the treble staff in the second measure is labeled "(false relation)". Two asterisks (*) are placed below the bass staff in the first and second measures.

The consistent use of the sharp third and the flat sixth are so plentiful in the set of fifteen voluntaries and fugues that no particular example needs to be cited. A more rare case, however, involves a false relation resulting from the abundant use of these modified pitches. (Example 2) Another unique feature of Roseingrave’s style involves the frequent use of the melodic augmented second. (Example 3) Note that the unresolved augmented fourth between the alto and soprano does eventually resolve in the next measure, after being transposed (the diminished fifth on the downbeat of the ensuing measure), suggesting that Roseingrave is simply using it as a means of creating a sustained sense of tension. Also, the seventh of the

original chord does resolve as expected, to the B^b (mediant degree of the temporary tonic: g minor). Finally, note the augmented second between the E^b and F[#], which adds a very unique touch to a conventional practice (circle of fifths progression). One final example demonstrates how Roseingrave achieved this sense of perpetual tension via a unique resolution of the dominant seventh chord (a resolution not repeated in any of the sonatas of Scarlatti). (Example 4) Here, the seventh is resolved in the upper voice, but is simultaneously transferred to the bass voice to function as the sub-dominant degree leading into the final cadence.

Example 3: Roseingrave, Voluntary IV (mm. 23-24)

Example 4: Roseingrave, Suite No. 1, Allegro (mm. 72-74)

Although the very original use of dissonance in the music of Roseingrave suggests a vision well beyond his time, one could argue that it demonstrates ignorance to the rules of

harmony on the part of the composer. This statement, however, would be one of ignorance in itself. The fact is that functional harmony, as we know it today, is based on the works of masters from the past. In Roseingrave's time, such a system had not yet been developed, simply because conventional harmony was still in its developmental stages. Even so, Roseingrave clearly understood the unwritten rules of harmony that would come to shape our modern understanding of it. Of testament to this are his twelve German flute sonatas, which follow these 'rules' quite diligently.

Concerning Burney's opinion of Roseingrave's fugal writing, there is little to say. He believed that the listener should hear every entry of both subjects in a double fugue clearly, and that too many entries, as in the music of Roseingrave, obscured the work into meaninglessness. It suffices to say that the real art of the fugue lies in the development of the subjects³, and their interaction with one another. Although the material must be stated clearly at the start, the true beauty of the medium lies in how all of the constituent parts unite to form a complete, harmonious whole. Thus, contrary to Burney's belief, it is not necessarily desirable for one to be able to identify every entry of each subject. Roseingrave's subjects are always stated clearly at the beginning of his fugues, and the numerous entries add an incredible rhythmic drive that intensifies the effect of the diverse harmonic palette.

In light of the aforementioned evidence, it is quite clear that Roseingrave's liberal use of stark dissonance was unprecedented. As such, he created a harmonic palette unique amongst his contemporaries, including the illustrious Domenico Scarlatti. His important role in establishing Scarlatti's reputation in England cannot be overlooked; however, to allow this

³ Here, the other constituent parts of a fugue such as the counter-subject, and the answer are considered to be a result of the subject's development.

fact to overshadow Roseingrave's *sui generis* style is not only an injustice to him, but also an indignity to the history of western music itself. As a composer, Roseingrave stands on his own, and as an innovator, far surpasses the confines of mediocrity. Perhaps misunderstood in his time, it is in our time that Sitwell's "genius manqué" must be considered as an important figure in the development of western music, and be given the attention that is long overdue.