

Nicholas Susi, pianist

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Audiophile Audition

2017; Critical review of debut album *Scarlatti Now*, by Sebastian Herrera

“Scarlatti Now — Nicholas Susi, piano—self produced. 66:00—8/4/17.

Born the same year as Handel and J.S. Bach, Domenico Scarlatti was no doubt influenced by his father, a successful composer. And while his father’s legacy would be vocal music, Alessandro’s son would be forever known for his keyboard exercises and sonatas. There have been very few performers who are up to the challenge of trying to record all of the over five hundred sonatas. Far more common is to find a “recital” of Scarlatti sonatas, some utilizing the harpsichord, the instrument with which Scarlatti used. But pianists, too, are fond of finding the potential for dynamic inflection within Scarlatti’s works. In this premier disc from pianist Nicholas Susi, he’s put together a recital of Scarlatti sonatas (K. 159, 379, 318, 319, 466, 141, 214, 96) alongside more modern pieces. The juxtaposition between styles, for me, helps me reconsider musical ideas that Scarlatti collected to form his themes and rhythmic motives. The question is, “How much did Scarlatti influence future composers?”

As one of the strongest examples presented by Susi is the pairing of Scarlatti’s Sonata in F minor K. 466 with Luciano Berio’s *Luftklavier*. The theme in Scarlatti’s sonata is so focused and memorable; it’s hard not to hear it in your head over the rambling discordant blur of notes that opens the *Luftklavier* piece. I heard the Scarlatti as a “waking moment” and the *Luftklavier* as a disconcerting dream. The following Scarlatti sonata, K. 141 in D minor, with fleeting, fast runs, somehow dovetails, for me, nicely away from the more dynamic moments of the Berio. Of course, we also have the ability to hear these pieces on their own, out of sequence.

Glenn Gould once remarked that he foresaw the ability of the modern listener of recordings in the home as a creative pursuit, wherein the listener at home would be able to customize the recording to their preferences. His context at the time was the tinkering of tone controls available on a home amplifier. Susi’s recording presents a series of pieces that form a program he’s created. It’s our choice if we want to hear the program or if we want to hear individual pieces. And that’s the rub: what if I love Scarlatti, but don’t care for Rossini?

Susi wants us, I’m guessing, to indulge in his program, at least once. And let’s be honest, the style of Salvatore Sciarrino’s *Prelude for piano* is very different than the baroque, ornament-encrusted sonatas by Scarlatti. But how clever are the little diatonic runs in K. 379, followed by the chromatic smears from Sciarrino? It is obvious Susi’s choice in

balance was purposeful. He also leveraged some familiar pieces in his program, from a selection from Rossini's Barber of Seville, to Liszt's Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este, and Une barque sur l'océan by Ravel.

The recorded sound of Susi's piano is clear and close. This closeness is especially rewarding when listening to the Scarlatti sonatas, especially so in the more difficult technical passages. His articulation is very clean and there's no hiding if he had flaws in technique. Susi, I believe, chose well in not going too out of character in these pieces by keeping the dynamic range within bounds and not overusing the pedal. What's most jarring, perhaps, is the very different sound world transmitted in a piece such as Une barque sur l'océan. The pianistic style changes, of course. While I am more used to hearing pieces like this with more reverb, Susi's recital let's us sit up a little closer to the piano. And in that experience his technique again is focused, so much so we get to marvel at the technique required to address the dynamic range and stylistic variety called for in "modern" pieces.

Susi is starting a career as a piano professor. This premier recording reveals he's a great technician, that he's sensitive to the style of pieces he presents, and has a vision for engaging the listener with variety and diversity in his programming. The baroque fan that I am enjoyed his Scarlatti. I am not always up to the challenge of mixing music from different periods in a listening session, but I have to admire a performer who is willing to challenge listeners in "seeing" and hearing new relationships in music. I'd like to wish Mr. Susi the best of luck in his new career as a pedagogue, but I'm certain we'll hear more of him in recordings as well.

—Sebastian Herrera”

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