

Domenico Scarlatti and the Hidden Voice Exchange

Abstract

The voice exchange is a time-honored way of traversing and enlarging the distance between the opening tonic and the major supertonic on the road to the dominant. It appears with equal frequency in the long allemandes of F. Couperin, J. S. Bach, and G. F. Handel, and in the sonata-form movements of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms. The voice exchange prolongs the tonic by introducing a passing supertonic and by adding an intervening dominant before the tonic's inversion. It often also changes the inverted tonic to a diminished-seventh or to an augmented-sixth chord. Most important, it provides for an expressive statement of scale degree 3 in the bass. Only one composer systematically downplayed or avoided the appearance of this inversion: Domenico Scarlatti. In his *30 Essercizi per Gravicembalo* (London, 1738), Scarlatti employed the voice exchange in almost every sonata, but either relegated it to a fleeting appearance at the end of a long preparatory passage or else hid it altogether. Scarlatti would subvert the conclusion of the exchange by suspending scale degree 1 in the bass below, by continuing the suspension as the seventh under the supertonic, and by covering 1 in the upper voice with a sustained 5 overhead. I suggest that there were stylistic and historical—as well as rhythmic and tonal—reasons for Scarlatti's special and complex procedure. While under pressure to compose in a demonstratively gestural and didactic style that permitted strong dissonance at the surface, Scarlatti was also under pressure to compose in the new and tasteful galant manner, with large-scale, homophonically tinged chords that favored root positions over first inversions. The resulting compromise was as polished as it was challenging.