

NAXOS

Padre Antonio  
**SOLER**  
Sonatas for Harpsichord  
Volume 11  
Gilbert Rowland



## Antonio Soler (1729-1783) Sonatas for Harpsichord, Volume 11

Owing mainly to the tireless efforts of the late Father Samuel Rubio and other editors in making many of his works available in print during the past forty years, Antonio Soler is now justly regarded as the most important composer active in Spain during the second half of the eighteenth century. He was born at Olot, in the province of Gerona in north-eastern Spain in 1729 and baptised on 3rd December. At the age of six he entered the famous choir school at the Monastery of Montserrat where he studied organ and composition. Before that he probably received some tuition from his father, who was a regimental bandsman. In 1744 he was appointed organist at the cathedral in Seo de Urgel and was later ordained as subdeacon there.

At that time the Bishop of Urgel asked him if he knew of a boy who could play the organ and who wished to take holy orders at the Escorial. Soler volunteered himself, saying that he very much wanted to take the vows and retreat from the world, and so on 25th September 1752 he became a monk and entered that famous monastery near Madrid, built by Philip II. He also became master of the Chapel there, probably in 1757 following the death of his predecessor, Gabriel de Moratilla. Soler remained there until his death in 1783.

During the years 1752 to 1757 Soler is reputed to have studied composition with Domenico Scarlatti and many of Soler's sonatas show his influence to a marked degree both in form and musical language. Despite his probable debt to Scarlatti, however, Soler's own personality is very much in evidence in these works. Many of these sonatas, like Scarlatti's, are single movements in binary form, that is, in two sections, each of which is repeated, although Soler also composed a large number of multi-movement sonatas. It is quite possible that he was one of the copyists of some of the manuscript volumes of Scarlatti's sonatas, now housed in Venice and Parma.

Fortunately for posterity Soler's wish for a quiet life did not work out quite as he intended. Apart from his monastic duties he was expected to train the choir,

provide choral music for services, and provide the Royal family with secular and instrumental music during their frequent visits to the Escorial. The Spanish court regularly spent the autumn there. Soler's achievement is also astonishing when considering that much of his day would have been taken up with prayer and the routine of the community. Periods of illness often prevented him from working. We learn from the anonymous obituary of Soler, written by a fellow monk on the day he died, that he survived on only four hours' sleep most nights, often retiring at midnight or one o'clock in the morning before rising at four or five o'clock to say Mass. Mention is also made of his religious devotion, compassionate nature, scholarly interests and excessive candour. Soler died at the Escorial on 20th December, 1783, from a gradually worsening fever which he had caught the previous month. Soler's huge output runs to nearly 500 individual works, and of his 150 keyboard sonatas, most were intended for harpsichord.

A large number of Soler's instrumental works, including many of the sonatas, were composed for the Infante Don Gabriel (1752-1788), son of Carlos III, whom Soler served as music master from the mid-1760s. As with Scarlatti, Spanish folk-song and dance elements feature prominently in his sonatas. Soler was much influenced by the changing musical fashions of the second half of the eighteenth century and some of the single movement sonatas, as well as the four-movement works dating from the late 1770s and early 1780s approach the Viennese classical school in musical language. There are a large number of slow movements amongst the single-movement works which contain some of his most profound and memorable music.

Recent research has shown that, as in the case of Scarlatti, many of the single movement sonatas were intended to be played as pairs, though this is not always apparent in Rubio's edition, except in the case of Rubio Nos. 1-27, which follows the same numerical sequence of the English edition. Many of Soler's sonatas make use of the full five-octave compass and were probably

originally played on a 63-key harpsichord with a compass from F to g<sup>2</sup> which Diego Fernández built for the Infante Don Gabriel in 1761.

The exuberant technically demanding virtuoso *Sonata in C major* (without Rubio number) with its frequent wide skips and delightfully syncopated second subject comes from a manuscript in the Biblioteca de Cataluña which appears to have been unknown to Rubio as it is not included in his catalogue. The infectious, rustic sounding dance-like 9/8 rhythms call to mind such works as *Sonata No. 88* (recorded on Vol. 10) and the *Finale of No. 93* (recorded on Vol. 3)

The first member of the contrasted pair of sonatas, *Sonatas Nos. 22/23 in D flat major*, is one of Soler's most extended slow movements. Although marked *Cantabile andantino* this work's frequent use of dotted rhythms and imitations of bugle calls give it more of a martial character at times, and there are some remarkable modulations as well as a profusion of contrasted ideas. *Sonata No. 23* is also rich in thematic material, and although in some ways a virtuoso piece with frequent wide skips in the left hand, plus a dramatic passage involving dotted rhythms in the right hand against arpeggios in the left, it is the warm, heartfelt, at times almost Schubertian lyrical character of this work which predominates. Again, there are some surprising modulations.

The structure of *Sonata No. 128 in E minor* is most unusual, even allowing for the fact that it is a kind of Rondo rather than a work cast in the composer's usual binary form. There appear to be two contrasted Rondo themes being developed alternately here. The initial theme, in triple time is lyrical and developed at considerable length through various keys until a more lively section in duple time starting in the tonic key and based on a theme featuring repeated notes is reached. This is followed by a short recap of the original theme, before the repeated note idea is developed more extensively. Variants of both ideas then continue to alternate.

*Sonata No. 45 in C major* is a sprightly, dance-like work containing some charming melodies seemingly derived from Spanish folklore. There is some

interesting use of chromaticism and a passage towards the end of each half, featuring cross-accented where the right hand's 3/8 pulse is perceived as 6/16. The 'Princesa de Asturias' to whom this sonata is dedicated is unlikely to have been Maria Barbara since Soler would have been barely seventeen years old when she became Queen of Spain in 1746.

*Sonata No. 51* is a short, light-hearted piece having the character of a jig. The work also contains some witty syncopations, and in the second half some teasing harmonic progressions

*Sonata No. 65 in A minor* is the third of a collection of six three-movement sonatas dating from 1777, and the only one of the set in a minor key. Both the lyrical, light-textured opening movement and the more forthright, driving second movement are very rustic in character and contain thematic material suggestive of Spanish folk-music. As with the other works in the set the last movement is fugal, and this one, in 6/8 time, is notable for its imitations in contrary motion, modulations to distant keys, and masterly flow of counterpoint, almost worthy of J.S. Bach.

*Sonata No. 127 in D major* is a brief, simply constructed work of much charm, and rather Scarlatti in idiom. Alberti figurations in the left hand feature prominently and there are one or two surprises in store such as the unexpected phrygian cadence at bars 21 and 22.

*Sonata No. 62 in B flat major* is the second of a pair of four movement sonatas dating from 1782. Like its predecessor, the work opens with a Rondo, and this one has an almost Mozartian charm and grace. Chains of thirds feature prominently in both the main theme and the first episode. The second, in the relative minor is more virtuosic, featuring some particularly skittish keyboard writing which involves the use of repeated notes and broken octaves. The buoyant, high-spirited second movement is thoroughly enchanting and seems to call to mind the sounds of a fairground organ at times. The *Minue di rivolti* (a "revolving" Minuet where all the themes keep re-appearing in a different order) seems to have been a Soler speciality where form and structure are concerned, and one of its themes could

easily be mistaken for a Neapolitan song. The jaunty Finale hovers around the key of D minor a lot of the time after the dominant of F major is reached. The first half ends in D minor, and it is this key which dominates

much of the second section before modulating back to the home key of B flat via G minor, C major and F major, thus ending as optimistically as it began.

**Gilbert Rowland**

## **Gilbert Rowland**

Gilbert Rowland was born in Glasgow in 1946. He studied the harpsichord with Millicent Silver at the Royal College of Music and made his debut while still a student at Fenton House, following this quickly with recitals at the Wigmore Hall. Further recitals at the Purcell Room, performances at major festivals in Britain and abroad, together with broadcasts for BBC Radio 3 and Capital Radio, have helped to establish his reputation as one of Britain's leading harpischordists. His recordings of works by Soler, Fischer, Rameau and his numerous Scarlatti recordings have received considerable acclaim from the musical press.

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The Catalan composer Antonio Soler spent much of his life as a monk at the 16th century Spanish monastery, the Escorial. In addition to his monastic duties he was expected to train the choir, provide choral music for services and supply the Royal family with secular and instrumental music during their frequent visits. Despite his onerous official duties, Soler found time to compose 150 varied and colourful keyboard sonatas, which often feature Spanish folk-song and dance elements. Highlights of this eleventh volume include the exuberant and virtuoso *Sonata in C major*, the *Sonata No. 65* with its masterful flow of counterpoint, and the *Sonata No. 62* which has an almost Mozartian charm and grace.

### Padre Antonio SOLER

(1729-1783)

- |    |  |       |
|----|--|-------|
| 1  | Sonata in C major                                      | 3:43  |
| 2  | Sonata No. 22 in D flat major                          | 11:33 |
| 3  | Sonata No. 23 in D flat major                          | 7:16  |
| 4  | Sonata No. 128 in E minor                              | 6:02  |
| 5  | Sonata No. 45 in C major 'Por la Princesa de Asturias' | 5:16  |
| 6  | Sonata No. 51 in C major                               | 3:27  |
|    | Sonata No. 65 in A minor (1777)                        | 15:49 |
| 7  | Andante cantabile                                      | 5:38  |
| 8  | Allegro assai  | 5:41  |
| 9  | Intento con movimento contrario                        | 4:31  |
| 10 | Sonata No. 127 in D major                              | 3:31  |
|    | Sonata No. 62 in B flat major (1782)                   | 21:38 |
| 11 | Rondo: Andantino con moto                              | 7:11  |
| 12 | Allegretto espressivo                                  | 5:13  |
| 13 | Minue di rivolti: Tempo suo                            | 2:56  |
| 14 | Allegro spiritoso                                      | 6:18  |

### Gilbert Rowland, Harpsichord

Recorded at Epsom College Concert Hall, Surrey, from 12th to 14th July 2004

Producer and engineer: John Taylor • Booklet notes: Gilbert Rowland.

Concert Flemish harpsichord from The Paris Workshop, prepared and tuned by Andrew Wooderson.

Cover Photo: *Marquise de San Andres* (c. 1785) by Francisco de Lucientes Goya (1746-1828)

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