

CLEMENTI

Piano Sonatas

Vol. 4

Susan Alexander-Max, Fortepiano



Muzio Clementi (1752–1832) Piano Sonatas, Vol. 4

On Thursday 29th March 1832 at Westminster Abbey, the choirs of the King's Chapel Royal, St Paul's Cathedral and the Abbey joined to perform a solemn funeral service for the burial of the composer and pianist, Muzio Clementi. Dr William Crotch wrote *'never was the mingled pathos and sublimity of the cathedral solemnities more intensely felt ... The cheerful noon-sun shone through the cathedral windows when the procession began to move to that memorable verse, "Man that is born of woman"; it was the illumination most befitting so clear and natural a spirit as Clementi.'* That fame and reputation, then seemingly so secure, faded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Born in 1752, Muzio was the eldest child of Nicolò Clementi, a noted Roman craftsman who specialised in embossing and chasing silver vessels and figures for church use. At the age of six he received his first music lessons from his relation the composer Antonio Boroni, a pupil of Padre Martini. At seven he began to study the organ and figured-bass, and at thirteen was so proficient that he was appointed organist at his local church of San Lorenzo in Damaso, Rome. In 1766 his playing so impressed Peter Beckford, a wealthy English 'grand tourist' then in Rome, that he negotiated with Nicolò Clementi to purchase, for a period of seven years, his son's musical services on his estate at Iwerne Stepleton, Dorset. Unlike his eccentric cousin William whose fame rests on his orientalist fantasy novel *Vathek* and the building (and ultimate collapse) of the equally fantastical Fonthill Abbey, Peter Beckford was a quiet, cultivated countryman, the author not of a Gothic novel, but *Thoughts upon Hare and Fox Hunting*. Beckford undertook to educate Clementi. This was hardly necessary, for Clementi was a disciplined, indefatigable autodidact, allotting regular periods of the day to keyboard practice and composition, to literature, scientific studies, and languages ancient and modern. By the age of eighteen he was a brilliant virtuoso on the harpsichord.

When the seven years were complete in 1774, he left

Beckford's house for London, and was appointed an 'Opera Conductor' at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket – actually a basso-continuo player coordinating the orchestra and singers from the harpsichord. Working with some of the finest singers of the age deeply influenced his musical language as both composer and performer. His adoption of a perfect *cantilena* and vocal character was borne out by Moscheles' later description of his keyboard style: *'Clementi's pianoforte playing, when he was young, was famed for the exquisite legato, pearliness of touch in rapid passages, and unerring certainty of execution.'* During these early London years, Clementi established himself as a solo performer, but the appearance in 1779 of his *Opus 2 Sonatas* was a sensation. Described as *'a work ... entitled to the credit of being the basis on which the whole fabric of modern piano-forte sonatas has been founded'* Clementi's career as the leading piano virtuoso in London was well and truly launched.

His reputation growing, in 1780 Clementi undertook the first of several continental tours, composing new works as he travelled, reaching Vienna just before Christmas 1781. The famous musical 'duel' between Mozart and Clementi took place by Emperor Josef II's command on Christmas Eve. Neither participant was aware of the competition, but the court had been informed, and bets placed. The Emperor declared honours to be equally shared; Mozart's dismissal of Clementi as a mere *'mechanismus'* and a *'charlatan like all Italians'* in letters to his father deliberately exaggerated his own prospects of success and potential income in Vienna. In reality, relations between them were cordial – and their meeting gave Clementi the great benefit of hearing Mozart play.

On his return to England, Clementi began publication of his new works and divided his time between composition, performing and teaching. Prospering financially and taking a special interest in the rapidly developing manufacture of pianos in England, he invested in the firm of Longman and Broderip, publishers and retailers of pianos carrying their own name. When this

business failed in 1795, Clementi bought the firm and established himself as both publisher and maker of pianos bearing the name Clementi & Co. The actual manufacture of the instruments was run by the brothers Frederick and William Collard, but Clementi clearly intended the instruments to meet his particular musical and technical requirements. So closely are Clementi's piano works dependant on the expressive potential and tone colours of these early pianos, that we can perhaps begin to see why his music gradually fell from favour as the piano evolved into the familiar modern instrument and earlier pianos were dismissed as obsolete.

The *Sonata Opus 1, No. 3* was written during Clementi's apprentice years in Dorset, the first of its two movements a simple ternary piece, the second an inventive *Air anglais varié*. Both are notable for limpid textures, melodic charm and a pleasingly novel asymmetry of phrase length. The piece is equally effective on either piano or harpsichord which, under Clementi's hands was undoubtedly an expressive instrument. The *Sonata Opus 8, No. 2* written in Vienna during his first, brilliant European tour demonstrates Clementi's growing maturity and grasp of Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach's first-movement form in its formal organisation and motivic development. Wide and subtle dynamic contrasts and effects are an essential part of the expressive language of all three movements, combined with fleet-fingered virtuosity. The piano is clearly essential for the proper interpretation of the work, and there can be little doubt that he was influenced by the pianos he now encountered. These superb instruments had first arrived in Vienna in 1780. Played to great acclaim by Mozart, their qualities led to a craze for instruments made either by their inventor Johann Andreas Stein of Augsburg, or Viennese imitators who immediately took up their construction.

Clementi's *Opus 50* sonatas dedicated to Luigi Cherubini were his last published piano works, released in

Fortepianos played on this recording

Grand piano by John Broadwood & Sons, London, 1816, signed by J. B. Cramer (tracks 1–6).

Grand piano by Longman & Broderip, London, 1794-5. Supplied to Haydn when he was in England, which he took back to Vienna on his return (tracks 7–11). Both tuned to a¹ = 415, equal temperament.

1821 but probably written twenty years earlier. The third, titled *Didone abbandonata – Scena tragica* is perhaps the culmination of his entire output for keyboard. The piece is a dark, dramatic tableau based on Metastasio's retelling of Virgil's tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage who fell in love with the Trojan hero Aeneas. Both the queen's passion and Aeneas's desertion of her was inevitable because preordained by the gods. As Aeneas's ship sails away from Carthage, Dido orders a ritual pyre to be built to burn her bridal bed and Aeneas's discarded military arms; in her despair she sacrifices herself on the pyre. The darkly powerful music Clementi created in response to this legend is a perfect illustration of his own operatic instincts absorbed as a young man. The writing vividly represents conflicted emotion, turning in an instant from the pathos of reflection on the tragedy, feelings of love, sorrow, of fury at rejection, to the final, horrific resolution. Throughout the score we find such indicators as *patetico, dolce, dolente, agitato e con disperazione, con furia, con anima*. These swift changes of character and 'affect' are enhanced throughout by the vividly dark colours and dramatic textures produced on a fine English fortepiano.

This work encapsulates a characteristic of Clementi's musical language that might also have contributed to the decline of his reputation. All his music depends on an idea or vision of a dramatic situation, whether of innocent charm, or comedy or of tragedy. His pianistic language seems to be illustrative, and to move forward according to dramatic representation – the world of opera, rather than the internal, abstract musical logic of a sonata by a Mozart or a Beethoven. This does not invalidate Clementi's music, but only describes it. It remains the work of a master, unquestionably best interpreted through the palette of dramatic effects and colours of the pianos on which he realised it with such masterly authority.

Derek Adlam



Photo courtesy of the artist

Susan Alexander-Max

A native of New York, a graduate, with distinction, of The Juilliard School of Music, Susan Alexander-Max was recognised internationally as a leading fortepianist and clavichordist specialising in the music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A featured performer on international radio and television, she was known to festivals, museums, universities and music colleges worldwide. In 1996 she founded the world renowned period instrument ensemble, *The Music Collection*, with whom she gave premières of new works, some commissioned especially for *The Music Collection*. A professor of piano at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London for many years, Susan Alexander-Max devoted most of her teaching time to giving lecture-recitals and master-classes in universities and conservatories, for example The Juilliard School of Music, the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts and the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse in Paris. Her recordings include both chamber music and solo repertoire, all to critical acclaim.

Susan Alexander-Max died on 26th January 2016.

In loving memory of Susan Alexander-Max

by Jessica Max

With Clementi's reputation having waned during the 19th and 20th centuries, it is no surprise to those that knew her, that Susan Alexander-Max would be the one to establish his revival in the 21st century. How fitting therefore, that Clementi's burial procession moved to the verse, "Man that is born of woman".

It is through her passion and dedication to composers such as Clementi, who were so underrated and misunderstood, that audiences have come to appreciate, respect and understand the intricacies that lie beneath the surface of their music. Having chosen to specialise in performing on period instruments, Susan brings to light nuances and techniques that were, for so long, elusive to the modern listener. Volume One brought us 'magnetic performances', Volume Two, 'several heroes or heroines ... insight and intelligence', and, Volume Three, 'probingly sensitive artistry'.

This recording of Clementi Sonatas marks the fourth in the series that Susan was recording for Naxos; it is being released in honour of a remarkable woman and, in the words of her critics, a 'consummate musician'. It is with great sadness that this will be the last recording in what was meant to be the complete Sonatas by Clementi, but, through her recordings both she and the music will live on forever. Susan may have left an enormous hole in the music world and in our hearts but she has also left a formidable legacy. This legacy is not only to us, her listeners, but also to composers like Clementi whose music she transformed and brought back to life with endless devotion.

This recording charts the breadth of Muzio Clementi's compositional life from his first fortepiano sonatas to his last. The works reveal the stylistic developments in keyboard music during this period as well as the evolution of the instrument itself, reflected in the historically important fortepianos selected for this recording. After the limpid textures and melodic charm of the two early sonatas, the *Sonata in G minor, Op. 50, No. 3* is the apex of Clementi's entire keyboard output, a dark and dramatic tableau based on the passion of Dido and Aeneas, shot through with operatically charged emotional conflict and vivid colours.

**Muzio
CLEMENTI**
(1752–1832)

Piano Sonatas Vol. 4

Sonata in D minor, Op. 50, No. 2	23:07	6 Allegro agitato e con disperazione	10:04
1 Allegro non troppo ma con energia	10:37	Sonata in G major, Op. 1, No. 3	11:13
2 Adagio con espressione	4:27	7 Allegretto	2:02
3 Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo	7:56	8 Air anglais varié (allegro)	9:10
Sonata in G minor, Op. 50, No. 3: Didone abbandonata – Scena tragica	30:27	Sonata in E flat major, Op. 8, No. 2	13:05
4 Introduzione: Largo sostenuto – Allegro ma con espressione	14:22	9 Allegro assai	5:43
5 Adagio dolente	5:55	10 Larghetto con espressione	2:43
		11 Allegro	4:36

Susan Alexander-Max, Fortepiano



Recorded at The Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands House, Guildford, Surrey, UK, 24–26 March 2015
 Producer, Engineer & Editor: Phil Rowlands • Booklet notes: Derek Adlam
 Fortepianos: John Broadwood & Sons, London, 1816 (tracks 1–6); Longman & Broderip, London, 1794–95 (7–11) • a' = 415Hz / equal temperament
 Cover image: Kew Palace, London (© David Watson / Dreamstime.com)



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Playing Time
78:13



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 Booklet notes in English