
Meridian
MUZIO CLEMENTI
1752 - 1832
"The Father of the Pianoforte"
Toccata: Opus 11
Sonatas: Opus 33 no.2
Opus 40 no.3
Opus 25 no.5
Opus 50 no.1
Simon Conning

Muzio Clementi

1752 - 1832

[1]	**Toccata in B flat major, Op.11**	5’47”
	Sonata in F major, Op.33 no.2	
[2]	Adagio - Allegro con fuoco	7’17”
[3]	Presto	3’35”
	Sonata in D minor, Op.40 no.3	
[4]	Molto adagio - Allegro	11’32”
[5]	Adagio con molto espressione	4’48”
[6]	Allegro ma non troppo - Minore - Maggiore	6’09”
	Sonata in F sharp minor, Op.25 no.5/Op.26 no.2	
[7]	Puittosto allegro con espressione	8’17”
[8]	Lento e patetico	4’23”
[9]	Presto	4’21”
	Sonata in A major, Op.50 no.1	
[10]	Allegro maestoso e con sentimento	9’46”
[11]	Adagio sostenuto e patetico - 'Canone'. Andante con moto - Tempo primo	5’59”
[12]	Allegro vivace	7’51”

Simon Conning - Piano

The purpose of these recordings is an attempt to portray different stages in a brilliant musician's compositional life. To this end, four contrasting sonatas written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have been selected and were recorded on a modern concert grand piano. The term 'sonata' had been widely used for at least half a century before two pioneers of the 'Classical' era, C.P.E. Bach (1714-1788) and Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), helped to clearly define it terms of form and content. For example, the six hundred-plus keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) were nearly all one-movement pieces. Other works labelled 'sonata' in the early eighteenth century were often written for differing combinations of instruments, the number of movements being frequently inconsistent from piece to piece. It wasn't until the early 1770's that Haydn published a three-movement 'sonata for solo piano', breaking the mould of a specific structure that historians would later call 'sonata form'. Many pianist/composers, not least Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), immediately seized upon this new vehicle as a concise means by which they could display their combined skills of performer and composer. Another youngster flexing his compositional muscle at this time was **Muzio Clementi**. He was born in 1752 and died in 1832, his life spanning those of Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) and Franz Schubert (1797-1828), so he was present for that whole era in musical history when those giants, along with Haydn, changed its course. Born in Rome to an Italian father and a Swiss mother, his talent was recognised and encouraged from a very early age. He became a church organist at the age of fourteen and it was around this time that his father accepted a deal whereby the boy would be looked after and be allowed to develop his skills in a peaceful environment in England. After seven years of intensive study in Dorset, the young Clementi made his way to London which remained the base for the rest of his professional career. He spent the next five years giving performances on the harpsichord and occasionally conducting opera from the keyboard. His acquaintance with the fortepiano came comparatively late and in 1780, a year after his Op.2 set of sonatas had been met with great acclaim, he embarked on what would prove to be a long and successful career as a touring fortepianist and composer, admired throughout Europe. Several of his early compositions placed new technical demands on the performer. He demonstrated these during what would prove to be his most famous encounter. In Vienna in 1781, a competition with Mozart was organised by Emperor Joseph ll. Clementi included his Sonata in B flat, Op.24, no.2 for the occasion. Mozart must have been impressed enough with the opening two bars because he remembered and borrowed them a decade later for the main theme in the overture to his opera, 'The Magic Flute'. However, he was scathing of Clementi in almost all other (musical) aspects, although he begrudgingly admired his already famous technical command, especially his execution of right hand 'thirds'. Clementi, understandably, was inspired by the meeting. It is

generally held that the contest was declared, tactfully, as a draw. He continued to perform and compose for many years as well as busying himself with teaching, publishing (he drew up a contract with Beethoven, who was a great admirer of Clementi's sonatas) and manufacturing pianos, his mechanical know-how proving to be invaluable in the evolution of the modern pianoforte. If not recognised as one of the compositonal 'greats', his role as innovator is undeniable. His influence on the next generation of pianists has led to him being dubbed 'the father of the pianoforte' although compositionally he was active also, to a degree, away from the keyboard. For example, his symphonies have been reconstructed and recorded in recent years. But it will be for his many sonatas and 'Gradus Ad Parnassum', an extensive collection of studies, that he is best remembered. Beginners still play his 'Sonatinas'. Such was the degree of respect afforded him that, after his death, a request from the Philharmonic Society that he be buried in Westminster Abbey was granted.

Serving as a kind of appetiser to the four featured sonatas is the **Toccata, Op.11** - a showpiece that wholly demonstrates Clementi's youthful preoccupation with virtuosity. A work bearing this title would typically display digital dexterity and Clementi's Toccata certainly does that but it lacks the improvisatory element gradually associated with this kind of piece from the early eighteenth century onwards. In fact, it displays a rigid structure consisting of two clear-cut sections and is therefore more akin to a Scarlatti sonata than a 'toccata'. Despite this, it can be safely said that its content was unprecedented in that Clementi pushed the limits of technical ability (for the right hand). 'Prestissimo' triplet runs in consecutive thirds and awkward figurations combining thirds, fourths, fifths and sixths dominate most of the first half and, after some even more rapid passage-work (semi-quavers), much of the second. It may come as no surprise to learn that this was Clementi's ace in the aforementioned 'duel' with Mozart. It should be added that, in this recording, a first-time bar has been inserted for the repeat of the second section and that the version presented here combines the original edition with some editorial detail from a nineteenth century one.

The first sonata of this selection is the second of Clementi's **Op.33** set of three. This piece consists of just two movements, both in F major. The absence of a slow middle movement is unusual but the conciseness of the overall structure satisfies, aided by the inclusion of a slow introduction to the first movement. Marked 'Adagio', it is only in this section that Clementi presents melody and true 'expression'. The thematic material of this preamble is abandoned with the launch of the 'Allegro con fuoco' main section of this first movement. Here, Clementi experiments with three-bar phrases and, in an anxious development section, rapid changes in harmony via chromaticism are achieved using much 'bravura'

passage-work for the right hand. In the left, the emphasis is placed on rapid split octaves and 'Alberti' bass figurations for the agitated accompaniment. The rambling theme of the 'Presto' also consists of three-bar phrases. Similarly, aspects of technique used in the first movement are employed here, also. However, this second movement is more quirky than the first. With its whimsy and (musical) question marks, the general feel is probably more reminiscent of Haydn than anyone else. (The finale of that composer's 'English' Sonata in C springs to mind.)

On the surface, in terms of melodic and harmonic content, it would seem Clementi returned to safer ground in his **Op.40 no.3** sonata. However, he was now using a much wider canvas. For example, despite returning to the more conventional three-movement format, the first begins with an expansive, dramatic 'Molto adagio' introduction in D minor. Immediately, we are plunged into the world of 'Don Giovanni' but after a pause, the bright, peaceful theme of the D major 'Allegro' alleviates the sombre mood and the 'Molto adagio' now seems forgotten. Not for long. Incidentally, the texture used to furnish this new theme is uncannily similar to that used by Beethoven for the opening of his D major sonata, Op.28, published a year earlier (1801). (It should be mentioned that the actual key of Clementi's sonata is ambiguous and this has led some to label it simply 'D major', 'D minor' or even 'D minor/major'. The predominant key does lean towards D major, but 'D minor' seems to be favoured. Since 1802, the jury's still out.) After the exposition is repeated, the rest of this movement expertly follows the tried and trusted route of first movement sonata form. Brilliant, charming and inventive, the flavour is often Mozartian. In fact, with Mozart now deceased, it seems Clementi had no qualms about nicking a few ideas himself. The next surprise comes with the choice of key for the 'Adagio con molto espressione'. Instead of adopting a relative major or minor key for contrast, Clementi daringly returns to D minor but the beauty of this movement negates any monotony. Eloquent and operatic, an expressive, yearning imitation of the very first bar of the 'Molto adagio' comes back to haunt. And, as before, a pregnant pause precedes the appearance of new material in D major, this time heralding the finale. Marked 'Allegro ma non troppo', it starts with a descending figure from A down to D via F sharp. Those three notes comprise the motif from that first bar of the sonata, (except the 'F' is naturalised in D minor) recently echoed in the slow movement. This is no coincidence - Clementi is now using that simple three-note figure from way back as the thematic bedrock for this third movement. This is made more evident from more disguised quotes in the first section and from the very start of the 'Minore' middle section. Here, that descending figure is stated emphatically, though embellished. And now, for the first time (on this disc), we are introduced to Clementi's favourite contrapuntal device, ie, 'canon'. In this instance, the device is used ingeniously. As well as regular canonic imitation, Clementi uses inversion and role-reversal

successfully before cleverly steering the action back to the initial cheery mood of this last movement, the defining moment emphasised by the clear anouncement, 'Maggiore'. A busy, condensed version of the first section, during which some additional material aids anticipation of the sonata's imminent conclusion, joyously rounds off the work. 'D major' wins the day.

The chronological flow is interrupted here to facilitate a smooth transition between the home keys of these four sonatas. In 1790, Clementi published his **Op.25** set of six. Subsequent editions split them up so the **Sonata in F sharp minor, no.5** is sometimes referred to as **Op.26, no.2**. This piece is one of his more famous sonatas and is considered by many to be a true gem amongst the entire collection. Accessible and attractive, the 'Piuttosto [*'somewhat'*] allegro con espressione' and the 'Lento e patetico' are both unmistakably operatic in nature - no doubt a hark-back to this part of Clementi's career. Even the passage-work in the first movement could have been inspired by a coloratura soprano. Perhaps more interesting is the finale. Simply marked 'Presto', this movement displays some of the grace and charm of the first two but it is primarily brilliant, often dramatic and acts as an effective foil to them. In terms of technique, tough demands are placed on the performer here. In particular, those tricky thirds appear again. It's interesting to note that, after the publication of this sonata, Clementi used this effect less and less. It's likely that he was tiring of technical display for its own sake but the next year marked Mozart's death; perhaps Clementi realised he could no longer impress (or taunt?) him. We'll never know ...

It's known that Clementi taught John Field (1782-1837), whose Nocturnes inspired Frederic Chopin (1810-1849), one of the towering figures of the 'Romantic' era, so it's possible that Clementi's influence may have been significant in an idiomatic respect, in addition to that of the art of pianism. In Clementi's last set of three sonatas, **Op.50**, it is perhaps the third, entitled 'Didone abbandonata', that is best known. It probably represents the first instance of 'programme' music in a solo piano work. In any case, the composer's writing is now leaning towards the 'romantic' while still retaining a 'classical' essence. This is ably displayed in the **Sonata no.1 in A major**. The first movement's tempo indication, 'Allegro maestoso e con sentimento' may seem elaborate but it's specific when one considers 'allegro' doesn't actually mean 'fast'. Much of the carefree, melodic material from the solid but lyrical opening is explored in the development section. Both gentle dialogue and great drama ensue as a result . It should be noted that Clementi's pianos were now extended in the treble so some of the passage-work sparkles even more than before. A classical concerto tradition is upheld towards the end of the movement with the inclusion of a brief cadenza. The second movement, in three sections, starts almost like a funeral march in 3/4 time. Again, as in Op.40 no.3, Clementi ignores the option of a relative key for his slow movement and instead

chooses A minor. It's now clear that by not departing from the root note, and by converting major to minor, he wants to sustain emotional intensity. Marked 'Adagio sostenuto e patetico' it is ponderous - near static, even. A three-note quaver figure which first appears in bar six becomes the focal point from bar twelve as it is subsequently imitated and inverted, intoned by various voices. This first section ends peacefully in A major. The two-part 'Canone. Andante con moto' middle section continues in the major key and exploits this three-note motif further. This is a straight canon, the two parts travelling exactly parallel. A searching, almost reverent feel gives way to tension before dying away, unresolved and cut dead when the third section ('Tempo primo') restates the first, but this time angrily with 'sforzando' accents. Thicker textures and additional counterpoint in this slightly condensed variation of the first section cause the conclusion, again in A major, to somehow feel less peaceful. The exuberant fanfare of the 'Allegro vivace' dispels the gloom. This rollercoaster ride in faithful sonata form explores the piano's extended upper register with brilliant right hand scales and arpeggios. A gentler element is introduced but octaves in canon soon put a stop to that. Towards the end of the exposition the frenzy is relieved by a colourful crossed hands passage. After the exposition is repeated, a contrapuntal development section (canon again) soon surrenders to more relentless bravura. The ideas are developed and condensed before and after the main theme is stated again. The playful crossed hand passage reappears, this time in the home key of 'A' but soon the semiquaver runs and arpeggios assert themselves once more and continue to the end where the work concludes triumphantly. Gone are the thirds, gone are the broken octaves (almost) but still a degree of dexterity is required in this, the mature composer's momentary return to youth.

Simon Conning - July 2013.

Simon Conning commenced his studies with Marjorie Kelly, then continued at the Royal Northern College of Music's Junior Department in Manchester with Marjorie Clementi and later studied at the Royal College of Music in London with Yu Chun Yee.

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"The Father of the Pianoforte"

A Natural Sound Recording	
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Recorded by **Richard Hughes**
Produced by **Susanne Stanzeleit**
Assistant Engineer **Alex Gettinby**
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P.O. Box 317, Eltham, London, SE9 4SF

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