Vittorio Rieti and the Harpsichord Music of the Twentieth Century By Mark Kroll

The Harpsichord "Revival"

Reports that the harpsichord vanished from the concert stage during the nineteenth century are, to borrow from Mark Twain's famous remark upon hearing the news of his own death, "greatly exaggerated." People *did* play the harpsichord throughout the Romantic era. Ignaz Moscheles, for example, began performing Bach, Handel, and Scarlatti on the instrument in 1837, and others followed in his footsteps.

That said, it was indeed around 1900 that pioneers like Wanda Landowska, Arnold Dolmetsch and other advocates began to devote their careers to restoring the harpsichord as the keyboard instrument of choice for the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Not only did they succeed, but at the same time created an entirely new genre: contemporary harpsichord music. Living composers became fascinated by the sounds and colors of the harpsichord and began to write new music for this "old" instrument almost as soon as it reappeared on the scene. Delius, Poulenc, and de Falla were the first, and since that time many composers have written one or more works that feature the harpsichord, either as a solo instrument or in ensemble, among them Milhaud, Piston, Martin, Orff, Carter, Ligeti, Berio, Gorecki, Xenakis, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, and Schuller, to name just a few. Vittorio Rieti was the most prolific. He wrote more works for the harpsichord than any other modern composer, and his treatment of the instrument is among the best since the eighteenth century.

Vittorio Rieti

A member of an Italian-Jewish family that could trace its roots back to the fourteenth century, Rieti was born in Alexandria, Egypt on January 28, 1898. His father ran a successful export/import business, enabling Vittorio to grow up with butlers, tutors in Italian, French, and English, and tennis and piano lessons. His musical talents revealed themselves early, and although his father was tolerant of his interest in the arts he expected his son to take over the family business; so Rieti was shipped off to Milan's Luigi Bocconi University in 1912 to study economics.

This did not prevent Rieti from continuing his piano lessons. He studied with Giuseppe Frugatta, a professor at the Conservatory of Music in Milan who, Rieti tells us, "introduced me to the moderns-to Debussy, to Stravinsky and to a man who was absolutely the last word, Schoenberg" (Rieti would eventually meet Schoenberg in 1921). Vittorio dutifully returned to Egypt in 1917 with a doctorate (his thesis was on the economy of Turkey), but he soon abandoned business for the world of music. Resettling in Rome with his family after World War I, Rieti had some lessons in orchestration with Ottorino Respighi and studied composition with Alfredo Casella, who took the "young Egyptian" under his wing, along with two other important Roman musicians, Gian Francesco Malpiero and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. Rieti reminisced about this period of his life in a speech he gave at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts on June 9, 1990: "I was first introduced to the musical world by Alfredo Casella, who was one generation earlier. Casella conducted a concerto of mine for woodwinds and orchestra [i.e., composed in 1923] in a festival of contemporary music in Prague in 1924. That was the beginning of my career, because the festival was attended by many conductors who took an interest in my music and performed it all over the world." Three of those conductors were Fritz Reiner, Willem Mengelberg, and Arturo Toscanini.

A year later, in 1925, Rieti took the next logical step—in fact the only one at the time—for a young artist eager to participate in all that was new and exciting: he moved to Paris, to the world of Hemingway and Stein, of Picasso and Braque, of Stravinsky and Jazz—or simply, "Paris in the 20s." Rieti joined the staff of Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes* in Paris, and enjoyed immediate success with his first ballet, *Barabau*. The sets were by Maurice Utrillo and the choreographer was 21-year-old George Balanchine. Like most Diaghilev productions, *Barabau* was no ordinary classical ballet, but in this instance the Russian impresario went a bit further than usual. The ballerinas wore falsies and fake bottoms, there was a generous helping of sexual innuendo, and Balanchine recalled that "it was the first time I'd heard people laugh non-stop all through a ballet." *Barabau* was also a huge popular success, not only in Paris but also in London and Monte Carlo. Rieti's international career was launched.

He also became a member of an inner circle of the most important musicians and artists living in Paris at the time, and forged artistic relationships and life-long personal friendships with composers such as Milhaud, Poulenc, Sauguet, and Honegger. Stravinsky was a particularly close friend and colleague. For example, in 1928 he asked Rieti to be one of the four pianists (the others were Poulenc, Georges Auric, and Marcelle Meyer) to play in Diaghilev's production of *Les Noces*. Rieti also maintained ties with Berg and Schoenberg in Vienna and Hindemith in Germany during this period.

This heady atmosphere came to an end in the 1930s as the intentions of the Nazis were becoming increasingly evident, especially with regard to Jews. Rieti saw what was coming and wisely decided to leave Europe. He made a final trip to Rome, spent some time in Switzerland waiting for visas, and it was only because he fit into the "Egyptian quota" that Rieti was able to emigrate to New York in 1940 with his wife Elsie (Rappaport) and son Fabio. The family moved into two small wood-frame houses on 66th Street and 2nd Avenue, sharing them with several other émigrés from Europe.

Unfortunately, the other members of Rieti's family who had remained in Europe were not so lucky. The letters he wrote to his friends reveal his awareness of the horror that was unfolding and his growing concern about the welfare of his relatives, as we read in a letter sent to Darius Milhaud on November 17, 1944:

My dear Darius,

... my mother was taken by the Germans from San Remo last May and carried to an unknown destination. All investigations are in vain, my sister tells me. My mother had been 74 years old, and with her she had brought her brother (81) and her almost blind sister (92 years old). I am in the process of making all the possible and imaginable investigations with all the committees, including among them the Red Cross, the Vatican, the Swiss and the Jews, but I am not going to fool myself. I am in despair.

There is also no news from my sister in Bologna. I hope that means that she is in hiding. My mother had not hidden, believing that their 247 years would protect all of them.

Rieti's mother, uncle, and aunt were ultimately murdered in the concentration camps.

Despite these tragedies, Vittorio was able to settle comfortably into the vibrant New York musical scene. He became a United States citizen in 1944 (Rieti used to say that his American passport "was a gift of Mussolini"), and began writing more ballets for Balanchine, who had also emigrated from France. The best and most famous product of their New World collaboration is *La Sonnambula* (1946); it received well over 3,000 performances and has become a classic in the ballet repertory.

Rieti remained in contact with his friends and colleagues in America and Europe, establishing a pattern in which he spent six months of the year in New York and the remainder in Paris and Rome. He continued to compose up to the last years of his life, writing some of his best works during these final decades, including several of the compositions on this recording. He also maintained a successful teaching career, holding positions at the Peabody Conservatory, Chicago Music College, Queens College, and the New York College of Music. When Vittorio Rieti died in New York City on February 19, 1994 at the age of 96, the musical world lost the last representative of the neoclassical style in the twentieth century.

Rieti, Neoclassicism and the Harpsichord: "Perfecting the Same Ground"

Indeed, the desire to compose modern music inspired by or in imitation of the baroque and classical styles was adopted by many composers in the first half of the twentieth century. Rieti, who probably absorbed neoclassicism from Stravinsky in Paris, embraced it with all the passion of his youth and of the period, but unlike his contemporaries, Rieti never let go of it. He continued to write in this mode throughout his life, long after most composers had abandoned or transformed the style. As Rieti himself remarked in 1973, "I maintain the same aesthetic assumptions I have always had. I have kept evolving in the sense that one keeps on perfecting the same ground."

The harpsichord, moreover, was perhaps the ideal instrument with which to invoke the neoclassical sound. Stravinsky's decision to give the instrument a prominent role in his last neoclassical work, *The Rake's Progress*, makes the connection to Mozart's operas all the more apparent. Rieti expressed his admiration for the harpsichord early on in his career. He intended to write a harpsichord concerto for Wanda Landowska in 1930, but the political events of the period made this impossible, and the work was later transformed into his first Piano Concerto (1937). Nevertheless, Rieti never lost his fondness for the harpsichord. If anything he became more enamored of it, and as his affection increased so did his skill in writing for it. Over the next sixty years Rieti would publish eight works that feature the harpsichord.

The first two appeared in 1946: the *Partita for Flute, Oboe, String Quartet and Harpsichord Obligato*, and the *Sonata all'Antica* on this recording. Sylvia Marlowe, who according to Fabio Rieti had a "very close" relationship with his father, commissioned the *Partita* and included it on her 1953 recording, the first long-playing disc of new harpsichord music (the other composers were Alan Hovhaness, John Lessard, and Virgil Thomson). Marlowe explained why she commissioned the *Partita*: "The Rieti Partita was the first work I commissioned for the harpsichord. I had heard his *Second Avenue Waltzes* (1942) for two pianos and fell in love with them. The Partita has everything I admired in the Waltzes—and more. It is spirited, elegant, witty, warm and sparkling . . . sunny, airy, beautifully made and orchestrated—and yes, there is even an element of 'camp' present."

Marlowe would go on to commission and premiere two more harpsichord compositions from Rieti, and also record more of his music. The *Sonata all'Antica* (1946) was first performed in 1951,

Marlowe premiered the *Concerto for Harpsichord and Orchestra* (1955, revised in 1957) with her "Harpsichord Music Society" in 1955, and his music was featured on Marlowe's final recording of contemporary harpsichord in 1967. Rieti would pay homage to his patron by composing the *Triptych for Two Harpsichords* (or *Trittico*, as it is also called) "to the memory of Sylvie [*sic*] Marlowe" for a December 1985 "Tribute to Sylvia Marlowe Concert" at Carnegie Recital Hall.

Three pieces for harpsichord on this recording date from the 1960s. They include the *Concertino* for Flute, Viola, Cello, Harp and Harpsichord (1963), the Pastorale e Fughetta for Flute, Viola and Harpsichord (1966), and the Sonata Breve for Violin and Harpsichord (1967). Rieti composed his last two compositions for harpsichord when he was in his eighties: the Variations on Two Cantigas de Santa Maria (1978), and the Triptych for Two Harpsichords (1982).

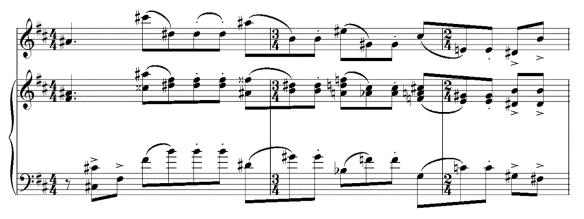
Rieti's death was greeted with little fanfare, but one can imagine that this would not have troubled this private and reserved man. As Robert Fitzdale, a close friend and a member of the duo-piano team Gold and Fitzdale remarked: "Vittorio never suffered from the American disease of having to be a success." He also left a lasting legacy of harpsichord music and other works in his very personal style, which was eloquently described by his old teacher Alfredo Casella: "Rieti's oeuvre stands apart in its specific clarity, gaiety and sophistication of a kind only he possesses, yet it hides a good deal of melancholy."

Rieti's Musical Style

There are several common elements that run through all of Rieti's compositions, including the pieces recorded here. One is the strong influence of dance, which can be felt in the melodic and rhythmic patterns he favors, and in the very titles of some of his pieces or movements, such as the *Allegro alla giga* and *Rigaudon* in the *Sonata all'Antica*.

Rieti's harmonic language is eclectic, ranging from diatonic, chromatic, whole-tone and pentatonic scales up to touches of bitonality. There are no examples of twelve-tone or serial technique, at least in his published works.

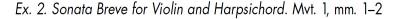
Other trademarks of the "Rieti style" include the displacing of rhythmic accents to weak beats of a measure, creating shifting barlines and meters. The following example from the *Sonata Breve* is representative:



Ex. 1. Sonata Breve for Violin and Harpsichord, Mvt. I, mm. 43–45

There are also rhythmic/melodic cells or patterns that appear throughout Rieti's music, such as the following examples from the *Sonata Breve* and *Concertino for Flute, Viola, Cello, Harp and Harpsichord*:







Ex. 3. Concertino for Flute, Viola, Cello, Harp and Harpsichord, Mvt. IV, mm. 52–53, violin and cello

Triptych for Two Harpsichords

The first movement opens with an *Andante tranquillo* in 6/8 that will also be heard, transposed, as a ritornello at the beginning of the other two movements. Harpsichord I then plays a jaunty passage in sixteenth notes accompanied by idiomatic repeated thirds in Harpsichord II. This material, which dominates this movement, will sometimes devolve into comic sections in which a jolly melody is accompanied by the type of vamping chords one might hear in a Parisian café:



Ex. 4. Triptych for Two Harpsichords, Mvt. I, mm. 36–37

The second movement features a sustained lyrical section in 12/8 marked *Dolcemente moderato* that is interrupted by a faster section in duple time, but which concludes as it began: gently and melodically.

The third movement begins with the "Andante tranquillo" ritornello and segues into a vigorous *Allegro*, with dotted melodic figures accompanied by a variant of the repeated chords heard in the first movement. Short chordal punctuations (see ex. 5) that recall those found in Stravinsky's early works conclude this rare contemporary work for two harpsichords:



Ex. 5. Triptych for Two Harpsichords, Mvt. III, mm. 63–66

Concertino for Flute, Viola, Cello, Harp and Harpsichord

The first movement begins with a haunting pastorale-style melody played by unaccompanied flute that is developed and transformed, sometimes contrapuntally, by the other instruments. The second movement, an *Allegro* in 2/2, takes advantage of the rhythmic shifts described above (see ex. 1). The pensive mood of the third movement is interrupted by two virtuoso cadenzas, the first for the harp and the second for the harpsichord. A long accelerating trill in the flute solo leads us into the final *Allegro*, a tour-de-force for all the instruments.

Sonata Breve for Violin and Harpsichord

Composed in the summer of 1967, the first movement of this sonata—which utilizes a theme from Rieti's ballet *Pastoral* [or *Sylvan*] *Dream*—is characterized by the repetition of the rhythmic/melodic cell described above (see ex. 2). It concludes with a long, virtuosic cadenza for solo violin that connects without pause into the *Adagio cantabile*, its intense melody in the violin accompanied by recitative-style chords in the harpsichord, which also has it own lyrical moments. The brilliant third movement opens with the Stravinsky-style chords found in the *Triptych*, and continues with a rollicking gigue in 6/8, a brief *fughetta* and a return to the opening percussive chords that leads to a dramatic, precipitous conclusion.

Pastorale e Fughetta

The first movement opens with a jaunty "Siciliano" in the harpsichord, its inherent rhythm picked up by the other instruments. The character becomes gradually more animated until the pastoral mood gives way to the more boisterous world of the gigue, but calm and order are restored with a quiet ending on a chord based on F-sharp, but without a third, enhancing its "antique" sound. The subject of the *Fughetta* is long and angular, quite similar to Bach's *Fugue in A minor*, no. 20, from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II (BWV 865). It is answered by the viola in inversion and followed by a dramatic homophonic countersubject in the harpsichord that is picked up by the other instruments. The initial fugal subject never returns in its entirety, however, and the piece ends quietly, this time on a full F-sharp major triad.

Sonata All'Antica

The first movement is a gigue in recognizable Baroque style, but one that starts in 12/8, shifts from 9/8 to 6/8, and concludes with a brief *Poco meno* section of sustained chords followed by a final statement of the opening gigue material. Movement II is short, with long lines and Rieti's trademark shifting meters (see ex. 1). The final movement is another recognizable Baroque dance, this time a French "Rigaudon": homophonic, in duple meter, jocular and rustic.

Variations on Two Cantigas de Santa Maria

This brilliant work is based on two selections from the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a collection of over 450 songs dedicated to the Virgin Mary that was commissioned around the second half of the thirteenth century by King Alfonso of Spain. Rieti indicates in the score the two "Cantigas" he chose (numbers "CLXVI" and "LXXVII"), and introduces themes from both at the outset: first a *Moderato (Cantiga* CLXVI) and then a *Più mosso (Cantiga* LXXVII). The characteristic hemiola rhythm found in many Spanish canzonas from this period can be heard in the opening measures:



Ex. 6. Variations on Two Cantigas de Santa Maria, Mvt. I, mm. 1–2, flute

There are five variations, and each is embellished further with changes in tempo, texture, dynamics, and instrumentation (including a passage for piccolo). Opportunities for individual virtuoso display abound, and there are even moments of the "camp" that Sylvia Marlowe so admired.

During a career spanning more than four decades, harpsichordist **Mark Kroll** has performed throughout North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, winning critical praise for his expressive playing and virtuosity. His extensive list of recordings includes works of J. S. Bach, C.P.E. Bach, Handel, D. Scarlatti, F. Couperin, Duphly, Balbastre, Schubert, and Biber; two critically acclaimed CDs of contemporary American harpsichord music; and a Grammy-nominated recording of Henri Dutilleux's *Les Citations* with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players. Kroll has also distinguished himself as a scholar and teacher. He has published important editions of the music of Hummel, Geminiani, F. Scarlatti, and Avison, and four books: *Ignaz Moscheles and the Changing Musical World of Europe; Johann Nepomuk Hummel: A Musician and His World; Playing the Harpsichord Expressively*; and with Lewis Lockwood, *The Beethoven Violin Sonatas*. Kroll has given master classes throughout the world, and is a professor emeritus at Boston University, where he served as chairman of the Department of Historical Performance for twenty-five years.

Marina Minkin, one of Israel's leading harpsichordists, moved from the former Soviet Union to Israel in 1981 and studied piano with Michael Boguslavsky and harpsichord with David Shemer at the Jerusalem Academy of Music. She then studied harpsichord with Mark Kroll at Boston University, earning the M.M. degree in Harpsichord in 1990 and the D.M.A. in Historical Performance in 1998. Dr. Minkin is founder and Artistic Director of LAUDA, a Jewish-Arab youth ensemble of early and ethnic music, and since 2009 Artistic Director of Israel's Yehiam Renaissance Festival. She teaches baroque music at the Levinsky College and the Israeli Conservatory in Tel-Aviv, and the Jezreel Valley Art Center. She performs and records regularly as a soloist, and as a member of the Phoenix Ensemble, the Spectrum Ensemble, and with the Israel Contemporary Players. Her recordings include *Harpsichord Music by Israeli Composers* (Albany) and *Bach, Bach & Bach* (Artona).

Zvi Carmeli, viola, has performed as a soloist with orchestras in Holland, Finland, Lithuania, Israel, and Austria. Founder of the SoLaRe String Trio, which won the first prize at the Netherlands Impresaariat Chamber Music competition and performed throughout Europe and America, Mr. Carmeli has participated in the chamber music festivals of Festivo (Finland), Rosklide "Schubertiade" (Denmark), Prussia Cove (England), Amadeo (Holland), Ars Musica (Belgium), Moab (U.S.A), Emilia Romagna (Italy), and Kfar Blum (Israel). He teaches viola and chamber music at the Jerusalem Academy for Music and Dance, and also holds a teaching and conducting position at the Universität der Künste (Julius Stern Institute), Berlin.

Moshe Aron Epstein, flute, studied with Dr. Uri Töplitz at the Rubin Music Academy of Tel-Aviv, winning first prize in the Academy's flute competition, and then studied with Marcel Moyse and Aurèle Nicolet. Professor of Flute at the Academy of Music and Theatre in Hamburg since 1999, Mr. Epstein performs regularly with Israeli and European orchestras, and has been invited to numerous chamber music festivals, including Kfar Blum, Bregenz and Hopfgarten, "Bach à Bartok" (Italy), Schwetzinger Mozartfest, Schlosskirche Concerts (Mannheim), and the Mozart Festival (Skopje/Macedonia). In recent years Epstein has been focusing on master classes in Europe, Israel, the United States, and Japan. **Carol Lieberman**, violin, has earned worldwide acclaim over the past 40 years for both her expertise on Baroque violin and her command of the Romantic and contemporary repertoire. The scope of Ms. Lieberman's versatility can be seen by her performances of the complete *Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord* of J.S. Bach in such cities as Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Boston, and San Francisco, and her recordings of works by Dohnányi, Carter, Messiaen, and Piston. Ms. Lieberman has given master classes in Poland, Israel, France, and England, and has served as Professor of Music at the College of the Holy Cross since 1985, where she is also Director of the Holy Cross Chamber Players.

Richard Paley, the principal bassoonist of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, IBA since 1982, was born in Boston, Massachusetts and educated at the New England Conservatory and the Eastman School of Music. He immigrated to Israel in 1978 at the invitation of the Israel Chamber Orchestra, frequently premiers and records new works by Israeli and foreign composers with the Israel Contemporary Ensemble, of which he was a founding member in 1991, and was a pioneer of baroque and classical period performance in the country. Mr. Paley is one of Israel's premier teachers of modern and baroque bassoon.

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, **Julia Rovinsky** graduated from the Rimski-Korsakov Academy of Music and was a prizewinner at the national harp competition in Moscow in 1988. Since immigrating to Israel in 1991, Ms. Rovinsky has become a central figure in Israel's concert scene. She is principal harpist of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, appears regularly as a soloist and in chamber music ensembles, and has participated in numerous music festivals in Israel and throughout the world. Rovinsky teaches at the Buchman-Mehta School of Music, Tel-Aviv University. She won Israel's Prime Minister Award for best performance of Israeli music in 2002, and has recently recorded several CDs of solo harp and chamber music.

Ella Toovy, cello, has performed in recitals and chamber music concerts in the United States, Europe, Asia, Latin America, and her native country, Israel, wining acclaim for her breathtaking style of playing. Concert appearances include New York's Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, and Steinway Hall, and her festival appearances include the Kfar Bloom, Cooperstown, Musica Viva, and Grandes De La Musica festivals, and the New York Summer Music Festival. Ms. Toovy studied for degrees at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance.

Born in Eilat, Israel, **Yael Zamir** studied oboe since childhood with Oded Pintus, Smadar Shazar, and Dudu Carmel. Combining her military service and academic studies at the Tel Aviv Music Academy between 1996 and 1999, she then went abroad to study two years at the Musikakademie Basel with Omar Zoboli and three at the Musikhochschule Zurich Winterthur with Louise Pellerin, earning degrees in teaching, solo oboe, and orchestral playing, the last two with high distinction. Since 2003 Ms. Zamir has focused on improvising as an oboist and a vocalist, developing an improvisation style that combines non-western music with her classical education.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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Triptych for Two Harpsichords (1982)

Recorded: March 13, 2014 at Jerusalem Music Center, Jerusalem, Israel Engineer: Zvi Hirshler Harpsichords: Martin Sassman and Michael Johnson Publisher: E. C. Schirmer (New York)

Concertino for Five Instruments (1963)

Recorded: May 4, 2014 at Ran Baron Hall, Israel Conservatory, Tel Aviv, Israel Engineer: Yaron Aldema Harpsichord: Henk Klop Publisher: General Music Publishing Company (New York, 1966)

Sonata Breve for Violin and Harpsichord (1967)

Recorded: August 19, 2014 at Brooks Concert Hall, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts Engineer: Toby Mountain, Northeastern Digital Harpsichord: William Dowd Publisher: General Music Publishing Company (New York, 1970)

Pastorale e Fughetta for Flute, Viola and Harpsichord (1966) Recorded: May 4, 2014 at Ran Baron Hall, Israel Conservatory, Tel Aviv, Israel Engineer: Yaron Aldema Harpsichord: Henk Klop Publisher: General Music Publishing Company (New York, 1967)

Sonata All'Antica (1946) Recorded: July 30, 2014 at Jerusalem Music Center, Jerusalem, Israel Engineer: Zvi Hirshler Harpsichord: Martin Skowronek Publisher: Broude Brothers (New York, 1957) Variations on Two Cantigas de Santa Maria (1978) Recorded: May 4, 2014 at Ran Baron Hall, Israel Conservatory, Tel Aviv, Israel Engineer: Yaron Aldema Harpsichord: Henk Klop Publisher: General Music Publishing Company (New York, 1981)

Producers: Marina Minkin, Mark Kroll, and Carol Lieberman Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC Cover art, including size, gallery credit, date, format of art (pastel, etc): Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

We express our sincere gratitude to the Research and Publications Committee of the College of the Holy Cross for providing funds to record the *Sonata Breve*, and to the Department of Music at the College of the Holy Cross for facilitating the recording at Brooks Concert Hall and the use of its Dowd harpsichord. We are also grateful to Dr. David Shemer for the loan and use of his Skowronek harpsichord, and to Professor Jonathan Arazi for the loan and use of his Sassman spinet.

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