REVIEW

French Music by an Italian Count

A Survey of Selected Recordings of Ludovico Roncalli

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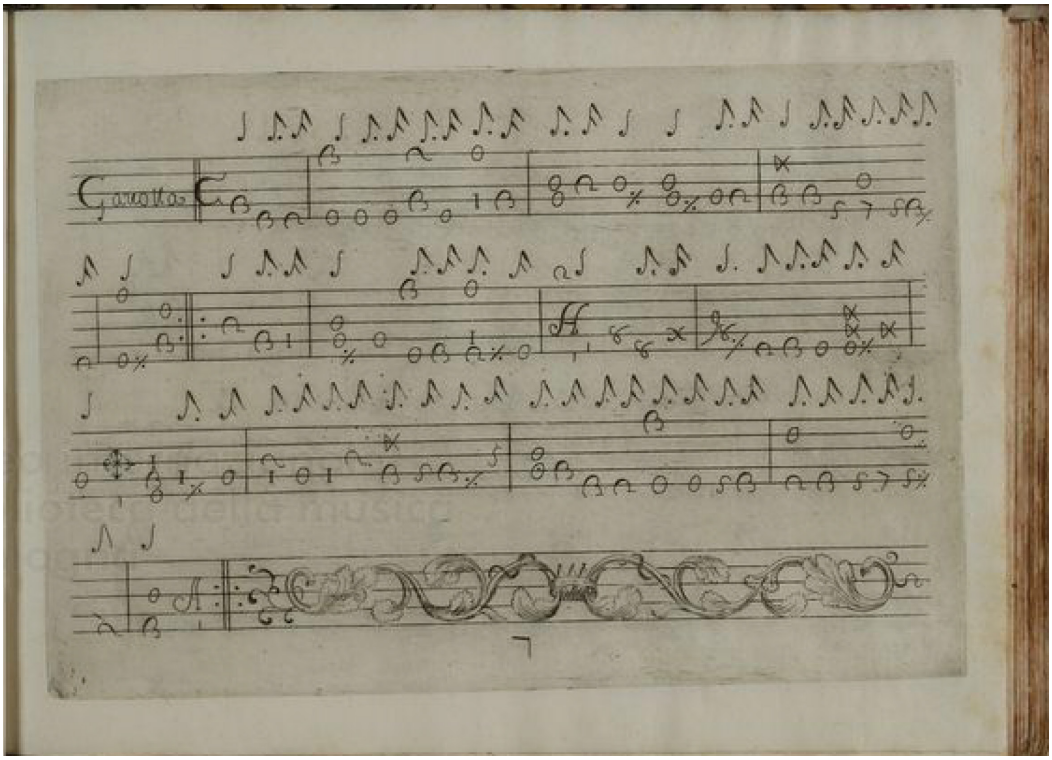
Roncalli: Complete Guitar Music
Bernhard Hofstötter, baroque guitar
Brilliant Classics, 2021. 2 CDs

Ludovico Roncalli: Works for Guitar
Hideki Yamaya, baroque guitar
Mediolanum, 2011. 1 CD

Sonatas for Baroque Guitar
Richard Savino, baroque guitar
Dorian, 2008. 1 CD

Ludovico Roncalli: Capricci armonici sopra la chitarra spagnola
Sandro Volta, baroque guitar
Arion, 1994. 1 CD

LITTLE IS KNOWN about the composer of a book of guitar music published in Bergamo in 1692, titled *Capricci armonici sopra la chitarra spagnola*. Ludovico Roncalli was born in Bergamo to a noble family in 1654, around the same time as de Visée, and inherited the title "Count of Montorio." Count Ludovico trained as a lawyer and was ordained as a priest, before publishing his only musical work. He was apparently not a professional musician but a dilettante composer and guitarist of an unusually high level of ability. He dedicated his book to the Cardinal Benedetto Panfilio, a high church official in Rome and important patron of composers such as Corelli, Handel, and Scarlatti, as well as an occasional author of opera libretti. Roncalli's music is demanding on the performer but restrained in style and altogether devoid of flashiness or gratuitous virtuosity.



Page 7 of Roncalli's *Capricci armonici*, showing the Gavotte from the First Sonata.

Capricci armonici is the last Italian source of music for the five-course Baroque guitar. The instrument originated as we know it in Italy at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with books devoted to strummed dance and song accompaniments and a highly-simplified chord-symbol notation called *alfabeto*. From the 1630s, *alfabeto* guitar began to evolve into a more sophisticated genre as lute-style right hand technique was gradually incorporated into the strummed repertoire and composers created a more and more complex solo literature for the instrument. Roncalli's work testifies to the level of refinement achieved in this branch of musical evolution. It consists of courtly dances for an elite audience, but also shows roots in *alfabeto* playing. Notated in Italian tablature, it still uses *alfabeto* symbols in places, to call for the strumming of stock chords from the guitar's *alfabeto* vernacular.

The contents of the book are made up of nine dance suites in French style, though the author titled them "sonatas," and gave the dances Italian titles. The sonatas are named according to an anachronistic sixteenth-century nomenclature, "primo tuono," "secondo tuono," and so on, that persisted in Italy well after it had been abandoned elsewhere; but musically they are solidly in the major-minor tonal system. The first eight of the "sonatas" are in relative major-minor key pairs. (The last, in G minor, is the odd one out.)

Each sonata begins with a *preludio* and *alemanda*, followed by various combinations of *corrente*, *gigua*, *sarabanda*, *minuet*, *gavotta*, and *passacaglii* (a *gigua* never ends a suite). Roncalli clearly intended his sonatas as unified compositions rather than just collections of dances in the same key; the head-motive of the *alemanda*

tends to recur in other movements, though where this happens is not predictable. For example, in Sonata I it shows up in the *corrente*, while in Sonata III it is more obvious in the *sarabanda* and in Sonata IV it appears in the *minuet*. On the other hand, formal integration is not so formulaic as to be limited to head-motive references. Other striking resemblances can also appear between movements within a suite: bars 10–11 of the *corrente* from Sonata III closely mirror bar 6 of the preceding *alemanda*, for instance, while in Sonata IX the pitch sequence F♯–G–F♮, seen in the bass of the *preludio*, returns prominently in diminution in the treble of the *alemanda*.

It is notable that *Capricci armonici* is especially carefully engraved, by comparison with many if not most Italian guitar books of its day. This may be because Roncalli, as a wealthy nobleman, could devote more resources to it than the average working composer-publisher. The result is that it is not only attractive, but easier to read and even more importantly, relatively free of the errors that plagued tablature printing in the day. These errors are the bane of the modern scholar and interpreter and must have been just as exasperating to the seventeenth-century guitarist.

Roncalli's book, though less well-known today than those of his French contemporary de Visée, was among the first to be revived in the modern era when Oscar Chilesotti published a transcription in 1881. Ottorino Respighi drew upon Chilesotti's transcription when he arranged the closing *passacaglii* from Sonata IX for his third suite of *Ancient Airs and Dances*, published in 1931, bringing Roncalli's legacy, however modestly, before the modern concert audience.

The prominence of French style is notable in Roncalli's work, coming as it did at the culmination of an Italian tradition rooted strongly in Spanish and Neapolitan influences. It seems probable that he composed his sonatas under the influence of de Visée and his many French contemporaries, and especially de Visée's two volumes of guitar music, published respectively ten years and six years before his own. The French flavor can be heard in the rhythmic character of the dance forms, especially the *correntes*, with their metric alternation, and the *minuets*, which are unusually rich with hemiolas.

THE 2021 RELEASE by Bernhard Hofstötter of a complete recording of Roncalli's book seems a good opportunity to examine and compare several recordings that have appeared since the tercentenary of its publication. These include, in addition to Hofstötter's, discs by Sandro Volta, Richard Savino, and Hideki Yamaya. All are well-crafted recordings on five-course guitar. The differences, both subtle and unsubtle, that can be observed among them will serve to illuminate the choices that performers negotiate in approaching this repertoire.

Austrian lutenist-guitarist Bernhard Hofstötter is a busy early-music specialist. In 2017 he issued a disc of guitar music by François Campion, reviewed in these pages (*SbS* 4, 2018). His other recordings have been on Baroque lute, including *The Baroque Lute in Vienna* (2015), a 2021 disc of Weiss, a 2022 album of lute solo and chamber music of Baron, and *Album for the Lute* (2023), featuring premiere recordings from a Baroque manuscript never before recorded. He is also unique among the present company for having studied law, though this gives him something in common with

Roncalli in addition to guitar. Hofstötter is a former law professor and the author of *Non-Compliance of National Courts: Remedies in European Community Law and Beyond*. His two-disc set, *Roncalli: Complete Guitar Music* (Brilliant Classics 95856), was recorded in 2019 and released in 2021, and includes all of Roncalli's work, in order from Sonata I to Sonata IX.

Hideki Yamaya is a Tokyo-born, California-trained, and Connecticut-based artist who works with Baroque guitar, romantic guitar, lutes, and historical mandolins. His recording credits include *The Archlute in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (2014), along with a number of collaborations with John Schneiderman such as *The Mandolino in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (2010), *Adam Darr: German Romantic Guitar Duets* (2014), and a recording of period arrangements of Beethoven on *Beethoven for Two Guitars* (2017). Yamaya's 2011 Roncalli disc is entitled *Ludovico Roncalli: Works for Guitar* (Mediolanum Music M005). A single disc, it includes everything except Sonata IX and two movements (the *corrente* and the second *alemanda*) from Sonata VII.

Richard Savino is a California-based guitar and lute veteran with teaching posts at San Francisco Conservatory and Sacramento State, known for his work in early music but with a respectable footprint in nineteenth-century repertoire as well. His long discography includes discs devoted to Murcia, Carulli, Giuliani, Mertz, and Boccherini, as well as a wide variety of recordings of early stage works and chamber music. His recording of Roncalli, *Sonatas for Baroque Guitar* (Dorian DSL 90804) is from 2008. Also a single disc, it lacks Sonatas IV, VI, and IX.

Sandro Volta is an Italian lutenist-guitarist, conductor, and musicologist. His recording credits include guitar discs of Carulli, Giuliani, and de Visée, and lute recordings featuring music of Dall'Aquila, Kapsberger, and Francesco da Milano, as well as a number of recordings of early chamber and stage works. His Roncalli disc, *Ludovico Roncalli: Capricci armonici sopra la chitarra spagnola* (Arion ARN 68336), is the oldest of the group, released in 1994. Another single disc, it lacks Sonatas III, VI, and IX, along with the *alemanda* and *corrente* from Sonata V and the *corrente* from Sonata V.

Volta, Savino, and Yamaya have naturally had to cut some pieces in order to fit their program on a single disc; we are thus fortunate that Hofstötter was not working under such a limitation. It is worth noting, however, that of the four recordings, only Hofstötter includes Sonata IX. This seems curious in that it is from this sonata that Respighi drew the piece he used in *Ancient Airs and Dances.* It is a shame that we can compare at least two recordings of all the other sonatas, but for this one we have only a single version.

Volta's disc is the only one of this group that adds another instrument to support the guitar: a theorbo (or chitarrone), played by Fabio Pesenti on Sonata IV (which ends his disc). Not much information about Pesenti is available, but he seems to have played guitar with an "Italian Celtic Folk" band named Myrddin, active between 2003 and 2010. He also has a Baroque guitar credit on a Monteverdi disc from 1996. On the Monteverdi recording, Volta is credited as *chitarrone* player, so it is possible that Volta actually handles the *chitarrone* on Sonata VII of the Roncalli disc, while Pesenti takes the guitar. The booklet is silent.

Recordings not examined for this essay include Giacomo Parimbelli's 2006 disc on the Tactus label, Jorge Oraisón's 1996 disc on the Vanguard Classics label, and Charlie Byrd's pioneering 1960 recording for Washington records. Parimbelli is a guitarist and researcher with a particular interest in Bergamo and its history; however, his recording uses a nineteenth-century six-string guitar, and the differences in tuning and stringing undermine any comparison with those using the instrument for which the sonatas were composed. The tuning and stringing of the Baroque guitar are so unique, that a version on a six-string instrument must be considered an arrangement. The same is true of Byrd's recording, which also suffers from being based on Chilesotti's 1881 transcription, since superseded by better understandings of Baroque guitar tuning and stringing. Byrd's recording, however, is historically important as the first recording of complete Sonatas by Roncalli (he recorded Sonatas I–IV), and is still worth listening to in spite of a somewhat dated approach to embellishment and Baroque style. Oraisón's recording was not available for examination by this reviewer.

THE BAROQUE GUITAR was smaller, with a shorter scale length, than the modern classical guitar. Three of the recordings examined offer information about the instruments used, and these illustrate three distinct approaches to historical instruments. Hofstötter's guitar is a Baroque original, dating from around 1640 and attributed to the Venetian maker Matteo Sellas. It has a dark and resonant sound that he uses to excellent effect. Savino's guitar is a modern instrument built in 2004 by Madrid maker José Ángel Espejo as a replica of an Antonio Stradivari original from 1682; this instrument has a brighter sound than Hofstötter's. Yamaya's instrument is more innovative. A contemporary design by San Francisco luthier Mel Wong, it combines aspects of French and Italian models, with a top based on instruments by seventeenth-century Parisian luthier Jean-Baptiste Voboam and a rounded back typical of Italian instruments from the period. Yamaya's guitar achieves a particularly bright and crisp sound, though this is also influenced by his approach to tuning and stringing.

The tuning of the Baroque guitar is a subtle and complex issue—really, a set of issues—that has been discussed by scholars for more than fifty years. The pitches correspond nominally to the pitches of the first five strings of the modern guitar in standard tuning, with a single *chanterelle* and four double courses, the last two of which are tuned an octave higher, to create a "reentrant" pattern, much as is used on the theorbo, the ukulele, and the five-string banjo. The subtleties reside in the dispositions of these reentrant courses.

Sylvia Murphy, in a 1970 *Galpin Society Journal* article, defined three basic tuning approaches based on the few available instructions in the literature of the period. The first, "fully reentrant" approach, tunes both strings of the fourth and fifth courses up an octave, so that the open fourth course, D, is one tone below the first, and the open fifth course one tone below the second. In this procedure, associated especially with strummed *alfabeto* guitar, the third course is the lowest in pitch and the open strings together span a compass of less than one octave. In the second approach, the fourth and fifth courses are tuned in octaves, with one string at the upper octave and one string at the lower. The lower strings are sometimes called *bourdons* in French or

bordones in Italian. This pattern, sometimes called "Italian" tuning, provides much greater resources for bass harmonic support. The third tuning approach can be thought of as a compromise between the other two, with a *bourdon* on the fourth course but not on the fifth course. Known as "French" tuning, this is especially associated with Corbetta and his French musical descendants including de Visée and Campion.

Donald Gill, in a 1975 article in *Early Music*, offered a more nuanced list of five different arrangements, taking care to associate each with specific guitar sources that supported it while acknowledging that the vast majority of sources were either reticent on the topic or altogether silent. James Tyler, in his 1980 book *The Early Guitar* and other books and articles, has added depth to the discussion and examined subtle details such as which side of an octave-double course might bear the lower string and which the higher, in order to facilitate the technique of sounding only one string of the pair; he also described the option of octave-doubling the third course, with a higher string sounding above the first course.

Gary Boye's contribution to Victor Coelho's 2003 book, *Performance on Lute, Guitar, and Vihuela*, digs deeper into the evidence for and against the use of *bourdons* in various Italian Baroque sources, attempting to better understand the contexts that make one or another tuning appropriate in a given case. Finally, Lex Eisenhardt in his 2015 book *Battuto and Pizzicato* and in articles on his website, and Monica Hall in numerous essays, mostly found on her own website, have more recently carried the discussion forward, weighing the evidence for various practices in various contexts and keeping the discussion alive.

The recordings under consideration offer a variety of approaches to tuning the instrument, giving us the opportunity to hear these different theories in action upon the same repertoire and judge their effect. Bernhard Hofstötter uses a French tuning, with a *bourdon* only on the fourth course. This makes the fourth course available for harmonic support, while facilitating the use of the fifth course in a melodic role, sort of like an alternate *chanterelle*—a resource Campion especially uses to good effect in his music. It lends itself readily to the use of *campanella* effects, where notes in a melodic line are shared between two or more courses, a peculiarly guitaristic technique that Roncalli exploits fully.

Richard Savino, on the other hand, uses *bourdons* on both the fourth *and* fifth courses of his guitar. Of the four artists, he addresses the issue of tuning most extensively in his notes. He asserts that this disposition was standard among Italian guitar composers from the 1630s, including Corbetta before his relocation to France, and finds that it, instead of French tuning, provides the best balance between Roncalli's *campanella* textures and articulation of his bass. He acknowledges, however, the complexity of the musical evidence at play, allowing that some of it supports his chosen tuning and some does not.

Notably, though Savino furnishes his guitar with fourth- and fifth-course *bourdons*, he does not always use them. For example, in the cadence at the end of the *minuet* of Sonata VII, Roncalli's tablature calls for D on the fourth and second courses, an octave if *bourdons* are used, but Savino clearly leaves out the *bourdon* to play a unison. In another example at the end of the *preludio* of Sonata V, the tablature calls

for A on the fifth and first courses, notionally two octaves apart. However, careful comparison of this last bass with the one that opens the piece shows that Savino eschews the lower pitch on the octave-strung fifth course and plays only a single rather than a double octave.

Hideki Yamaya uses a fully reentrant tuning, an unusual choice for music as contrapuntal as this; he also uses the high octave doubling on the third course, which has the effect of assigning to the third course both the highest and the lowest open notes on the instrument. Yamaya explains in the notes to his disk that he bases this choice primarily on internal musical evidence in Roncalli's pieces, finding that it optimizes linear continuity and avoids many awkward melodic leaps of a seventh or a ninth. It also results in an overall sonic environment overwhelmingly dominated by the treble register. Another factor combines with Yamaya's tuning to shape the character of his sound, and this is the absence of reverb used in his audio processing. In listening to Volta, Savino, and Hofstötter, we hear a generous degree of reverb that lends a feeling of deep resonance. Yamaya's recording is mastered without the same kind of effect. At first I encountered this contrast as simply thin and lacking sustain, but I found myself over time experiencing it as more honest, and at least in this aspect, more noble, than the superficially more resonant sound of the other recordings.

Sandro Volta offers no information about his approach to tuning in the notes to his disc. However, careful comparison of his recording to Roncalli's tablature (for example, in the opening of the *preludio* to Sonata V), as well as a general absence of bass support throughout, indicate use of a fully reentrant tuning like Yamaya's. (I would not commit myself as to his disposition of the third course.) Volta does, as noted above, add a bass accompaniment to Sonata VII, as if in compensation for the bass his guitar lacks. The historical precedent of supporting the guitar's chords with a bass instrument is something scholars have yet to agree on. But especially in the reentrant tuning used by Volta, many chords are heard in inverted forms that violate harmonic norms upheld in other seventeenth-century genres. The addition of a bass instrument solves this problem, if indeed it is such, and by doing so Volta offers another alternative sonic model for our consideration.

RONCALLI'S MUSIC is above all dance music, and it is reasonable to judge the performers' interpretation on this basis, taking into consideration factors like tempo, rhythmic drive, and metric nuances characteristic of specific genres, especially in triple-meter dances. Here, none of the four artists stands as an outlier from the others. Yamaya tends to choose a faster tempo slightly more often than the others, but certainly not always. Volta takes the fastest tempo in the *preludio* and *gavotta* of Sonata II, while Savino is faster in the *gavotta* of Sonata I and the *alemanda* of Sonata V, and especially the *corrente* of Sonata VIII. Hofstötter is faster in the *corrente* and *sarabanda* of Sonata IV and the *alemanda* of Sonata VIII. Slow tempos are just as important; here we tend to see the greatest variation between performers, especially in *sarabandas*: in the *sarabanda* of Sonata I, for instance, Volta takes a quick tempo one might associate with a minuet, while Savino and Yamaya use a much slower tempo, closer to what one traditionally associates with a sarabande. In the

Sonata III *sarabanda*, on the other hand, Savino and Yamaya diverge considerably, with the latter adopting a much slower tempo. As Richard Hudson has written of a distinctly slower type of *Sarabande* in France and Germany in contrast to a faster Italian type, it is interesting to see how the different performers handle the dance in this French-influenced Italian music.

Closely associated with tempo in dance music is the issue of metric strictness (as anyone who has played for dancers will attest). Here, Yamaya stands out somewhat among his colleagues, especially in the slow movements just described. Of the four, Yamaya alone consistently performs the *sarabanda* with such attention to the beat that it sounds like a slow dance. Not that he is mechanical; he pays due heed to cadences and allows his music to breathe properly. He is also capable of a very flexible tempo in the *preludios*, as for example in Sonata VIII, and he can use such flexibility expressively, as in the *alemanda* of the same Sonata, where he achieves an especially wistful feeling.

By contrast, Hofstötter generally adopts the most flexible approach to tempo, though not always and not by so great a margin. This may sometimes undermine the dance character of pieces, as one might argue it does in the *sarabanda* of Sonata V; it may also tend to obscure the motivic construction of a composition, as one might argue it does in the *preludio* of Sonata IV (though it could also be used to bring out the motivic structure). However, it is equally an expressive device, and allows Hofstötter room to linger over the embellishments in which he seems to revel. He is certainly capable of a strict dance tempo, as for example in the *corrente* of Sonata IV.

If Yamaya and Hofstötter represent the two (not very widely separated) poles of metric strictness, Savino and Volta comfortably fill the space in between. Each shows enough individual variation to avoid easy characterization. Volta is sometimes strict, as in the *minuet* of Sonata VIII, and sometimes flexible, as in the *sarabanda* of Sonata V. Savino, too, is sometimes flexible, as in the *gigua* of Sonata V, and sometimes strict, as in the *minuet* of Sonata III.

Roncalli's triple-meter dances, even the *minuets*, very often contain prominent hemiolas, and a conscientious approach to the beat helps tremendously to bring these out. Volta's use of a bass accompaniment on Sonata IV offers an instructive case in point. In the *sarabanda* of this sonata, the theorbo's bass playing steadily on the downbeat undermines the hemiolas in the first and third phrases; but in the *minuet* of the same sonata, the bass notes are so distributed as to reinforce rather than obscure the hemiola.

Taken together, the four artists provide enough variety of interpretation to nourish plenty of esthetic reflection.

IN THE AREA OF EMBELLISHMENT, all four artists bring taste, skill, and elegance to Roncalli's music. Here, however, Hofstötter may fairly be recognized as standing out in terms of originality and boldness. He is generally the most generous in his use of embellishment, although as noted above, this sometimes comes at the expense of metric integrity. The *alemanda* of Sonata V is a typical example, where his lingering over luxurious *agréments* does not support the stately rhythmic flow usually associated

with the *allemande*. The individual listener, however, may find that he makes up for this in the variety of original ideas he contributes to the music. One place he typically introduces these is in passages he interpolates in the approach to the repeat of a section, usually the first section of an *alemanda*, as in Sonata II and Sonata VIII, though he also treats the second section of the *alemanda* this way in Sonata IX.

Hofstötter also stands out in terms of formal embellishment: he is the only of the four to use the *petite reprise*, a practice whereby the conclusion of a Baroque dance was often reinforced by repeating the last phrase before the final cadence. Sometimes this was notated by composers; Roncalli was not among them, but his music lends itself to the gesture. Hofstötter uses it often, as in the *sarabanda* of Sonata I, the *sarabanda* and *gavotta* of Sonata II, and the *sarabanda* and *minuet* of Sonata IV. Sometimes, as in the *corrente* and *sarabanda* of Sonata V, Hofstötter adds not quite a *petite reprise*, but rather a short coda in the spirit of one: in the first case repeating not the entire last phrase, but only part of it; and in the second case only the final cadence, but preceded by a long and elaborate flourish. However, Hofstötter takes the greatest and most interesting liberties with the *passacaglii* of Sonata V, creating his own strummed introduction, which he brings back at the midpoint, articulating the piece into two groups of sections; he then repeats it four times at the end as a coda, reinforcing a unified statement of Roncalli's composition.

ALL FOUR OF THESE ARTISTS perform Roncalli's music well, with taste, sensitivity, and variety. Their different approaches to stringing and tuning create different sound worlds, but this reviewer is unable to say one is superior to the others. Hofstötter's approach is rhythmically expressive and exploits a particularly generous approach to embellishment and formal modification. Yamaya hews the closest to a strict dance-music interpretation of Roncalli's music. Each artist plays delightfully, though differently, shines brightly in certain pieces, and may appeal more to certain listeners. We are fortunate to have four such sensitively crafted interpretations of Roncalli's music on the five-course guitar, the unique instrument for which it was composed. It is to be regretted only that Hofstötter alone offers all the movements of all the sonatas.

Greater familiarity with these recordings will stimulate greater interest in the music of Roncalli, a prominent late figure in the Baroque guitar who bridges the Italian roots of the instrument and the peak of refinement to which it was ultimately brought in France by de Visée and Campion. All four discs reward close and repeated listening.

About the Author

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