HARPSICHORD DECORATION—
A REFLECTION OF
RENAISSANCE IDEAS ABOUT MUSIC

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A prominent feature of leisure at all levels of Renaissance society was an "immense enthusiasm for music." And sources as diverse as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353), Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* (1528), the *Tischreden* (1566) of Martin Luther, and Thomas Morley's *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597) give insights into the role of domestic music making in Renaissance society, as well as into the degree of musical skill expected of a member of "polite" society.

Such diverse music making of course required musical instruments. And among those used in the Renaissance were keyboard instruments: harpsichords, spinets, virginals, and clavichords. As with many other such ostensibly utilitarian objects in Renaissance life, great care and expense were often lavished on the decoration of these instruments: they were often painted with allegorical, mythological, or pastoral scenes; veneered and covered with inlay-work and sculpture; or embellished with semi-precious stones. Some decorative schemes gave great prominence to written inscriptions or mottoes. Such instruments were obviously intended to serve as works of art and signs of wealth as much as musical instruments. Baldassare Castiglione reported that his ideal ruler, Federigo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, included "every kind of musical instrument" among the adornments of his palace.
and that he did not "tolerate anything that was not most rare and outstanding." And Sabba da Castiglione (Knight Hospitaller, scholar, and art collector, c. 1484-1554) could commend furnishing palaces and rooms with musical instruments, including organs, harpsichords, and clavichords, "because such instruments as these greatly delight the ears, and they also please the eye very much when they are diligently made by the hands of excellent and ingenious masters." Thus some of the mottoes painted on harpsichords reflect this dual role when they proclaim *Rendo lieti in un tempo gli occhi e'l core* ("I make happy at one time the eyes and the heart") or *Riccho son d'oro et riccho son di suono...* ("Rich I am of gold, and rich I am of sound").

The presence of a sententious, moralizing motto as part of the decoration of an instrument elevates it from the realm of the merely decorative and causes it to partake of the Horatian ideal: to delight and instruct. The instrument becomes an example of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a unification of the visual and sonorous arts with an ennobling literary, intellectual idea.

But as we should suspect during an age under the raging influence of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* (1505) and Alciati's *Emblemata* (1531) and during an age obsessed with embodying hidden meanings and moralizations within allegorical, mythological, and emblematic images, even the decorations on musical instruments carried cultural and ideological significance deeper than mere visual decoration. In this paper we will be concentrating on two aspects of harpsichord decoration—the written inscriptions or mottoes and the mythological paintings—to discover how they reflect certain features of Renaissance culture and thought, but emphasizing where possible ideas and attitudes about music.

The practice of placing mottoes on harpsichords and the particular form the mottoes took reflect several aspects of Renaissance literary and artistic culture. First, we immediately see the influence of the humanist revival of classical learning: not only by the predominant use of Latin, but also by the quotations drawn from classical Greek and Roman authors, frequent use of classical verse forms,