

# Bartolotti *Passacaglie* Liner Notes

The twenty-four *Passacaglie* of Angiol Michele Bartolotti represent not only a highly significant contribution to the repertory of the guitar, but they are quite possibly the earliest example of a set of pieces written as a set to encompass all major and minor keys. For the first half of the 17th century, this is a revolutionary concept, full of bravado and completely modern. Certainly, efforts to write a tonally all-encompassing set of pieces can be traced back to the *recercare* of lutenist Francesco Spinancino, from 1507. There is also an example from the second edition of Vincenzo Galilei's *Il Fronimo* (1584). However, there are two major factors which distinguish Bartolotti's *Passacaglie* from these previous works. First of all, Bartolotti uses fully developed major/minor tonality, flush with sophisticated harmonic procedure: complex chromatic voice leading, advanced manipulation of harmonic functions and substitutions, and innovative modulation schemes. All of the known previous examples use modal composition techniques, firmly entrenched in the sonic language of the Renaissance. This is especially significant when considered in the light of Jean-Phillippe Rameau's 1722 treatise, which is considered to be first codification of major/minor tonality. In this treatise, Rameau explains that he is describing changes in music from over the previous forty years. Bartolotti predates this window by two decades. Furthermore, in the music of Bartolotti's contemporaries (Cavalli, Cesti, and even Monteverdi) we hear remnants of the modal approach of the 15th and 16th centuries, but Bartolotti has unequivocally embraced the new harmonic style. It is worth mentioning that the English lutenist John Wilson also wrote a set of thirty preludes for lute in all major and minor keys, but these come a few years later than the *Libro Primo*, which Bartolotti published in 1640. The Wilson preludes, unlike the other examples cited here, were never published and exist only in manuscript. Another notable lute source is Denis Gaultier's *La rhetorique des dieux*, a manuscript compiled in 1652.

The second remarkable feature of Bartolotti's *Passacaglie* is the sheer scope of the composition. Taken together, the *Passacaglie* are nearly ninety minutes worth of music. Each piece consists of thirteen stanzas, and each stanza is four measures long. The 13th stanza of each *Passacaglia* is a modulation to the next key, following a major/relative minor scheme around the circle of fifths. The seventh

and eighth stanza of each piece is presented without the typical *battute* (strumming), in what was known as *pizzicate* (plucked) style. Even within the rigid confines of these structural dictates, each of the twenty-four *Passacaglie* is a highly-developed and unique work. Every one is full of invention and wonderfully crafted counterpoint, avoiding any formulaic tendencies. As a whole, the *Passacaglie* present an encyclopedic compendium of playing techniques for the instrument, including complex strumming patterns, cascading legato scales, harp-like effects, and ornamentation.

The history of the development of passacaglia is intertwined with the development of the early guitar. Its first known printed appearance is from Giralamo Montesardo's guitar book published in 1606 in Florence. Most of the guitar books (and there are at least one hundred!) published during the 17th century feature a set of passacaglias designed as instruction for chord strumming. These passacaglias are often simple exercises presented in a type of shorthand called *alfabeto*. Bartolotti's *Passacaglie* represent a quantum leap forward, and are fully-developed virtuoso compositions, painstakingly notated. Curiously, there is a similar example found in Domenico Pellegrini's 1650 guitar book, in which all twenty-four keys are presented in a single piece. Though Giralomo Frescobaldi is often discussed in relation to the form, Bartolotti's output is arguably the most significant contribution to the development of the passacaglia. As far as an effort to write in all keys, there is nothing else comparable in scope until Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722/42), which came nearly a hundred years later.

### **About the composer:**

Angiol (or Angelo) Michele Bartolotti published two books for guitar, the first (*Libro Primo*) in 1640, from which these *Passacaglie* are taken, and a second (*Secondo Libro*) in 1655. He described himself in both publications as being from Bologna. Little else is now known about the details of his life, but he is associated with two of the most interesting figures in all of European history: Jacopo Salviati and Queen Christina of Sweden. Salviati was the Duke of San Giuliano and a descendent of the legendary Medici family. His wife, Veronica Cibo, is famous for ordering the murder of his mistress and placing her severed head in the Duke's dresser drawer. A dedication to the Duke and the Salviati coat-of-arms are seen on the frontispiece of Bartolotti's *Libro Primo*, and it can be assumed that Bartolotti

might have been under his patronage. Another employee of the Salviati family was none other than Giulio Caccini, whose 1602 publication *Le nuove musiche* hailed the beginning of a new style which came to be known as "monody," a cornerstone of Baroque music. Bartolotti's *Secondo Libro*, published in Rome in 1655, is dedicated to Queen Christina of Sweden, who employed him as part of an entourage of Italian musicians at her court in Stockholm. Christina was a controversial figure, regarded as quite a libertine, dressing in men's clothing, obsessed with the arts and philosophy, never marrying, and abdicating the throne after converting to Catholicism. She led a festive caravan of 255 people across Europe on her way to the Vatican, where she was received in a celebration witnessed by some 6,000 spectators. Bartolotti may have made his way to Paris with Christina when she travelled there to negotiate with Louis XIV in an unsuccessful bid to be made Queen of Naples. He published his instruction for theorbo there in 1669. It is surmised that he remained in Paris for the rest of his life. Mention is made in the 1682 books of the French royal household of a "Miquelange, italien" in reference to a body being removed - it is generally assumed that this was Bartolotti.

### **About the instrument:**

The five-course, or "baroque" guitar was commonly referred to as the "*chitarra spagnola*" or "Spanish guitar" by 17th century Italians. This was more to distinguish it from other types of guitar than to acknowledge any Spanish cultural connection to the instrument. In the modern age, much of the guitar's image is tied to its use in Spain, and it can be difficult to understand that the development of the repertoire really came from Italian-speaking lands. The instrument used on this recording was built in 2010 in Columbus, Ohio by Chadwick Neal. It is modeled after a French instrument from the Voboam workshop, ca. 1680. There are four pairs of gut strings, or "courses," and a single high string, (also gut) called the *chanterelle*. The instrument is tuned analogously to the highest five strings of a modern guitar. There is much confusion and debate about the stringing of this instrument as regards the proper octaves of the bottom two courses. Surprisingly, although there are hundreds of primary sources from the 17th and 18th centuries, very few of them clearly stipulate how the instrument is to be strung. Sometimes clues can be taken from the music itself, and conjecture is often made based on region and date. There is also a great deal of speculation based on ambiguous tuning instructions. Bartolotti leaves absolutely no information at all on this matter in either of his guitar books. Furthermore, when one searches for musical evidence, it is possible to find reasonable justification for any of the three commonly-

accepted tuning schemes. I would put forth the argument that, given the considerations of practicality in finding strings in the 17th century, musicians then were probably very much like musicians are now - they worked with what was available to them. Perhaps Bartolotti and other 17th century guitarists at times played with *bourdons*, or low-octave strings, on either the fourth and/or fifth courses, and at other times they did not. Perhaps he intentionally avoided precise instructions because he knew that readers would use different stringings. One thing is certain: we do not know and should therefore be cautious when making any assertions about unspecified practices. For this recording, I strung the guitar with a *bourdon* on the fourth course, and two high strings on the fifth.