

## Introduction to the video “Passagagli”

The variations on the musical ground „passacalle/passacaglio“, commonly known through the plurals „passacagli“ (sometimes misspelled as “passagagli”, as in this case) or the Latin-derived neutral plural form „passacaglia“, are, since their first introduction in Europe, in the Renaissance, the hypnotic music par excellence: dozens and dozens of small variations over the same short and constantly repeated ground. They went to the point of their performance being sometimes forbidden in the church, because of their seductive, sensual power on the human intellect. Those played in this video are one of the several settings for harpsichord published in 1664 by Bernardo Storace, a composer active as state “maestro di cappella” in Messina (Sicily). They are particularly enticing because of their very long “preparation”: for the first half of the piece the music progresses through minimal changes (indeed the “passacaglia” are somehow the prototype of minimalist music), “torturing” the listener in the wait for something more exciting to happen. Finally this comes, and the music fires up.

The visuals follow the suggestion of the music: they start with a minimalist superposition of almost light-gray fragments on a black underground, each entry synchronized with the introduction of a new variation of the musical ground. They are however small worlds in themselves, as the vision on an ultra-high-definition screen makes clear. At the beginning the viewer is caught by the association new-variation/new-visual-entry, but after some dozens of them appeared, he gets lost in the pattern created by their stacking on the screen. He can no more count them, as he can no more count also the musical variations. And then, suddenly, the tone of the music changes: the variations start to acquire motion, at first slow, then faster and faster, and in correspondence the viewer gets the more and more caught by the game of moving forms, and colors that become warmer and warmer.

The composer has grouped the variations in six “chapters”, the “partite”. Each one of them has its own mood and character. Also the video, although flowing seamless, like the music, is divided in chapters that correspond to those of the music: 1) just “black-and-white”; 2) the music becomes more emphatic / larger patterns are introduced; 3) the music starts developing more affection / blue-tones are introduced; 4) the music starts moving / the pictures too; 5) the music becomes more emotionally involved / warm colors appear; 6) for a moment the music rests and turns back to the overall melancholy implied by the descending tetrachord, just before the final firework / the video also slows down a bit and the colors get darker and colder, before flowing into their final visual explosion.

The visuals are derived from photographs of my own, and I play the music on a copy of a Messinese harpsichord of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.