

National Identity, Modernity and Other Intertextual Relations in the *Ninth String Quartet* of Villa-Lobos¹

Paulo-de-Tarso Salles

University of São Paulo, Brazil

The music of Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) is associated with the burst of nationalism that occurred in Brazil at the turn of the twentieth-century. He was engaged with the Brazilian modernists and lived for some years in Paris during the Twenties, forging a mixture of personal style and mixing his cultural references with the romantic tradition and European modernism. Like many musicians of his generation, Villa-Lobos was acquainted with the styles of Chopin, Wagner, Debussy and was overwhelmed by *Le Sacre du Printemps*. But his music also demonstrates a peculiar taste for traditional composers such as Bach, Haydn and Beethoven.

In many of his works he explicitly tried to represent the national character, picking up melodies of children's songs that reappear mainly in his piano and choir music.² At other times he borrows some rhythmic figurations, and melodic fragments, or even reharmonizes entire tunes composed by popular musicians such as Ernesto Nazareth and Anacleto de Medeiros.³ Another important feature came from the use of Indian

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² I offer as an example some of his most representative piano works as the suites *A Prole do Bebê* [*The Baby's Family*] #1 (1918) and #2 (1921) or the *16 Cirandas* (1926). The most remarkable choral music collection by Villa-Lobos is perhaps is *Guia Prático* (1932-49), in eleven volumes.

³ Some of the Nazareth piano works are quoted in the *Noneto* (1923), *Choros #8* (1925) and in the *Suite Sugestiva* (1929). In the *Choros #10* (1926) a *xote* named *Yara* by Anacleto de Medeiros with lyrics by Catulo da Paixao Cearense is extensively quoted in the last section of the work.

melodies.⁴ We can quote some instrumental combinations, vocal sounds, timbre and other materials that establish some sort of connection with Brazilian culture.⁵

Another possible way to establish a national character is through the titles and subtitles of many of his works. In them the listener can make such connections, as in the symphonic poems *Urupuru* and *Amazonas* (the both composed in 1917). In these works we can hear and see musical gestures founded on the music of Wagner, Debussy and Stravinsky, but adapted to serve as a representation of Brazilian jungles. Anyway, the national character cannot be defined by isolated elements, as observes Carl Dahlhaus:

[...] if a composer intended a piece of music to be national in character and the hearers believe it to be so, that is something the historian must accept as an aesthetic fact, even if stylistic analysis - the attempt to "verify" the aesthetic premise by reference to musical features - fails to produce any evidence. There is no line of argument which would make it permissible to leave ideological "appearances" out of account in assessing the aesthetic "reality".⁶

However, these associations are harder to find when Villa-Lobos seems to express himself in a more universal style, manipulating such traditional genres as symphonies and string quartets. Symptomatically, some critical judgments assert that Villa-Lobos was less prepared to compose from standard musical forms.⁷

The "national" style can be defined as "marked", and in turn its asymmetric pair, the "non-national" style, or "universal" style can be classified as "unmarked".⁸ Precisely in this asymmetry lies much of this embarrassment with correlating "non-nationalism" to the Villa-Lobos style, with

⁴ Indian melodies are a representative feature in the *Choros #3* (1925), *Choros #7* (1924) and *Choros #10* (1926).

⁵ These features can be found in the *Nonetto* (1923) and in the *Choros #10* (1926).

⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 1989, pp. 86-87.

⁷ Lisa Peppercorn remarks that: "While he [Villa-Lobos] used classical forms, like that of the sonata, for his chamber music and orchestral works, these proved to be rather more of an obstacle to the growth of his musical ideas than a freer framework would have done" (Lisa Peppercorn, *Villa-Lobos, the Music: an Analysis of His Style*, Pro/Am Music Resources, White Plains, New York 1991, p. 34).

⁸ I refer to the classification proposed by Robert Hatten in *Musical Meaning in Beethoven* (1994), where the correlations between structure and meaning are investigated from the theoretical concept of Markedness (Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation and Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 2004, pp. 29-44).

trying to understand his peculiar borrowings of modernist European gestures through the bias of Brazilian modernism. It is worth pointing out that this difficulty is not inconsiderable when somebody tries to define what is “national” in music.

I intend to demonstrate in this article that the string quartets of Villa-Lobos are not a mere imitation of their traditional models, but represent precisely his attempt to hybridize the most traditional genre of European chamber music, through several intertextual operations between his own style and the tradition of this genre. As we cannot address all seventeen Villa-Lobos string quartets in this space, I chose the *Ninth String Quartet* (1945), because the examination of its structure and meaning has given rise to some peculiar questions. However, due to the complexity inherent in modern music, this work proposes some initial thoughts that will be further developed because, as noted Robert Hatten, the

Fragmentation of contemporary culture and musical styles makes historical reconstruction of a gestural language for Beethoven easier than for many modernist compositions. To counteract this gestural estrangement, many contemporary composers incorporate gestural and expressive “connections” with which the performer (or listener) has greater familiarity – the topical use of popular styles, for example.⁹

This fragmentation and reconstruction occurs frequently in Villa-Lobos’ music; one of his most notable compositional devices is the assembling of layers of great diversity, not only at the level of the surface materials, but also in the stylistic references captured from several sources. This approach tends to be more complex when we define this style as an “unmarked” one, as is observed in this context. We will see some possible interpretations of these features in the *9th String Quartet*.

***Ninth String Quartet* (1945): structure and intertextuality**

The *9th String Quartet* seems composed according to the classical sonata-form, expanded to a post-tonal context. The next table shows its themes and materials according to this model.¹⁰

⁹ Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2004, p. 120)

¹⁰ I refer in this case to the definition of classical sonata form made by Charles Rosen (ROSEN, 1998, pp. 30-42).

Table 1: Formal structure of Villa-Lobos' 9th String Quartet

Themes	Bars	Instruments/Materials
EXPOSITION	1-115	
A	1-38	
- a1	1-9	A-Bb-F# (vl.1)
- a2	14-32	
- a3 (a1)	33-38 (rehearsal 2)	
Bridge	39-44	
B	45-115 (rehearsals 3 to 5)	
- b1	45-48	G-A-G-A-G
- b2	55-64	Octatonic collection (8-28)
- b3	65-78 (rehearsal 4)	E-G
- b4	87-115	Punctuated melody (vla+vlc) C-B-D-C-B-D
DEVELOPMENT	116-179 (rehearsals 6 to 8)	
RECAPITULATION	180-281	
A	180-217	
- a1	180-192	D-Eb-B (vl.2)
- a2	193-211	
- a3 (a1)	212-217	
Bridge	218-223	
B	224-281 (rehearsal 12 a 14)	
- b1	224-237	C-D-C-D-C (vl1+vla+vlc)
- b2	244-281	E - F# - G - A - B - A - G - F# (vl2) – diatonic pentachord.
CODA	282-344	

Some classical features are self-evident in this context. Haydn's influence is strong, mainly in the motivic treatment and constant use of mirroring that resembles the *al rovescio* counterpoint of Op. 20/2's *fuga*. The subject, played on the 1st violin (Example 1), is repeated in the inversion (Ex. 2, bar 102) at the same time that the 2nd violin plays it in a Perfect Fourth down transposition (Example 2).

Fuga a 4 Soggetti **IV**

Allegro

sempre sotto voce

sempre sotto voce

sempre sotto voce

Example 1: Haydn: fugue subject of Op. 20/2, IV. Dover, p. 34.

al rovescio

110

Example 2: Haydn: subject *al rovescio* of Op. 20/2's fugue, IV. Dover, p. 38

At the very beginning we can see how Villa-Lobos employs similar procedures and gestures in a fully expanded tonal context, although centred on E flat (Example 3). This demonstrates a negotiation with the string quartet style; a landmark associated with Haydn's “conversational” style,¹¹ which Villa-Lobos respected even in his most “rhapsodic” string quartets, as #1 (1915), #5 (1931) and #6 (1938/43).

¹¹ See Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures...*, *op. cit.*, p. 135, quoting the four kinds of “dialogical relationships”: the “lecture”, the “polite conversation”, the “debate” and the “conversation” from Mara Parker’s book *The String Quartet, 1750–1797: Four Types of Musical Conversation*.

I

H.VILLA-LOBOS
(Rio, 1945)

Allegro (♩ = 120)

6

Example 3: Villa-Lobos: 9th String quartet, I, bars 1-11. Southern Music Publishing Company

The 2nd violin line results in a palindrome between bars 1 to 6, considering both pitch and timbre (alternating *arco* and *pizzicato* markings, Example 4). This line doubles, without ornaments, the 1st violin line. The viola and cello parts start in contrary motion to the violins, but turn to an autonomous direction from bar 3, where the contrary motion occurs among them.

pizz. _____ arco pizz. _____

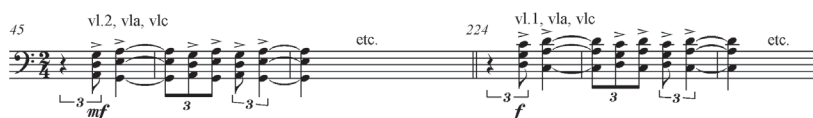
Example 4: Villa-Lobos: 9th String Quartet, I, Palindrome in the 2nd violin's line, bars 2-6

Besides these associations with Haydn's quartets, the harmonic content requires another kind of approach, since the tonal relationship is much expanded. The trichords appears as the main motivic cell (Example 5). The extensive use of Major-minor trichords (3-3 according to Forte classification) resembles works of Schoenberg (Op. 11/1), Berg (*Lyric Suite*, II) and Webern (Op. 24).¹² Following the proposals made by Hatten, the blending of the two separated gestures resulting in an emergent one may be considered as a *troping* of gestures (HATTEN, 2004b, pp. 136-7). In this peculiar context, i.e. Villa-Lobos's personal style, we can classify these gestures as an expression of a non-national language; his search for a "universal" style.¹³



Example 5: Villa-Lobos: *9th String Quartet*, Main motif and its variations on 1st violin part, I, bars 1-4

The second group of themes (B) changes from Exposition to Recapitulation. There are four themes in the Exposition (b¹, b², b³ and b⁴), but just two of them appear in the Recapitulation (b¹ and b²). The b¹ theme is fully homophonic and is transposed up a Perfect Fourth in the Recapitulation (Example 6).



Example 6: Villa-Lobos: *9th String Quartet*, I, Theme b¹ in the Exposition and its transposition in the Recapitulation

¹² Villa-Lobos employed these trichords in earlier works such as *Nonetto* (1923) or his *2nd String Quartet* (1915).

¹³ The tendency to use atonal elements is also present in some earlier quartets of Villa-Lobos. Eero Tarasti wrote about the *Sixth Quartet* of Villa-Lobos (1938/1943): "[...] the first movement of the quartet is either straightforwardly Mediterranean in its lightness and energy, or then music based on chromatic, atonal, almost serial passages. If the former refers to Milhaud, then the latter alludes to Schönberg" (Eero Tarasti, *Heitor Villa-Lobos: The Life and Works, 1887-1959*, MacFarland & Company, North Caroline 1995, p. 307).

Theme b² has an octatonic character in the Exposition,¹⁴ divided by two 6-z13 hexachords (Example 7a). The reappearance of this theme in the Recapitulation (Example 7b) is not so clear. In this case things are slightly more complex: the melodic profile is inverted and a diatonic pentachord is employed (Example 8).

55 vl. 1

6-z13 subsets of 8-28 octatonic collection 6-z13

Example 7a: Villa-Lobos: *9th String Quartet*, I, Theme b² in the Exposition, rehearsal 3 + 11, 1st violin

245 vl. 2

5-23

Example 7b: Villa-Lobos: *9th String Quartet*, I, Theme b² in the Recapitulation, rehearsal 13 + 1, 2nd violin.

Exposição

Recapitulação

Example 8: Villa-Lobos: *9th String Quartet*, I, Comparing both versions of theme b²: Exposition (on top) and Recapitulation

¹⁴ The octatonic collection perhaps shows the interest of Villa-Lobos in Stravinsky's music, another powerful element of his personal style. The use of this collection by Villa-Lobos sometimes received a vivid interpretation of Brazilian landscape in works like *Nonetto* (1923) and *Choros #10* (1926).

Some gestures associated with the 2nd Viennese School are even more evident in the 2nd movement (*Andantino vagaroso*, Example 9) if we look to the motivic treatment, melodic profile and harmonies. The beginning of the 2nd movement of Berg's *Lyric Suite* (1926) shows some of these gestures characteristic of the expressionist mood of 2nd Viennese School (Example 10). There are some remarkable and candid resemblances between Villa-Lobos and Berg in these quartets (Example 11).¹⁵

Andantino vagaroso
vl. 2

4

vl. 1

mf

mf

p

Example 9: Villa-Lobos: *Ninth String Quartet*, II, reduction, bars 1-6

¹⁵ The same atmosphere is also perceptible in all the “Mesto” [sadly] sections presents in the four movements of Bartók’s *Sixth String Quartet* (1939). The melancholic mood of some Brazilian *serenatas* must be considered as a possible interpretative strategy in the 2nd movement of Villa-Lobos’s quartet. In these three examples (Berg, Villa-Lobos and Bartók) we can see slightly different interpretations of the same gesture, permeated by its contexts. This seems to illustrate the creation of a “new” or “modern” quartet style, as suggests Robert Hatten: “When an individual impulse finds expression within the stylistic constraints governing a work, a more or less original musical gesture is the result. Since it must be expressed within the constraints of a style, is likely that the ‘new’ gesture will be understood as a token of an established type. If other, similarly distinctive tokens of that type are created, then it may be possible to generalize a new (sub)type from the set of distinctively configured tokens, resulting in style growth” (Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134).

II

Andante amoroso

$\text{♩} = 100$ (*Tempo I*)

3 poco rit. -

Example 10: Beginning of Berg's *Lyric Suite*, 2nd movement. Universal Edition, p. 11

Berg, *Suite Lirica*, II 3-3 3-3

3-3

Villa-Lobos, *Quarteto n° 9*, II

3-3 3-3 3-3 3-3

Example 11: Comparative analysis of Berg's *Lyric Suite*, II and Villa-Lobos's *Ninth String Quartet*, II

In both pieces we can see the appearance of 3-3 between adjacent notes, with crossings, superimpositions or interpolations. In Berg's suite, even the initial pair of notes could be associated with the lonely C in the second bar. In Villa-Lobos's quartet, the initial pair suggests a deletion of an additional note, possibly an E or A. This trichord has a relevant presence in the music of the beginning of the twentieth-century, in jazz (a.k.a. the *blue note*), in serial or atonal organization by Webern, Berg and Schönberg, in the music of Ravel, Debussy, Stravinsky, etc. Perhaps this could be

interpreted as an attempt to shuffle the duality between major and minor modes, adapted to these styles. Thus, the 3-3 trichord can be considered as an object with the properties of a musical gesture.¹⁶

From structure to meaning: searching for answers

The analysis above shows some remarkable aspects of intertextuality between the style of Villa-Lobos and two Viennese musical trends presented in a straightforward structuralist fashion: Haydn's Classicism and Berg's Expressionism. Obviously, the meaning of a work cannot be explained by a formalist description. Maybe the crucial point is to question why Villa-Lobos apparently abandoned the most recognizable elements of his style, marked by nationalist stimuli.

Villa-Lobos's style marginalized him from what were alleged to be the "most advanced" practices of that time, especially the serial school introduced in South America during the Forties.¹⁷ Maybe this explains why there are no allusive references to nationalism in most of his String Quartets. This is the case with the 9th *String Quartet*, which seems to evoke at same time both a more neutral style like Classicism and a more modern one, Expressionism, with some provocative atonal flavour.

¹⁶ I am again indebted to the Theory of Musical Gesture developed by Robert Hatten (Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-10). He explains the distinction between *type* and *token* as levels that characterize style. Considering that Hatten restricts himself to tonal music, he can define the "tonic triad" as a *type* in the style of Beethoven, as well as admitting the "wide range of variation in accepted tokens of the functional type", as tonic triads omitting the chordal third or fifth and doubling of roots, thirds and fifths (Hatten, *Musical Meaning...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51). I'm trying to bring these concepts to a post-tonal context in which there is no reference to diatonic scale degrees, but to the whole chromatic scale. Thus, the segmentation in trichords, tetrachords, etc. distinguishes not a functional level but a *density* of this expanded harmonic field, expressed not only by its cardinality (indicating the *quantity* of pitch classes involved) but also by the *quality* of these sets (expressed by the distance between those pitch classes, ordered by the Forte numbers). Therefore, the 3-3 trichord can be understood as a type in which reveals itself as an expression of a style that searches to avoid major-minor dialogism.

¹⁷ The Institute Torcuato di Tella, founded in 1958 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, was an important center of the diffusion of serial music. In Brazil the twelve-tone technique was introduced by the German composer, teacher and musicologist Hans-Joachim Koellreutter (1915-2005) in the Forties.

This effort contradicts a negative assumption of that time, as expressed by the Argentinian composer Juan Carlos Paz, who demonstrates a jaundiced view of the national character of Brazilian music, considered as “easy traditionalism”. According to his view, only the serial composition (as practiced by Paz, a composer himself, acquainted with the Darmstadt School) deserves an honoured place in music history.

All Brazilian music seems to be spiritually confined in these boundaries; [...]. The most important elements to surpass the easier traditional means of psychical influence like laughter or crying, has no appeal to the Brazilian composer used to follow a tradition such this. To this kind of composer is enough to move a finger and build up a symphonic poem, an Indo-Italian opera or a suite, always in a descriptive fashion, picturesque, realistic and imitative in essence, and ornamented with the features that impressionism and verism offers to all the amateurs in the universe. This is, in resume, the uncontrolled and deformed labor of the Brazilian national school, to Villa-Lobos and all his imitators and epigones like Lorenzo Fernandes, Francisco Mignone, Barroso Neto and Frutuoso Viana.¹⁸

Brazilian politics was another problem area that put Villa-Lobos’s music under attack. With the changing of sides during the War from 1942 (ending his support of Hitler and Mussolini to joining the side of the Allies), the Vargas government was weakened and Villa-Lobos was deeply involved through his collaboration with the Music Education program. Ever since the composing of his *Fifth String Quartet* (1931) the friendship between Villa-Lobos and Mario de Andrade was corrupted.¹⁹ Accused of “savagery”, Villa-Lobos was put aside from the national school led by Andrade, who came to dedicate himself to composers such as Guarnieri and Mignone.²⁰

This double attack, from inside and outside, maybe represents the twofold aspects that can be detected in the *9th String Quartet*. The Neo-

¹⁸ Juan Carlos Paz, Música brasileira de vanguardia: Hans Joachim Koellreutter y el Grupo Música Viva, [in:] *Revista Latitud*, Buenos Aires: Mayo de 1945.

¹⁹ Andrade was a fierce opponent of Vargas and was displeased with Villa-Lobos when he realized that the *5th String Quartet* signaled his adherence to the new regime by using folk tunes from Vargas’ birth place as a sort of hymn of welcome (Paulo de Tarso Salles, *Processos composicionais de Villa-Lobos*, Editora da Unicamp, Campinas 2009, pp. 98-99).

²⁰ Camargo Guarnieri (1907-1993) was the main disciple of Mario de Andrade and is considered to be the founder of the Brazilian School, since Villa-Lobos apparently refused to assume himself as teacher or leader of a National composition school. Francisco Mignone (1897-1986) was another representative composer associated to Mario de Andrade.

classic gesture, using classic formal elements such as the sonata form and the developing of variations, seems to answer the inside criticism which accused Villa-Lobos of lacking technical expertise. The Expressionist gesture, through dense chromaticism and melodic profile, meets the demand of the external criticism that his music was old fashioned.²¹

Even without an explicit and objective national element, the 9th *String Quartet* stands as a work associated with a strong national identity, inseparable from Villa-Lobos's personal style. Carl Dahlhaus asserts that it would be absurd to say that “[...] the differences between Chopin’s [“national”] mazurkas and his [“non-national”] waltzes are far more important than their similarities”.²² The same is true of the dialogue between Villa-Lobos, European traditions and Brazilian folk elements. Nothing was more appropriate than a genre labelled as “intelligent conversation”, such as in the *String Quartet*, to the expression of this entire complex chain of meanings. Post-modernist *avant la lettre*,²³ Villa-Lobos demands an approach that blends his national identity with his individual choices, in contact with other individuals and their own identities.

Besides that, this investigation points to a possible connection between twentieth-century composers of different national and stylistic backgrounds, such as Stravinsky, Schönberg, Webern, Berg, Villa-Lobos, Bartók, Szymanowski, Janáček, de Falla, Martinu, Revueltas, Ives, Carrillo, etc. The understanding of an “extended common practice” can throw some light on the networks of meaning that were lost over the first half of the last century.

²¹ Moreover Villa-Lobos went in 1944 to the U.S., where his music was judged by the standards of composers such as Copland and Sprague Smith, who worked in the Office of Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.

²² Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism...*, *op. cit.*, p. 88)

²³ In my book (Salles, *Processos composicionais de Villa-Lobos...*, *op. cit.*) I tried to demonstrate how modern Brazilian music, associated with the national trend during the first half of twentieth century, seems to anticipate some problems related to Post-modern matters.

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