

Ritual dance, by Villa-Lobos: A Music Topic in the Tropics

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Resumo: Este artigo propõe um tópico na música do século XX, inicialmente rotulado como “dança ritual”, e explora sua apropriação e ressignificação pelo compositor brasileiro Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959). Sua significação principal é o característico uso do ritmo, que já foi descrito como “dionisiaco” (Boulez) e de “força quase selvagem” (Griffiths). Desde sua primeira aparição na *Sagração da Primavera* de Stravinsky (“Cântico dos adolescentes”), pretendo demonstrar como esse tópico tem se tornado uma representação sonora de rituais e danças que antecedem a civilização europeia, bem como suas convenções artísticas e sociais. Nessa mesma linha, o tópico vem sendo explorado por outros compositores como Béla Bartók, que incorporou essa sonoridade e gestualidade para expressar tradições “exóticas” da Hungria, Bulgária e Romênia. Neste trabalho proponho que certos usos feitos por Villa-Lobos de “temas rítmicos” para representar rituais ameríndios ou a apoteose dos desfiles carnavalescos no Rio de Janeiro, em alguns de seus *Choros*, música de câmara e obras para piano mais representativos, são de fato empréstimos do caráter dionisiaco do tópico dança ritual.

Palavras-chave: Villa-Lobos; dança ritual; música brasileira; modernismo; primitivismo.

Abstract: This paper aims to define a twentieth-century musical topic, tentatively labeled “ritual dance”, and explore its appropriation and re-signification by Brazilian composer Heitor Villa Lobos (1887-1959). Its main signifier is a characteristic use of rhythm, which has been described as “Dyonisian” (Boulez) and of “almost savage strength” (Griffiths). From its first appearance in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (“Dances of the Young Girls”), this topic, it is argued, became a sound representation of rituals and dances predating European civilization and its social and artistic conventions. In this regard, it was exploited by other composers, such as Béla Bartók, who incorporated this sonority and musical gesture to express “outsider” traditions from Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. In this paper, I propose that Villa-Lobos’s uses of the “rhythmic theme” to represent Amerindian rituals or the apotheosis of the carnival feast in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), in some of his most representative *Choros*, chamber music, and piano works, are in fact borrowings from the Dionysian character of the ritual dance topic.

Keywords: Villa-Lobos; ritual dance; Brazilian music; modernism; primitivism.

Introduction

The first version of this paper, delivered in the Denis Arnold Hall in the University of Oxford’s Music Department, presented my proposal of a Brazilian musical topic with a different name, where “tribal” replaces “ritual”. There are some important reasons for this change, the first being a suggestion made by Dr. Michael Fend, who attended my presentation and questioned the expression “tribe” as something associable to an ethnographic approach, which is not my point. My original choice for “tribal dance” relates to the meaning it assumes in popular cultural studies, not limited to

¹ I want to thank the friends and colleagues who helped in the preparation of this work: Dr. Lars Hoefs, who proofed my abstract; my doctoral student Joel Albuquerque, who put the *Choros n° 7* into Sibelius notation software; Dr. Melanie Plesch, who kindly invited me to the Oxford conference (Topical Encounters and Rhetorics of Identity in Latin American Art Music, Conference-workshop, 13-15 February, 2015), giving me all support; and Dr. Reinhard Strohm, who generously offered me a grant from his Balzan Foundation Prize for Musicology. Unfortunately, at that time I was not able to go further with preparing the text in its final form, so I own a lot to the unidentified reviewers who put some ideas that I use in this work.

ethnic implications, although my study case deals with national identity. Thus, it fits potentially with some contemporary cultural phenomena, such as rock festival audiences and football fans, as well as traditional social groups.²

The group aspect originally attributed to this musical topic led to the second objection to my original label, casually posed immediately following the outstanding presentation by Argentinian musicologist Omar García Brunelli on “The Topic of the Tango in the Music of Juan José Castro”. Dr. Acácio Piedade suggested that some powerful rhythmic tango features in Castro’s music could fit with the “tribal dance” topic, considering also the influence exerted by Stravinsky upon Castro. This idea was rejected because my definition of the musical topic was linked to the collective character of a “tribal dance”, something foreign to tango, a seductive and sophisticated tête-à-tête dance. It makes me think that so similar rhythmic features could not be separated by such distinction, which results in such different musical meanings; the problem is not about how many dancers are involved, but it lies with their ritualistic attitude.

After these two major contributions, perhaps the musical topic’s profile is better defined if emphasis is put on its “ritual” rather than on its “tribal” quality. For now, I will not extend my case to the tango, and the newly christened “ritual dance” topic remains a work in progress.

The “ritual dance” can be defined as a musical topic often heard in early twentieth-century music, where the employment of ostinato figuration became a stylistic choice for avoiding harmonic progressions in the traditional sense; instead, such ostinato figuration suggests a rhythmic progression, while the pitch structure remains static. “Dances of the Young Girls”, from Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* epitomizes this musical topic, associated with barbarism. Adorno says that, despite the stylistic difference between *Rite of Spring* and *Petrushka*, they both share the “anti-human sacrifice to collective”, a sacrifice that determines entirely the musical development and presents itself with “bloody severity” (ADORNO, 1974, p. 116). From a structural point of view, Boulez says “the most important phenomenon in the thematic domain of *The Rite*, is the appearance of a

² Jing Wang tells how the concept of “neo-tribes” is applied to the context “at the higher end of consumption ladder in urban China” (WANG, 2005, p. 533).

rhythmic theme in its own terms, having its own existence inside a static vertical sound” (BOULEZ, 1995, p. 90).

However, the process of national identification is not straightforward in *The Rite*; it occurs by means of folksong quotation, as well by the plot. The savage dance, with its lack of thematic assessment is like the very essence, the prototype of the pure exotic. Lawrence Kramer considers that behind the concept of the primitive associated with *The Rite* there is a continuum in which “[t]he pure exotic represents the (civilized) other as purely compliant with its appropriation; the pure primitive represents the (uncivilized) other as purely resistant” (KRAMER, 1995, p. 287, fn.25).

How could this idea be defined in terms of topic theory? According to Ratner, musical topics exist as either types or styles (RATNER, 1980, p. 9.); the hierarchical levels of styles can be derived from dance forms, and some of them, such as minuets and polonaises, “grew livelier toward the end of the century, reflecting both a more frivolous life style and the restlessness of the times”.³ Ratner’s account highlights the expressive transition from hierarchical levels of Classic music to Romanticism, anticipating the tendency to a rupture in the 20th century, as one can recognise in Bartók, when he criticizes “the excesses of the Romanticists” as a sort of dead end, praising the expressive power of peasant music as something capable of changing or rejuvenating ways of making music (BARTÓK, 1998, p. 1438).

One can therefore say that ritual dance is a musical topic that acts as an affirmation of otherness against a tradition recognized as dominant. Adorno states, alluding to the reception of *The Rite of Spring* in Paris, that “in France they somehow intended to oppose the prehistoric world to civilization”. The birth of musical modernism was like a two-way street: on the one hand, we see an agonizing culture changing its paradigms; on the other hand, other cultures strive to be recognized.⁴ In this sense, ritual dance as a musical topic represents the essence of the pure primitive even before the existence of a civilized label as “peasant”; it proposes a celebration that ignores such conventions as “high” or “low”.

³ Ibidem, p. 9.

⁴ DAHLHAUS (1989, pp. 82-3) says that “after 1849 nationalism adopted a haughtily exclusive or even aggressive instance, and although it was the oppressors who initiated this unhappy change and were the primary offenders under it, the attitude of the oppressed was equally affected by it. So long as nationalist movements supported the aspirations of every other nation to the freedom from internal and external tyranny [...]”.

It is so essentialist that it allows being easily associated with any “exotic” culture from a “civilized” perspective like that of art music. At the same time, it is important to note that, without such association, it would turn into pure musical “minimalism”.

Villa-Lobos’s approach to folk music is not systematic; he travelled in his country as an informal researcher, making himself familiar with the peasant music-makers of small villages, as well as with the peripheral culture in Rio de Janeiro, where he was born and where he knew the extraordinary popular musicians called “*chorões*”. Additionally, Villa-Lobos studied collections of Indian music made by Jean de Lery and Roquette-Pinto,⁵ the latter providing some field recordings made in 1912 of the *Parecis* and *Nambiquaras* tribes of Serra do Norte, in the mid-western Brazilian state of Mato Grosso.⁶

The identification with Indian culture, however, does not exhaust the expressive content of the ritual dance topic in Villa-Lobos’s music. The analysis of indigenous elements represents only a part of it, since many other genres of ritual dance are found in Brazilian culture, the most famous of them being the carnival.

One of the strategies adopted by composers outside the European mainstream in the early 20th century was to deny some conventions of that musical tradition; the harmonic progression grounded on the diatonic scale and tonal organization is especially targeted by the ritual dance topic, the static ostinato not admitting conventional solutions according to the tonal tradition. Such “primitive” action is one of the most distinguishing features of this modern music, found in Stravinsky, Bartók, Falla, and naturally, Villa-Lobos, among others.

Villa-Lobos’s music is full of extra-musical images, by means of which he expresses his national identity. Brazilian musicologist Acácio Piedade has studied his music through its rhetorical potential, which he affirms to be due to “production of sound images of Brazilian folklore”, represented as “impressions, landscapes and emotions”, being a “vehicle for expressing extra-musical phenomena” (PIEDADE, 2013, p. 346).

⁵ Jean de Lery (1536-1613) wrote the book *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Also Called America* (1578), in which he narrates his experiences amongst the *Tupinambas* Indians. Lery transcribed some melodies heard from the Indians in his book. Edgard Roquette-Pinto (1884-1954) wrote *Rondonia: Antropologia Etnográfica* (Rio de Janeiro, 2^a ed. Imprensa Nacional, 1919), a seminal book about the Nambiquara Indians, who he met during Rondon mission in 1912 in the Amazon jungle.

⁶ The recordings collected by Roquette-Pinto are available at: <http://laced.etc.br/site/projetos/projetos-executados/colecao-documentos-sonoros/>.

The ritual dance topic is very often heard in folkloric-inspired music in the first half of the 20th century. Because of its otherness, it is frequently associated with the “primitive”, pre-civilized world. Its main feature is the communal invitation to dance, to produce a sort of ecstatic trance resulting from the interconnection of rhythmic cells organized through repetition, but it also involves stylistic aspects such as texture, orchestration, harmonic language and modes of enunciation. Moreover, it is a powerful means of representing national identities, since it potentially deals with traditional dances and other cultural traces.

Because of the problematic association between musical topic theory and national identity, this study is invested with a similar spirit to that proposed by Melanie Plesch, in feeling the need to investigate it according to “a larger, coherent, cultural system”, requiring “a full cultural study” (PLESCH, 2013, p. 328).

More than an appropriation of a modernist topic heard in Stravinsky’s music, Villa-Lobos’s “ritual dance” is connected to the context of some cultural transformations verified in Brazil during the 1920s that were significantly expressed in his music. One of the most important of those transformations is the Brazilian modernist movement, epitomized by the event known as the “Week of Modern Art” in São Paulo, 1922.

Primitivism and modernism in Villa-Lobos’s music

Villa-Lobos shared some ideals with other contemporary Brazilian artists who called themselves “anthropophagus”, linking their artistic credo with the stories told by explorers about cannibalism among some Amerindian tribes. Villa-Lobos was the main musical representative in the Week of Modern Art. The poet Oswald de Andrade published in 1928 his *Manifesto Antropófago* [*Cannibal Manifesto*], which begins,

Only cannibalism unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.

It’s the only law of the world. It’s a disguised expression of all individualism, of all collectivism. Of all religion. Of all peace treaties.

Tupy, or not tupy, that’s the question. [...]

Only what is not mine interests me. It’s the Man’s law. It’s the Cannibal’s law [...].⁷

⁷ Translated by the author. ANDRADE, 1928. “Só a antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente. / Única lei do mundo. Expressão mascarada de todos os individualismos, de todos os coletivismos. De todas as religiões. De todos os tratados de paz. / Tupy, or not tupy, that’s the question.

One of the songs collected by Roquette-Pinto is *Nozani-Ná* (Fig. 1), a tune of which Villa-Lobos created different versions: a song for voice and piano (undated); *Choros n° 3* (1925) for male chorus and wind ensemble; and *Choros n° 7* (1924) for instrumental chamber ensemble.⁸

Nozani-Ná

Recolhido por Roquette Pinto

Animato



No - za-ni ná Ô - re-ku-á ku - á_____ Ka - za - ê - tê, ê - tê_____ No-
 7
 za-ni-na Ô - re-ku-á ku - á_____ No - za - ni no - te-ra-han, ra - han_____ O -
 13
 lo-ni-ti, ni - ti_____ no - te-ra-han ko - zê-to-zá, to - zá_____ No - te-rá, te-
 19
 rá_____ Ke - ná-ki-á, ki - á_____ nê - ê - ná, ê - ná_____ U - á-lá-lô, lá-
 25
 lô_____ gi - rá há-lô, há - lô_____ No - lô_____ U - ai!

FIGURE 1: PARECI SONG NOZANI-NÁ, COLLECTED BY ROQUETTE PINTO.⁹

Villa-Lobos harmonized *Nozani-Ná*, a song in which “primitivism” can be easily recognized, for voice and piano. It is composed with an extreme economy of means: the piano alternates between two chords (C-major with added 9th and F-major with added 9th), with two slightly different cycles of four bars each; the voice sings in a small range (E⁴ to C⁵), reproducing exactly the repetitive melodic pattern of the Indian melody (Fig. 2). Considering the whole piece, one sees that only the collection of diatonic “white keys” occurs; the song expresses the feeling of collective trance, like a sort of ritual dance. The text of the song is:

[...]. / Só me interessa o que não é meu. Lei do homem. Lei do antropófago [...].” Quoted from TELES, 1999, p. 353. “Tupy” is a generic word for designating Indian languages or cultures in Brazil, and Oswald de Andrade explores its phonetic resemblance with the famous Shakespeare’s line in *Othello*: “to be or not to be [...].”

⁸ The Villa-Lobos’s song *Nozani-Ná* was premiered in April 12th, 1929 at Teatro São Pedro in Porto Alegre. *Choros n° 7* premiere occurred in September 17th, 1925, in Rio de Janeiro, and the Parisian premiere was in October 24th, 1927; *Choros n° 3* premiere was taken in November 30th, 1925 at Teatro Municipal of São Paulo and its Parisian premier occurred in December 5th, 1927. One could deduce that the voice-piano version is supposed to be composed earlier than the most elaborated works, however there is no further evidence supporting that claim.

⁹VILLA-LOBOS, 1940, p. 69.

It's time for drinking
It's time for eating
Let's eat the *kozetoka*
Let's drink the *oloniti*¹⁰

A Elsie Houston

Nozani-Ná

Canto dos índios Parecis da Serra do Norte (Mato Grosso)

A partir do fonograma n° 14597 do Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro

Recolhido por E. Roquette Pinto

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Muito animado (Trés animé) ♩ = 112

No - za - ni ná ô - rê ku - á, ku -

Muito animado (Trés animé) ♩ = 112

f *sans la pédale toujours*

6

á - Ka - za ê - tê, ê - tê, No - za - ni ná ô - rê ku - á ku -

FIGURE 2: VILLA-LOBOS, NOZANI-NÁ, BARS 1-10.

The song is an invitation to a meal, one of the most important social events among indigenous cultures. Lévi-Strauss has collected Indian myths that tell how humans learned from animals how to cook meat, affecting the empirical opposition between the raw and the cooked.¹¹ From this account one can deduce how important to the Pareci culture a community meal is and how much of that is represented in a song like *Nozani-Ná*.

¹⁰ VILLA-LOBOS, 1978. See also NEVES, 1977, p. 42. Recently, ethnomusicologist Pedro Paulo Salles reveals another perspective, taking white representations of *Nozani-Ná* back to the Parecis and researching on the actual meaning of the words, providing a more accurate translation, and giving us opportunity to know better how that Indian community feels about that song (SALLES, Pedro P., 2017).

¹¹ LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked*. I quote it from the Portuguese translation: *O Cru e o Cozido*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naif, 2004.

Villa-Lobos's harmonization is grounded on the repetition of melodic cells. In a sense, the ritual dance acts like a sort of rhythmic theme that evokes an earlier, pre-Columbian age, as the Stravinskian "Dances of the Young Girls". In this particular case, the texture of the accompaniment is a rhetorical element that reinforces the idea of "Indian" music. Avoiding a traditional solution – such as a harmonic progression – Villa-Lobos proposes a parallel text in a "dance mode", turning the subordinate accompaniment function of an ostinato into a secondary, if not parallel, rhythmic theme, giving to the song its full sense. Kofi Agawu's definition of dance mode in Romantic music seems to apply to this case:

While the dance mode often includes song, its most marked feature is a sharply profiled rhythmic and metric sense. The invitation to dance – to dance imaginatively – is issued immediately by instrumental music in dance mode. This mode is thus deeply invested in the conventional and the communal. Since dance is normally a form of communal expression, the stimulus to dance must be recognizable without excessive mediation (AGAWU, 2009, p. 99).

Villa-Lobos dedicated his *Choros n° 3* (1925), for male choir and seven wind instruments, to Tarsila do Amaral and Oswald de Andrade, two of the most important Brazilian artists of that generation and active participants in the modernist movement. In the score of *Choros n° 3* there is a small subtitle to the verses of *Nozani-Ná*: "Bacchic song", reinforcing the ritualistic idea represented in the music.¹² The *Pareci* song is treated by imitation (rehearsals 0-4), a sort of dialogical gesture (HATTEN, 2004, p. 143), in which one can notice a dialectical relationship between the "learned" style and the "primitive" melody, while preserving the idea of community. At rehearsal 5, where the choir sings the word "*picapau*", Villa-Lobos creates another pattern of ritual dance (Fig. 3), grounded on two chords whose voice leading is achieved almost entirely through leaps of a perfect fifth (except for C-G \flat).

¹² SALLES, Pedro P., 2017, reveals that the true meaning of words in *Nozani-Ná* is not related to any sort of orgiastic or Bacchic ritual; actually, it represents another kind of experience. Thus, the hegemonic and white view stands as a one-sided understanding (or misunderstanding) of that song.

très rythmé ♩ = 92

5

BARYTON

Pi-ca - pau, pi - pau pi - po - pi-po-pi-pau Pi-ca - pau, pi - pau pi - po - pi-po-pi-pau Pi-ca

BASS

Pi-ca - pau, pi - pau pi - pau pi - pau Pi-ca - pau, pi - pau pi - pau pi - pau Pi-ca

6 tenors

Ah!

pau, pi - pau pi - po - pi-po-pi - pau Pi - ca - pau, pi - pau pi - po - pi-po-pi - pau Pi - ca -

pau, pi - pau pi - pau pi - pau Pi - ca - pau, pi - pau pi - pau pi - pau Pi - ca -

FIGURE 3: VILLA-LOBOS, A “RITUAL DANCE” IN THE CHOROS N° 3.

The presence of perfect fourths or fifths is another mode of representation of the “Indian” character associated with the overtone series. Thus, one could say that the perfect intervals represent Nature in that context.¹³ Of course it does not represent an actual appropriation of the way Indians sing, but it is a “cultural trope” with scientific truth. A re-evaluation of Indian representation in art form was one of the goals of the Brazilian modernist artists, a sort of reaction against the romantic view in which Indian characters from novels, poems, and operas express themselves like European heroes. It is an attempt to elaborate a native view, treating the Indian as an autonomous, independent culture, representing a new feeling offered by a new world - South America, Brazil.

The Indian is viewed by the hegemonic (white) account of that time as part of the mestizo culture of Brazilians, the part that is closest to nature, the mysteries of the woods and

¹³ Schoenberg discusses consonance and dissonance from a correlation between art and nature: “Art in its most primitive state is a simple imitation of nature”, a claim that proceeds to an evaluation of the overtone series (SCHOENBERG, 1983, pp. 18-22). I comment the analogy between the overtone series and the nature in Villa-Lobos’s symphonic poem *Amazonas*, in which he evokes a sort of “water mode” to represent the Amazon River (SALLES, 2013, p. 344).

animals, the part that does not accept any imposition on their own culture or way of living. It became an important symbol to incorporate as a stylistic bias, not only avoiding techniques and conventions from mainstream art, but also using it in a different way, mingled with other criteria. That is the “anthropophagy”.

Dancing with the tribe

There are many other instances of ritual dances in Villa-Lobos’s work. Staying with *Nozani-Ná* – this time used as an introductory theme¹⁴ – in *Choros n° 7* we can find many ostinati turned into “themes” (Fig. 4). In bars 10-16 (rehearsal n°1) the ostinato assumes a conservative profile, grounded on a D-minor chord in first inversion; but at bar 17 the cello line moves to E, the tempo accelerates, and the tetrachord E-A-D-G (a superimposition of perfect fourths) becomes the harmonic background of a ritual dance that prepares the prolonged zigzag figuration starting in the bassoon and moving to the oboe (bars 19-24), going from A³ (on the bassoon) to A⁵ (on the oboe and clarinet, bar 25).¹⁵ Thenceforth, a series of interconnected ritual dances begins.

FIGURE 4: VILLA-LOBOS, CHOROS N° 7, REHEARSAL 1.

Further on (at rehearsal 10), Villa-Lobos plays with the dance-theme idea, “modulating” from the primitive dance to a slow waltz (Fig. 5). Curiously, this slow waltz still preserves the “tribal” ostinato, offering a pointed demonstration of the “anthropophagic” procedure, something close to Hatten’s definition of “gestural troping”:

1. The trope must emerge from a clear juxtaposition of contradictory, or

¹⁴ It is another aspect of Villa-Lobos’s style, the ever-changing functionality of materials: the Indian tune as melody for the voice-piano song; as a thematic motif for the imitation in the *Choros n° 3*; and finally, as an introduction for the *Choros n° 7*.

¹⁵ The prolongational zigzag is a Villa-Lobosian contrapuntal device in which a pitch moves onto a different octave. See SALLES, 2009, p. 116.

previously unrelated, types.

2. The trope must arise from a single functional location or process.
3. There must be evidence from a higher level (for example, Grabócz’s isotopies) to support a topological interpretation, as opposed to interpretation of contrast, or dramatic opposition of characters (HATTEN, 1994, p. 170).

FIGURE 5: VILLA-LOBOS, CHOROS N° 7, REHEARSAL 10.

From Hatten’s perspective, one could say that there is a clear contradiction between the waltz, a typical dance of that “frivolous” age of Romanticism, in such a “savage” context of *Choros n° 7*, where the harmony refuses to proceed in a tonal progression; these contradictory elements are juxtaposed in such way that the rhythm suggests the feeling of a waltz, strangely transformed by the relentless ostinato. Continuing with the analogy, the trope arises from a process comparable to a “modulation”, resulting from the “cadence” on a trichord (G-C-D)¹⁶ that can be interpreted as a representation of nature because of the superimposed perfect fifths; the *rallentando* in the previous measure adjusts the tempo for the entrance of the waltz, defined by the bassoon melody in E_b-major. At a higher level the passage can be interpreted as the will for representation; Villa-Lobos consciously evokes the racial fusion found in Brazilian culture by putting the dances together: the “primitive” one with the waltz. The gestural troping seems to be evident (Table 1).

STRUCTURE	MEANING
Trichord C-G-D	Overtone series; Nature

¹⁶ In my forthcoming book, *Os quartetos de cordas de Villa-Lobos: o discurso da Besta* (São Paulo: EDUSP), I discuss in detail the logic behind Villa-Lobos cadences, which are based in an opposition between symmetry (rest) and asymmetry (motion) that is analogous to the traditional tonal system dialectic between consonance and dissonance. In this particular case (*Choros n° 7*, bars 128-136), the trichord CGD has an axis of symmetry resulting from the even interval distance between its pitch classes. That trichord is enhanced in bar 136 by the appearance of F on the cello, becoming a symmetrical tetrachord FCGD, also grounded on superimposition of fifths.

Ostinato	Ritual dance; Indian culture
3/8 meter	Waltz; European culture
Eb-major	Tonality; European music

TABLE 1: CORRELATION BETWEEN STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS AND THEIR POSSIBLE EXPRESSIVE MEANINGS IN CHOROS N° 3 AND N° 7.

Dancing in the streets: the Brazilian carnival

Villa-Lobos describes *Choros n° 8* (1925) by recalling a powerful image of the street carnival from his youth in Rio de Janeiro: “The counterpoint between the several themes throughout the work is clearly complex and atonal, purposely aiming to convey the sense of a nervous crowd gathered for dancing” (VILLA-LOBOS, 1972, p. 201). The composer proposes a work grounded on the potentially chaotic burst of excitement during a carnival celebration; perhaps this explains the continuing waves of interlocking ostinati that shape *Choros n° 8*, sometimes intersected by fanfares, folkloric tunes, clusters, etc., reminiscent of the opposing sounding sources heard in Charles Ives’s music. Whether or not many of these ostinati are mere accompaniment figurations, some of them assume the role of a distinct rhythmic theme in which the ritual dance emerges as a musical topic. In my book on Villa-Lobos’s compositional processes I study the ostinati in *Choros n° 8*:

There are about 36 ostinati in *Choros n° 8*, which coordinate a complicated flow of sound. I don’t intend that it must be an exact figure, because there is no common sense for defining what an ostinato really is. Anyway, I try to find the most significant figurations according that criterion, and I estimate that it is worth it. It is difficult to define an ostinato precisely when two of them are superimposed; in *Choros n° 8* they are frequently found on different layers with their own identities and independent cyclic rhythm. In many cases, when those different cycles are interconnected, I classify the layers as if they convey to build a *complex* ostinato (SALLES, 2009, p. 216).

At rehearsal 14 there is an instance of a ritual dance arising from a “simple” ostinato (Fig. 6) grounded on the staccato bassoon line; the alternating motifs exchanged between the solo viola and cello start a different cycle; the metrical changes, subdividing unevenly the 9/8 metre (3/4+3/8; followed by 2/4+3/8), invite one to dance. Four bars on, the trumpets add some chromaticism, preparing the arrival of a new layer added by the horn section replacing the strings, at rehearsal 15 (Fig. 7).

This is a type of drum-section writing, alternating instrumental sections over a repeated pattern and this game continues until rehearsal 17, when the whole texture is replaced by another sound block, recalling the image of rivalry between different carnival groups. The overall effect is a kaleidoscopic mutation of rhythmic cycles, like an entire evening of

carnival amusements in full swing – ecstasy and exhaustion, an authentic Dionysian celebration.

14 (M: 96 = ♩ et 192 = ♩)

Clar. *mf*

Sax. *pp*

Fag. 2. Solo 1. Solo 2. Solo 1. Solo

Harpe

I Vno

II Vno

Altos 1. Solo *sord.* (*son nasillarde*)

Vcello 1. Solo *sord. f* (*son nasillarde*)

C. B.

FIGURE 6: VILLA-LOBOS, CHOROS Nº 8, OSTINATO AT REHEARSAL 14.

Fag. *unit*

C. Fag. *Sourdine (brucha)*

I Cors *unit*

II Cors *Sourdine ff (brucha)*

III Cors *unit*

IV Cors *unit*

Pist. *f*

Trb. I *f*

Trb. II *mf*

Trb. III *mf*

Tuba *mf*

Tymp.

Piano B e Harpe

15

FIGURE 7: VILLA-LOBOS, CHOROS Nº 8, REHEARSAL 15.

STRUCTURE	MEANING
Metrical changes	An invitation to dance; suggests the <i>samba</i> syncopation
Bassoon zigzag ostinato in distant register	Evokes a percussion instrument
Alternation of instrumental sections	“Drum-section” writing; rival carnival groups
Asymmetric-to-symmetric (sustained chords)	Dissonance-consonance cadencial move
March-like ostinato	Carnival parade

TABLE 2: CORRELATION BETWEEN STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS AND THEIR POSSIBLE EXPRESSIVE MEANINGS IN CHOROS N° 8 (NOS. 15-16).

Carnival as a social dance

If today the carnival is considered a symbol of Brazilianness, it was not so in the early 20th century. Centered on *samba*, the Brazilian carnival mingles elements from the Portuguese *entrudo* with the African descendant rhythms born in Brazil in the *candomblé* ritual. Since society was extremely divided by slavery, black culture was considered “barbaric” and socially backward; it took time for general acceptance of *samba* as a national icon, a sense of nationality had to be constructed until its consecration among the people. Plesch says,

In this regard it is crucial to take into account that musical rhetorics of nationalisms are not inclusive systems but selective ones and that they exclude more than they include. When analysing nationalist musical *topoi* it is revealing to observe whose voices were incorporated into the fabric of the music of the nation and whose were excluded (PLESCH, 2013 p. 335).

Thomas Skidmore offers an interesting view of this transition in the Brazilian multi-racial system, describing the complexity of the relations of social exclusion:

But the mulatto can be said to be the central figure in Brazil’s “racial democracy”, because he was granted entry – albeit limited – into the higher social establishment. The limits on his mobility depended upon his exact appearance (the more “Negroid”, the less mobile) and the degree of cultural “whiteness” (education, manners, wealth) he was able to attain. The successful application of this multi-racial system required Brazilians to develop an intense sensibility to racial categories and the nuances of their application. Evidence of the tension engendered by the resulting shifting network of color lines can be found in the voluminous Brazilian folklore about the “untrustworthy” mulatto (SKIDMORE, 1974, p. 40).

During the 1930s Villa-Lobos contributed to the definition of certain national traits through his involvement with the new political regime centered on President Getulio Vargas, who named him as director of the music education program. It is interesting to note that Villa-Lobos’s choice of musical *topoi* contributed to their establishment as signs of identity. Since then the “myth of the three races” has arisen as a shared national symbol, idealizing the contribution of European (mostly Portuguese), African and indigenous

cultures. According to Brazilian anthropologist Renato Ortiz, the improvement of social conditions made possible an actualization of that myth as a ritual:

The ideology of miscegenation, which was imprisoned by racist theories and their ambiguities, could be socially spread – after being reworked – and became common sense, ritualistically celebrated in everyday life, or in the major events like the carnival and the soccer. The mestizo becomes national (ORTIZ, 1994, p. 41. My translation).

Conclusion

Villa-Lobos just came back from Paris. One expects that someone who came from Paris is full of Paris. However, Villa-Lobos came full of Villa-Lobos. Nevertheless, something shook him dangerously: Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. It was, he told me, the biggest musical thrill in his life [...].¹⁷

Probably the involvement with the modernist movement led Villa-Lobos to a new sensibility to the nationalist ideal; initially, Debussy was his musical hero, opening doors to a new world of sound, but Stravinsky revealed to him the possibilities behind musical “barbarisms” that could be more faithful representations of a national identity.

The Villa-Lobosian works of the 1920s are a landmark of Brazilian musical modernism, an almost euphoric celebration of that miscegenation and the richness of its musical invention. In the ritual dances heard through his *Choros*, piano works, and guitar studies composed in that decade, he skillfully adapted some Stravinskian techniques to the *topoi* of Amerindian and carnival music and with these built his own musical language, helping to define some other musical topics that have since been adopted by the next generation of Brazilian composers. Villa-Lobos was also careful to take into account urban popular music (in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Recife, Salvador, etc.), as well as folklore; a whole collection of Brazilian musical topics can be found in his music.

The ritual dance applied as a musical topic to Brazilian nationalism reveals itself as a complex blending of three different ethnic backgrounds whose *topoi* are full of historical contradictions and many potentially expressive meanings. Derived from the Brazilian multi-racial system, it creates a complex network of cultural interaction and can

¹⁷ Manuel Bandeira, Brazilian poet, on Villa-Lobos first trip to Paris, 1924 (my translation from Portuguese), in: MARIZ, 1989, pp. 66-67.

contribute to a better understanding of the Latin American role in a global history of music.

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