

Heitor Villa-Lobos: Brazil's Master of Musical Fusion

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) was one of Brazil's finest 20th century composers. Heitor's surname is sometimes written in the Spanish form as Villalobos, which he rejected in favour of the Portuguese hyphenated form (Appleby 2002, p2). Villa-Lobos was born in Rio de Janeiro, and was in his early years taught the cello by his father, who was a good amateur player (Fraga 1996). One of the most popular of modern Brazilian composers, Heitor Villa-Lobos wrote a wide range of music for piano, guitar, orchestra, voice, mixed chamber ensembles, harp, and even mouth organ. He is viewed as a composer working freely across folk, national, and modernist idioms, using diverse lyrical, impressionist, romantic and classical elements. During his youth Villa-Lobos was influenced by the street music of Brazil, particularly the *choro* groups, which would often include a flute, guitars and guitar-like instruments, and used patterns of improvisation on well-known songs (Appleby 2002). Thus Villa-Lobos was influenced by great improvisers such as Ernesto Nazareth (Appleby 2002, p19). He did engage in trips to northeast and southern Brazil during the ages of 18-25 years (Fraga 1996), though doubts have been raised about the degree to which he could access local music from other regions. Even if Villa-Lobos did not personally engage in sustained collection of indigenous music, he was willing to utilise materials and songs collected by others, e.g. by E. Roquette Pinto and Astolfo Tavares, and had a sustained nationalist interest in Brazilian and Amazonian themes (Appleby 2002, pp24-25, p58). He was largely self-taught, having been expelled from the conservatory for rejecting criticism of his composition, but studied compositional works such as Vincent d'Indy's *Cours de composition musicale*, and undertook further musical explorations in Europe (Appleby 2002, p27, p46; Gates 1939). It has also been suggested that early teachers such as Angelo França, Frederico Nascimento, and Francisco Braga may have had a lasting impression on the young composer (Fraga 1996). Though unwilling to admit influences from contemporary classical composers he had a lifelong fascination with the music of J.S. Bach (Appleby 2002, p119). Others have suggested a wide range of influences across his compositional career, e.g. Wagner, Puccini, Debussy, Milhaud, Ravel, and Bela Bartok, while in Europe he did meet leading figures such as Serge Prokofiev and Leopold Stokowski (Dasila 1979, pp169-170; Fraga 1996).

Villa-Lobos also sought to weld together specific idioms: thus the *Bachianas Brasileiras* series was based on the idea of fusing the influences of J.S. Bach and Brazilian folk music. This claim has been challenged by later commentators, e.g. Michael Round has suggested that the Bach elements are either superficial or driven by common fugue structures, and that Villa-Lobos was far from being a serious ethnomusicologist (Round 1989, p34). Nonetheless, other works do take on stronger Bach elements - the *Prelude no. 3* (for guitar), a homage to Bach, has clear, partially chromatic, descending lines against pedal points, a direct reflection of Bach's style. Villa-Lobos in fact had a life-long respect for the work of Bach and the Baroque period, and late in his life returned to this obsession with works such as *Concerto grosso*, and the *Suites for Chamber Orchestra I and II* (Appleby 2002, p168). Another problem that has emerged with Villa-Lobos is that he had a rapid style of composition, producing manuscripts that often needed further revision or interpretation before playing (Round 1989). Thus any student or performer of his work is advised to check for errata to published music, as well as for later critical editions. Part of this issue is

the repetition of themes in different settings and instrumentation, as well as the mixing of earlier pieces into new longer works, e.g. in some of the *Bachianas Brasileiras* (Round 1989). However, this re-use of themes is also true of great composers such as J.S. Bach and Mozart, who regularly transposed pieces onto different instruments and in different arrangements. Villa-Lobos himself was also something of a prankster, willing to make up humorous and exaggerated stories about the origins of his pieces (Appleby 2002).

Having said this, certain clear features emerge from Villa-Lobos' works. They are often tightly structured on rhythmic or harmonic forms that are the core of the composition. Sometimes they invoke imaginary landscapes, creating highly effective impressions, e.g. *Prelude No. 4* (for guitar). Other pieces are romantic in tone, though interspersed with highly rhythmic sections that reflect Spanish and Latin American styles, e.g. *Prelude no. 1* (for guitar), or use Latin American forms throughout, e.g. the *choro*, literally a lament (Appleby 2002), though often played in a highly rhythmic and lively fashion. Villa-Lobos was also fond of extended *glissandi*, effective on the guitar but at times problematic if extended too far for other instruments (Round 1989, p39). He also often repeats sections, either exactly or almost exactly, leading to the need for a player to vary tone, colour, tempo or pulse in order to gain dramatic effect (Round 1989, p39), e.g. *Prelude No. 1*, *Prelude no. 3*, and most problematically *Choro No. 1* with its repeated sections.

The *choros* for the guitar and for other instruments, 'sought to amplify the idea of providing a panoramic view of the improvisatory techniques of street musicians' (Appleby 2002, p79). Their popular nature was emphasised by Villa-Lobos during a lecture when asked what a *choros* was. He replied: 'These *choros* are popular music. *Choros* in Brazil . . . are always made by musicians playing together, good or bad musicians making music for their own pleasure, often at night, improvising, and the musician demonstrates his skill and his technique. And it is always very sentimental, this is important.' (in Appleby 2002, p80). In general terms the *choro* was a fusing of European, Portuguese and African styles with a unique Brazilian urban twist which emerged in the early 20th century but was based on late 19th century musical trends (*Clique Music Editora* 2000). The structure of the *choro* is similar to the rondeau, with the first section repeated after each new part (*Clique Music Editora* 2000). This music emerged as a powerful popular force in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and was developed by early guitarists such as João Pernambuco and Rafael Rabello, but is now part of the wider fusion of Brazilian styles pushed forward by recent composers such as Guinga and Aldir Blanc (*Clique Music Editora* 2000). The modern forms of the *choro* have been explored in the film *Brasileirinho* (by Mika Kaurismäki 2005) which features the work of artists such as Marcello Gonçalves, Ze Paulo Becker, Rolando do Bandolim, Ronaldo Souza, Yamandu Costa, Elza Soares, Teresa Cristina, Pedro Miranda, Paulo Moura, Guinga, Zeze Gonzaga, Marcos Suzano, Joel Nascimento, Silverio Pontes, and Ze de Velha.

For the guitarist, Villa-Lobos has provided a superb and popular collection of pieces that range from middle to high levels of difficulty. Heitor apparently had guitar lessons from a neighbour and picked up much from the popular musicians of Rio de Janeiro, and it has been suggested that he studied the written works of guitar masters such as Sor, Carulli, Carcassi and Giuliani, and that he met Sergovia in Europe (Fraga 1996). His main guitar compositions are the five preludes, the five choros which form

the *Suite Popular Brasileira*, (including *Mazurka-choro*, *Scottish-choro*, *Valse-choro*, *Gavotta-choro* and *Chorinho*), *Choro No. 1 for Solo Guitar*, the twelve etudes, a guitar concerto and *Introduction to the Choros* for guitar and orchestra (Patykula 2006). The Preludes and *choros* are the most approachable, followed by the Etudes. Each has its own challenges, however. Thus *Prelude No. 1*, requires a precise control of rest-stroke on the thumb, with a middle section with complex rhythm changes that must not be lost if too much speed is used. *Prelude no 4* requires a strong understanding of natural harmonics that need maximum projection, combined with rapid and accelerating arpeggios that need to slowly speed up into a virtual right hand roll - this transition of speeds is needed to capture the drama of the middle section. The guitar concerto is also a colourful piece originally in the form of a Fantasia Concertante, with a cadenza especially written for it because Segovia wanted it to have the full concerto form (Fraga 1996). Less-well known guitar works by Villa-Lobos include the *Mazurka in D* (1899), *Panqueca* (1900, but the manuscript now lost), *Valsa Brilhante* (1904), *Fantasia* (1909), *Canção Brasileira* (1910), *Dobrado Pitoresco* (1910), *Tarentela* (1910), *Simples* (1911), and *Oito Dobrados* (1909-1912, manuscripts lost), while the *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5* has been arranged as an Aria for Voice and Guitar, (see Fraga 1996). Certain other of Villa-Lobos' works may also be suitable for adaptation and transcription to the guitar, e.g. some of the other *Bachianas Brasileiras*, and possibly his harp concerto. Guitarists also enjoy *Distribuição de Flores* for Flute and Guitar, the *Mystic Sextet*, *Historias da Carochinha* (arranged by Isaías Savio) which are four 'Fairy Tales' for solo guitar, the more difficult *Modinha O Ginete do Pierrozinho*, and *Viola Quebrada* (Villa-Lobos' treatment of a traditional Brazilian song) arranged by Laurindo Almeida. *Green Mansions* (for Soprano and Orchestra with guitar) was written in 1958.

Villa-Lobos soon came to the attention of major European and American composers and players. He impressed the pianist Arthur Rubinstein from 1918 onwards and Darius Milhaud was one of the first French composers to note this young talent (Appleby 2002, pp39-47). He wrote for a wide range of instruments including piano, voice, violin, cello, guitar, chamber orchestra, woodwind, massed choirs, and harmonica, including a number of commissions for particular players, events, and films (Gates 1939). His strong legacy is now confirmed both for the guitarists and for the wider audience, based on a huge output of compositions (perhaps one to two thousand works), which are both Brazilian and universalist in its appeal.

Villa-Lobos had a passion for Brazil that went well beyond a shallow or political nationalism. As stated in a speech he gave in 1951: -

Never in my life did I seek culture, erudition, knowledge or even wisdom in books, doctrines, theories, or orthodox forms, never, because my book is Brazil. Not a map of Brazil in front of me but the land of Brazil where I place my feet, where I feel, where I walk. Each man that I meet in Brazil becomes a part of my musical conception. Each birdsong that comes to my ears is a theme that joins other invisible melodies and becomes sound and a part of my music. Music that is as free as nature, as free as the land of Brazil. (in Appleby 2002, pp178-179)

It is perhaps in this context that he is sometimes viewed as a nationalist in the narrow sense, but he may well have been using this as a vehicle for musical education, especially after his appointment as Superintendent of Musical and Artistic Education in the Federal District and his role in setting up a program to educate music teachers

(Vassberg 1975; Gates 1939). It was in this context that he conducted massed choirs of ten, eighteen, thirty and forty thousand, introducing school children to a revised tool for teaching singing (Orpheonic singing and *manossolfa*, the use of hand signals to indicate pitch) with an emphasis on national themes and values (Gates 1939; Vassberg 1975).

Many modern guitarists have played Villa-Lobos in whole or part, e.g. Segovia, Alirio Diaz, Julian Bream (who has recorded all of the solo guitar pieces), John Williams, Narciso Yepes, Slava Girgoryan, Eduardo Fernandez (from Ecuador), Turibio Santos and Norbet Kraft, while one of the most focused of modern interpreters is Fabio Zanon, who has studied the original music manuscripts in detail.

References, Further Reading and Discography

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Webpages

The *Villa-Lobos Museum* is found at <http://www.museuvillalobos.org.br/index0.htm>

Several historical examples of Villa-Lobos playing his own pieces can be found via *YouTube*, e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BZv_5VCxu0;
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLbZLmIhggA&feature=related>; and
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wi4PBgP7rql&feature=related>