

Rhetoricity in the music of Villa Lobos: musical topics in Brazilian early XXth-century music

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I propose an analysis of the music of Brazilian composer Heitor Villa Lobos under the perspective of musical Rhetoric and the theory of musical topics. I argue that this point of view makes it possible to understand a characteristic of his musical style that was not well discussed so far, which led some critics to claim that Villa Lobos' music is excessively chaotic or formally disoriented. In fact, I claim he is using topics of Brazilian music in a special way. The paper starts by addressing the theoretical adaptation of the theory of musical topics in the context of National musical styles. I discuss the pertinence of topics theory in this case, departing from several authors who wrote about topics, including Raymond Monelle, and I also use some concepts of the Group $M\mu$. I draw upon a concept of musical topics that is more interested in the forms of use of music figures than in their fixed structures itself, which can vary among several possibilities inside the universes of topics. Then I argue that Brazilian topics started to appear in the first decades of the XXth-century in parallel to the modernist movement in the Arts, also a time when key popular music styles were in consolidation and were especially important to the agenda of the intellectuals involved with the construction of Brazilian national music. After this I present the universes of Brazilian topics and discuss excerpts of works of Villa Lobos in order to show how they appear there and to argue that rhetoricity and density of topical meaning are important characteristics of his style.

1. INTRODUCTION

The music of composer Heitor Villa Lobos remains a difficult task to the analyst, maybe because of his historical independence and originality, since in the first decade of the XXth-century the composer was writing music in a direction that would be developed only from the 20s on, by composers of the Modernist movement, who sought a National language for concert music [1]. Or maybe because his music has been considered complicated in terms of structural-semiotic analysis, being deeply anchored in the production of sound images of Brazilian folklore. The composer himself declared that he painted impressions, landscapes, emotions, and therefore he described his own music as a vehicle for expressing extra-musical phenomena. Following this path, a rhetorical analysis of Villa Lobos' music can bring up interesting discussions about signification and I think that the concept of rhetoricity as well as the theory of topics are contributions in this direction. At first I will comment on the theory of topics and its application to Brazilian music. Then I will present some universes of Brazilian topics I've been working with and I will discuss how these topics navigate the music of Villa Lobos. I shall conclude by claiming that topical density and high rhetoricity are important characteristics of his musical style.

2. BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE THEORY OF TOPICS

Many authors are constructing the theory of musical topics since its initial contribution by Ratner [2], followed by Agawu [3], Allanbrook [4], Hatten [5], Monelle [6,7], Sisman [8] and many others [9]. This collective effort constitutes a new perspective to the investigation of meaning in music, which shall be experimented in the study of other musical universes than the European music of the common practice period. In this sense, I've been trying to adapt this rhetorical approach in order to apply it in a completely different case, the Brazilian music of the end of the XIXth and first decades of the XXth-century. The reason for that is that I think that the theory of topics is a powerful tool to investigate the diversity of musical repertoires inside a limited cultural universe such as a National music, and also because I think that during this period of Brazilian music history there was happening the consolidation of musical genres that are still stable and operative as pillars of what is considered to be Brazilian music. I take the risk of facing so many inconsistencies in the question of what is to be considered Brazilian or not, but yet I think this enterprise is worth because I've been verifying that the categories I've been working with somehow fit with what musicians and musicologists say. The case of the musical language of Villa Lobos is an example of this, and I will try to develop it in this paper.

A condition to engage an application of the theory of topics is a well-established and stable socio-historical context, as it is the case of the music of the Classical period. However, if one wants to approach topics in a National music, the problem starts with the idea of Nation itself. Apart from the geopolitical concept of Nation-state, many social scientists agree that Nation is something arbitrary and even imaginary [10]. Though it is purely a rational convention, a Nation is often taken as an objective thing in the world, and this essentialization ends by posing theoretical problems and paradoxes. But the fact is that despite being a social construction, a Nation is real to the extent that it is something strongly experienced by people. In fact, it is a tacit consensus at least for the people that live in it, and it is also a very important notion in their lives and identities.

Considering this pragmatic dimension of Nation and the pertinence of the idea of historically and geographically located communities that share a musical world, I think that one can speak of musical repertoires considered to be originated from the Nation-state Brazil as being Brazilian music. This allows the construction of a context that is not a historical period such as the Classical one but instead a set of musicalities of a contemporary community living in its territory [11]. I shall remind that musicality, like identity, is a contrastive concept and therefore there can only exist a Brazilian musicality to the extent that there is also an Argentinean or a Scottish one. And this contrastive aspect continues to apply inside the category of National musicality, for it comprises several different regional idioms that can form individual musical languages, each one of them being also a particular musicality pertaining to the Nation. For example, there is a musicality for the tango and other genres of the region of the river de la Plata, South America, and one can conceive that all of them fit inside a larger category of Argentinean musicality, which however may encompass this musicality but is not limited to it. The same process may be exercised to think any relation of National and regional music styles.

Insofar there is a musicality, one can think about the rhetorical dimension of it, which is an important effort for the construction and maintenance of its identity. And this allows one to think about the isotopic constitution of it, whereas topics and figures are active units. Isotopy, as I will comment below, is the characteristic that renders acceptability and stability of conventional meaning in a chain of musical ideas. The inner musicalities of a Nation constitute the different universes of topics I shall refer here. I employ the idea of universe of

topics used by Agawu [3] as musical-symbolic sets that can be isolated from each other within a larger musicality, such as a National one. It is a generic term to put together some musical structures and cultural-literary ideas that it makes sense to separate from other universes. The elements of these groups of topics can be used to promote a greater rhetoricity in the musical text.

The idea of rhetoricity in music derives from the distinction between topic and figure, which can be drawn from the General Rhetoric of the Group Mμ [12]. Briefly, the application of some ideas of this group of Belgian semioticists leads to think the musical *topoi* as constituents of an isotopic chain, and the figure as the surprising element that breaks up the semantic stability of this level. Musical topics are thus topological: they have a specific place in the narrative to correctly affect the audience. However, a musical topic can turn into a musical figure by means of making changes in its placement, form or disposition, and this transformation increases its rhetoricity, that is, the level of its rhetorical quality [13]. The idea that music can present different degrees of rhetoricity helps to understand how sometimes musical topics acquire a higher salience by breaking the expectation generated by isotopic conventionality, thereby becoming a figure, as I think it is the case in many works of Villa Lobos.

3. BRAZILIAN TOPICS IN THE MUSIC OF VILLA LOBOS

In Villa Lobos, as well in other Brazilian Nationalist composers such as Camargo Guarnieri, there is often the musical evocation of the later XIX-century Brazil, the time of the old waltzes and other genres such as Seresta and Modinha, a time when life was attributed with lyricism, simplicity, freshness and nostalgia. There are some depictions of Portugal in this symbolic set, for instance some evocations of Fado musicality, and also embellished flourishing melodies with many arabesques, as well as rhythmic patterns of old dances such as Maxixe and Polka. One can hear sound structures of old civil-military bands that many countryside little Brazilian cities used to have, like for example patterns of tuba-like bass lines. One can add here the Choro, a very important genre to all this symbolic-musical set of categories. All these elements can work together in a musical text to musically recreate a kind of deep Brazil, a land whose myth of origin tells that the real "authentic" and "pure" Brazilian musicality is lost in the ashes of the past but may be re-experienced by the enacting of these specific musical configurations. I call this universe of topics "Época de Ouro" ("golden age").

Golden age topics are abundantly found in the music of Nationalist compositions, such the *Valsas de Esquina* by Francisco Mignone, to mention only one. In Villa Lobos this universe often emerges by means of Choro's 7-stringed guitar bass-lines, for example, which the composer uses in various transformed ways. In the example below, from the *Chôros Nr. 1* for guitar, there are some golden age topics:



Figure 1: from *Chôros Nr. 1*, cc. 9-12.

Paris: Éditions Max Eschig, M.E. 7418, 1959.

The fermata in bar 9 and 11 are a kind of emulation of the *rubato* lyricism in the singing style of Seresta and other old genres, usually presenting a descending *glissando* after the retained note. Bars 10 and 12 present a Choro-bass line, here in the original guitar timbre. These lines, called by musicians "baixaria", appear in several forms in the music of Villa Lobos, mostly serving to connect parts of the melodic theme, and many times appearing in a pretty transformed way. In the following example, the octavated bass line points to the *topos*, the conventional space of these guitar typical phrases:

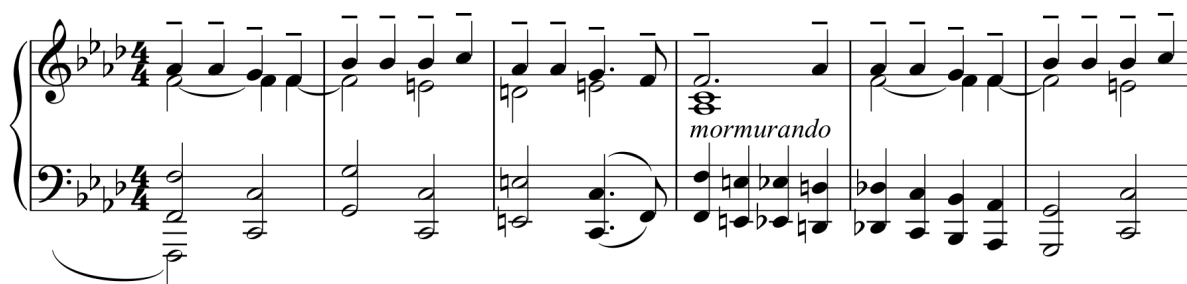


Figure 2: from *Bachianas Nr. 4, Ária*, cc. 7-12.
New York: Consolidated Music Publishers Inc., 1948.

Besides this, the example above, an excerpt of the *Ária* of the *Bachianas Brasileiras N. 4*, brings up in the melody a clear reference to another universe of topics of Brazilian musicality: the "Nordestino" ("northeastern"). Being a great source of inspiration for Nationalist composers, the generalized musicality of northeastern regional culture generated many expressions that were recognized as deeply Brazilian, such as the musical genre Baião and the many melodies that employ the Mixolidian and Dorian modes in a very particular way. Therefore, the excerpt above shows this frankly Nordestino theme in dialog with Choro-like descending bass lines that evoke the Golden Age universe, a completely different symbolic-musical set. This polyphony is an example of the double remission to different topical universes that causes the matching of two diverse worlds of meaning, provoking a kind of excess that is important in Villa Lobos musical language.

The Prelude to the *Bachianas Brasileiras N. 2* (1933) begins with a dark atmosphere in the strings but soon the solo of tenor sax makes a timbristic allusion of the world of Choro, therefore a Golden Age topic. The sax in the Choro is a major contribution that saxophonist-composer Pixinguinha had just consolidated in that time. This remission is followed by a solo of trombone with many glissandi, what emulates the romantic Golden Age singing style and at the same time points to a specific use of this instrument in the so-called Gafieira ballroom dance music that was in progress at the time this composition was written. In this piece, the strings construct the melodic prominence together with the solo sax and the solo trombone. This is here the case of universe of Golden Age topics, but soon it comes a brief section with plenty of harmonic and rhythmic allusions to another universe of topics, the Caipira ("countryman") topics (see below), after what there is the recapitulation of the initial material. This succession of topical universes may cause an astonishing impression of expressive incongruence, due to the dark and lyrical density of the first and last sections and the innocent dancing simplicity of the second one. This certainly is part of the rhetorical intents of Villa Lobos, something that is curiously expressed in the title of this Prelude, "O Canto do Capadócio", that appear in the score translated into several languages (Ricordi

Editions) as "the song of countryman". But in fact "capadócio" was a word also used to mean rogue, rascal, pointing to the figure of the "malandro", an important constituent of a different universe of topics, which I call "Brejeiro" [11].

The evocation of the Caipira universe, which evokes a crucial aspect of the inner side of Brazil, particularly the countryside of Southeastern region, where there is the figure of the Caipira and one recognizes and praises his way of life, sincerity and simplicity. Villa Lobos very directly evokes this universe in his *Trenzinho do Caipira* ("Countryman's little train"), as well in *Plantio do Caboclo*, a piece from the cycle for piano solo *Ciclo Brasileiro*:

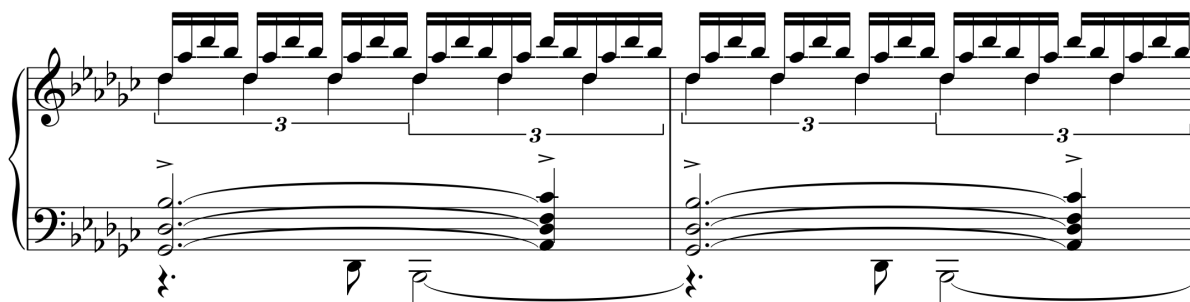


Figure 3: from *Ciclo Brasileiro*, *Plantio do Caboclo*, cc. 10-11.

New York: Consolidated Music Publishers Inc., 1948.

Here the chords in the left hand remind the typical Caipira guitar called "viola caipira", also in the simplicity of the harmonic progression (I-V7) of this genre, which is called "toada caipira". There is at the same time the *ostinato* of the right hand, which seems to put a special brilliant light in the countryside landscape that is being painted here.

Caipira topics are also clear in the Prelude to the *Bachianas Brasileiras N. 7* (1942), entitled "Ponteio", which presents a typical melodic contour in parallel thirds and sixths. But there the Caipira elements are permeated with a learned style marked by the contrapuntal texture and the very Bachian melody. At the same time, one can notice those already mentioned bass lines of Choro, both from 7-stringed guitar and from band-like tuba patterns, as well as other elements that recall the Golden Age universe.

Villa Lobos inaugurated in the Brazilian musicality a universe of topics that may be called Indígena ("Indigenous"), in which the evocation goes to the Indigenous forest peoples and their surrounding world, especially the birds. Villa Lobos largely employed iconicity in his works to mean the chant of birds such as the "uirapurú". And also so-called spirits of nature are present in these references to the Indígena universe, like in the *Suite Amazonas*. The example below is an excerpt of this work, the beginning of a section called "Dance of the enchanting of the forests":

9 - Dança ao encantamento das florestas
No mesmo mvto.

The musical score is presented in four systems. Each system consists of a piano part (left hand) and a right-hand part. The first system begins with a 6/8 time signature and includes the markings 'rall. poco a poco' and 'ff'. The second system features a '5' marking. The third system features a '3' marking. The fourth system features '5' and '3' markings. The score is characterized by complex polyrhythmic textures and rhythmic modulations.

Figure 4: from Amazonas: Bailado indígena brasileira, for piano, Section 9.
Paris: Éditions Max Eschig, M.E. 6675, Paris, 1953.

The polyrhythmic texture and the rhythmic modulation in the right hand produce a sense of independence and great liberty of the melody in relation to the *ostinato*. Following the clues that Villa Lobos himself presents in the score of this programmatic piece, that freedom evokes the presence of a living being of the forest, be it the voice of a bird or the one of a spirit that freely flows over the stable current of arpeggios.

The Indígena in Villa Lobos is not like the romanticized Indigenous world of *Il Guarany*, an opera composed in 1870 by Carlos Gomes in which the idea of the noble savage is prominent. In Villa Lobos, the Indígena universe is one of the dense and remote forest, much more wild and savage and, at the same time, one that is coherent with the ideal of the Modernist movement of 1922 [14]. The Indigenous here is much more free, it is the anarchic Indian of Mario de Andrade's roman *Macunaíma*. Villa Lobos himself was called a "white Indian", a wild composer to the eyes of Europe [15]. The fact is that the Indigenous universe

of topics is very important in Villa Lobos general style, and particularly in some of his pieces he employs so-called Indigenous melodies taken as "authentic", like in the *Três Danças Características (africanas e indígenas)*, where he uses a song of the Caripuna Indians, which he supposedly collected himself in their village.

4. CONCLUSION

The complexity of the music of Villa Lobos has been commented by several musicologists [16] and re-discovered by contemporary researchers [17], but the apparent chaos of its semiotic density favoured the construction of his image as that of an artist with almost bursting and savage creativity. His colleague composer Francisco Mignone for instance said Villa Lobos was an "animal" with a volcanic talent, a magnificent force "from the caves of irrationality" [18]. What I find with the analysis of meaning in the music of Villa Lobos is a particular density of different topical references that may put some light on views like this one. Working as if it had layers of meaning, the "plot" (as Agawu called it) of Villa Lobos' music seems to be eventually constituted of sequences that mix of two or more universes of topics, successively or even simultaneously. This ends by putting together distant worlds like for example Indigenous melodies and old Brazilian waltzes, or Brejeiro *scherzando* gestures and Choro bass lines, or European Modern Impressionist music sounds together with topics of Brazilian northeastern universe. The high rhetoricity of his music results from these transformations and dislocations, a feature that is responsible for dense evocations and a sense of excessiveness characteristic of Villa Lobos musical language.

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