

RABECA REBORN: THE REVIVAL OF THE BRAZILIAN FIDDLE AND THE HISTORICAL PERFORMANCE OF MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

Background in Ethnomusicology

In spite of its impressive emergence in Brazilian World Music and Pop groups, the *rabeca* is very few studied by the musicological perspective. As an instrument that is deeply bound to Brazilian eastern cultures, present in many native narratives and rituals, the ethnomusicological approach is the ideal one to grasp the various socio-cultural and historical connections established by the *rabeca*.

Background in Music Performance

The second half of 20th Century witnessed a large transformation on musical performance parameters, especially concerning the performance of Baroque music. Musical historical instruments started being played again, now oriented by a Musicology that has turned its focus from the musical text and composer to the act of performance and the instruments themselves. This movement was called *Historically Informed Performance* (HIP), and it may be connected with the emergence of the World Music at the 70s, which brought to the musical scenario native exotic instruments. We propose this connection between the historical performance and World Music, and we envisage both as postmodern reactions to musical modernism and the structural analytical approach that dominated the performance theory until then.

Aims

We're working on the following questions: How important is the role of historical or folk instruments in the choices that a musical performance may take? Concerning the music of J. S. Bach, for instance, Adorno claims that historical instruments are meaningless and unable to reveal the nuances of Bach's textures. What these instruments bring to us both musically and symbolically? Do they represent, as suggested by Adorno, just a historicist revival movement, a retrograde force that blocks the progressive flow of music? Or, on the contrary, do they actually stand for the most important renewal of musical interpretation occurred in the last decades? The Brazilian *rabeca* may also be put in this debate: brought by Portuguese settlers to Brazil at the 16th Century, it was long restricted to local village rituals, but its recent emergence has to do with the empowering of regional identities and search for authenticity. We aim to study these movements as part of global changes in the world of music after the 70s.

Main Contribution

The performance of string instruments is still strongly attached to a Romantic approach. The dialogue between historical instruments and popular traditional ones can open new ways to the understanding of the musical phenomena and its connections with history and culture. We intend to view these two movements as part of the same quest for Otherness: while the World music movement looks for the Other in the diversity of distant musical living cultures, the Historically Informed Performance movement, with its glance at the Past, aims to go towards this Other which is distant in terms of historical time.

Implications

Several questions about the *rabeca* in its authentic traditional setting and its new usage out of it refer to the same problems of the re-integration of historic instruments in the concert rooms. One question is the following: why these instruments that remained for such a long time outcast from the urban musical practices suddenly became accepted by musicians and audiences that were until then completely unaware of their existence? Our paper intends to bring answers to this and other questions related to the links between the Baroque violin and the Brazilian fiddle *Rabeca*.



1. INTRODUCTION

The renaissance of forgotten instruments has been an important issue in the musical world in the last decades, and it is linked to the strangulation of the Western musical language as a consequence of the modernist search for the new: the culture of progress. This reaction made possible the critique of the cultural centralism and the valuation of the peripheries.

This is the context for the rising of the so-called Historically Informed Performance movement (HIP), which retakes old interpretative practices through the use of long abandoned instruments as much as the re-evaluation of the performer as a co-creator of the musical work, this happening after a long period of romanticist filter. On the other side, the post-modern re-emergence of local identities urged a valuation and re-signification of regional musical practices that feed the cultural industry of the so-called World Music.

In this article we are putting side by side the Baroque violin and the *rabeca*, two instruments with no apparent historic connection but that well represent the above described moment. The new usages and new contexts given to both these instruments in the contemporary world instigate the reflection about a possible sense behind these phenomena.

2. THE RABECA

The word *rabeca* comes from the Arab word *rabab*, which means a very old Arab stringed instrument that is played until today in Morocco. There are many linguistic variations of the word, such as *rubeba*, *rebec*, *rabé*, *rabel*, *ribeca*, *rebeca*, which point to a wide Mediterranean area in which the Arab musical influence was strong. The Brazilian *rabeca* stems from this world as inheritance from the Iberian ancestors. The lute was then

the most appraised instrument of the Courts as well as of Islamic singers and music theoreticians, and the *rabab*, on the contrary, was linked to the practice of street musicians and dancers, and so remained for centuries in this peripheral music culture (see Alves 1989). The *rabab* was construed in a single carved wood piece, and many times it had a gourd with stretched skin surface for resonance, and over it there was a not-curved bridge for the 2 strings. It was played on the legs or supported on the breast.

Following a more imaginative than historically documented narrative, the *rabeca* arrived in Brazil with the Portuguese settlers in the 16th Century, and since then it remained isolated from the urban and industrialized regions as part of the musical practices of little communities of the coastland. In such regions like Cananéia (southern São Paulo State) or Pernambuco (northeastern State), the *rabeca* still play an important role in popular rituals and feasts (or, as modernist thinker Mário de Andrade called, “dramatic dances”) such as *Fandango* (see Pimentel, Gramani and Correa 2006) or *Cavalo Marinho* (see Murphy 1997, 2008).

2.1 The *rabeca* for Mário de Andrade

Mário de Andrade was a very important figure in Brazilian modernism of the first half of the 20th Century. He played an important role in Brazilian musicology, especially concerning the nationalistic thinking and the collection of folkloric music (see Travassos 1997). Mário’s *Dicionário Musical Brasileiro* (“Brazilian Musical Dictionary”) began to be written in 1929, and though it presented a notable musicological competency for that period in Brazil, it reveals the thinker’s engagement to a sort of elitist thinking inherited from the German idealistic romanticism (Andrade 1989). For instance, the entry *rabeca* shows this fact very clearly, for it presents the instrument as it were a mere kind of popular violin, thereby ignoring the difference, the origin and the value of the *rabeca* itself, which is actually related, as already stated, to the *instrumentarium* of European Middle Ages, therefore prior to the modern violin. Andrade claims that *rabeca* “is how the people of Brazil call this violin. Its voice isn’t heard anymore among cultivated classes” (Andrade 1989, p.423). His ideas about that are traversed by a sociological idiom of class struggle, as when he says that “in the second quarter of the 19th century the violin, until today called *rebeca* by the people, was already vulgarized among the proletarian classes” (*Op. Cit.*, p. 563).

Andrade’s point of view was the same of the modernist composers such as Villa-Lobos. The use of elements of the traditional Brazilian music in concert music was stimulated as an effort to create a national musical idiom, one that could be well accepted among the cultivated international society. Concerning the musical instruments themselves belonging to these traditions, such

as the *rabeca*, they were practically ignored and only their musical traits were to be transferred to the orchestral *instrumentarium*. The focus was on rhythm, melody and form as structural elements of the composition, and no importance was given to the ritualistic process that involves the use of traditional instruments.

2.2 The *rabeca* on the way to Brazil

If the *rabeca* survives in Brazil, maybe because of its location in isolated regions or of these isolated communities' resistance against the urbanizing forces and the mediatic pressure, in Portugal it is almost extinguished, being substituted by the violin (see Veiga de Oliveira 1982). In Brazil, therefore, the *rabeca* endured even though its trajectory has been much more obscure if compared with that of its classic mirror or *alter ego*, the modern violin. Following the same logic of losses and exchanges between dominated and dominating cultures, the Brazilian *rabeca* has been surviving at the margins of the official culture: instead of following a formal pattern and a specified sonority, the *rabeca* is constantly being re-invented by the free imagination and talent of the *rabequeiros* (*rabeca* players, often the instrument's builder). Each *rabequeiro* builds the *rabeca* on its own way, with particular form and tuning, designed to be played in a specific and unique way.



Genir Pires (photo in Pimentel *et alli* 2006, p. 129)



Zé Pereira (photo in Pimentel *et alli* 2006, p. 130)

This configuration was usual in pre-modern societies, in which music practice was much more limited to certain social and ritual functions and the musical knowledge was orally transmitted. In this sense, more than having an etymological root, the *rabeca* and its world may be linked to the context of its African ancestor. In order to achieve a better understanding of the complex and long flow in the cultural history of the *rabeca*, we intend to provide some documental information, also envisaging to putting some light over persistent dichotomies such as classic/popular, written/oral, author/interpreter, and work/ritual.

The 13th Century treatise of Jerome de Moravia, from Paris, presents a large description of the *rubeba*, a bow instrument with two strings tuned in fifths, which is probably the same *rubeba* that is still today played in Morocco (Page 1986, p. 126). This document is important because it states a migration of a popular instrument to the elite's written tradition, showing the change of *status* of the instrument. The Middle-Age fiddle directly derived from the *rubeba*: it became a three-stringed instrument, keeping the *rubeba*'s massive wood piece carved in periformal design, with a plain top made not of leather but of low-density wood (pine). The increase of one string imposed the use of a curved bridge. The *viele*, *viella* or *fidel* is a similar instrument that was also largely used during the Middle Ages, but it was constructed with different pieces of wood. This fact made it possible to increase the number of strings without augmenting the weight of resonance box. Such lighter instruments are more adapted to have its technical resources expanded: one may see in the medieval iconography relatively big bowed-strings instruments being supported on the player's breast, as it is showed in the adornments of the book *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, attributed to D. Afonso X, the wise. This technical demand required the new mastering of instrument building, for now on they were to be built not

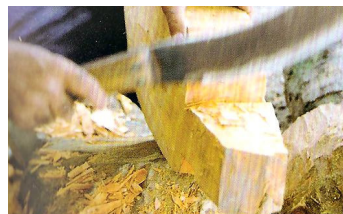
of a single calabash or massive wood piece anymore. We may speak here of the probable start of the musician's professional life as different of that of the *luthier*. And this moment is also important to understand the links between the *rabeca* and its ancestors: in the traditional communities where they are played, the *rabeca* is built by the players themselves, the *rabequeiros*, just like the medieval configuration of the multi-instrumentalist who build its own instruments in conformity with his own needs.

The violin came with the conjunction of the *vielle* with the medieval fiddle, at Northern Italy during the second half of the 16th Century. The instrument was initially meant to Court and Church music, but shortly it was to make the inverse path of the *rabab*: it migrated to the world outside these territories of power. This was the case of the Scottish *strathspey*, a popular dance genre from the Highlands in which the violin came to substitute the old harps and pipes.

The violin's capacity of adaptation to diverse musical configurations and cultural contexts, besides its powerful role of representing the European civilization, led it to replace similar instruments in different cultures: it is still frequent to find it substituting the traditional Hindu *sārangi*, the Persian *kemache* (*kemençe*) or the Moroccan *rabāb* in their respective musical groups. This phenomenon also explains the quasi evanishment of the fiddle, which perished before the multiplicity of uses of the violin. According to Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira (1982, p. 226), the fiddle since long disappeared of the Iberian world (except at the Santander hills, where there is the one or two-stringed *rabel*, played by shepherds to accompany their singing and also in dances). The Iberian fiddle was substituted by the violin or by adaptations of it, like the *rabeca chuleira*, a kind of violin with shortened arm which permits the player to reach very high notes.

The case of the *rabeca*, the Brazilian fiddle, seems to be an exception in this global process of the violin encompassing several instruments. However, the distinction between *rabeca* and violin isn't so evident, it points to questions that evolve not only organological elements but rather sociocultural aspects. The *rabeca* has always been associated to isolated old communities, occupying an imaginary space of a moor ancestry which was brought by the Portuguese. For instance, ethnomusicologist Kilza Setti, in her important ethnography of the music of São Paulo's northern coast, preferred the term *violino caiçara* ("caiçara violin" – *caiçara* is how the natives are called) to call the local *rabecas* (Setti 1985, pp. 132-171).

There is a considerable variety in the design of the *rabeca*: some are more similar to the modern violin (with several glued wood pieces), while other are made of a single wood piece carved in the form of a trough, as those build by *rabequeiro* Nelson da Rabeca.



Nelson da Rabeca constructing a *rabeca*



"Seo Nelson" (as he is called) uses several kinds of local wood, like that of the *jaca* fruit tree (he lives in the city of Marechal Deodoro, State Alagoas, Northeastern Brazil). His *rabecas* don't follow any pre-established formal pattern other than what his imagination tell him. He never knew a string instrument until he was 50, when he started inventing his *rabecas*, which represent a direct connection to the European medieval world not only because the way they are construed but also because of its sonority. Most of his life he worked in sugarcane farms enduring a very hard job and low conditions of living. However, he managed to overcome these difficulties and became a famous *rabequeiro* well known in Brazil as a reference in the world of *rabeca* building (Gramani 2002).



The modalism of the music played by these *rabecas* is another factor in the approximation between Northeastern sound and medieval music. The tuning doesn't involve consecutive fifths, as in the violin, but interpolates fourths and major thirds, and this fact emphasizes the fundamental tone of the harmonic series. This tuning, which was called heterophonic (Page 1986, p. 127-128. The author refers to the *rubeba* and the *vielle*), enhances the modal bass note, therefore allowing interpreter to play almost all the time with two simultaneous strings, thereby producing a vigorous and full sound as well as clear rhythmic patterns.

If the tuning of the *rabeca* engages these possibilities, one may remember that the violin's tuning in fifths advantage the playing of scales and homogenous melodic patterns.

3. THE HISTORICALLY-INFORMED PERFORMANCE MOVEMENT

3.1 The HIP Movement

The historical performance practice originated from the 20th Century musical esthetics debates. Despite the references to the pioneers who first looked early music without the obstructive post-romantic way, such as the instrument builder and musician Arnold Dolmetsch (1858-1940) and the harpsichord's revivalist Wanda Lankowka (1879-1959), it was only after the 50s that there occurred a remarkable change on the musical approach to musical performance of early music.

The "historically-informed performance" (HIP), as same scholars call this movement today, had a turning point at the commemoration of the year of J. S. Bach's death in 1950. According to John Butt (2002), this ephemerid represents a landmark for the discussions on how the music of Bach shall be played. German composer Paul Hindemith, who already sympathized with the idea of musical restoration of the past (Hindemith 1969), advocated the use of original instruments and ensembles to play the music of Bach. He claimed that:

We can be sure that Bach was thoroughly content with the means of expression at hand in voices and instruments, and if we want to perform his music according to his intentions we ought to restore the conditions of performance of that time (Hindemith apud Butt 2002, p.3)

Some of the most important performers that lifted the movement's flag ahead also started their careers as performers at that moment, for example Nikolaus Harnoncourt, who founded the *Concertus Musicus Wien* in 1953. Together with the harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt and the flutist Franz Bruggen, they can be considered the leaders of a movement that sought for authenticity in the musical performance of the music written before 1800. The HIP movement has influenced a whole generation of musicians who assumed the task of performing the music of the past with the instruments for which that music was written. This new generation retook the techniques of building and playing old instruments which at that moment were irremediably lost in the dust of the past. They acquired this expertise thorough the study of the old treatises of musical performance written by famous composers and instrumentalists of the 18th Century.

Besides the quest for authenticity on the musical performance, the HIP has revealed a new side of the musical phenomenon: the complexity of the musical gesture, understood as the sensorial relation between the musical instrument and the performer. These two poles form an axis of sound production in which the slightest change cause effects in the tenuous balance of the final performance. These considerations then became part of the world of performance as a discipline, but the musicological questions still were not active in the area. Even when performers like Landowska adventured herself to play Bach and his contemporaries' music on the harpsichord, the instrument she used had the sound conception of a romantic piano much more than of a historical harpsichord. It was only when the performers themselves started to believe that the historical instruments could sound more appropriately than the modern ones, and that they where most suitable to that music, which actually was written to be played with them, it was only then that the performance began to reveal more balanced musical gestures for that music. The HIP has put side by side *theoria* and *praxis*, therefore situating the musician in a privileged crossroad between Art and Science, and pushing him to a phenomenological approach to music playing that implies the necessity of different disciplines and musical experiences (See Harnoncourt 1988).

The HIP movement thus raised this phenomenological side of the musical performance, which would be emphasized from the 60s on through the

postmodernist changes. Besides this, the privilege of European cultural mainstream was then substituted by focusing its peripheries, one of which was the early music instrumental revival. Another modernist claim was then refuted: that of there was a kind of teleology in the instrument's evolution, and each instrumental development implied the discard of all older versions. This had been the case of the replacement of the harpsichord by the "much more developed" fortepiano. If this teleological approach sounds unacceptable today, it was not so until the early 50s.

As a reaction to the culture of restoration represented by that Bach's commemoration, in 1951 Theodor Adorno wrote the article "Bach Defended against his Devotees" (Adorno 1990). In this article Adorno strongly attacks the use of original instruments to play Bach's music, for he argued that the modern developed instruments had much better conditions of giving to Bach's music the appropriate nuances meant by the composer, especially those concerning the hearing of the counterpoint. Despite the feeling of anachronism that these claims present today, Adorno's point of view is actually important to situate the HIP beyond the historicist critique that permeated the debates in posterior decades. His blindness allows us to perceive the important role that the instruments assumed in the interplay of musical performance and history.

3.2 The measure of the baroque violin's soul

Since the publication of the book "The History of Violin Playing from its Origins to 1761" by David Boyden (1965), many questions concerning the violin playing and construction before 1800 become clear and are sustained by historical evidences and documentation. Boyden presents an overall panorama of baroque violin that evidences how different it was from the 19th Century instrument, the one that came to our days through the conservatorial tradition of violin teaching. Other important books were released in the 70s, including the facsimile editions of Francesco Geminiani's "*The Art of Playing on the Violin*", originally published in 1751, and Leopold Mozart's "*Violinschule*", which first appeared in 1755. These publications brought large musicological information to a wide range of performers interested on the violin performance tradition before the romantic era, musicians eager to change their conceptions of how to play baroque music on the violin. Precious information about the violin practice during the 17th and 18th were provided by these books, which also contributed to retake the original *instrumentarium* for the baroque orchestral practice. And today there is plenty of technical information about the baroque violin setting and playing available, but one important question remains opened: there are the gut strings, the finger board measures, the neck angle, the

looser pressure on the belly, the "chin off" technique of holding the instrument without the aid of the chin or the pressure against the shoulder, the lighter and more agile bow, there are all these elements which combined according to the baroque treatises, but are they enough to define a frontier line between baroque violin and modern violin? Some of the precursors of the recuperation of the baroque technique of violin playing, like the Belgian Sigswald Kuijken, think it is not. He claims that the instrument constitution may point to the way the musician shall play, but this fact alone is not enough to change the sense of the performance. The musician himself should change his musical mind and perception to be able to let the instrument itself to speak in the baroque rhetorical idiom. This requires an interaction between instrument and performer that necessarily involves a phenomenological approach to the musical making. It concerns a practical knowledge and a theoretical reflection built after this practice, both engaging the consolidation of the daily relation between master and disciple. Such considerations ask for remarkable changes also in the way of teaching, which should get away from the Conservatories' institutional standard. It's about the recuperation of the learning process as it was before the French Revolution, an important issue that can contribute to enrich the contemporary musical learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Where do these two relatively simultaneous movements point to? In the *rabeca*'s case it is not hard to conclude that its re-emergence in the media and, more than that, in the Brazilian musical imaginary, points toward the emergence of local identities that come into view as a consequence of the new global scenarios since the 60s. The consolidation of the idea of local culture is a consequence of the critique of the notion of Nation-state as being something more substantial than more than a political unity (Hobsbawm 1992; Anderson 2006). The local is culturally independent of the State; it appears as a collection of unique knowledge, an irreducible constituent of the cultural tissue of National identities at the post-modern global scenario. The re-emergence of the *rabeca* accompanies this pace: as part of local cultures, it assumed a vital role of simultaneously engaging the particular language of the local and the deep roots of the National identity which emerges by means of these languages.

But where does the HIP movement point to? We could say that, in a similar path, the focus here is the identity, but in another level. The Western glance into the past reveals an intention of meeting an Other: one that is distant from the Same not due to its epistemological positioning but by means of the flow of time. That is to say that the Past itself becomes the upmost Alterity, it becomes

what we were and no longer are, and all the efforts of performing historical reconstitutions reflect the secret wish to taste the astonishment of seeing the Oneself in the Other who is already gone. According to this, the effort of producing accurate re-creations on the construction of this Other is not so different of that effort of searching for a living alterity: that is the local culture. It is in this sense that Lévi-Strauss once said that anthropology is a psychology (Lévi-Strauss 1962).

From the interpreter's point of view, however, the esthetical possibilities are guided much more by a kind of blind search, a sensorial experimentation, than by the aforementioned epistemological matter (Fiaminghi 2008). The playing of a baroque violin is not to be exclusively defined by the accuracy of the historical model of the instrument, but it depends mostly on the relation established by the interpreter with it. It relays on the performer's understanding of the functionality of this "new" baroque way of playing, a much more phenomenological than theoretical or historical knowledge. The *rabeca* as well demands of those who wish to touch its worlds a permanent disposition to adapt to new musical contexts.

This approach provides the musical instrument itself with a different function, the one of having an active voice which the musician is urged to hear, he shall listen to what the instrument may say. This means that the performance should not be based on the training of repetitive formulae, which is the emphasis of the usual methods from the Classical and Romantic periods, still considered fundamental. We believe that, as suggested by Nattiez (1990), it is disciplines such as Hermeneutics, Musicology and Ethnomusicology that are nowadays fundamental to the performer, for they make possible the opening of his vision of his own playing.

This approach, far away from Adorno's critique of the HIP, was created by researcher-musicians like Kuijken, who re-established the musical performance as a ritualistic practice, restoring it from the dilacerating tensions of the cultural industry.

The ethnomusicological perspective to early music movement (see Shelemay 2001) as well as to other world music traditions (see Blacking 1973) also provides many contributions in this sense. After studying the 14-stringed Afghan lute *dutar*, John Bailey created a consistent theory on the morphology of this instrument and its relationship to musical structures, developing the concept of "spacio-motor-thinking" (Bailey 1995). Brazilian ethnomusicologist Oliveira Pinto, commenting this concept, claims that due to its ergonomics, each musical instrument imposes certain ways of executing moves. The interaction between the human body and the morphology of the instrument strongly influences the musical structures by channeling the human creativity through previsible and musical ways, leading to specific rules of musical movement as a whole (Pinto 2001, p. 235).

The instruments and their "imperfections" become substantially relevant for the contemporary performer of violin, *rabeca* or any other. They instigate the approach of local languages, urban or rural soundscapes, and also suscite phenomenological aspects such as the "*corps à corps avec l'oeuvre*" and the "maturation" of the interpreter, that intimacy that surpasses and integrates all objective knowledge (Imberty 2001, p. 27), be it the case of historical instruments or that of those ones "without history" such as the *rabeca*. The world music brought these peripheral voices to the global musical stage, which is actually very much a political arena (see Feld 1994), but that also is where the baroque violin and the *rabeca* may cohabit and musically enlighten each other.

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