

An Overview of Villa-Lobos Compositions for the Violoncello

Um Olhar Sobre as Composições de Villa-Lobos para Violoncello

Tânia Lisboa
lisboa@dsl.pipex.com

Abstract: Villa-Lobos is the most prolific Brazilian composer of all times. An adventurous musician, known worldwide mostly for his piano, guitar and orchestral works, Villa-Lobos started to learn music through the cello. However, most of his compositions for the cello are not known or even performed. This article presents a brief summary of Villa-Lobos musical training and it gives an overview of his compositions for the cello divided in two parts: Villa-Lobos compositions for cello and piano and The Bachianas Brasileiras N.1 and N.5 for cello octet. This article relates to the author's recordings of Villa-Lobos' complete works for cello and piano, in three volumes, on Meridian Records label.

Keywords: violoncello, performance, Villa-Lobos, compositions.

Resumo: Villa-Lobos está entre os compositores Brasileiros mais importantes de todos os tempos além de ser conhecido mundialmente. Este artigo enfoca a relação de Villa-Lobos com o violoncelo, apresentando uma sinopse das obras para violoncelo e piano e das Bachianas Brasileiras n° 1 e n° 5 para octeto de violoncelos. Apesar de muitas dessas obras não serem tão conhecidas, como as composições para piano ou violão, elas refletem um período importante na vida de H. Villa-Lobos quando ele sobrevivia trabalhando principalmente como violoncelista. O artigo inclui também, uma lista das obras para violoncelo apresentando referências às gravações existentes.

Palavras-chave: violoncelo, Villa-Lobos, performance, forma musical.

This paper outlines aspects of Villa-Lobos' (1887-1959) connections to the cello and generally surveys his compositions for the instrument (published works and available recordings). It focuses particularly on his repertoire for cello and piano and cello ensemble, which occupy a place of great significance in relation to his overall output. Although these works are not performed as frequently as his works for guitar and for piano solo, they comprise most of his first compositional phase – the time when Villa-Lobos' association with the Brazilian musical scene was primarily as a *performing cellist*. The biographical material presented herewith has been drawn from a variety of sources; for more comprehensive details, readers may wish to consult Greene (1986).

Much is known about Villa-Lobos' introduction to music, but it is worth emphasizing that it was both hereditary and environmental. His maternal grandfather had composed and his father, Raul, a writer and an official of the National Library, was a conservatory-trained amateur musician, famous in Rio for his musical salons. When Villa-Lobos, at an early age started picking out tunes on the piano, his father began to teach him his own instrument, the cello. Some accounts state that he first used a viola held in a cello-fashion; others insist that it was a small gut-strung guitar (and indeed, he later became a master of the guitar). His father also taught him the clarinet, but the cello was to remain Villa-Lobos' instrument, the one he studied seriously – as opposed to the piano and the guitar, which were virtually self-taught.

When Villa-Lobos was 12, his father died, and his mother, foreseeing a medical career for her son, forbade him to continue with music. He rebelled, adopting a bohemian lifestyle, surviving by playing in itinerant instrumental bands

(*chorões*) and by working as a cellist in theatres, cinemas and cafes. When life became difficult financially, he also sold books from his father's extensive library. Villa-Lobos joined a touring opera company, worked in a match factory and when he could, took field trips to the Caribbean and into the jungles of the Amazon. (Greene, 1986)

Around 1912, in Rio, Villa-Lobos began to do some serious, and perhaps rather academic composing. Several of his compositions for cello and piano are dated from this period, between 1913 and 1917, just before he met the French composer Darius Milhaud (1892 - 1974). At a time when he was writing the *Danças Características Africanas* experimenting with new rhythms in his orchestral works, he was writing miniature pieces for the cello, exploring the singing tone of the cello through simple, but beautiful melodies.

On November 13th 1915, several of Villa-Lobos' early compositions were presented at a concert at the Jornal do Comércio Hall: the *Piano Trio n° 1*, the *Sonata n° 2* for violin and piano, the *Waltz Scherzo* for piano solo, a *Berceuse* for cello and piano, and several songs. The concert was given a controversial reception and may have prompted Villa-Lobos to start studying more seriously. Whilst keeping his job at the cinema as a cellist, he decided to enrol at the National Institute of Music studying the cello with Benno Niederberge and composition with Francisco Braga, a pupil of Massenet. However, he found the formalities stultifying, and gave up his classes to read and study scores outside the formal educational structure. During this time, whilst still earning his living as a performer, he was turning more and more to composition.

Cello and Piano Works of Villa-Lobos' first phase of composition

The main published cello and piano pieces written at the beginning of his career (between 1913 and 1917) are: *Pequena Suite*, *Prelude n° 2*, *Sonhar*, *Berceuse*, *Capriccio*, *Elegie* and *O Canto do Cisne Negro*.

The *Pequena Suite* and the *Prelude n° 2*, both dated 1913, derive from a period when the rich middle classes of Rio were faithful consumers of European art. At the same time as Villa-Lobos was being exposed to classical and romantic composers, he was travelling through lands full of history, collecting data from Brazilian folklore. There is a story told by Villa-Lobos that in a trip to Amazonas, he met a young British girl, fell in love and decided that they should set sail for the USA. The

ship anchored in Barbados for repairs, and the couple managed to lose all their money gambling. In order to survive on the island, Villa-Lobos had to improvise concerts, playing his cello in bars and cabarets accompanied by his girlfriend on the piano. It is from these heady and impecunious times that are attributed his early compositions for cello and piano (Lisboa e Braga, 1997).

At the time of World War I, the influence of post-impressionism was beginning to reach Brazil and may account for Villa-Lobos' seemingly audacious and innovative harmonic approach to *Sonhar* (1914), *Berceuse* (1915), *Capriccio* (1915) and *Elegie* (1916). The popular *O Canto do Cisne Negro* (1917), written for violin (or for cello with piano accompaniment) is an excerpt from the symphonic poem *Naufrágio de Kleônicos*. Rippling arpeggios on the piano depict the lake with the black swan emerging *molto espressivo* on the cello. The gradual *morrendo* indication at the end of the piece portrays the last efforts of the swan to sing its song.

Works for cello and piano from this first period do not seem to incorporate elements of folklore to the same extent as his late compositions. They are melodic, resembling the French influence that Rio was experiencing at the time and exploring, in a somewhat romantic approach, the full range of cello. Many of these compositions were written in the style of *salon* type of music, as for example the Prelude n° 2 (Prelude n° 1 is never mentioned in catalogues of his music). These pieces contrast dramatically with the *Divagation*, written much later in 1946. Here, the rhythmic figures derive mainly from Brazilian folklore and include imitative effects of percussion instruments with the *ad libitum* directive *avec tambour*.

Considering that Villa-Lobos was actively working as a cellist during the time that these melodic, generally slow, and rather short pieces were written, one might assume that they reflect the type of repertoire that he was performing as an itinerant musician. However, they contrast considerably with the *Sonata* written in 1916 which displays a more virtuoso style and is much more technically demanding for both the cello and the piano.

The multi-cultural influences to which Villa-Lobos was subjected at critical stages of his development can be identified throughout his creative output. Both the European and Brazilian influence inform his *Second Sonata* for cello and piano opus 66. It comprises four movements which make strong but effective demands on the two instruments. Intriguingly, the whereabouts of a first sonata remains a mystery.

The *Sonata n° 2* brings together stylistic elements representative of different

periods of Villa-Lobos' creativity. First, the influence of Debussy is expressed clearly in the use of whole-tone scales, widespread seventh and ninth chords, and parallel dissonances and fifths. Second, the piece has moments of more conventional tonality, exploring the lyricism of the cello. The combination of his harmonic treatment with the lyricism of the cello in the second movement, would later influence the more popular Brazilian music of today known as Bossa Nova. Third, the strength of the rhythmic elements is strongly present for the first time in his cello compositions. More specifically, the first movement is introduced by the piano in a cadenza-like passage of modulating mobility. After the 'cello entry, the work proceeds to a development in which new ideas are liberally and eloquently introduced prior to their synthesis in the powerful coda with which the movement concludes. The wistful theme of the *Andante Cantabile* is first introduced by the piano. Written in 12/8 time, the theme is subjected to chromatic and rhythmic alterations culminating in the cello's triumphant *forte* restatement. Chromatic variation and rhythmic development are the essential characteristics of the colourful *Scherzo* as its principal material is reassembled in a multitude of combinations, culminating in a tumultuous coda. The last movement is introduced by the cello with an ascending staccato theme, accompanied by staccato chords in which the piano is directed to emulate drum-like sonority. This is followed by a more lyrical theme introduced by the cello and supported by a rippling semiquaver accompaniment which asserts itself in turn as the basis for three-part contrapuntal development. Themes from other movements are recalled before the work concludes with a brilliant coda (Lisboa e Braga, 1998).

As mentioned above, this paper focuses mainly on the compositions for cello and piano and for cello ensemble, but it is perhaps worth mentioning his works for cello and orchestra: the *Grande Concerto n° 1* Op.50, *Fantasia* for cello and orchestra and *Concerto n° 2*. The two concerti are separated by almost forty years, the first written in 1915, and first performed in Rio de Janeiro by Newton Padua as soloist and Villa-Lobos conducting himself; and the second written in 1953, commissioned by Aldo Parisot. Considering that the cello was his first instrument, it is curious that Villa-Lobos wrote more concerti for the piano than for the cello. Nonetheless, his affinity with the cello can be appreciated in the number of chamber works in which he gave the instrument a prominent role, as well as the existence of the *Fantasia* for cello and orchestra written in 1945.

The Cello Ensemble

Villa-Lobos' relationship with the cello is also reflected in his transcriptions and arrangements, such as the transcriptions of Preludes and Fugues by J. S. Bach,

for cello ensemble and also for cello and piano (*see list below*). These are dated from the 1930's when he was also engaged in the composition of the *Nine Bachianas Brasileiras*, written between 1930 and 1945 his great homage to Bach. Two of the nine Bachianas are written for cello ensemble and a third one is transcribed for cello and piano. Villa-Lobos' affinity with the 'cello and J. S. Bach is evidenced in the skill with which he balances authenticity with instrumental considerations and personal fantasy. In other words, Villa-Lobos' admiration for Bach did not lead him to imitation, but rather to a rendering of his style in a Brazilian idiom.

The composition of the Bachianas seems to have led to a new Chamber Music grouping: the eight members cello ensemble. Nowadays, many professional cello groups comprise this combination which is required to perform both Bachianas n° 1 and n° 5, and one very rarely finds compositions for eight cellos written before the Bachianas, though many composers have dedicated themselves to writing for this type of ensemble since then. Indeed, the cello ensemble is now common in chamber music training at Music Colleges and Universities, many orchestras now have their own cello ensemble developing an independent career (e.g. *The Cellos of the Berlin Philharmonic*, in Germany; *The Rio Cello Ensemble*, in Brazil), and many festivals are dedicated to the cello ensemble (e.g. *The Beauvais Cello Festival*, in France; *the International Cello Encounter* and the *Festival International de Cellos da Amazonia*; in Brazil).

The *Bachianas Brasileiras n° 1* was dedicated to Pablo Casals, and it illustrates Villa-Lobos extraordinary ability to combine different elements in one style. This music contains elements and forms based on the music of Bach, but still is unmistakably that of Villa-Lobos. The three movements are based on forms characteristic of Bach's music (toccata, aria and fugue) but the first two are in very Brazilian genres: the first is a form of folk dance called an *embolada* and the second is a *modinha* which is a type of song dating from the seventeenth century. The last movement is a fugue in four voices.

The *Bachianas Brasileiras n° 2* was written in four movements, three of which - *Preludio*, *Aria* and *Toccata*, he transcribed for cello and piano. In the first movement of this arrangement, *Prelúdio (O Canto do Capadócio)*, the composer evokes the figure of the *Capadócio*. This unusual word is used to describe a bohemian, someone malicious, frivolous or fraudulent. The *Capadócio's* character, according to Villa-Lobos, has various psychological manifestations: sentimental and dramatic, lyric, pathetic and tragic. The second movement, *Aria (O Canto da Nossa Terra)* - "The song of our Land", opens passionately with a Largo in D minor. In the central part, a nostalgic melody is initiated over a persistent rhythmic pattern on the piano,

reminiscent once more of native songs and rhythms. The four bars of the Largo are restated and the first section is re-exposed, before concluding on a unison D. The work is completed by the *Toccata (O Trenzinho do Caipira)* "The Little Train of Caipira", which has become one of the composer's most popular pieces. Villa-Lobos uses complex rhythmic figures to reproduce the sound of a departing train followed by its arrival at the station. He starts with the piano in tempo *un poco moderato*, employing gradually quicker rhythmic figures, communicating the impression of an *accelerando*. With this background, the cello gives life to the piece through a simple melody, later reproduced by the piano. A reversal of the rhythmic figures is employed to stop the train with added harmonics to emulate the braking as it arrives at the station. This movement is said to have preceded the others and to have been conceived during a one-hour local train journey in the State of São Paulo.

Regardless of how unfamiliar some of Villa-Lobos' works remain to the world at large, the *Aria (Cantilena)*, from the *Bachianas Brasileiras n° 5*, has enjoyed universal popularity for its beguilingly beautiful melody (Mariz, sexta edição). Dedicated to Mindinha Villa-Lobos, the first movement is based on a poem by Ruth V. Correa, and this piece was originally written in 1938 for soprano and cello orchestra. The opening pizzicati in 5/4 might have been scored with the guitar in mind, and Villa-Lobos did subsequently produce a transcription with guitar accompaniment. The scene is set for the *Aria* whose seamlessly unfolding melody introduces and concludes the movement. The poem is reserved for the middle section, and its intensely nostalgic sentiment is matched by an accompaniment of poignant dissonances. All that remains is for the soprano to return to the *Aria*, but now humming rather than singing. The second movement is a dance- *Dança (Martelo)* - based on a persistent rhythm and elements of folklore, which requires considerable agility on the part of the singer in the rapid enunciation of successive syllables referring to a bird song.

Summary

The prolific and varied output of Heitor Villa-Lobos suggests a musician interested in a wide range of musical genres, adventurous enough to try all kinds of combinations from the most traditional to the most audacious styles. Whilst other composers were writing traditional concerti for the violin or for the piano, Villa-Lobos was writing concerti for the guitar, for the harmonica and for the harp. No other Brazilian composer has attained the international recognition of Villa-Lobos and yet, many of his compositions are still in manuscript, some are missing and many have not yet been performed or recorded.

DATE	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RECORDINGS AVAILABLE/Label - Catalogue. N.
1910	Fuga (Bach transc.) Prelúdio - F sharp Minor	Score missing Score missing	
1913	Prelúdio Op.20, n° 2	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223527 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
	Pequena Suite Romancette Legendária Harmonias Soltas Fugato (all'antica) Melodia Gavotte-Scherzo	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223527 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
	Pequena Sonata	Score missing	
1914	Sonhar Op.14	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223298 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
1915	Berceuse Op.50	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223298 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
	Sonata n° 1	Score missing	
	Capriccio Op.49	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223527 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
1915	Grande Concerto n° 1 Op.50 <i>(for cello and orchestra)</i>	Max Eschig	U.Schmid, NW German PO, (1989)/D. Roggen/ Danbringhaus und Grimm- L3339 A. Menezes Galicia S.O. (1996)/Valois V4843
1916	Elégie Op.87	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223527
	Sonata n° 2 Op.66	Max Eschig	A. Nunes, M.Duphil(r1988)/Marco Polo-8 233164 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
1917	O Canto do Cisne Negro	Arthur Napoleão	R.Rust, D. Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223298 S.Isserlis, T.Ades (1997)/RCA-09026 68928-2 J.Lloyd Webber, J.Lenehan (1992)/Philips-462 712-2PH T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357 L.Blake, H. Webb (r2001)/Lowri Records T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1998)/ Meridian- CDE84391
1930	Preludio n° 8 <i>(transc. of J.S.Bach Prelude BWV 853)</i>	Seresta Music	T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1998)/ Meridian- CDE84391
1931	Fuga n° 10 <i>(transc. of J.S. Bach Fugue BWV 855)</i>	Seresta Music	
	Preludio n° 14 <i>(transc. of J.S.Bach Prelude BWV 883)</i>	Seresta Music	T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1998)/ Meridian- CDE84391
	Noturno Op.9, n° 2	Score missing	
	Preludio <i>(O Canto do Capadócio)</i> <i>(arr.cello and piano from</i>	Not edited	T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357

DATE	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RECORDINGS AVAILABLE/Label - Catalogue. N.
	Bachianas Brasileiras no.2) Aria -(O Canto da Nossa Terra) (arr.cello and piano from Bachianas Brasileiras No.2)	Not edited	J.Lloyd Webber, J.Lenehan (r1992)/Philips-462 712-2PH T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/Meridian- CDE84357
	Tocata -(O Trenzinho do Caipira)(arr.cello and piano from Bachianas Brasileiras No.2)	Not edited	T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/Meridian- CDE84357
1945	Fantasia for cello and Orchestra	Associated Music	PublishersA. Menezes Galicia S.O. (1996)/Valois V4843
1946	Divagation	Max Eschig	R.Rust, D.Apter (r1993)/ Marco Polo- 8 223298 T.Lisboa, M.Braga (r1997)/ Meridian- CDE84357
1953	Concerto n° 2 (for cello and orchestra)	Max Eschig	Andres Dias - Bolivar S. O. (1995)/Dorian U.Schmid, NW German P.O., D. (1989)/Roggen/ Danbringhaus und Grimm- L3339 A. Menezes Galicia S.O. (1996)/Valois V4843

Referências

GREENE, D. M. *Biographical Encyclopedia of Composers*. London: William Collins Sons & Company, 1986.

LISBOA, T e Braga, M. *O Violoncello do Villa: Heitor Villa-Lobos complete works for cello and piano, vol. 1*. Liner notes for the CDE 84357. London: Meridian Records, 1997.

LISBOA, T e Braga, M. *O Violoncello do Villa: Heitor Villa-Lobos complete works for cello and piano, vol. 2*. Liner notes for the CDE 84391. London: Meridian Records, 1998.

MARIZ, Vasco. *Heitor Villa-Lobos: compositor brasileiro*. Ministério da Cultura. Fundação Nacional Pró-memória. Museu Villa-Lobos, Sexta edição.

MUSEU VILLA-LOBOS. *Villa-Lobos, sua Obra*. Rio de Janeiro: Museu Villa-Lobos, 1989.

R. E. D. *Classical 2001 Catalogue*. London: Master Edition, R.E.D. Publishing, 2002

Tânia Lisboa - Após formar-se pelo Conservatório Dramático e Musical "Dr. Carlos de Campos de Tatui" SP, os estudos de Pós-graduação foram realizados em Londres: Advanced Solo Studies; MA in Music Performance e PhD. Atualmente integra o Centro de Pesquisa em Performance da Royal College of Music em Londres, tendo apresentando palestras em várias Conferências na Bélgica, Austrália, França, USA, Alemanha e Inglaterra. Em paralelo à sua carreira acadêmica, gravou cinco CDs como violoncelista para Meridian Records e apresenta-se regularmente na Europa, USA, Japão e Brasil.