

THE NORTH-AMERICAN SINGER AND BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE LYRIC DICTION ISSUES IN THE SONGS OF HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

O CANTOR NORTE-AMERICANO E A DICÇÃO LÍRICA DO PORTUGUÊS BRASILEIRO NAS CANÇÕES DE HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

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Abstract: The North-American singer faces particular diction challenges with the relatively unfamiliar Brazilian Portuguese used in the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos. There is a generalized tendency to approach Brazilian Portuguese diction using as reference the idiomatic “feel” and sounds of Spanish. This method can be helpful, but lacks breadth, subtlety, and accuracy. In Spanish there is a remarkable correspondence between spelling and pronunciation. Written Portuguese does not communicate the sounds of the language with that same precision, especially Brazilian Portuguese, which has been influenced by European languages, African dialects, and the languages of native tribes. This article addresses the diction of the most challenging phonemes for non-Brazilian singers, dispensing particular attention to the questions of Brazilian nasal vowels, diphthongs, and problematic consonant pronunciation. These diction issues are exemplified using Villa-Lobos’ *Canção do Amor* and *Melodia Sentimental*, two songs which are part of the original score of the movie *Green Mansions*.

Keywords: Brazilian Portuguese Diction; Villa-Lobos songs.

Resumo: O cantor norte-americano enfrenta grande desafios quanto ao preparo e performance das canções de Villa-Lobos, escritas em português brasileiro. Frequentemente encontra-se uma tendência para o uso dos sons e cadências típicas do espanhol, uma língua mais familiar ao cantor norte-americano, causando uma dicção errônea do português brasileiro. Em espanhol há uma grande correspondência entre grafia e pronúncia. A grafia do português já não é tão exata, especialmente do português brasileiro, com suas influências européias, africanas e ameríndias. Este artigo identifica os fonemas mais difíceis para o cantor estrangeiro, dando atenção especial às vogais nasais, ditongos, e certas consoantes problemáticas. Estas questões são exemplificadas nas canções *Canção do Amor* e *Melodia Sentimental*, ambas da trilha sonora do filme *Green Mansions*.

Palavras-chave: Dicção do português brasileiro; Canções de Villa-Lobos.

The American singer, who is often familiar and usually quite adept at approaching texts in Spanish, French and Italian, faces particular diction challenges when attempting to sing the repertoire in the relatively unfamiliar Brazilian Portuguese used in the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos. For most Americans there is a generalized tendency to approach Brazilian Portuguese diction using as reference the idiomatic “feel” and sounds of

Spanish. This method can be helpful in some respects, but lacks breadth, subtlety, and accuracy. In Spanish there is a remarkable correspondence between spelling and pronunciation, so that what one sees written on the page is basically a precise representation of the words one will speak or sing. The written form of Portuguese does not communicate the sounds of the language with that same precision; especially Brazilian Portuguese, which has been influenced by European languages, African dialects and the languages of native tribes. Brazilian Portuguese requires the use of nasality along with vowels and consonants pronounced in a way which is closer to classic Italian and French than to Spanish. Therefore, the practice of applying Spanish diction to Portuguese leads invariably to “orthographic singing,” a term coined by the Brazilian musicologist Mário de Andrade, meaning that the singer is pronouncing the letters instead of the actual sounds.¹

The absence of good quality editions and proper IPA transcriptions of the Villa-Lobos repertoire compounds the problem, and even the most beautifully sung modern recordings of hallmark works such as the *Bachiana Brasileira no. 5* fall short of an ideal approach to precise diction. Some of these egregious diction issues are addressed here in a closer look at two well known works of Villa-Lobos: *Canção do Amor* and *Melodia Sentimental*, songs which are part of the original score of the movie *Green Mansions*.

CANÇÃO DE AMOR

Sonhar na tarde azul
Do teu amor ausente
Suportar a dor cruel
Com esta mágoa crescente
O tempo em mim agrava
O meu tormento, amor!

Tão longe assim de ti
Vencida pela dor
Na triste solidão
Procuo ainda te encontrar
Amor, meu amor!

SONG OF LOVE

Dreaming in the blue afternoon
absent from your love
bearing the cruel pain
with this growing sorrow
time intensifies in me
My torment, beloved!

So far away from you
overcome by suffering
in sad loneliness
I still seek to find you
Love, my beloved!

Tão bom é saber calar
E deixar-se vencer pela realidade.
Vivo triste a soluçar--
Quando, quando virás enfim?

It is better to keep silent
and give in to reality.
I am sad and sobbing--
When, when will you finally return?

Sinto o ardor dos beijos teus
em mim.
Ah! Qualquer pequeno sinal
E fremente surpresa
Vem me amargar.

I feel the passion of your kisses
in me.
Ah! The slightest start
and trembling surprise
cause me grieving.

Tão doce aquela hora
Em que de amor sonhei
Infeliz, a sós, agora
Apaixonada fiquei
Sentindo fremente
O teu reclamo, amor.

So sweet that moment
where I dreamt of love;
I am alone now with my sorrow,
mired in obsession,
feeling the quivering urgency
of your beckoning, my love!

Tão longe assim de ti
Ausente ao teu calor
Meu pobre coração
Anseia sempre a suplicar
Amor, meu amor!²

So far from you,
deprived of your warmth,
my poor heart
always yearns, imploring for
Love, oh my love!³

MELODIA SENTIMENTAL

SENTIMENTAL MELODY

Acorda, vem ver a lua
Que dorme na noite escura,
Que fulge tão bela e branca
Derramando doçura
Clara chama silente
Ardendo o meu sonhar

Awake, come behold the moon
that sleeps in the dark night,
that shines so beautifully and white,
overflowing with sweetness,
a bright silent blaze,
inflaming my dreams.

As asas da noite que surgem
E correm no espaço profundo

The wings of the enveloping night
soar through deep space;

Ó doce amada, desperta
Vem dar teu calor ao luar.

Oh, awake sweet beloved
ome, lend your warmth to the
moonlight.

Quisera saber-te minha
Na hora serena e calma
A sombra confia ao vento
O limite da espera
Quando dentro da noite
Reclama o teu amor.

I wished to know you were mine
In a moment serene and calm
the shadow confides to the wind
the end to the time of waiting
when in the night
your love is reclaimed.

Acorda, vem olhar a lua
Que dorme na noite escura,
Querida és linda e meiga,

Sentir meu amor e sonhar.
Ah!⁴

Awake, come look at the moon
that sleeps in the dark night,
My darling, you are beautiful
and gentle,

Feel my love and dream.
Ah!⁵

Singers will often rely on a native speaker to gain insight into proper pronunciation of a foreign language. But American singers will find very few properly trained Brazilian performers who can offer educated guidance in this area. Singers can thus find themselves in danger of acquiring the regional dialect of the Brazilian informant, since Brazil, being the fifth largest country and the fifth most populous country in the world, offers an array of regional accents, some of them verging on a dialectal status. Though the proper pronunciation of regular vowels and consonants has now been described in English by a certain number of sources,⁶ the American singer might find it difficult to find specific phonetic descriptions of the more specific and problematic issues.

The diction challenges for a North American English speaker who wishes to sing in Brazilian Portuguese can be separated into three main categories, namely, the modification of final vowels, modification of consonants, and the nasalization of vowels and diphthongs. These issues are especially challenging when singing because the sounds happen on a continuum of phonation, and in general terms, phonetic transcriptions function only as symbolic representations of how sounds are articulated and

codified. Phonetic symbols can do no more than approximate the actual articulation of the sounds of a particular language, even when those sounds are explained and marked with the most accurate diacritics.

It is interesting to note that the XVI century Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes once called Portuguese “the sweet language”. Obviously, his observation was drawn in comparison to his own native Spanish. Considering that the Brazilian colonization by the Portuguese began in that same century (the official “discovery” date of the country is 1500), Cervantes was most certainly referring to the sonority of the language which travelled to Brazil at that time. Not uncommon in the history of colonized language imposition, the initial language remained frozen in the territories, while a local dialectal version of it started to blossom. Meanwhile the speakers who remained in the European country of origin continued to develop newer phonation patterns. Therefore, modern European Portuguese features a strong rhythmic aspect with frequent modifications of unstressed syllables, through apocopes (the cutting off or loss of one or more letters at the end of a word, such as in the words *figo* and *copo*, which can be pronounced [ˈfiɡ] and [ˈkɔp]) and synopes (the loss of a sound or letter in the interior of a word, such as in the word *menina*, which can be pronounced [mˈni.nɐ]). In contrast, Brazilian Portuguese acquired a more melodic aspect, in which all syllables are pronounced, whether they are stressed or not. Moreover, Portuguese, both in its European and Brazilian dialects, features a general softening and lifting of all unstressed vowels, in clear contrast to the consistent phonetic value of Spanish vowels. Perhaps this softening and the upward phonetic modification of vowels influenced Cervantes to think of Portuguese as “sweet”.

In *Melodia Sentimental* the singer immediately encounters this vowel modification in the very first phrase. Though the reader sees four *a* vowels, two of them are in initial or stressed positions (*a*corda and *a*), being rendered as /a/, while two are in final unstressed positions (*a*cord*a* and *lu**a*), and must be sung as /ɐ/. The next phrase brings another form of vowel modification required by Brazilian Portuguese, namely, the upward transference of unaccented vowels. The final *e* in *dorm**e* and the final *e* in *noit**e* are pronounced as /ɪ/, while the same vowel in *ver* remains /e/. A similar phonetic behavior occurs when the final vowel is “o”, such as in the words *derramand**o* and *ardend**o*, where the proper sound is /ʊ/.⁷

/a/→/ɐ/	/e/→/ɪ/ or /i/	/o/→/u/
acorda [a'kɔr.dɐ]	dorme ['dɔr.mi]	acorda [de.xã'mã.du]
lua ['lu.ɐ]	noite ['no:j.tʃɪ]	ardendo [ar'dẽ.du]

Figura 1: Vowel modification.

The modification of consonants in Brazilian Portuguese is perhaps the most immediate noticeable characteristic of the spoken language. While European Portuguese assigns only one phonetic value for the “l”, in Brazil that letter can also become a semi-vowel /w/, whenever it is found in the final position or followed by another consonant. Thus, the correct pronunciation of the country’s name is [bra'zi:w]. In the third line of *Melodia Sentimental* the word *fulge* follows the same rule, rendering the ‘l’ as /w/: ['fu:w.ʒɪ]. Another peculiar consonant modification is the addition of an alveolar-palatal fricative element to *d* and *t*, whenever these consonants precede a /i/ or /ɪ/. The singer must also note that often the /ɪ/ is written as *e*. The word *noite* must be sung then with /tʃ/, instead of /t/: ['no:j.tʃɪ].

/l/→/w/	/d/→/dʒ/	/t/→/tʃ/
fulge ['fu:w.ʒɪ]	tarde ['tar.dʒɪ]	noite ['no:j.tʃɪ]
azul [a'zu:w]	de ['dʒɪ]	silente [si'lẽ.tʃɪ]
cruel [kru'ɛ:w]	realidade [xe.a.li'da.dʒɪ]	limite [li'mi.tʃɪ]

Figura 2: Consonant modification.

Also in the first phrase of this song the singer faces the challenges of Brazilian nasal vowels. Unlike the French nasal sounds, Brazilian Portuguese nasalization involves the addition of a nasalized semivowel to the basic vowel, creating an off-glide diphthong at the end of the phonation. Thus, the word *vem* requires the nasalization of ‘e’ and the addition of an unstressed nasalized closed frontal semivocoid, rendering the phonetic transcription as ['vẽ: ʝ].⁸ This particular aspect of nasalization does not apply, however, if the nasalized vowel is followed by a /t/, /d/, /p/, or /s/ as in the word *ardendo*. In this case, the nasalized vowel is prolonged because it is the stressed syllable, but there is no off-glide addition: [ar'dẽ.du]. Though some regional dialects add the off-glide sound in all circumstances, in lyric diction that addition should be reserved for cases where the nasalized vowel is followed by consonants other than /t/, /d/, /p/, or /s/.⁹ This rule also applies when the nasalized vowel is an initial or medial ‘a’ as in the word

branca: ['brã.kɐ]. The same applies to the nasalized 'a' in *derramando* and in *chama*.¹⁰

final + j̃ vem ['vẽ:j̃] surgem ['sur.ʒẽ:j̃]	final + j enfim [ẽ:j̃'fi]	medial ø ardendo [ar'dẽ.du] vencer [vẽ'ser] branca ['brã.kɐ] derramando [de.xa'mã.du]
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Figura 3: Nasalization.

It is also important to notice that, once again, unlike the nasalization of French vowels, the placement in the mouth of Portuguese vowels when nasalized is exactly where they would be when not nasalized.¹¹ In French the pronunciation of nasals involves a shift in mouth position, either by making a smaller and more acute focus with the lips in /õ/, by focusing and lengthening the tone by using the lips and dropping the jaw in /ã/ and /œ/, or by broadening the sound by making a wider space inside the mouth in /ẽ/. In Brazilian Portuguese the nasalized vowel retains the original position: the only difference is the lowering of the soft palate, causing phonation to enter the nasal cavity. Thus, in a word such as *minha* ['mĩ.nɐ], the first vowel, receiving the nasalization by proximity with the consonant *n* must sound as a pure nasalized [ĩ], an occurrence not found in French.

Portuguese vim ['vĩ] vinte ['vi.tʃi] minha ['mĩ.nɐ]	French vin ['vẽ] vingt ['vẽt]
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Figura 4: Portuguese nasals vs. French nasals.

It is a known linguistic phenomenon that any speaker will carry to a second language the phonetic behaviors of their native tongue, often without any auditory consciousness of the approximations and deformations inflicted on the target language. Any brave American singer who ventures into the Villa Lobos song repertoire should be made aware of some common traps for the American English speaker when singing in Brazilian Portuguese. These challenges can be grouped into two main categories: the first being mistakes relating to approximations of phonemes be-

tween the two languages and the second being mistakes born of misreading the orthography of a song's text.

The North American singer almost never associates the letter *i* with the phoneme /ɪ/. Therefore the most common mistake is the substitution of /ɪ/, which is prevalent in English, for the Portuguese /i/. In *Canção do Amor*, singers must be careful to retain a pure /i/ vowel in the words *t*í*, *vencída*, *tríste*, *solídão*, *realídade*, *vívo*, *virías*, *siníal*, and all the other words which feature an /i/ whether stressed or not. Perhaps because the English speaker rarely encounters the sound /i/ written in English with the letter *i*, the natural tendency is to pronounce it as the much lower /ɪ/ sound, as in ['trɪs.tʃɪ], while the proper pronunciation is ['trɪs.tʃi]. (This is also a common tendency for English speakers when pronouncing Italian.) Another mistake of phonetic approximation is the common addition of off-glides to pure vowels, creating diphthongs out of single sounds. The English speaker often pronounces the letter *o* as a diphthong [ow] and the letter *a* as the diphthong [ej]. In Portuguese those diphthongs are always spelled with two vowels, as in *beijos* ['be:j.ʒus] and *louca* ['lo:w.kɐ]. The American singer must carefully refrain from creating such diphthongs when faced with only pure vowels, as in *soluçar* [so.lu'sar] and *agrava* [a'gra.vɐ]. This is another case where comparison to the Italian language is appropriate, because in both Italian and Portuguese diphthongs are never represented with only a single vowel.*

/i/ NOT /ɪ/	/o/ NOT /ow/	/a/ NOT /ej/
triste ['trɪs.tʃɪ]	soluçar [so.lu'sar]	reclamo [de.xã'mã.du]
vencida [vẽ'si.dɐ]	procuro [pro'ku.ru]	agrava [a'gra.vɐ]

Figura 5: Approximation mistakes - Vowels.

Most English words ending in a single *s* preceded by a vowel or a voiced consonant realize that sound as /z/, the exception being the common words *yes* and *this*, or a few other words which come from Latin or Greek, such as *genus*, *atlas*, and *focus*. Because there is no absolute rule for this aspect of spoken English, North American singers will often choose the most common practice they experience and pronounce a final *s* as a voiced /z/. This is never the case in Portuguese, because the final *s* is never voiced unless it is followed by a word starting with a vowel. In that case, like in French

(in which the final *s* of a word is usually silent); when the final *s* elides with the next vowel it becomes a voiced fricative /z/. The singer of *Canção do Amor* must therefore be careful to keep the voiceless fricatives in *beijos* [ˈbe:j.ʒus] and *teus* [ˈte:ws], while voicing the *s* in *virás enfim* [viˈra.zẽ:ʒiˈfi].

/s/ NOT /z/	/s/→/z/
dos [ˈdus]	virás enfim [viˈra.zẽ:ʒiˈfi]
beijos [be:jˈʒus]	teus em [te:wˈzẽ:ʒi]

Figura 6: Approximation mistakes - Consonants.

The double consonants found in Portuguese can be another source of confusion for the North American singer. Perhaps the most misleading is the cluster *ch*, because it is a common occurrence in English and in Italian. However, in Portuguese these letters are never pronounced as the English /tʃ/ or the Italian /k/; the correct sound is always a simple /ʃ/, as in *chama* [ˈʃã.mə]. Note that in Spanish this cluster is also pronounced as in English^{xii}, reinforcing the earlier argument that the singer must refrain from applying Spanish diction rules to Portuguese.

The clusters *nh* and *lh* present a different challenge. Though there are no equivalents in English for these sounds, there are a few approximations which can cause the singer to fail in producing an authentic pronunciation. In the case of *nh*, as in the word *minha* [ˈmĩ.nɐ], it should be pronounced always as /ɲ/, with no epenthesis (the insertion of an unwritten sound) between this consonant and the following vowel. In this situation the American singer might be tempted to introduce the epenthetical glide /j/ as in the English word *onion* [ˈʌn.jən]. One word of caution about this specific sound is that it is similar but not equal to the Spanish ñ. While the Spanish phoneme is alveolar (produced with the tip of the tongue touching the hard ridge located behind the upper front teeth), the Portuguese *nh* is palatal (with the middle of the tongue touching the hard palate). The awareness of this difference in tongue position will correct any undesired approximations.

In the same manner the *lh* in the word *olhar* [oˈʎar] in *Melodia Sentimental* must always sound as a clean /ʎ/, once again avoiding the epenthetical vowel. The English speaker may try to approximate that phonation to the closest occurrence in their language, which would be in a word such as *million* [ˈmɪl.jən], and that would be a mistake. The tongue must roll directly into the /a/ vowel, with no glide. The best example of that oc-

currence in another situation is the Italian contraction between an article and a noun that begins with a vowel, as in *gl'occhi* [ˈlɔk.ki].

CH /ʃ/ NOT /tʃ/ OR /k/	/e/→/ɨ/ or /i/
chama [ˈʃã.mɐ]	cheiro [ˈʃe:j.ru]
NH /ɲ/ NOT /nj/	/e/→/ɨ/ or /i/
minha [ˈmĩ.ɲɐ]	sonhar [sõˈɲɐɾ]
NH /ɫ/ NOT /lj/	/e/→/ɨ/ or /i/
olhar [oˈɫɐɾ]	colher [koˈɫɐɾ]

Figura 7: Double- Consonants with one sound.

One more spelling that may be misleading for an English speaker is the Portuguese use of nasal consonants to mark nasality of vowels, but with no consonantal value, as is also the case in French. There is no orthographic situation in English where a final nasal consonant has no phonation of its own, serving only as a marker of nasality for the preceding vowel. Thus, words such as *ausente*, *com*, *mim*, and *tormento* (*Canção de Amor*) are frequently deformed by the addition of a nasal consonant non-existent in Portuguese:

<i>Ausente</i> [a:wˈzẽ.tʃɨ]	and not [a:wˈzẽn.tʃɨ]
<i>Com</i> [ˈkõ]	and not [ˈkõm]
<i>Mim</i> [ˈmĩ]	and not [ˈmĩm]
<i>Tormento</i> [torˈmẽ.tu]	and not [torˈmẽɲ.tu] ¹³

Figura 8: Consonants as nasality marks (only).

The development of accurate and fluent pronunciation of Brazilian Portuguese for the North American singer can be an undertaking filled with confusing and contradictory aspects that in some cases do, but in other cases do not relate specifically to pronunciation codes they have learned for other Romance languages such as Italian, Spanish, and French. However, as more Brazilian linguistic scholars emerge to undertake the task of codifying and describing these challenges, North American singers will find more and better resources to assist them. Their reward will be a greater and more profound insight into the vast output of vocal music by Brazilian composers, especially the marvelous works of Villa-Lobos.

Notas

- ¹ Vasco Mariz, *A canção Brasileira- erudita, folclórica e popular* (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Cultura. Serviço de Documentação, 1956), 265
- ² Dora Vasconcellos, *Quatro Canções da Floresta do Amazonas*, ed. Roberto Duarte (Rio de Janeiro: Academia Brasileira de Música-Banco de Partituras de Música Brasileira, 2002), 11.
- ³ Free-poetic translation by the authors of this paper.
- ⁴ Dora Vasconcellos, *Quatro Canções da Floresta do Amazonas*, ed. Roberto Duarte (Rio de Janeiro: Academia Brasileira de Música-Banco de Partituras de Música Brasileira, 2002), 16.
- ⁵ Free-poetic translation by the authors of this paper.
- ⁶ Maria Helena Mateus & Ernesto D'Andrade, *The Phonology of Portuguese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Stela Maria Brandão, "The Brazilian Art Song: a Performance Guide Utilizing Selected Works by Heitor Villa-Lobos" (Doctoral Dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, NY, 1999); Marcos Krieger, "Portuguese Diction in Brazilian Vocal Music," *Journal of Singing* 60, no. 5 (May/June 2004):479-485.
Between the time when this article was written and its present publication, two other related sources appeared in English: Martha Herr, Adriana Kayama, Wladimir Mattos, "Brazilian Portuguese: Norms for Lyric Diction," *Journal of Singing* 65, no. 2 (November/December 2008):195-211, and Marília Álvares, "Diction and Pronunciation of Brazilian Portuguese in Lyric Singing as Applied to Selected Songs of Francisco Mignone" (Doctoral Document, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, NE, 2008). The article by Herr, Kayama, and Mattos is a systematic description of Brazilian Portuguese sounds appropriate for singing, without targeting specific problems faced by the native English speaker. Moreover, the phonetic transcriptions are often arbitrary and inaccurate, exposing a bias towards the "Paulista" accent. The doctoral document by Álvares, which was co-advised by Dr. Krieger, addresses many of these problematic transcriptions, offering a more complete and accurate chart of the Brazilian Portuguese sounds to be used in lyric singing.
- ⁷ Krieger, 480.
- ⁸ This is perhaps one of the most difficult sound clusters of this language. Often the American singer makes the mistake of not nasalizing the off-glide, lifting the soft palate while transitioning between the two sounds (nasalized vowel+ off-glide). Already at the First Brazilian Congress of Theatre Portuguese diction in 1956 a clear directive was made to transcribe this cluster with a tilde over each sound or a tilde large enough to cover both sounds, stressing the fact of a continuous nasality in this situation. The singer should keep the soft palate lower, closing the nasal port, though the tongue moves to form the off-glide. Lília Nunes, *Manual de voz e dicção* (Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Nacional de Teatro, 1978): 158.
- ⁹ Krieger, 481
- ¹⁰ Krieger, 481
- ¹¹ Obviously, the lowering of the soft palate always alters the oral cavity, thus influencing the quality of the vowel. In Portuguese, however, this change is minimal: the position of both the tongue and lips must remain identical to the position for the oral vowel represented by the respective letter. See Thaís Cristófaros Silva, *Fonética e Fonologia do Português* (São Paulo: Editora Contexto, 2001): 91.
- ¹² For example, the word *chica*, which is pronounced [ʃi.ka].
- ¹³ However, the nasal consonant followed by a vowel will always have consonantal value, without influencing the oral aspect of the following vowel, as in the word *canôa* [kã'no.ɐ] and not [kã'nõ.ɐ]. The nasality by approximation to nasal consonants only works retrogressively, i.e. to the vowel preceding the nasal consonant.

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