

Alberto Beriot Nepomuceno (1864-1920)

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the European model of composition was considered the ideal in Brazil. Alberto Nepomuceno's nationalistic philosophy brought him into conflict with the musical establishment there. A century later musical prejudice continues to loom across the conservatory landscape in Brazil. Few of the great pioneer Nepomuceno's works are known, and even fewer are performed.

This study explores Alberto Nepomuceno's life and work as a nationalistic voice, especially focusing on the area of song composition. It is my hope that such an important innovator may find more honor at home and abroad as a result of this research that will seek to address the needs of performers, voice teachers and vocal coaches.

Alberto Nepomuceno's art songs are part of the literature of the Romantic period, and must be studied in that context if they are to be fully understood. The composer should be regarded as a pivotal figure in the history of Brazilian art music because he courageously championed the use of nationalistic material and the vernacular in his own compositions. He also provided leadership in the cultural community of Brazil to provide public concerts of other nationalistic composers such as Heitor Villa-Lobos. The examination of this repertory demonstrates Nepomuceno's deliberate attempts to incorporate national elements in his compositions.

As a resident of Brazil for fourteen years (1975-1989), I had both the privilege of studying with two Brazilian voice teachers and one Frenchman of long-standing residence, and of being active in music circles of Rio de Janeiro. Never was the work of Nepomuceno suggested to me as a possible resource for study literature. It was not until I began to formulate a program for a Master's recital in the United States that I began to examine Brazilian song literature.

Alberto Beriot Nepomuceno was born in Fortaleza, Ceará, a coastal city in the Northeast of Brazil. According to Sérgio Nepomuceno, Alberto Nepomuceno's grandson, the middle name of Beriot was recently discovered to be the original Jewish surname of the family.¹ As *novos cristãos* (new Christians), shortly after their conversion from Judaism the composer's parents emigrated from the Portuguese colony on Madeira Island. The elder Nepomuceno, Victor Augusto, in an attempt to obscure their origins, took the name of Nepomuceno after Saint Nepomuk.

Alberto Nepomuceno's musical studies took him to Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, Paris, Vienna and Rome. While in Vienna in 1891 on extended holiday from the *Academische Meisterschule*, Nepomuceno became a student of Theodor Lechetizky (1830-1915), who had been a student of Czerny. Valborg Bang Hermansen Rendtler (1864-1946), a Norwegian pianist, who had studied with Grieg, and future wife of Nepomuceno, was also a student of Lechetizky at that time.

Following a two-year courtship, Valborg and Alberto married in Cristiania (the former name of Oslo) in July of 1893. This union would prove artistically and personally fecund, for a time. Like Clara Schumann for Robert, Bang became a proponent of Nepomuceno's piano works, premiering his *Folha d'álbum* Nos. 1-6 in Cristiania on February 25, 1892. (This piece would be debuted in Vienna by the couple's piano professor Lechetizky in August of that same year.)

Upon their return to Brazil, Bang would be featured in the concert series established by Nepomuceno, *Os Concertos Populares*. She performed the Grieg *Piano Concerto in A Minor*, Opus 16 (1893), and the Schumann *Piano Concerto*, Opus 54 (1845), in the aforementioned concert series under the baton of her husband. She also gave concerts interpreting Nepomuceno's *Seis valsas humorísticas* (1902) for piano and orchestra. Unlike the Schumann's, the couple's union did not withstand the tumult of an artistic life and they spent the last fourteen years of the composer's life separated.

Alberto Nepomuceno and Valborg Bang had four children. Sigrid Nepomuceno Alvim Corrêa (1896-1985), a daughter and the mother of Sérgio Nepomuceno Alvim Corrêa, was the inspiration for six pieces written especially for her by her father. Born without a right arm, Sigrid was an accomplished pianist, performing not only her father's compositions for left-hand piano but also those of Scriabin, Saint-Saëns, and Count Zichy (a student of Liszt's, also born without a right arm).

On their honeymoon in Bergen, Norway, the newlyweds were guests of Edvard and Nina Grieg. The fiercely Norwegian Grieg offered advice to his fellow composer, the fiercely Brazilian Nepomuceno: write what you know. Grieg knew that the unique "voice" of one who has lived the reality of a culture is the "voice" that will sing with the vigor of confidence, the potency of national pride. This is the dictum that informed the Norwegian's own work, and the cry that began to gather in the heart of Alberto Nepomuceno finally began to find utterance in 1895.

Não tem pátria um povo que não canta em sua língua [A People Who Do Not Sing in Their Language Have No Homeland]

As Grieg mentored Nepomuceno, so Nepomuceno later mentored Villa-Lobos; this is evidenced in the compositional style choice that manifested itself later in Villalobiana as the *Bachiana Brasileiras* 1-5 (1930-1948). Nepomuceno's early compositions are musically remote from any nationalist tradition, whereas the *Bachiana* incorporates rhythmic and melodic elements in addition to subject matter and Portuguese text (in the case of No. 5). Villa-Lobos, however, had the advantage of chronology in succeeding Nepomuceno, the fountainhead of Brazilian nationalism, facilitating Villa-Lobos's genius and ability to successfully blend his own prodigious gifts with the essence of folk themes and raw musical material.

Although several movements in Brazil during this time encouraging the use of Portuguese are documented, most composers including Nepomuceno, still wrote songs with texts in other languages. Italian and German were the favoured idioms. Upon hearing Nepomuceno's early efforts employing Portuguese texts, the critical wrath unleashed in Oscar Guanabara de Souza e Silva (1851-1937) was vicious. As a highly vocal Italophile and Germanophile, the powerful music critic of the *Jornal do Comercio* was incensed, deeming Portuguese an unsingable language.

The fight for the use of Portuguese as texts for classic training would be debilitating and a constant struggle throughout Alberto Nepomuceno's entire career. During his tenure as the Director of the Instituto Nacional de Música, Nepomuceno enforced the rule that songs were to be sung in the vernacular. Nepomuceno was tenacious in his beliefs that to sing in "Brazilian" was not only possible because of the languid flow of words so similar to the liquid flow of French, but also desirable. As a largely oral tradition, "Brazilian" was the only choice

for popular and folk music. But the educated music, the "highbrow" practice of the art, made use of the imposed languages of the European cultures that intellectuals attempted to imitate. The Romantic period provided the first opportunity Brazilian artists truly had to find their voice, the voice of "Brazilianess." The educated were poised and well-prepared, generally by a European education. As poetic texts began to find their way to publishers, the logical consequent was that educated composers began to set these texts.

Nepomuceno staunchly believed in the beauty of the Portuguese language. Fluent in five languages (Portuguese, French, Italian, German and Norwegian), he could have chosen any of the other four, and did so in the early stages of his song composition. Nevertheless his commitment was to Portuguese. He persisted in honoring all things Brazilian worthy of honor. His compositions using the vernacular supported and honored Brazilian poets, most of them acquaintances, many of them personal friends.

Alberto Nepomuceno collected poetry wherever he could find it. This poem first appeared in an 1898 edition of *A Mensageira*, a magazine published from 1897-1900 by and for women. Little is known about Adelina Lopes Vieira, but the publication date of her poetry and the style she employed point to classification as a Parnassian. The poem is in the Petrarchan sonnet form, a form greatly favoured by Parnassian poets in Brazil.

Adelina Amelia Lopes Vieira (b. 1850) "Anoitece" ["Nightfall"]

Véu de tristeza a terra e os céus invade;
De espaço, ave agoureira pia;
O orvalho chora, e, em lenta suavidade,
Badala o sino ao longe, Ave Maria.

A veil of sadness invades heaven and earth
From the air the ominous bird chirps,
The dew weeps, and in slow softness the
Far away the bell tolls *Ave Maria*.

Ave Maria, ess'hora em que à saudade
Da luz, se junta o horror à terra fria,
Tão cheia de mistérios e ansiedade,
Tão repassada de melancolia!

This time (of day) when to the longing for light
Comes also fear to the cold earth,
So full of mysteries and anxieties,
So saturated with melancholy.

Cheguei também da vida a ess'hora triste,
Crepúsculo, em que o sol já não existe,
Em que a luz da ilusão, desaparece.

I also came from life at this sad hour,
Twilight, when the sun exists no more,
In which the light of illusion disappears.

Horas ardente em que o sol fulgural
Horas de amor! de Glória! de ventural
Dial! Por que foges?! Anoitece . . .²

Ardent hours in which the sun dazzles!
Hours of love! Of Glory! Of happiness!
Daylight! Why do you flee?! Night falls. . . .

The poem is little more than a descriptive juxtaposition of two views of nightfall. The poet sets up the reader with an Edgar Allen Poe-like, ominous description of the coming darkness. The bells toll the hour, a bird crows, the poet is anxious, and melancholy. The "Ave Maria" that is mentioned is particular to Roman Catholic countries in South America. The "Ave Maria," a setting of Bach's melody by Charles Gounod, is ritualistically sung at evening mass. In modern Brazil, a recording is played in every place of business or commerce. Thus the reference in the poem adds religious and national colour to the mood of the two quatrains.

It is interesting to note the composer's choice to set this text as he was suffering from a heart ailment that had worsened in 1904 during this particular compositional period.

Nepomuceno was in an experimental phase, looking backward at the Romantic period and forward to Impressionism in Brazil, a movement reaching South America around this time, later than this shift occurred in Europe.

Though tonal, "Anoitece" represents experimentation. Written in b minor, Nepomuceno does not use one b minor chord in root position in the three sections or postlude, blurring the sense of tonic key. The composer uses the Griegian technique of pedal tone. The pedal is mostly the fifth in b minor, and is yet another technique that blurs the listener's tonic sense.

One of the most important contributions made by Alberto Nepomuceno to Brazilian musical life, and the least easy to quantify, was his indefatigable presence on the podium in Rio de Janeiro. The first presentation under the baton of Nepomuceno of a composition by Villa-Lobos with the Orquestra Sinfônica was realized in December of 1917. (The first "official" concert entirely of Villa-Lobos's works had taken place in November of 1915.) This reawakened the howls of Nepomuceno's nemesis Oscar Guanabara. With this concert, Nepomuceno personally lifted Villa-Lobos to prominence. The young Villa-Lobos was introduced to Nepomuceno's publishers, Sampaio Araújo, as the older nationalist passed on the encouragement he had received from Grieg. Villa-Lobos was later to state, "Without Nepomuceno, I would not have written my songs." (*Sem Nepomuceno, eu não teria escrito minhas canções.*)

The year 1908 is a hallmark for another "first" for the controversial Nepomuceno. The guitarist Catulo da Paixão was heard in concert at the Instituto, whipping up the fury of the Director's critics yet once again. Although Villa-Lobos was making sketches and short compositions for the guitar as early as 1900, it is my opinion that the dates of his historically significant *Suite Popular Brasileira* (1908-1912) be seen as a direct result of Nepomuceno's vision. Without Nepomuceno, Villa-Lobos would not have written his songs and perhaps not his compositions for guitar either.

The title "Xacara" or "Ballad" is misleading in the case of this poem. Rather than telling a story, the more common definition of ballad, this poem follows the second definition as "a popular love song." The poem is in the form of a *ballade provençal*.

Orlando Teixeira (1874-1901) "Xacara" ["Ballad"]

Dona Alva, minha senhora,
Que tanto amor inspiraes
Hei de querer-vos embora,
Dona Alva não me queiraes;
Pois o querer-vos agora
Eu prefiro a tudo o mais,
Dona Alva, minha senhora
Que tanto amor inspiraes.

Madam Alva, my lady,
How much love you inspire
I shall desire you even though
Madam Alva, you should not want me
For to desire you now
I prefer above all else
Madam Alva, my lady
How much love you inspire.

Dona Alva, minha senhora,
Dona de risos fataes,
Alegre, garrula, mora
Como um bando de zagaes
Nos vossos olhos a Aurora;
E em trevas me mergulhaes,

Madam Alva, my lady,
Yours are lethal smiles.
Daybreak lives in your eyes,
Happy and garrulous
Like a group of herdsmen;
You plunge me

Dona Alva, minha senhora,
Dona de risos fataes.

Madam Alva, my lady,
Yours are lethal smiles.

Dona Alva, minha senhora,
Senhora de olhos mortaes
Tanto esta alma vos adora,
Tanto me desadoraes . .
Sejal Este amor não descora
Muito embora o maldigaes,
Dona Alva, minha senhora,
Senhora de olhos mortaes!

Madam Alva, my lady,
Lady of looks that can kill.
How this soul adores you
Is matched only by your disdain.
Let it be! This love does not fade
Even though accursed by you,
Madam Alva, my lady,
Lady of looks that can kill.

The poet is addressing the unrequited love that he suffers. The title with which he addresses Dona Alva would suggest that she is older than he, and possibly married. (*Dona* is a term of respect reserved for ladies of elevated class and age. *Minha senhora* signifies that she is most likely married.) The first stanza addresses the poet's intense desire inspired by the mere presence of his beloved. Stanza two describes the wild happiness she elicits with her laughter. He then introduces those beautiful eyes into the equation of stanza two. They are "daybreak eyes" that invite the poet to simply "dive in." Stanza three expresses little hope that this love will ever be anything but unrequited.

As a Symbolist poet of little note, Orlando Teixeira left only one publication of his poetry, *Magnificat* (1901), published in Rio de Janeiro. The poet was likely a part of Nepomuceno's circle of artistic friends; he set Teixeira's poem even before it had been published. Teixeira was from the southern part of Brazil, born in São João da Boa Vista, São Paulo.

Imitating the strumming of a guitar, Nepomuceno sets up an ostinato accompaniment that he maintains throughout the song. The piano and vocal lines are in 2/4. The use of a triplet figure on the downbeat of every measure that returns to simple duple on the second beat gives the syncopated effect of a lazy habanera. The vocal line often contains a triplet on the second beat, creating a soft swinging feeling to the union. For Vasco Mariz this song contains important examples of nationalist elements. I quote:

In *Xácara* Nepomuceno has a grand moment. This is a provocative song from the remote interior of Brazil [in the style of], with an attractive counterpoint of the guitar as accompaniment. It possesses a melodic line, Brazilian rhythm and represents for many the best example of its type by this author [composer]. (Mariz, 1977, p. 38)

Nepomuceno consistently pushed the conventional boundaries in an effort to encourage Brazilians to give honor to all things Brazilian. He incorporated the sound of this popular folk instrument in the debut of this song in 1902, six years before the instrument's actual concert debut in 1908.

Nepomuceno's defining theme "Não tem pátria um povo que não canta em sua língua" (A people who do not sing in their language have no homeland) exemplified his fervent patriotism and dedication to "Brazil for Brazilians." Alberto Nepomuceno's strong nationalistic convictions allowed the pairing of poet and composer to be a happy union, not a marriage of convenience.

Of the seventy-one art songs he composed, fifty-one are settings of Portuguese texts by twenty-seven Brazilian authors and one from Portugal.

As Nepomuceno made literary choices for his song settings, honoring his Brazilian contemporaries was a priority. This was affirmed and strengthened in response to the nativistic fervor of Edvard Grieg that had strongly influenced the young composer. Nepomuceno developed a power to create melody that framed the written word, couching it so it would linger in the conscious memory of listeners. He utilized poets from the Romantic school, the Parnassian movement, and Symbolist movement. Nepomuceno had to wage war with his critics over the viability of the Portuguese language in the composition of "serious" songs. He persisted when few offered support. Thus the *canção da camara* (literally, song of the chamber, used to denote art song) found its first master in Alberto Nepomuceno.

Nepomuceno's compositional style ranges from Romantic to Impressionist with experiments in polytonality and modalism. His compositional vocabulary most notably reflects the influences of Edvard Grieg. Although influenced by several musical traditions, Nepomuceno's compositions do not directly imitate any of the song masters of his day. On the contrary, his musical idiom is a synthesis of these styles filtered through the lens of Brazilian folk and popular styles. His role as a Brazilian nationalist mirrored that of Glinka, Pedrell, Smetana, and Grieg in their respective countries. Each song shows the unique qualities of Nepomuceno's ideas.

Juvenal Galeno (1836-1931) "A Jangada"

Minha jangada de vela,
Que vento queres levar?
Tu queres vento de terra,
Ou queres vento do mar?

My raft with a sail,
Which wind do you want to carry you away?
Do you want the wind of the land
Or the wind of the sea?

Aqui no meio das ondas,
Das verdes ondas do mar,
É como que pensativa,
Duvidosa a bordejar!
Minha jangada de vela,
Que vento queres levar?

Here, in the middle of the waves,
The green waves of the sea,
It is as if you, pensive,
Doubtful, begin to zigzag.
My boat with a sail,
Which wind do you want to carry you away?

Saudade tens lá das praias
Queres n'areia encalhar?
Ou no meio do oceano
Apraz-te as ondas sulcar?

Are you longing for the beaches,
Do you want to go aground on the sand?
Or in the middle of the ocean,
Would you like to plow the seas?

Sobre as vagas, como a garça,
Gosto de ver-te adejar,
Ou qual donzela no prado
Resvalando a meditar:

Upon the billows, like the sea heron,
I like to see you flutter
Or as a damsel in the meadow
Resting and meditating

Se a fresca brisa da tarde
A vela vem te oscular,
Estremeces como a noiva
Se vem-lhe o noivo beijar:

If the refreshing afternoon breeze
Comes to kiss your sail,
You quiver like a bride
When the groom kisses her.

Quer sossegada na praia
 Quer nos abismos do mar,
 Tu és, o minha jangada,
 A virgem do meu sonhar:

Whether on the peace on the beach
 Or in the abyss of the sea
 You are, my dear skiff,
 The virgin of my dreams.

A tua vela branquinha
 Acabo de borrifar;
 Já peixe tenho de sobra,
 Vamos á terra aproar:

Your little white sail
 I have finished sprinkling;
 I already have more than enough fish,
 Let's head for shore.

Ai, vamos, que as verdes ondas,
 Fagueiras a te embalar,
 São falsas nestas alturas
 Quais lá na beira do mar:
 Minha jangada de vela,

Let's go, for the green waves,
 Happily working you,
 Are false here
 As they are at the shore.
 My boat with a sail

É tempo de repousar!

It's time to rest!

Juvenal Galeno is known as a pioneer of folklore from the Northeast whose Romantic poetry uses the popular idiom to emphasize the individual. His work deals with the subjects most commonly found in lyric poetry—the joys and sorrows of human existence and what it means to be alive. His work honors the cult of the imagination so prevalent in Romanticism. In Juvenal Galeno's case, however, the imagination of the "low-brow" was courted. Favouring the popular idiom, he exploited the potentialities of the language, remaking and rearranging it without obscuring its meaning. The expertise needed to make a polished art form seem spontaneous, appearing to be a part of an oral tradition, demands a rare gift. Galeno possessed that gift.

A *jangada* is a small sailing vessel, a homemade catamaran, is the fishing boat of the Northeast. The fishermen take these fragile boats miles out to sea. This poem is a depiction of everyday life and working folk through a highly stylized poetic portrait. Galeno uses the simple form of a folk ballad.

As the last song Nepomuceno is known to have composed, the composer gave final instructions for its completion on his deathbed. It is interesting to note that Nepomuceno's last two songs were perhaps his most nationalist expression. In 1918 he wrote an original *modinha* (a lyrical, sentimental type of song), "Conselho." "A Jangada" uses modal harmony in imitation of the folk music from his natal state Ceará. Prominent in the harmonic structure is the lowered seventh and raised fourth, signalling the hypolydian mode.

"A Jangada" is a delightful song; the syncopation of the accompaniment is attractive and affirms the "Brazilianness" of the piece. Even working with Portuguese as a second language, this author's experience confirms Nepomuceno as a composer who composed "singable" music.

Alberto Nepomuceno was drawn to the poetry of his beloved Brazil for several important reasons. First, it was his language. It was the language of the people. It was uniquely the language of Brazil as the original verbal stock of the motherland had been enlarged and invigorated by the admixture of words that the indigenous and African populations had contributed.

Secondly, Nepomuceno valued all things Brazilian that he deemed worthy of recognition and encouragement. His selection of these poets validates them within the nationalistic stream,

some that were neglected by popular favour in their time. Many produced better poetry than those chosen by Nepomuceno.

Alberto Nepomuceno possessed a natural ability for word setting that was augmented by the importance he placed on communication. His wish for the listener to understand the texts may also account for his mostly syllabic settings even when the texts might have suggested a more melismatic treatment. Perhaps these songs have been inaccessible for linguistic reasons, but with the younger generation of singers, authentic performances are made possible through the use of phonetic transcription.

Phonetic Transcriptions of Song Texts

"You are the Sun"³

"Tu És o Sol"

[tu ɛz u sɔl]

You are the sun! From regions ethereal

Tu és o sol! Das re-gi-ões e-the-re-as

[tu ɛz u sɔl daz re ʒi õis etɛrɛ aʃ]

To earth you send your light blessed

À ter-ra en-vi-as tua luz be-né-fi-ca

[a ter ra ɛ) vɪ aʃ tua luz bɛ) nɛ fi ka]

And its warmth

E seu calor

[i sɛʊ kalɔɾ]

Is your love. . .

É seu amor. . .

[ɛ sɛʊ ã mɔɾ]

Its beautiful rays your glances vivd.

Seus lin-dos rai-os teus o-lha-res vi-vi-dos.

[sɛʊz li duʒ rai uf tɛʊs o ʎa riʒ vi vi duʃ]

And your smile

E teu sor-rir

[i tɛʊ sɔɾ riɾ]

It has been a loss to the core repertoire of art song that these compositions of Alberto Nepomuceno have received such limited hearing since their creation. However, to have had to suffer English translation or, worse, translations into Spanish, they were better left alone. There is no longer a linguistic excuse for performers not to sing them. These songs can be heard as they were intended, in the language over which battles with critics were waged, battles that

jeopardized a promising musical career, and most likely resulted in the composer's shortened life. Gratitude to Alberto Bériot Nepomuceno is due.

Musically, these songs demonstrate a creative and unique compositional voice. The tonal, motivic, and melodic vocabulary of Nepomuceno is as independently wealthy as is the Brazilian tropical culture from which it sprang. These songs are worthy as the centerpiece of the canon of Brazilian *canção da camara* and should find an audience beyond the shores of Brazil as well as Latin America. This study has attempted to provide a general overview of Nepomuceno's compositional style, focusing on his approach to the union of music and text, his declared nationalism, and the effects of that philosophy and passion on his work. Brazilians are engaged in the dynamic process of "embracing their homeland" through the attention to more "things Brazilian." The wealth of their musical landscape is as verdant as their lush tropical forests, and gem-filled as the mines for precious stones that still yield shimmering riches. The challenge is to reclaim "Brazil for Brazilians" with the energy, vigor, dedication to quality, and pure patriotic devotion that the life and work of Alberto Bériot Nepomuceno exemplified.

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- A. Nepomuceno: Canções. (1997). A.M. Kieffer, mezzo-soprano; A. Picchi, piano. Akron: CD04.
- Alberto Nepomuceno: Piano Works. (1993). M.I. Guimaraes, piano. Marco Polo Latin American Classics: CD8.223548.
- Brazilian Quartets. (1970). Brazilian String Quartet. Odyssey: 32.160175.
- Canções. (1988). O.M. Schroeter, soprano; L. Fountain, piano. Fundação Nacional de Arte: MMB 88.055.
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- Seis Canções para Soprano e Orquestra. (1976). M.H. Buzelin, soprano; A. Bocchino, conductor. Angel-Odeon: SC 10124.
- Trouvas e Cantares. (n.d.). C. McDavit, soprano; M.T. Madeira, piano. NovoDisc Manaus Industria Fonografica: MCM01.

Endnotes

- ¹: Alberto Nepomuceno's grandson, Sérgio Nepomuceno Alvim Corrêa, has collaborated with me since 1993. His assistance through correspondence and phone interviews has been a tremendous asset to my research and writing.

² All prose translations are by the author in consultation with Joan R. Sutton.

³ These phonetic transcriptions are based on those suggested in James L. Taylor and Priscilla Clark Martin, *Portuguese-English Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).
