

# Ethnic Brazilian Choral Music on Indigenous Themes

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The present work seeks to present a brief panorama of Brazilian choral compositions based on indigenous musical themes and, through a historical and musical analysis of some of these works, to comment on the compositional processes that reflect the artist's and the society's vision of the indigenous music within Brazilian culture. This paper was presented as part of a live presentation in which listening examples were used to augment written material as well as to give the audience an aural example of the music being discussed; as such, the author encourages readers to consult the listing of musical examples used for the presentation at the end of this paper.

## Choral Singing in Brazil

As part of both indigenous and popular Brazilian music, singing in groups is an important social activity and cultural tradition. However, Brazilian choral singing since Colonial times typically models that of the Europeans. As such, stylistic influences carry over from earlier periods of music (i.e., classical style during the Romantic period). Unlike the unmistakable Isocathamia style of South Africa which synthesizes the tradition of the Protestant choirs with African music, or the remarkable Bulgarian sound, Brazilian choral music does not yet have such a strong identity.

From the colonization in the 16th century, the missionaries used music and song as their primary instrument of catechesis. The plainchants in native language and indigenous songs with text of the Gospel were both practiced. Descriptions of these celebratory activities with choirs of Indians participating en masse in the special religious services are present in several reports of this period's correspondence to the court.

Without the presence of written notation (scores) from this time period, we rely on the aforementioned correspondence or reports to indicate that there was a prevalence of sacred music (see Appendix I). In the region of Bahia, the priests began training the first well-educated masters of arts to play instruments and sing in choirs. The repertoire consisted of plain chant, namely Portuguese Renaissance and Medieval music. By the end of the 17th century, there were small music schools for Indian children as well as kappellmeisters in the region's churches.

Recent research performed in the late twentieth-century on the music practised in the main economic centers during the Colonial Period has made some vital contributions. Included are recovered scores (mainly starting from the 18th century) and a significant amount of choral music with some peculiarities (called "Brazilian Baroque Music," but strongly influenced by European models [Haydn and Mozart]).

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a wave of late nationalism (a century after the European Romantic period), marked by the Week of Modern Art, 1922. Aspects of nationalism as reflected in the arts were celebrated; subsequently, a new interest on the part of Brazilian composers to present ethnic manifestations highlighting the contributions of the indigenous culture (native people), the Africans (descendants of slaves), Portuguese settlers (Iberian culture), and European immigrants (see Appendix II) was stimulated. This awakening sparked the production of music attempting to reflect the multifaceted nature of the peoples of Brazil.

At this point, the composers began to look for inspiration in the myths, legends, melodies, and rhythms of the popular cultures, with a predominant influence of the African and European elements. As a consequence of this patriotic "movement," the Canto Orfeônico (choir singing activities at school), was led by Villa Lobos, with the interested support of the State. Performances involving massed choirs of school aged children were conducted.

I would like to argue that this movement resulted in the production of a significant amount of high quality literature. However, as a body of work, this music may not have achieved its own stylistic characteristics. While the music did contain ethnic manifestations (thematic material) as was the compositional goal, it was at times hidden and unrecognizable as such. What is important about this observation is that this body of work does not highlight the ethnic influences present in indigenous music. The presence of the indigenous material in this music is questionable; in spite of this statement, contemporary Brazilian composers of today are writing music based on indigenous musical culture.

### **The Indians and their Music**

The research indicates the non-existence of a uniform type of indigenous music. Each tribe's music (as an aspect of each tribe's culture), with its own languages, tendencies, formulas, and expression, creates a distinguishing pattern, which can be immediately recognized. In spite of each tribe's idiosyncrasies, they share a common foundation. A discussion of this foundation of shared elements will provide the reader with a sense of the meaning of the music in context with the Indian culture.

### **Music, Word, and Movement**

In indigenous music each element acts in concert with the others. Melody, the meaning of the words, and the movement, etc., are all working together; no elements exist in isolation. Along with this idea, these elements do not carry the same meaning when extrapolated out of the group. The rhythm is the connective tissue, but it is not privileged. In my opinion, in contrast with the role of rhythm as paramount in African music, the element of rhythm in indigenous Brazilian music is just the vehicle through which the words and the movement travel. The song reinforces the sense of the word, while the gesture or movement completes the ideas. The music is an integral part of tribal life assuming a social-cultural importance. There are still *acalantos* (lullaby songs) and work songs serving a specific function within the culture. All of the Indian's rituals and celebrations include song and dance.

The analysis of indigenous music requests other parameters to be explained, as the previous paragraph dictates. Western modes of analysis may not provide insight into this unique music and may actually underestimate its worth.

### **Catechesis and *Deculturação* (Process of Assimilation)**

Several historical reports (dating from the arrival of the Portuguese) supply descriptions of the music of the native ones and of the work of the missionaries' catechesis. These descriptions include references to using music as the main way of indoctrinating the native people. When

making use of singing and instruments, the catechist, consciously or not, gave continuation to the Indians traditional practices. But, it is important to note that this was being done for assimilation purposes, not to celebrate the role of these activities in the native's culture.

The first religious missions had the determination of moving the native away from his/her cultural habits, as a way of incorporating him/her into the new community. For example, Bishop Fernandes Sardinha in 1552, was opposed to the continuation of the native songs (and dances), while Nóbrega's P. Manuel proposed substituting sacred songs (Plainchant and *Ladainhas*) for certain "diabolical and lewd" songs of the natives. When implementation was attempted, the missionaries were not satisfied with the results. Later, the bad results obtained with the adults inspired the focus of the indoctrination practices to be shifted to the children. References exist to songs of the church in indigenous language, as well as indigenous songs in Portuguese. The missionaries also made use of dramatic plays based on medieval themes that made use of moralities recognized by the church. Specifically, they made use of Iberian medieval music. The native's intelligence and abilities were not being challenged in the dramas and musical activities they were made to participate in. The native is engaged as an "actor," but never as creator.

This process of catechesis produced polarized results. In some cases, the indoctrination of the natives exterminated countless indigenous communities and cultures. In contrast, the introduction of catechesis did not influence indigenous music nor did it have an effect on its transformation.

### Conclusion: Idealistic Vision of the Indigenous Music

Historical documents contain many contradictory references towards indigenous music. While the missionaries' descriptions of the music and social context contain moral judgements, slanted criticisms, and "fantasy-like" observations, lay persons visiting Brazil (artists, government researchers, etc.) seem to have described the music and context with more authenticity and impartiality. While historical documents describing indigenous music of the 16th and 17th century, and even beyond, contain aesthetic judgements, opinionated descriptions, and varied perspectives, they are all we have. Thus, it is important to have a working knowledge of the source and stance of the author. For example, Helza Cameu has done extensive work on collecting and compiling historical documents dating from the 16th-20th centuries. In my opinion, she provides a neutral presentation of these materials. Her book, *Introdução ao Estudo da Música Indígena Brasileira*, is considered to be a definitive source.

It is important to note that most of the historical references to the music share a common sense of depreciation. Descriptions of the performance context include references to "strange sounds, shout like and out of tune singing, rough, rude, and devil like sounds" as the norm rather than the exception. Musical analysis is equally problematic. The music is treated as monotonous, uninteresting, and poor in its melodic content and construction. Nonexistent harmony, simplistic use (and even understanding) of rhythm, and the overuse of repetition provides the "evidence" for such determinations against the value of the music.

When positive descriptions are given as an exception, they are in relation to what would be considered musical by civilized peoples; thus, musicality is seen as being exclusive to those who live in contrast to the indigenous people.

Perhaps these aesthetic concepts reinforced over time are significant for the understanding of Brazilian choral music centering on indigenous themes. This music reflects an idealized conception of the Indians and their music. Compositions using indigenous thematic material do not seem to take in consideration the disconnect with indigenous music and culture. As a group, these compositions fail to deconstruct idealized representations of the indigenous people. A large gap exists between the two that results in a continued lack of Brazilian choral music that represents the true nature of indigenous music.

A relationship between the nationalistic composers of the 1920s and the mis-appropriation of indigenous material further explains the aforementioned phenomena. Composers wrote "fantasy melodies" over traditional harmonies in an attempt to recreate legends and indigenous myths. The vocal ranges and distribution of voices suggested by the music hint at a European model. Actually, aspects of indigenous music such as a guttural sonority, the vigor of the dances, the music as a ritual of passage, magic, feast, or of lament are hidden and even lost.

In addition, musical analysis was being done from the Western perspective. Not until recently has this changed. Contemporary historians, ethnomusicologists and anthropologists specifically, bring a much more contextualized approach. This provides us with an analysis that is more authentic, appropriate, and celebratory; this approach appreciates rather than depreciates the music. As a result, appropriations of indigenous material in compositions of late reflect this heightened sense of awareness. Many composers involved in this spirit are able to recreate the music with composed themes inside of an imaginary frame that seeks the reproduction of the indigenous musical atmosphere. The importance of this is paramount; the contributions of these composers may have a profound effect on the existing body of Brazilian choral music. As such, these compositions serve as avenues through which a contextual, historical, and musical hypothesis can be drawn regarding the true nature of indigenous music.

## Selection of Recordings

I present some Brazilian interpretations of choral compositions that illustrate several composing procedures on this theme.

### I. Indian I

"Kaapor Indians. "Cantos e pássaros que não morrem

"kākā- Macaco- Soko- Japú-Iraúna

To observe the guttural emission and the ornaments and effects

### II. Indian II

Música dos Índios Kamayurá

CD Música Popular do Norte. Discos Marco Pereira

To observe the rhythmic aspects and sound quality of group singing.

### III. Grupo Beijo. CD Marluí Miranda I-HU Os sons da Terra"

The music is about the ritual of the cassava crop

The group creates again the atmosphere of the ritual exploring the Unison.

The interval of octaves. And search clear and metallic vocal emission. The rhythm suggests a corporal movement

### IV. Moacaretá Sérgio Vasconcelos Correia

CD Desenredo Altivoz Choir

A construction that joins three themes native in an fugue composition..

Nozanina Orekuá

Canide lune

Heura Heura

The melodies are presented in its original shape. The last two songs were scored from the Tupis from Jean Lery in 1585.

In spite of we observe a composition elaborated with dissonant harmonies, the sound result sends us to a festive atmosphere and a modal atmosphere with strong percussive suggestion.

V. Série Xavante Guerra Peixe

CD Música Coral Brasileira Contemporânea

Canto em Canto

The own composer affirms that uses the fantasy for the four themes without any fidelity with authenticity of the melodies.

We observed however that the writing looks for guttural sounds and rhythmic and sound effects that send us to an primitive atmosphere.

VI. Iurupari e o menino

CD Cantos Brasilis, Madrigal de Brasília

(Duas Lendas Ameríndias) Villa Lobos

The text is in Nhen Nhengatu, language used in the colonial times before the Portuguese's statement as language of the national territory. The first text counts the indigenous legend of Iurupari created again with a modal melody of great extension accompanied by harmony of seventh and eleventh interval marked as an ostinato. This piece well built, but it refers the thematic without however to create a characteristic atmosphere. The choirs sing them with traditional voice sound.

VII. Three native songs of Indian Kraós Marcos Leite

CD Coral da Faculdade Ibero Americana

In this case we have three set songs, with simple harmonies and vocal extensions that propitiate the use vocal emissions more guttural colours. The arrangement looks for sounds recreate forests , wild screams and feasts. Vocal Ostinatos in the masculine voices maintains the pulsation in an organic way, while the women sing in canon.

## Appendix I: Historical Reports

- 1551 Letter of Pero Belt correspondent of São Paulo: "Making a diabolical harmony."
- 1555 Azpicuelta Navarro's Priest João on Porto Seguro: "Twisting the mouths and giving Howls of dogs."
- 1555 The Franciscan Monk Andre Thevet: "they seem to wake up the numb courage or to excite them."
- 1557-58 Jean Lery: "To dance and to sing in a such harmonious way, that nobody would say they didn't know music . . . it began by finding them barbarians, ended for appreciating them: "still today when I remember this scene I feel to palpitate the heart."
- 1875 Geographical description of América Portuguesa: "Has good voices, but they only know a tone or tunes that everybody says.
- 1584 Fernão Cardim: "It is a labyrinth or hell to see them and to hear them . . . . They make a harmony that seems music of the hell, but they will act in them with if they went the softest of the world."
- 1587 Gabriel Soares of Souza: "They sing with bearable tone."
- 1767 The Jesuit João Daniel: "There are not doubts that some make it with perfection and with soft and dove harmony."
- 1775 "It's accompanied by bearable screams unpleasant horns"
- 1803 Francisco Xavier Ribeiro of Sampaio in Rio Branco: "A song dismal, a lot of out of tuned To which the assistants corresponded in the same way."

- 1815-17 "The men the songs resemble each other to a disjointed noise, that oscillates between three or four notes, some times arising other times descends and it seems to come more of the fund of the chest. The women sing very low and in an unpleasant less way, that they are not going besides some little notes, unceasingly repeated."
- 1818 Giving monotonous roaring that after all the whole horde repeated in a noise of frightening . . . it could represent as a scene of the hell . . . of a monotonous recitative song that shouted . . . strident whistles . . . the rough women's voices (*esgançadas*) turned a terrible squeal (*guincharia*) . . . not more in the men's simple snore, while the sopranos, squeals the melody, they joined to the abominable yowl.
- 1844 The priest José de Silva Guimarães found "the unpleasant music . . . trumpets that take out sounds without any harmony . . . and its song of an unpleasant tune."
- 1892 Guido Boggiani: "It is not a real song, in fact it approaches of the imitation of screams or roars of animals than of a music any as we understood each other. . . . Chamacos was everybody heard and with the brilliant eyes of intense happiness, they heard it and those screams lowered *dulcíssimos*( sweat) to its heart. . . . Its song can be called true song with certain rhythm knowledge and pitch . . . Nor the music nor the steps revealed some appreciable thing . . . its song was melodious and full of sadness, finer and nice. . . . Some women that sang its *nêrias* (songs) with nasal and strident voice . . . it seems to indicate the song more than a voice. . . . The singers are always men, the women do a type of accompaniment in tenor voice or of soprano."
- 1906 Hermann von Ihering: "They sing and they dance in the same way monotonous."
- 1908 Fritz Krause: "Monotonous, dismal songs. They are melodies of tones it records and prolonged of a wonderful beauty and of a solemn load. . . . The songs *caiapós* seems very beautiful, almost . . . melancholic."
- 1901 Koch Gruenberg in collaboration with the musicologist Erich Hornbostel: "They sang in unison with purity . . . dismal very low intoned song that still more it enhances the sadness of the moment . . . they continue to give sharp screams, crying and spilling tears."
- 1912 Roquete Pinto: "Instead of screams . . . they came singing loud in *melopéia* (recitative). Its music demonstrates a very early elaboration."
- 1914-15 H.H.Manizer: "All of this testifies a very defined scale . . . a such state of things is not I privilege of the civilized ones."
- 1927 Sylvio Froes Abreu: "Tangos and *maxixes* with a lot of grace . . . monotonous indigenous tunes and *plangentes*."
- 1934 Luciano Gallet (musician): "Verifications of primitive character, confirm in the themes musical natives of the old and modern time . . . what comes you isolate them absolutely of our contemporary music."  
On indigenous and Brazilian music: "They are ignored to each other . . . I observed that the musical process of the Indian stands back of the European . . . nontemperate scales. I heard song to several voices."
- 1938 Luiz Heitor: "In Africa as in the whole part there are people that sing without pitch and out of tune instruments."
- 1941 Laurel Fernandes: "Confused and tuneless sounds."
- 1943 Harald Schultz: "Melodies and rhythm are strange.. They sounded as a to gargle deep."
- 1948 Darcy Ribeiro talking about feminine choirs: "They knew how to maintain in perfect synchronization."
- 1963 Terence Turner: Horns represented in the independent dances with relationship to the rhythm and height of the song."

## Appendix II: Nationalism

Wisnick:

The nationalism adopts a platonic solution for the subject of the culture, projecting the hegemony of the learned music, absorbing in the folkloric popular ethos.

The popular-erudite national project, the music of national stamp should absorb the rustic style of the popular.

Mario of Andrade proposes:

To determine and to normalize the permanent ethnic characters of the Brazilian musicality, presents in the folkloric popular music, absent in the artistic music of mere European conversion. The artist should base as documentation and as inspiration in the folklore, losing this its "primitiveness" unable to accomplish a musical product as a whole and the artistic music its irresponsibility with no roots.

The learned composition should inspire itself in the popular sources, stylizing its themes, imitating its forms, incorporating its technique. The artistic music should find a new practical function, the conquest of the national expression, bringing consequences on the form, divided between the constructive development and the characteristic redundancy (ostinatos a lot of times used as caricature).

Wisnick on the national and the popular in the Brazilian culture:

The Modernist nationalism takes the authenticity of those manifestations (unconscious rural, regional and of its community, contained in the folklore) as base of its representation in detriment of the manifestations of the urban and folkloric popular life.

Gilberto Mendes:

The folkloric music, taking as passive repertoire of the artistic music, source of themes and motivations, doesn't act directly on the language of modern music, while the urban popular music, to the opposite, it invests actively on this language, bringing contributions of the most significant for its development.

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