

PROGRAM NOTES

Devouring musical exotism

In 1864, a young Imperial Russian Navy officer was on a training trip around the world when the ship he was on sustained damage in the Southern Atlantic Ocean. The ship was taken to Rio de Janeiro for repairs and as the crew was forced to rest for a few months, they were able to become acquainted with the "Wonderful City," as Rio is known in Brazil. In his memoirs, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) recalls his fascination with the unexpected colors and sounds of the Brazilian landscapes: "The New World, the Southern Hemisphere, a tropical winter in June! Everything was different, not the same as with us in Russia."

For the people from Rio at the time, the exotic event was rather the presence of this lively troop of drunken sailors, singing their strange songs across the streets of the city. Years later, the young Russian man would change careers from military to music, but his romantic attraction to picturesque landscapes and exotic sensuality, acquired during his trip around the world with the Navy, became one of the trademarks of his style, as we can hear in his tone poem *Scheherazade*, written in 1888, based on episodes of *Arabian Nights*. Like any good Russian Romantic composer, Rimsky-Korsakov was *au fait* with his country's ambivalent position as an immense nation influenced by Europe and Asia alike. In his music, he sought to greatly amplify all exotic overtones, incorporating musical elements of traditional popular Russian music and composing works inspired by Arabic or Spanish culture, as is the case here and with his famous *Capriccio espagnol*.

The tale of *Scheherazade* proved to be a suitable subject for a creative foray into Asian-European themes. The initial contraposition and final reconciliation between masculine and feminine elements organize the work's varied episodes. In the first moments, the brass introduce Sultan Shariar's

theme, somewhat rudely, in a martial and incisive manner. A short transition brings in the solo violin and Scheherazade's theme, a long phrase in Dorian mode that conjures up typically Arabic musical elements. At the end of this beautiful and famous theme, a spiraling cadenza dissipates into a sustained note that evokes a sigh of longing, an element that will later frame the various episodes of the four movements.

By retaking the themes in varied manners, Rimsky-Korsakov intended to escape the rigidity of the programmatic form and obtain a purely musical unity: "These given motives thread and spread over all the movements of the suite, alternating and intertwining each with the other. Appearing as they do each time under different illumination, depicting each time different traits and expressing different moods, the self-same given motives and themes correspond each time to different images, actions and pictures," coalescing into what he called "a kaleidoscope of fairy-tale images and designs of oriental character."

Musically, this kaleidoscope takes shape in the oscillations between storm and quiet, love and hate, life and death, symphonic contrasts developed in sequences that progressively grow more intense, with harmonic modulations and lush rhythmical diversity, until the final climax and the lyrical coda, which dissipates all tension and announces the reconciliation that is brought by Scheherazade's amorous theme. The exotic is finally redeemed by the erotic, as Rimsky-Korsakov's music beautifully solves all contradictions.

Years later, another young composer would seek new possibilities for amorous and musical synthesis in the exotic day-to-day life of Rio de Janeiro's streets. Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959), one of the foremost representatives of Brazilian Modernism, would shock his fellow countrymen with his scandalously futuristic yet openly and unmistakably Brazilian musical writing. Historical hindsight allows us to comprehend that the complexity of his vast legacy (a result of a prolixity acclaimed by some as the fruit of tropical

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abundance, but criticized by others as a telltale sign of hurried sloppiness) is the result of an unrelenting quest for new forms of expression that should fill the gaps between Europe and the Americas, the erudite and the popular, the city and the forest, the national and the foreign, the past and the future with surprising melodies, harmonies and rhythms.

As it redefines the meaning of the exotic and systematically shakes up its stubborn oppositions, Villa-Lobos's music ends up anticipating, with its creative syntheses, some of the ideals of the anthropophagic movement proposed in 1928 by poet Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954). Thanks to pianist Arthur Rubinstein's intervention, Villa-Lobos traveled to France in the 1920s and was able to strike a dialogue with the leading figures of the French *avant-garde*. There, he fascinated everyone with his exuberant personality, his exaggerated anecdotes (such as his adventures among the Amazonian indigenous peoples) and, mostly, with his intense and original music, which insisted on treating the very culture of Europe as an exotic source of inspiration. This is how, devouring material and forms from the most diverse origins, Villa-Lobos left us an immense legacy of over one thousand works (many of which are still unpublished), a product of his quest for "a distinct cultural synthesis, with a denser national consciousness." (Raul Bopp)

His first experience with synthesis occurs with the *Chôros* series, however the original polyphony that gives life to the *Chôros* is heard in Villa-Lobos's second moment of "creative synthesis": the series of nine *Bachianas brasileiras*. Composed for diverse groups of instruments and singers, they pay tribute to Johann Sebastian Bach. Attentive to European history and to Brazilian dreams, Villa-Lobos seasons Bach with elements of Indigenous, traditional, and popular music collected during his purported ethnographic fieldwork in the most remote parts of Brazil.

The fourth of the *Bachianas brasileiras*, originally written for piano and subsequently orchestrated

by Villa-Lobos himself, is marked by the use of symmetrical sequences of motifs and themes (a technique frequently seen in Bach), which are successively repeated in diverse (and sometimes unexpected) tonal regions. The first of four movements, "Prelude" quotes the theme from *The Musical Offering*, a challenge King Frederick II posed to Bach upon a visit of the composer to his son Carl Phillip Emmanuel, who was a musician at the Berlin Court. The offering (also "sacrifice," in its original German double-meaning) is melancholically depicted, suggesting the feelings of uncertainty towards religious redemption in the Brazilian modernist composer with secular Baroque tendencies. The central movements "Coral: Canto do Sertão" [Choral (Song of the Backlands)] and "Ária: Cantiga" [Aria (Song)] submit traditional melodies to complex harmonies and insistent rhythms, as if the obstinate repetition of certain motifs sought to break the shackles of nostalgia and longing for times past. The movement flows into lively "Dança" [Dance], inspired by a Brazilian Northeastern dance, "miudinho," stylized in a counterpoint of complex rhythms and simple melodies. In the orchestral version, the wealth of timbres provides the necessary suspense for a grand finale which seems to affirm: Bach has arrived in the Tropics.

Another important example of synthesis in Villa-Lobos's vast production are his diverse concertos, such as those for guitar, piano, and cello, often commissioned by his soloist friends. The peculiar *Concerto for Harmonica* was composed in the United States, where Villa-Lobos spent long periods towards the end of his life. His works were well received, "modern" and "picturesque" as they were, in tune with esthetical and political yearnings post-Second World War across the Americas. Commissioned by American virtuoso John Sebastian and part of his legacy to expand the harmonica's repertoire, Villa-Lobos's *Concerto for Harmonica*, in three movements, illustrates Villa-Lobos's creative habits. Embracing the

expressive possibilities of the accordion and the bandoneon's quaint yet powerful relative, the concerto features repeated sequences of simple motifs, eloquent melodies, rhythmical counterpoints and extremely virtuosic passages. The final cadenza is particularly breathtaking, as it draws upon the material developed in the first movement to display the innumerable harmonic possibilities after which the instrument is named.

A lively synthesis of its country and its time, Villa-Lobos's work managed to overcome the supposed limits of exoticism, demonstrating that Brazilian culture's anthropophagic instinct was indeed able to merrily devour the Other (foreign, European, African, Indigenous) in a critical and original fashion, with the ironic zest only tropical Amazonian creativity could provide.

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JOSÉ STANECK, HARMONICA

■ Called "the David Oistrakh of the harmonica" by French critic Olivier Bellamy and compared to Andrés Segovia and Mstislav Rostropovich by Brazilian critic Luiz Paulo Horta, José Stanek fuses elements of concert and popular music into a unique style and remarkable sonority. Widely known not only as a soloist but also as a producer and musicologist, he has recorded 15 albums, including Villa-Lobos's *Concerto for Harmonica and Orchestra* with the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, under the guidance of Giancarlo Guerrero (Naxos, 2019). Stanek is also active in several social projects, using his harmonica as an instrument of social transformation.



credit: Ramiro Pérez