

The (almost) unknown Villa-Lobos

Analysis of his musical oeuvre, particularly the symphonies, reveals the Brazilian composer's complex creative process

Christina Queiroz | PUBLISHED IN MAY 2018

With a catalog of hundreds of works, including symphonic poems, concertos for various instruments, and ballets, the composer and conductor Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959) achieved critical acclaim for pieces that showcased elements of national identity, including Afro-Brazilian rhythms and allusions to indigenous cultures. However, a new aspect of the Rio composer's production, which also included 11 symphonies, 3 operas, and 18 string quartets, is beginning to be better appreciated, and it involves exactly those works in which these Brazilian elements do not prevail, as the results of two recent research projects show.

The first of these, *Villa-Lobos, um compêndio – Novos desafios interpretativos* (Villa-Lobos, a compendium: New interpretive challenges; UFPR Publishing House, 2017), a book of essays by several researchers, reveals the complexity of the artist's compositional processes. The second project, the restoration and complete recording of his symphonies by the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra (OSESP), puts into circulation a set of his works that had almost been forgotten. "Villa-Lobos created his works from a complex process that combined elements of Brazilian popular music with the European musical tradition," explains Paulo de Tarso Salles, a professor in the Department of Music at the School of Communication and Arts of the

The symphonic scores contained errors that compromised their performance



VILLA-LOBOS MUSEUM

- Symphonia - (I)

H. Villa-Lobos (Op. 112)
Rio, 1946

(I = Tempo)

Mai Moderato

1^o Solo
Flauti
2^o Solo

Solo

Solo

Solo

Mai Moderato

p

pp

f

f > p

f > p

Errors in scores are not exclusive to Villa-Lobos. Mozart and Beethoven, for example, have also had their manuscripts revised

University of São Paulo (ECA-USP) and one of the book's editors.

This image differs from the accepted critical view, according to which the artist composed without technique or rigor, and the vision held in the popular imagination, of the purely intuitive composer. Such viewpoints appear, for example, in the documentary *Indio de casaca* (The Indian in a tailcoat), produced by the Manchete TV in 1987 and directed by journalist Roberto Feith. The film contains an account by Antônio Carlos Jobim (1927–1994), who tells of his encounters with Villa-Lobos, during which the composer would compose huge scores while smoking a cigar and listening to symphonies with the TV on and a soprano and a pianist rehearsing in the living room of his small apartment. Jobim recalls that, even in this chaotic environment, it was possible to observe Villa-Lobos's obliviousness to it all during his creative process. At one point, the narrator of the documentary says that Villa-Lobos was a genius when he composed intuitively, but when he was guided by reason, his music sounded erratic. "Villa-Lobos himself collaborated in propagating this idea of the composer who is driven by intuition to create," says musicologist Manoel Aranha Corrêa do Lago, a member of the Brazilian Academy of Music (ABM). The book challenges this idea by showing the sophistication of his creative process.

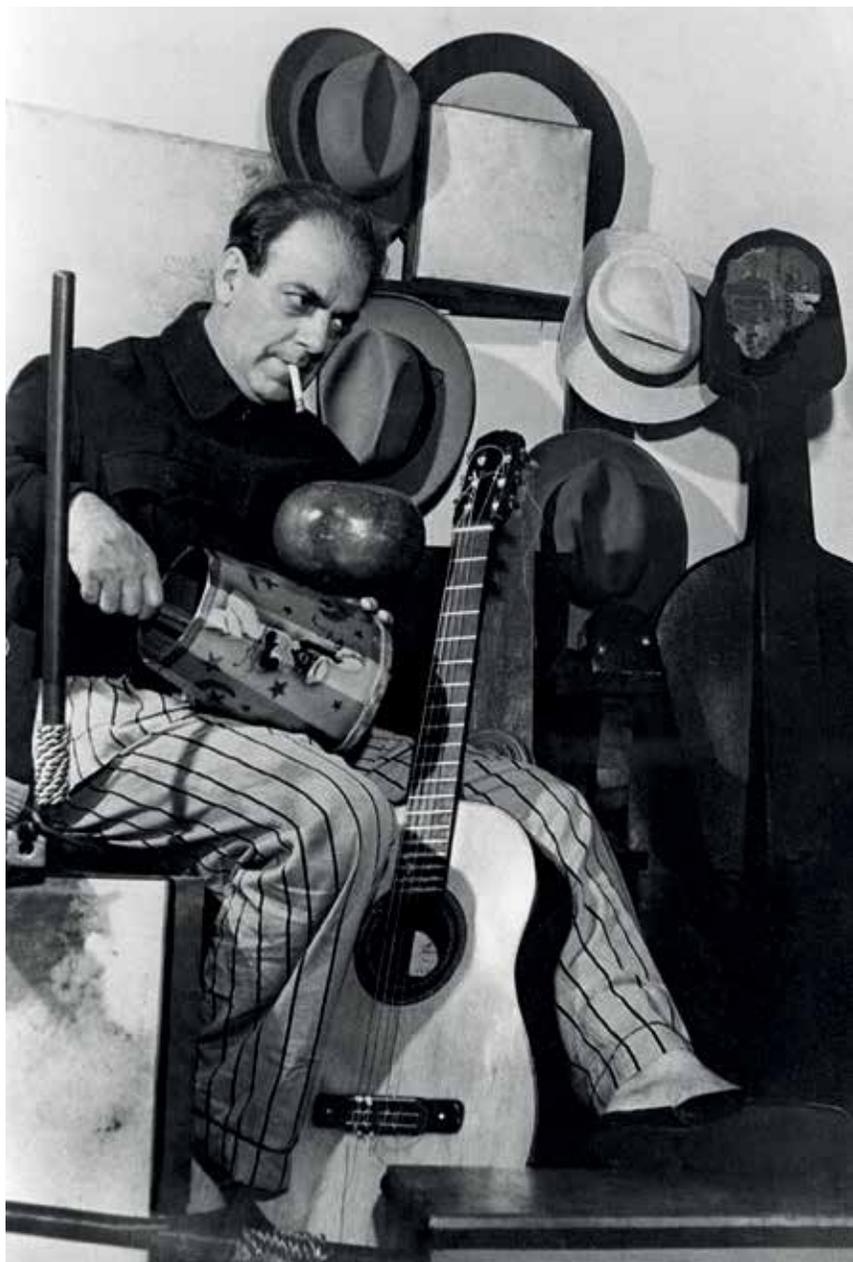
Nahim Marun, a pianist and professor at São Paulo State University Arts Institute (IA-UNESP), São Paulo campus, notes that works such as the series of nine *Bachianas Brasileiras* and the fourteen *Choros* are frequently played in concert halls. "Villa-Lobos was one of the most active composers of the twentieth century, but he became known for only a small fraction of his productive output," he says. This fraction of well-known pieces includes those in which the Brazilian influence is evident, while the repertoire associated with the European tradition, such as his symphonies and string quartets, is less recognized. "Villa-Lobos's work on these compositions was seen as a paradox in his creative career, as something he stubbornly insisted on doing despite his 'precarious' technical training. He was regarded as a composer whose intention was to exalt the national identity," explains Salles, from USP. The researcher is finalizing a book to be published in the second semester, in which he analyzes the artist's compositional process in his quartets: "I identified that he composed by establishing a dialogue between elements of the sonata form and Brazilian sonorities."

Salles explains that part of the idea that Villa-Lobos had no technical background comes from the fact that he did not complete his formal studies. Other Brazilian composers, such as Carlos Gomes (1836–1896), were able to carry out studies in Europe. Villa-Lobos's participation in *rodas de choro* (jam sessions for playing *choro*, a Brazilian instrumental music genre) in Rio de Janeiro helped to reinforce this idea. "However, as an autodidact, he studied the scores of European composers in depth, such as those of Claude Debussy [French, 1862–1918] and Igor Stravinsky [Russian, 1882–1971], while he lived in a universe of popular music, playing not only at the *rodas de choro* but also with *seresteiros* [groups playing *serestas*—Brazilian serenades]," he observes. For Salles, the composer's experience with musicians who played *choros* and *serestas* was part of his learning process and was incorporated into his compositional methods, combining with his knowledge of European classical music. One of the elements that provides evidence for the technical precision that went into his compositions is the concept



Score manuscript excerpts from the symphonies (above and below) and the new score (in the background), after editing





Villa-Lobos in Paris: unusual instruments appear in his compositions

lished in the book *Villa-Lobos, um compêndio*. In his article, Waizbort dialogues with the theoretical framework of the German philosopher and sociologist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). He goes on to observe that some indigenous elements used by Villa-Lobos in his music stemmed from his contact with recordings of the melodies and songs of the Pareci and Nambiquara natives from the Serra do Norte (northern range) region. The recordings were collected by Edgar Roquette-Pinto (1884–1954) in one of his expeditions with Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, known as Marshal Rondon (1865–1958). The material is archived at the National Museum and is, in Waizbort’s estimation, somewhat worn out by the countless times Villa-Lobos listened to it. The composer incorporated not only the indigenous music into his works but also the technical defects heard in the recordings: “Thus, in his compositions it’s not exactly the indigenous music that’s present, but something created using it as a starting point. Villa-Lobos brought the performance of the machine itself into his music.” With the development of postgraduate programs in music and musicology in Brazil since the mid-1980s, musicological study has expanded, and Villa-Lobos has emerged as a special subject for research, which has come to reveal previously unknown aspects of his career and his works.

RESTORING THE SYMPHONIES

The creation of quartets and symphonies is considered fundamental to achieving a serious reputation as a composer. In general, all original scores, from the simplest to the most complex, need to be proof-read by someone other than the author. “Throughout music history, it’s common for the scores of even great composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven [1770–1827] or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart [1756–1791] to contain errors, but in the case of the European composers, critically revised editions have already been published,” notes Marun, from UNESP. With symphonies, the proofing process requires greater efforts when compared to the restoration of string quartet scores, for example, which involve fewer instruments. “With quartets, it’s

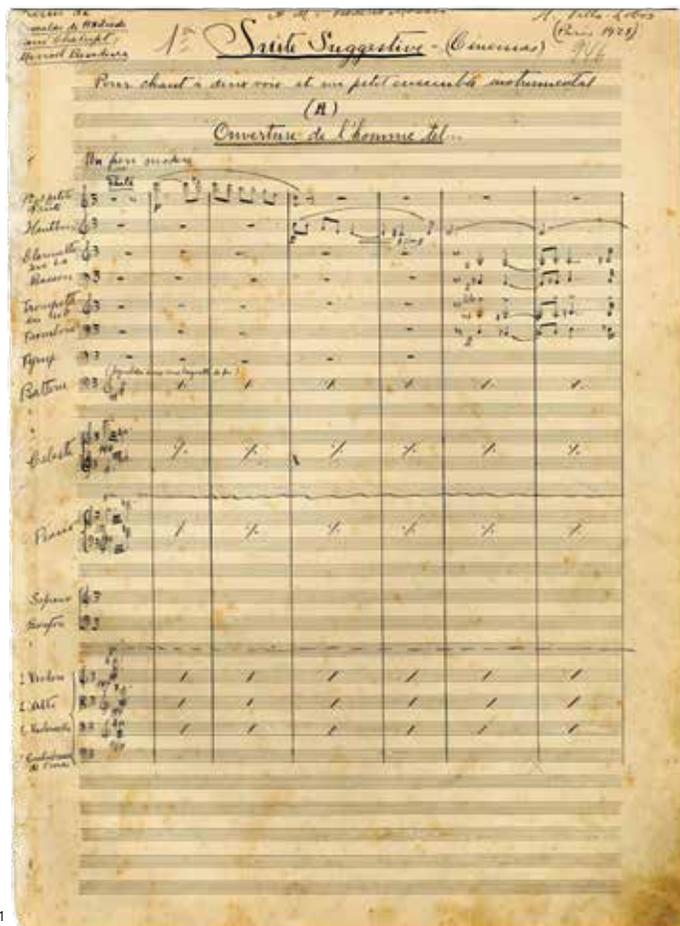
of symmetry, which appears in various works, including the symphonies. “Villa-Lobos was concerned with creating musical structures that were rhythmically and harmonically balanced, in the same way that conservatory-trained European composers were,” explains Salles.

Leopoldo Waizbort, a professor in the Department of Sociology at USP, also argues that Villa-Lobos adopted compositional procedures common to other European artists, including the use of the octatonic scale, frequently employed by Russian composers Igor Stravinsky and Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857).

This procedure involves the creation of eight-note musical scales within

the range of an octave, with the best-known example being the symmetric scale formed by alternating intervals of a whole step and a half step. “This scale was widely used by Villa-Lobos as a constructive element in his compositions, a method that has historically been neglected or diminished in studies of his music,” the researcher says. For Waizbort, a better understanding is needed of how the composer combined and organized the elements of Brazilian and European music in his works.

This understanding was one of the objectives of the study he developed, which gave rise to the article “How, when and why Villa refuted Benjamin,” pub-



Manuscript from *Suite Suggestive*, one of the Brazilian composer's more experimental pieces

first four between 1916 and 1919 and the other seven between 1944 and 1957. "We decided to revive them and make new recordings because they had been rarely performed even in Brazil, and the only complete recording was done by a German orchestra that has little familiarity with the composer's music," says Arthur Nestrovski, OSESP artistic director. He counted hundreds of errors in the symphonies' handwritten scores, which may have been committed by either the composer, who was not in the habit of revising his work, or by those who helped him copy out the notation onto paper. The revision and editing project conducted by OSESP between 2010 and 2017 was based on copies of these hand-written manuscripts.

One of the errors identified involves passages in which several instruments play the same melody. When the score moves to the next page, one of the instruments disappears from the melody. "This means there was a transcription error for that instrument on the part of whoever was copying out the work. Making a parallel example with literature, it's as if a sentence were cut in half," explains Nestrovski.

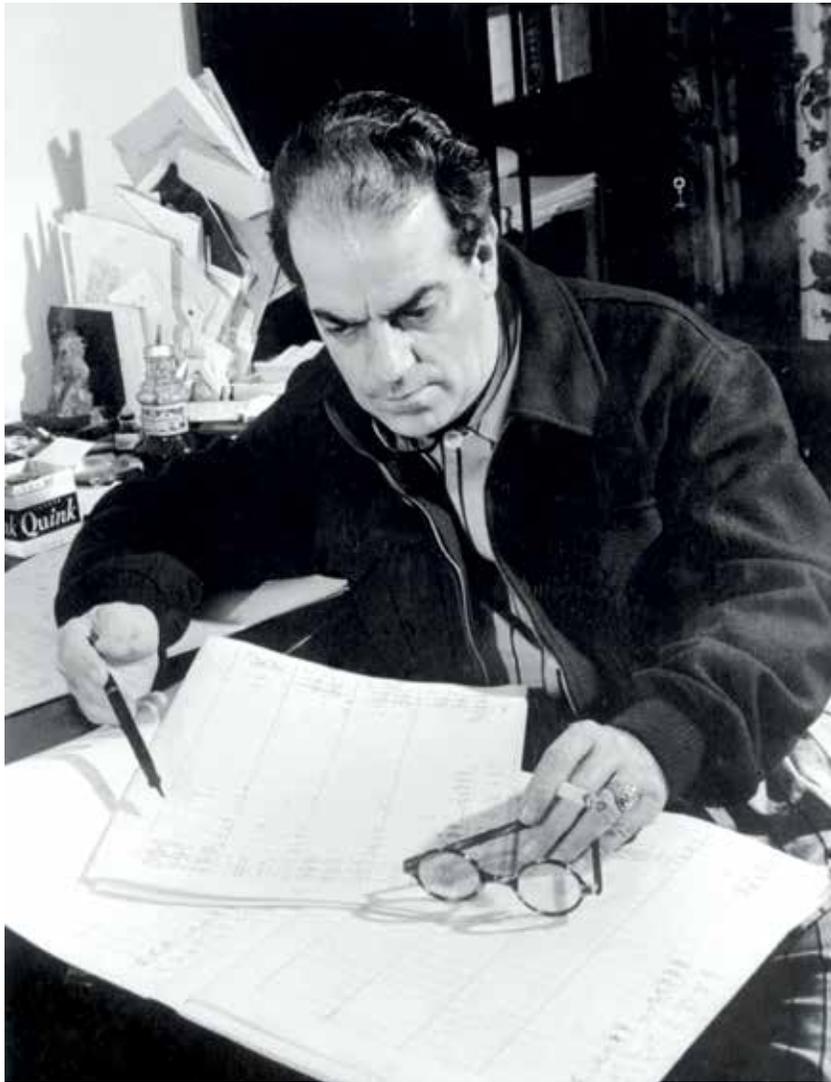
In addition to the corrections made by the conductors, during rehearsals, the musicians further indicated any elements that did not make sense involving harmonies, connections between notes, and melodic continuity. Recordings of the symphonies were only possible after the correction of new errors, such as problems with unity, sonority, and dynamics, were perceived after three or four performances. Analysis of the scores alone did not allow such flaws to be identified.

The edited scores are now available for use on the Brazilian Academy of Music website. Neves, of OSESP, says that French publisher Max Eschig holds the copyrights for some scores — including symphonies 1, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 — until 2029, when they will enter the public domain. However, that publisher only partially revised the manuscripts created by the composer and his last wife, Arminda Neves de Almeida, "Mindinha," who helped him as copyist. The ABM, in Rio de Janeiro, owns the rights to the scores for symphonies 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7. The fifth symphony has been lost.

often possible to correct the principal errors during rehearsals, after analysis and discussion among the musicians. That's unfeasible for symphonies, which include dozens of instrumentalists and, in some pieces, also lyric singers," adds Salles, from USP. Villa-Lobos's eleven symphonies have been rarely performed, not only due to their lack of direct allusions to Brazilian popular music but also because of countless errors in the scores and the large number of instruments required for their performances. Now, they've gained new life with a project coordinated by conductor Isaac Karabtschewsky and the Center for Music Documentation (CDM) at OSESP and directed by conductor Antonio Carlos Neves. With this project, OSESP revised and edited the scores, presented them in concerts, and recorded the entire set of eleven symphonies. Prior to this undertaking, only the Stuttgart Radio Orchestra had recorded the symphonies, from 1997 to 2000, under the direction of Carl Saint Clair.

The symphonies were a long-term project for Villa-Lobos, who wrote the

Villa-Lobos combined elements of Brazilian popular culture with the European classical music tradition



The composer produced hundreds of musical pieces, including symphonies, quartets, operas, songs, and ballet scores

In the view of Flávia Camargo Toni, a professor and researcher at the Brazilian Studies Institute (IEB-USP) and at ECA-USP, the symphonies probably are not as well-known

due to hasty critical judgment. Villa-Lobos was a celebrated composer, and everything he produced was received with great expectations. As soon as they were composed, his works would promptly be performed by an orchestra, and the critics were quick to analyze them. "The symphonies indicate a more evident dialogue with the tradition of European music. They didn't fit the tacit interpretation that Villa-Lobos composed in order to exalt Brazilian culture, so in the immediate evaluation of the critics, they were considered of minor importance in his musical oeuvre," she believes. She recalls that Stravinsky also experienced similar treatment in the second stage of his career, when he strayed from the established aesthetic values that had brought him critical acclaim. "People expected him to compose a new *Rite of Spring*," she notes, mentioning his most famous work.

Toni believes that the symphonies illustrate Villa-Lobos's considerable technical capabilities, in that they were part of a long-term composition project, begun in 1917 and completed only a few years before his death in 1959. "The works have a coherency between them and were created in a coordinated manner," she adds. Salles, from USP, believes that OSESP's work with the symphonies will provide ground for new academic studies and will encourage research on the composer's other lesser-known works, such as the string quartets. "One of Villa-Lobos's most experimental works, the *Suíte Sugestiva* written in 1928, has only one known recording, made by a Finnish orchestra. It is just one of the many forgotten works in his repertoire that deserves to be rediscovered," he concludes. ■

Book

Salles, P. de T. and Dudeque, N. (org.). *Villa-Lobos, um compêndio: Novos desafios interpretativos*. (Villa-Lobos, a compendium: New interpretive challenges). Curitiba: Ed. UFPR, 2017.

To OSESP's Neves, the earliest Villa-Lobos symphonies, dating from 1915 to 1920, denote the influence of French composers such as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and César Franck in their sonic language, and in the way the melodies are developed, "...expressing a certain spirit of the Belle Époque." As an example, he notes, "The second symphony contains a waltz in the second movement." The latter symphonies, written after 1945, contain the composer's own characteristic and mature language, in which he more subtly combines European influences with elements of popular culture, especially in the slow movements. "In the symphonies, the Brazilian identity is not so explicit or thematized. It's a more intellectual music, with less allusions to elements of popular culture," explains Nestrovski.

Corrêa do Lago, of the ABM, agrees that the symphonies were relegated to

the background because they did not contain such evident elements of "Brazilianess," except for the tenth symphony, titled *Ameríndia*. "When Villa-Lobos chose to name his works as quartets or symphonies it meant that they present a universal and not a local character," he stresses. As a result of the project coordinated by OSESP, Lago believes there will be a trend for the symphonies to be performed more frequently around the world. In addition, OSESP's recordings of the symphonies should establish a new standard for other orchestras with which to interpret the works, since they were performed by mostly Brazilian conductors and musicians, who are very familiar not only with the Villa-Lobos repertoire but also with Brazil's musical language, including the rhythms and melodies used in *choros*, *sambas*, and *serestas*.