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RECOGNITION POLITICS: The Black Brazilian Concert Composer's Influence

Robert Morris

I. Prelude

"We're Brazilian! We're all Brazilian!" Upon hearing these words, I could see plainly that the "racial democracy" theory was indeed in place, supported, and believed by many Brazilians — at least those who benefit from its existence.¹ Everything that I learned about the history of Brazil makes it almost inevitable for Brazilians of color to respond to the omnipresence of race.

I wanted to know how Black Brazilian composers trained in Western European styles view themselves. What of their African heritage do they incorporate into their compositions? If they do not use their African heritage or strive to filter it out, why? What and how do they view their impact on world music? What elements should be present in music that the world recognizes as "Brazilian"? What lessons do they have for African-Americans trained in Western European styles? My basic supposition for investigation is this: After all this time (400 years) in Brazil, Blacks would/should have representative musicians, especially composers active in concert art and/or classical music.

Interviewing Brazilian composers who would identify themselves as Black was the cornerstone of my project. Without an affirmative response to this designation, all subsequent discussions regarding cultural ownership of African-derived music in Western European-style compositions by Brazilian composers become moot. It was my hope to use the presence of works by

Black Brazilian composers in “standard repertoire”² as a measure of the recognition of their existence as a significant contributing part in society.

Brazil is larger than the continental United States and is one of the many countries in Latin America that is culturally influenced by African traditions and customs. As a country where approximately 60 percent of the population can trace some African heritage, Brazil cannot easily and readily deny this indelible imprint. Each state in Brazil is different. Therefore it is not possible to study all of Brazil in a short period of time. This was never our goal. Each of the thirteen seminar members had a specific geographic area or concern in mind. My continuing personal interest in and investigation of the music and cultural heritages passed on or lost when Africans were brought to the New World have taken me to Cuba four times. It goes without saying, then, that when considering Brazil, I would spend my time in the acknowledged cultural center of the country, Salvador, Bahia. Outside of Africa, Bahia is special. For no other place in all Brazil has as many Blacks or can boast of the influence of their presence quite like Bahia. Yet, it is not always prudent—even in Bahia—to admit to being Black. The social burden that goes along with such a designation is usually onerous.

In the days prior to my encounters with composers in Salvador, the seminar participants spent a few days at the spacious University of Campinas, where we were involved in probing conversations. These discussions were brought about, perhaps even provoked, by the papers prepared by prominent Brazilian scholars. Invariably, either through their own realization or after being confronted with difficult challenges, these scholars had to concede that racial democracy was not really working in Brazil. Especially, since *class*, the other code word for racism, always underscored that the poorest and most disenfranchised segment of Brazilian society was overwhelmingly Black. Economic inequality, so much the bane of Brazil, was brought to our attention in the presentation by Maria Lucia Caira Gitahy and Francisco Foot Hardman and the ensuing discussion. They write that “[t]he wealthiest 10 percent earn almost 50 percent of the national income, while the poorest 10 percent earn only 0.8 percent. This inequality has grown over time: in the sixties, the income of the richest 10 percent was thirty-four times that of the

poorest 10 percent; in the nineties, it is seventy-eight times greater!"³

Blacks make up the largest portion of Brazilian Atlantic Coast populations, especially in the northeastern regions; they are also among the poorest, least educated, and most often exploited and homeless segments of the total population. Blacks perform the menial tasks, do the work that provides the least amount of satisfaction, and earn incomes commensurate with their lower station in life. In essence, such a group profile is a reminder of the durability of the deep effect of slavery on Brazilian society.

II. Composer Interviews—My Interpretations

Compared to the university campuses at Campinas and São Paulo, Salvador's is poor. Yet it is acknowledged as one of the music leaders among the universities. The Conservatory of Music at the University of Bahia in Salvador does not have an extremely large student body, nor does it have state-of-the-art equipment in all areas. Yet, it has five (or more) composer-teachers on its faculty. In the sixty or so years of its existence, the mission it has defined for itself is to train and produce composers. In Salvador, despite the overwhelming presence of Blacks, the Conservatory of Music has had only one Black on its faculty and his position was, in essence, that of a visiting artist-in-residence.

My study group consisted of five composers on the faculty at the Conservatory of Music. They are all products of the school. Their music is well crafted and much of it is aggressively modern. Old and new musical composition techniques and processes — complicated non-tertian, quartal, and quintal; harmonies, complex formal structures; counterpoint; atonality/multitonicity, aleatory, and twelve-tone procedures; use of tapes and computers; unusual uses of instruments and instrumental colors; and multimedia, among others — are found in their works.⁴ Sometimes, African elements are added, but rarely as an essential part of their works. Often, they merely genuflect to its existence. As with many modern composers anywhere, these musicians have small, limited, almost cultlike audiences. They expressed no desire in their responses to draw more heavily and consciously from the rich trove of music available to

them on a daily basis. After all, it is often remarked, "It is in the culture, in the air everywhere!"

Why the emphasis on Western European musical styles? Why not use the abundant music infused in the culture by the presence of so many persons with African heritage? I was told that one early head professor was sensitive to the music that came from folk traditions and did not prohibit or inhibit his students from tapping those sources. However, later composition faculty moved away from this thinking. One of them in particular, trained in Europe and from the southern part of Brazil, discouraged the use or inclusion of any music or composition procedure that was not in the standard or accepted lexicon of Western European cultural traditions. He was German.

I did not find one composer who admitted to being Black. Two of the composers in my group said that there were mixtures in their family background, with prominent presence of Black ancestors. After listening to them, I recalled that in my family there existed some of the same mixture. Seeing my rich skin tone when I asked them what I would be considered in Brazilian society, invariably their response was a blank stare. One composer's response was, "You have that problem in the United States. Here, in Brazil, we do not!" Because it was not possible to identify a Brazilian composer who would undeniably identify him/herself as Black, it was necessary to reexamine my original proposal. In light of the situation, I had to change my tactics. I decided to probe into Brazilian music history in order to decipher the situation and give meaning to my findings. Consequently, if this discussion raises more questions than it answers, the major part of my objective will have been achieved.

A. Africanity in Bahia

In Bahia, many Africanisms have survived. Each composer said that, of course, some of these Africanisms appear in their music. My question was: Who takes ownership of the African melodies, rhythms, instruments? Usually, a pause and again the response: "It is in the culture, in the air everywhere!" There is no way to deny that some part of that statement is true. Nonetheless, I wondered where were the (Black) composers who could take

ownership and say “This is from my African heritage.” At this point in my probe, without verbalizing, we returned to “We’re Brazilian, we’re all Brazilian!”

This glaring absence of the Black Brazilian concert composer is most puzzling because the first real explorations into art music in Brazil started with the Jesuits teaching Blacks. One of their students, José Mauricio Nuñez-García (1767–1830), became a priest and composer himself and is widely regarded as the father of Brazilian concert/art music. The Jesuits were active in many Latin American countries during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. Part of their activity in early-seventeenth-century Brazil was in Santa Cruz, near Rio, where they established the Conservatorio dos Negros. Art music in Brazil may be said to date from these small organizations formed for the musical instruction of slaves.⁵

History readily provides information on the departure of the Portuguese monarchy in 1808 to escape the impending invasion by Napoleon. Upon their arrival in Brazil, the colony became the United Kingdom of Portugal and Brazil. What may be more difficult to ferret out is that the Black Brazilian Nuñez-García was appointed composer to the court in exile. One would think that a Portuguese musician would have been named to the royal court. Instead, it was Nuñez-García, notwithstanding the African family background on his mother’s side of the family.⁶ He served the Royal Chapel from 1808 to 1821 while King John VI reigned. His list of compositions is impressive, the most important of which is the *Missa de Requeim* (Mass for the Dead) used for the funeral of Queen Dona Maria I (1811). Subsequent art music composers of Brazil are indebted to Nuñez-García because “[v]irtually all of Rio’s future musicians studied with him, including Francisco Manuel da Silva (1775 – 1865), whose ‘Ouviram do Ipiranga’ of 1831 was formally adopted as Brazil’s national anthem in 1922, replacing the ‘O patria, o rei, o povo’ composed by the Emperor of Brazil, Pedro I (later also King of Portugal).”

“Yes!” responded one composer to the question “Do you think there should be traits in music that the rest of the world recognizes as Brazilian?” This composer did not know or seem overly concerned about the presence or absence of African blood in his ancestry. Again, “We’re Brazilian, we’re all Brazilian!” He

proceeded to play his guitar. Our time became almost a musician's "insider" session. With terms, harmonic progressions, etc., being bantered back and forth, my translator had a very difficult time keeping up. I could hear that his music was grounded in the popular music that flares up from time to time in Latin countries and makes an impression in the world. Predictably, the name Antonio Carlos (Tom) Jobim, the music composer of "The Girl from Ipanema" surfaced. Very unexpected, however, was the composer's intimation that certain musicians refuse to accept Jobim's music as representative of Brazilian music. Jobim writes many pieces that employ samba rhythms. The African rhythmic presence is the essence and heart of samba. Could the reason for the refusal to acknowledge Jobim's music as valid Brazilian music be because of the obvious African influence?

Is there bigotry within the ideology of Brazilian racial democracy? I interviewed one composer who has no known African mixture in his family background. This composer consciously used music from African traditions (*orixás*, *Candomblé*, percussion instruments, etc.) and recounts this story: After applying and being admitted to a major U.S. university to further pursue studies in composition, he was told that the state (Bahia) did not have the money for a scholarship. He thought that was possible, so he tried again the following year. Again, another major university in the United States gladly accepted him. This time, he did not hear from the Bahia government until it was too late. During his most recent application opportunity, it was intimated to him—and by this time he too had begun to suspect—that perhaps his music, though extremely well crafted and very exciting in performance, was not what the authorities wanted to be known to the world as "Brazilian" music. He commented during my interview that perhaps his music "should be more like Mozart." This was the most telling and scathing moment of all the interviews.

Artistic bigotry—this is perhaps the most harmful kind. This Brazilian artist with European background was denied the opportunity to exhibit his talent just because his music has African content. Its plain to see that those in power in Brazil have no intention of being known as a country that produces a music representative of its racial collage.

Soon, it became clear to me that in the politics of striving for recognition, the music school moved to what I would describe as the bland, middle course. In this gray, generic land, it is possible for Brazilians to par with Germans, Italians, or any other Europeans. This, in my opinion, is costly. An obviously multiracial society denies itself the fruits of a significant portion of its history as well as the talents of a large portion of its people. As far as Black composers are concerned, this situation may be indicative of the contradictions of the larger Brazilian society.

II. Music as a Global/International Force

Music is a powerful global force even though we do not often think of it that way. Of all the gifts of nature as well as human inventions, I feel that music is the most powerful. It is ever present and can be heard and felt in all cultures. The history of music is almost as old as the history of humankind itself. It permeates politics and social interactions of every kind, educates, heals, can raise the human spirit to ecstasy or plunge it into depression, and, as the U.S. recording industry has shown, is a global economic presence.

Music crosses international boundaries with relative ease. Like ideas, and perhaps as ideas, its message cannot be easily halted once in motion. The multinationality of music can be gleaned from modern history. For instance, Western Europe participated in the development of a form of music that can be considered international during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—the dance suite. Very simply, it is a set of contrasting instrumental dances. What is unique about this form is that each dance (movement) is from or bears a name characterizing the music of a different country. The usual order of these dances has come down to us as Allemande (German), Courante (French) or Corrente (Italian), Saraband (first Mexican, then Spanish), optional group (various countries), and, finally, the Gigue (English). The dance suite was seen in some form in almost all of the European countries where learned and skilled musicians were present.⁸

Brazil came close to having a national musical identity during the early years of the twentieth century when the new and burgeoning recording industry provided opportunities for samba to

gain wide popularity. At first, the White elite did everything in its power to keep Blacks from expressing this music and themselves at Carnival. The reason, often given, was that their presentation was “vulgar.” Then, the Black middle class, perhaps for slightly different reasons, distanced themselves from overt displays at Carnival and samba—a music too much associated with the wretched huts, shacks, and makeshifts known as *favelas* where the very poorest Brazilians live.⁹

III. Final Thoughts

The presentations made and papers read instructed us how such a large society as Brazil can lose footing among the community of nations from which it desires recognition and membership. In pursuit of global/international recognition and inclusion in music, did Brazil lose its way? Perhaps so, but pinpointing the exact time of that loss in an all-too-short reflection is neither possible nor prudent. Instead, I shall use the telling statement by Gitahy and Hardman:

In Brazil, the local elite, fearful of social upheaval and territorial disintegration, conducted a hesitant independence process. Haiti’s fate echoed as a threat to the White Brazilian elite, which made up less than 30 percent of the population. They waited until they convinced the crown heir himself, Dom Pedro, Regent of Brazil, of the opportunity for political independence for the kingdom. Supporting the Crown, the elite managed to keep robust all the economic, social, and cultural institutions forged in colonial times and to postpone deeper political social reform.¹⁰

These insights may appear to be distant from our discussion of music; however, a society’s ensembles affect each other. We learned that Brazil’s refusal to invest in the welfare of most of its population is one of the reasons why the country’s potential is always just that—potential. For most Brazilians, the struggle to be educated and escape a life of poverty, even destitution, is paramount.¹¹ Coupled with racist hostility to things African, Black cultural and artistic talent have yet to gain a central place in the constitution of Brazilian identity. It is my sense, then, that Brazil’s full and successful entrance into global society will con-

tinue to be enervated by the marginalization of its Black people. A reappraisal of the situation could begin with a critical examination of the axiomatic assertion “We’re Brazilian! We’re all Brazilian!”

Notes

1. Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 2–8.
2. In concert/classical music parlance, “standard repertoire” usually refers to the works by (European) composers such as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, to name a few. A work that is performed often by major or important music organizations and is used as a measure by which other works are judged can be considered, or become, a “standard.”
3. Maria Lucia Caira Gitahy and Francisco Foot Hardman, “Brazil in the Global World: Five Centuries of Lost Memories” in *Macalester International* 5 (Fall 1997): 77.
4. For all musical terms, procedures, and concepts, see Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969) or *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (publication information unknown).
5. See Dominique-René DeLerma, “The Life and Works of Nuñez-García: A Status Report” in *The Black Perspective in Music*, no. 14 (1988): 93–102 and *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2d ed., s.v. “Brazil,” by Juan Orrego-Salas.
6. DeLerma, “The Life and Works of Nuñez-García.”
7. Ibid.
8. *Harvard Dictionary of Music* and/or *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Refer to either or both for definitions and discussions on the suite.
9. Alma Guillermopreito, *Samba* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 25.
10. Gitahy and Hardman, “Brazil in the Global World”: 80.
11. More than a few very disturbing conversations mentioned the fact that street children in the *favelas* could be summarily shot to death by the police with impunity.