Heitor Villa-Lobos: Choros No. 4:

An Analysis and Interpretation

The sixteen *Choros* of Heitor Villa-Lobos written between 1920 and 1929 are considered by some, “the most significant contribution not only to the music of Brazil, but to twentieth-century music in general (Behague 72).” These considerations stem from the contributions that were made compositionally, defining Brazilian nationalism, and as a whole showcase the ideology of *modernismo* – “the glorification of the country in general through a total assimilation of its most nationalizing musical sources, within a perfectly synchromous, modern style of composition (Behague 74).” As Villa-Lobos was deeply enthralled by the cannibalistic *Je suis sauvage* (I am a savage) he found himself in an ambiguous place in the European setting. His music is extremely modern, but unlike his European colleagues he did not have to pretend to be different. Thus he was released from many composers’ journeys to find a voice in the modern style (Tarasti 103). Poulenc turned to the African idiom, Milhaud - Brazilian tangos, Copeland with American folk. Villa-Lobos was free to attain a power of life in his compositions, attaining the modernism so many searched for. Yet a large part of Villa-Lobos’s works are seemingly typical of the *modernismo* from Paris and in many examples his works are varied in quality to the extent that labeling him becomes elusive. What Villa-Lobos has attained in his *Choros* may not be so much the most significant contribution of the past century so much as an accurate representation of the mindset and output of the modern composers. *Choros No. 4* can be viewed as a typical representation of the works, and through its analysis light may be shed on what *modernismo* actually came to be in the musical setting.

The term *Choro,* meaning, “cry” or “lament” in Portuguese is used to describe a popular Brazilian instrumental style. In spite of the name, the style has often a fast and happy rhythm, characterized by the virtuosity and the improvisations of the musician. The instrumental group usually contains a mix of flute, ophicleide, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, mandolin, guitar and the native *cavaquinho* (essentially a small four-stringed guitar). *Choros* refers to the music played by this broken consort. In a broad sense Villa-Lobos referred to the *Choros* as the street musicians who played in the urban areas, particularly Rio, and developed a tradition which Villa-Lobos used as inspiration on many of his works (Peppercorn 51). Musically, they represent a parallel musical structure of the American Bluegrass in the intensity of speed and focus on technical virtuosity, separated in idiom and interesting modalities and modulations. Villa-Lobos did not try to duplicate the folk nature but instead, in a mimeographic work called *Technical, Aesthetic, and Psychological Study* noted:

The Choros [were] built according to a new special technique based on the musical manifestation of the Brazilian natives, as well as on the psychological impressions brought by certain popular characters, extremely original and quite remarkable. Choros No. 1 was deliberately written as if it were an instinctive product of the ingenuous imagination of these popular musical characters, to serve simply as a point of departure and broaden itself gradually later, in its form, technique, structure, and genre (Behague 74).

Yet Villa-Lobos never explains what these characteristics are and leaves it up to his imagination to decide for himself how to express Brazilian folk music in the classical art form.

In *Choros No. 4*, Villa-Lobos, while in Paris, carefully chooses to write for trombone and three French horns. This decision is especially unique because trombone still carries the burden of the “instrument which falls from Paradise” (Tarasti 102). Additionally, horns are almost always paired in groups of two, namely high and low in two different keys. This consort displays the uniqueness of the traditional ensembles, though surely he is quite aware of the trombone writings of Stravinsky’s *Octet*. Wind writing is in vogue in Paris in 1926, and this is no exception. The tradition of quintets of Milhaud, Franciax, Poulenc, and Stravinsky’s *Octet* excellently displays the uniqueness of the ensembles and allows each instrument a chance to show off a pallet of colors. In *Chors No. 4* however the instruments have a way of smearing the colors into a wash and creates an improvisatory quality. This sets the stage for the character of the work.

The work consists of three main sections with a coda. It begins as a series of ascending chords in the three horns after which the trombone states the first theme. It fuses together a French circus march with an improvisatory flare. It is important to note that the three horns are choral in nature and if it were part of his later style, it would probably be reflected by imitation by Bach’s chorales. Yet this early in his career, it is can be assumed that he is imitating later French composers or perhaps Stravinsky because of the tonal ambiguity in the first two phrases. It seems to be more based on Paris because soon thereafter the chorale like writing morphs into a Dukas-like “*La Peri*” fanfare setting up the meat of the first section at Rehearsal 3 (note: all rehearsal number references are taken from *Choros No. 4* Editions Max Eschig 1965). The main body strongly reflects Stavinsky’s *Histoire du soldat*: Part 1 with the non-functional harmonic ostinato. It seems almost like ironic writing because of the modal writing but happy, march like quality. This is the *modernismo* which can be seen in so much of the Parisian writing of the time - the ironic pull to reject the past without creating anything specifically new. He continues the march by passing off the ostinato to the 3rd horn. The march collapses beginning at Rehearsal 8 by destroying the duple with descending triplets and returns to the opening chorale.

In this work it is notable that Villa-Lobos is very specific as to how he utilizes the quartet. The dynamic of the ensemble varies as much as the texture itself. Sometimes he treats the consort as horns accompanying trombone, as seen in the opening chorale. In the march, for example it is treated like a horn quartet with the 1st horn used as the primary melodic vehicle, similar to SATB writing. But the second section, as well as the third, he utilizes the structure of a big band trumpet section, where the 1st horn plays lead, the 2nd horn solos, and the bottom two voices accompany harmonically or become a part of the rhythm section. This treatment of the writing seems to mimic the Afro-Cuban influence in the third section (Rehearsal 15). This is very unique to Villa-Lobos when compared to the Parisian mimicking of Stravinsky in his wind writing where treatment of instruments is stable. This gives the work a color pallet much more washed but extremely vibrant.

The second section (Rehearsal 13) utilizes the big band treatment of instruments. It is a chorale in F minor. Here the second horn has free reign to explore the F minor acoustical scale in a very easily accessible lullaby. It is a key moment in the work because of the transition it creates harmonically to the third section. The first section remains very vague tonally; The ostinato leaps are so wide, tonality becomes difficult to hear. The third section rests soundly in Bb, so the second section creates an easy transition to tonality.

The third section is an explosion of Afro-Cuban or Afro-Brazilian excitement. The solo lies in the second horn and the melody could easily be set to a Spanish or Portuguese libretto. It starkly contrasts the rest of the work which even more accentuates the improvisatory nature and depicts *modernismo* through an arrival to something exciting. It has been noted that this could be based on Milhaud’s *La création du monde* (Tarasti 105). However this section is too simple to compare it to the highly classical interpretation of American jazz. It seems that the first half of the music is calling for something simple and Villa-Lobos finally arrives with what a *Choros* and essentially what Brazil is capable of. It is more than a glance at the folk style of music which may be considered trite, and would have solid ground to say so except that he does return to the classical idiom for the coda. The coda is a clear example of a horn quartet fanfare similar to Bozza’s horn quartet writing. The rich harmonies create a very powerful and dramatic ending.

What this says about his *Choros* is that though this analysis, nothing new is created. It is entirely built on ideas of the past, yet starkly different. Villa-Lobos and all the Parisians began writing this new music with the complete understanding of the past, which they revered and utilized. Stravinsky spent the later half of his life in the neo-Classical idiom. These works seem to say that as tonality was conquered, these artists needed to find some way to express themselves. Villa-Lobos and many Brazilians ascribed to a Cannibalist manifesto, while Parisians consciously rejected their German counterparts. But not until Schoenberg does history see something completely broken from the past. These composers found their niche in creating “new” from creating nationality and identifying through it.

Works Cited

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