



A VOICE  
FOR  
BRAZIL

A portrait of Villa-Lobos  
by J. Rosa

Heitor Villa-Lobos began his musical career as a cellist and wrote numerous works for the instrument, including the monumental Second Cello Concerto. However, his primary interest lay in promoting the folk traditions of his Brazilian homeland rather than advancing the cello's virtuoso repertoire, writes **Felipe Avellar de Aquino**

**B**orn in Rio de Janeiro in 1887, Heitor Villa-Lobos is widely regarded as the most important Brazilian composer; he enjoyed great popularity during his lifetime both in his homeland and abroad. We know from concert programmes that he was performing as a cellist in orchestras and small chamber groups as early as age 15. In fact, he started his career as a cellist, playing in cafés and cinemas in order to make a living. This led him to compose a series of short works for cello and piano in his twenties, such as *Capriccio* (1915), *Prelude no.2* (1913), *Pequena Suite* ('Little Suite' – 1913), *Sonhar* ('To Dream' – 1914), *Berceuse* (1915), *Élégie* (1916) and *The Song of the Black Swan* (1917). Establishing a solid career as a composer enabled him to build up firm industry connections and become one of the foremost musical figures in the Americas. It is perhaps a sign of his international reputation that the 1945 *Fantasia* for cello and orchestra was dedicated to Serge Koussevitzky. This work was premiered in Brazil in 1946 by Iberê Gomes Grosso; its first performance in the US was given in 1957 by Brazilian-born cellist Aldo Parisot (one of the leading cello pedagogues in the US, who taught both at Yale University and at the Juilliard School), with the New York Philharmonic's Stadium Symphony Orchestra; and in 1988 it was recorded by János Starker with the Paraíba Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky disciple Eleazar de Carvalho.

Villa-Lobos's musical output (totalling around a thousand works) is highly influenced by Brazilian folk and popular music.

In fact, he was the first Brazilian composer to inject his works with a strong national identity, and as such he influenced several generations of composers in his home country. Towards the end of his productive life, he fulfilled several concerto commissions in which he incorporated virtuosic elements into his nationalistic compositional style.

### CELLO LEANINGS

Villa-Lobos began his musical training at an early age. When he was about six years old his father, an amateur cellist, started teaching him the cello on an adapted viola. He undertook intense training, and by 1898 he had already started developing his love not only for the works of Bach but also for the popular music of Rio de Janeiro – two elements that were to become highly influential in his compositions. Besides the cello, Villa-Lobos played the guitar, an instrument widely employed in Brazilian folk and popular music; this enabled him to be in contact with the most important popular musicians of his time.

Villa-Lobos composed many works for the cello, having become an accomplished player. Apart from the pieces already mentioned, he wrote two sonatas for cello and piano (the first of which is lost) and two concertos. In addition, he composed the *Bachianas brasileiras* no.1 (1930, dedicated to Pablo Casals) for cello ensemble, the *Bachianas brasileiras* no.5 (1938–45) for soprano and cello ensemble and the massive *Fantasia concertante* (1958) for an orchestra of 15 or 30 cellos. These were the first ▶



Left to right Brazilian composer-conductor Alfredo Franklin de Mattos, Italian composer-conductor and pianist Ítalo Tabarin, Villa-Lobos with his cello, and Brazilian composer-conductor and pianist Souza Lima in January 1931. Photo from a concert tour of over 50 cities throughout São Paulo

VILLA-LOBOS WAS THE FIRST BRAZILIAN COMPOSER TO INJECT HIS WORKS WITH A STRONG NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND AS SUCH HE INFLUENCED SEVERAL GENERATIONS OF COMPOSERS IN HIS HOME COUNTRY

major works written for the cello ensemble medium; thus even if Villa-Lobos did not invent this genre, it was certainly established by him. The *Fantasia concertante* also represents his last composition dedicated to the cello. It was commissioned by Bernard Greenhouse's Violoncello Society of New York – a personal request from Greenhouse, who played the first cello part at its premiere at the Town Hall, New York, in December 1958, as well as on the recording (also 1958) for the Everest label. It's a major work in three movements, scored for five voices in such a complex texture that at times there are fifteen distinct parts playing simultaneously.

According to sources at the Villa-Lobos Museum in Rio de Janeiro, Villa-Lobos was still performing on the cello in 1931, as part of a long concert tour. After retiring as a professional performer around this time, he never stopped writing new works for the instrument, as shown by the long list of subsequent cello compositions by him. Although there is no surviving evidence of him performing as a cellist after 1932, his Professional Card (a mandatory employment document in Brazil) from 1937 still lists him as musician/cellist.

In January 1959, Villa-Lobos served on the jury of the second international Pablo Casals cello competition in Mexico, together with (among others) Cassadó, Eisenberg, Navarra, Nelsova, Odnoposoff, Rostropovich, Sádlo and Casals himself. Among the prizewinners were Anner Bylisma and Josef Chuchro, as well as Luis García-Renart, Rama Jucker, Aleth Lamasse and Saša Večtomov. Here is further evidence that Villa-Lobos was closely associated with the leading cello circles around the world. It's very unfortunate that, as Rostropovich once recalled, Villa-Lobos never fulfilled his promise of writing a triple cello concerto for him, Fournier and Navarra, owing to his death in November 1959. The piece would have reflected, in musical portraits, the personalities of these three great cellists.

### CALL OF EUROPE

As a composer from a country outside the musical mainstream, Villa-Lobos was a figure surrounded by myths and exotic episodes. In many instances he is pictured either as a wanderer who participated in all sorts of street music gatherings or as an exotic composer who walked among indigenous peoples in the middle of the jungle searching for inspiration. Villa-Lobos himself helped to cultivate both these images. But in fact his early compositions show that he was strongly influenced by European composers, notably Debussy and d'Indy. This can be seen in works such as the Sonata Fantasia no.1 (*Désespérance* – 1913) for violin and piano, Piano Trio no.2 (1915), Cello Sonata no.2 (1916), as well as in his first two symphonies (1916 and 1917).



Villa-Lobos conducting the premiere of his *Fantasia concertante* for an orchestra of cellos

Despite being based in his home country, he was aware of the rapid changes in musical aesthetics that were taking place in Europe in the first two decades of the 20th century. Furthermore, his acquaintance with Milhaud, who lived in Brazil in 1917–18, allowed him to become more familiar with the music of Debussy and Les Six. Artur Schnabel, with whom Villa-Lobos developed a great friendship, was one of the first internationally renowned musicians to perform his works in Europe. Nijinsky and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes caught Villa-Lobos's attention during their performances in Rio de Janeiro in 1917, when he had a chance to hear Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and *The Firebird*, as well as Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. And during his stay in France in the 1920s, he was surrounded by artists, musicians and critics such as Koussevitzky, Le Flem, Léger, Prokofiev, Segovia, Schmitt, Stokowski and Varèse. ▶

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Villa-Lobos conducting the *Bachianas brasileiras* no.1 with Bernard Greenhouse (centre) as first cello in 1958

**BACH TO BRAZIL – NEO-CLASSICISM AND FOLK ROOTS**

Even though Villa-Lobos’s field research was not as systematic as Bartók’s, one can draw a parallel between their compositional thinking. Like Bartók, Villa-Lobos was close to all forms of vernacular expression among the people of his native country, and he ingeniously combined these elements with the avant-garde European musical aesthetics of his time. He collected more than a thousand folk melodies, absorbing traditional elements from the three primary ethnic groups that comprise the population of Brazil: people of Portuguese descent, those of African descent and indigenous peoples. Thus, when Villa-Lobos did not quote directly from folk music, he still incorporated folk characteristics into his compositions.

Villa-Lobos also undertook in-depth study of Bach’s contrapuntal techniques, and having transcribed preludes and fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* for both cello and orchestra and cello and piano, he absorbed Bach’s techniques into his own compositions. The combination of Bach’s contrapuntal style with the strong rhythmic figures and melodic lines of Brazil’s folk music is probably what makes Villa-Lobos’s music sound unique; his *Bachianas brasileiras* (1930–45) are excellent examples of this fusion – embodied in the title of the series – of neo-Classical trends with a robust national inspiration.

**BIRTH OF A CELLO CONCERTO**

Cello Concerto no.2 (1953) is one of Villa-Lobos’s most notable works for the instrument, as it represents a full expression of his compositional style, displaying both his Brazilian soul and his love for the cello. It was dedicated to Parisot, who commissioned it for

**CELLO CONCERTO NO.2 REPRESENTS A FULL EXPRESSION OF VILLA-LOBOS'S STYLE, DISPLAYING BOTH HIS BRAZILIAN SOUL AND HIS LOVE FOR THE CELLO**

his first performance with the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. During the 1950s Parisot was at the peak of his concert career and was considered one of the most important cellists of his generation. He collaborated with Villa-Lobos on several aspects of the score, notably idiomatic ones and passages of virtuosic display.

It was Parisot’s agent that suggested he ask a Brazilian composer to write a new cello concerto. When discussing his collaboration with the composer, Parisot mentioned that he commuted from Connecticut to New York every day for a week, practising the cello in Villa-Lobos’s hotel room while he was writing the new work. He remarked that the concerto was tailor-made, as he was able to try out each new passage; and he recalled that Villa-Lobos would sometimes take the cello to demonstrate how he wanted certain passages to be played.

Following the premiere under Walter Hendl on 5 February 1955, Parisot was granted >



World premiere of the Cello Concerto no.2

IMAGES VILLA-LOBOS MUSEUM/BRAZILIAN INSTITUTE OF MUSEUMS

exclusive rights to perform the concerto for two years. It seems it was so successful that he was engaged to play it with the New York Philharmonic's Stadium Symphony Orchestra in an all-Latin American Stadium Concert in July 1959, under Mexican conductor Carlos Chávez. Parisot was also responsible for the first recording of the piece, in 1962, with the Vienna State Opera Orchestra under Gustav Meier.

The continuous use of vernacular elements – whether simple thematic material or elements drawn from a particular genre of Brazilian music – is the leading factor in the musical language of the Second Cello Concerto. This would seem the most natural way forward for a prominently nationalistic composer writing for a countryman at the peak of his international concert career. Some of the components originate from the region in which Parisot was born, north-eastern Brazil, whose folk expressions were studied in depth by Villa-Lobos. So ultimately, the composer had the major task of combining these nationalistic trends and their distinctly improvisatory character with virtuosic writing within the traditional European genre of the concerto.

Villa-Lobos employed the standard pattern for a four-movement work – a model that he used consistently in his oeuvre, usually beginning with an elaborate fast movement, followed by a slower, singing second movement, then a scherzo and ending with a finale, generally in a fast tempo, cast in either rondo or sonata-rondo form. The first movement (*Allegro non troppo*) of Cello Concerto no.2 is an elaborated multisectional structure – not in sonata form – that is contrasted by a slow second movement (*Molto andante cantabile*) in ABA form. The third movement is a scherzo (*Vivace*), followed by a compact finale (*Allegro energico*) in rondo form. Since the last two movements are very short, they are linked by a cadenza in order to give balance to the overall structure of the work.

The improvisational gestures of the first movement are contrasted with elements associated with the texture and technique of guitar music. The first theme is presented by the cello in a highly declamatory, improvisatory recitative-like



Pablo Casals Cello Festival in Xalapa, Mexico, 1959  
Left to right standing André Navarra, Zara Nelsova, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Miloš Sádlo, Gaspar Cassadó, Mstislav Rostropovich, Adolfo Odnoposoff, Maurice Eisenberg, unidentified gentleman and Blas Galindo  
Centre seated Pablo Casals and Rubén Montiel

manner, thus immediately establishing a dialogue between soloist and orchestra. This is reminiscent of the popular song genre known in Brazil as *desafio* (which literally means 'challenge'), an orally transmitted tradition in which two or more alternating singers compete to show their improvisational skills on a given subject matter. The contrasting second theme is presented by the cello in an arpeggiated texture involving string-crossings, resembling music written for the guitar – an instrument that was particularly treasured by Villa-Lobos.

The second movement resembles the celebrated Aria from *Bachianas brasileiras* no.5, about which Parisot commented: 'I had hoped Villa-Lobos would write a slow second movement similar in expression to his famous *Bachianas* for eight cellos and voice. When he finished the concerto the resemblance was remarkable, even to the melody of the soloist accompanied by the *pizzicati* of the strings imitating the sounds of the Brazilian *violão* or guitar.' As in the *Bachianas*, this concerto movement is marked by a constant change of metre, which is a result of its asymmetrical, eliding phrases that occur especially in the outer sections. Furthermore, the melodic lines are characterised by an intense use of chromaticism.

The third-movement scherzo is grounded on a rhythmically strong motif based on a triplet figure, which on first hearing

## THE BERIMBAU

The *berimbau* originated in Angola and the Congo and was brought to Brazil in the 16th century. It consists of a thick wooden stick with a metal string attached to each end which pulls the stick into an arch (or bow) shape. A hollowed gourd attached at the lower end of the bow works as a resonator.

The main sound is produced by striking the string with a small, thin bamboo stick. A metal coin serves as a movable bridge that provides the different pitches. In order to complete the instrument, the performer holds, in the same hand as the bamboo stick, a small basket shaker called a *caxixi*, which provides an accompanying sound. The *berimbau* is closely associated with the Brazilian martial art and dance form capoeira, originally practised by Afro-Brazilians.



Villa-Lobos (at the piano) rehearses his Second Cello Concerto with Aldo Parisot in 1953

**EXAMPLE 1**  
Main motif of the Cello  
Concerto no.2 scherzo:  
berimbau bow stroke



**EXAMPLE 2** Cello Concerto no.2 Cadenza: 'Villa-Lobos glissando' and the sounds of the berimbau

seems to be influenced by Spanish music (**example 1**). It might well originate from Spain, but it is also a stylisation of the rhythmic patterns played on the *berimbau* – a single-stringed instrument of African origin, which is widely popular in Brazil and which would have been well known to Villa-Lobos. One cannot be certain whether the composer intentionally combined the Spanish rhythm and the *berimbau* patterns, or whether he created this ingenious fusion intuitively. What is important is the way in which the blending of European and African elements seems to encapsulate the formation of Brazilian culture.

As a cellist himself, Villa-Lobos was able to write down exactly the kind of effect he was looking for. In the first cello entrance in the third movement, the bow stroke alludes to the percussive sounds of the *berimbau*. In order to mimic this particular sound, the player has to throw the bow at the strings like a *berimbau* player would throw the bamboo stick to obtain the same effect. In the cadenza, where Villa-Lobos explores thematic elements from all the preceding movements, the double-stopped tremolo glissando – which Parisot refers to as the 'Villa-Lobos glissando' – recalls the glissando of the *berimbau* (**example 2**).

Further allusions to the *berimbau* patterns reappear in the coda section of the last movement, closing the work with a strong folk gesture. By making numerous folk and dance elements the basic features of his music, Villa-Lobos was demonstrating less regard for formal structures than for expressing his intense nationalism. The Second Cello Concerto undoubtedly contains more folk and dance elements than any other concerto ever written for the instrument.

Although Villa-Lobos was fully able to explore the cello's idiomatic language, demonstrating a deep understanding of the possibilities of the instrument,



he doesn't properly fit the role of a virtuoso cellist-composer. The cello repertoire developed hugely throughout the 20th century, an era when cellists such as Casals, du Pré, Feuermann, Fournier, Nelsova, Parisot, Piatigorsky, Rostropovich and Starker inspired composers to write new works for the instrument. Villa-Lobos was undoubtedly too busy adding new works to the cello literature to develop his own career as a cellist. He worked towards voicing his homeland's cultural expressions through his fascinating music and unique compositional language. Thus, when referring to the short period of time in which Villa-Lobos completed the Second Cello Concerto, Parisot summarised his personality in just a few words: 'For ordinary people, time is a clock or a calendar; for a genius like Villa-Lobos, it is an empty space to be filled with creation.' ●