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Music in Brazil: Willy Corrêa de Oliveira and Gilberto Mendes

To many foreigners, Brazil conjures up visions of Copacabana, Ipanema, sun, samba and, of course, Carnival, but for most Brazilians the reality is startlingly different. First, a few facts. Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world, taking up 8.5 million square kilometres, i.e. almost half of the Latin American continent. With a population of 135 million and a GDP of \$280 billion, it is the eighth largest economy in the West. Among developing countries, Brazil is number one. It is the world's largest coffee exporter, the second largest soyabean producer, the biggest sugar producer and the second biggest cocoa producer. It is also the world's second largest cattle producer and the second largest producer of iron ore.

In spite of all this, Brazil is not yet the economic power it could so easily be, due mainly to the corruption and unbelievable incompetence of its government. Instead, it constitutes the biggest single threat to the stability of the world's financial system, with a foreign debt of around \$110 billion. Two years after the fall of the military régime (which had lasted for twenty years) and the birth of a fragile democracy, the country is in the grip of its worst-ever economic crisis. Inflation is out of control and the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Many workers are trying to survive on a minimum salary of £30 a month, thousands of homeless children wander the city streets begging, and vast numbers of people are driven from the barren north to the southern cities (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro), only to find themselves living in one of the *favelas* (shanty towns) without a job. In 1960, 55% of Brazilians lived in the country and 45% in the cities. Today 72% live in the cities and 28% in the country.

And so, with this in mind, what is happening in Brazilian music today? Indeed, what has happened to Brazilian music since the death of Heitor Villa-Lobos in 1959? For reasons of space alone, I am unable to give a comprehensive account of the last 28 years but, by offering a brief historical survey and by concentrating on two major composers – Willy Corrêa de Oliveira and Gilberto Mendes – I believe that I can give some idea of the developments that have taken place during that time. Although this will mean omitting a number of distinguished composers – such as Jorge Antunes (b. 1942), Marlos Nobre (b. 1939) and José Antonio de Almeida Prado (b. 1943), all of whom are internationally renowned – not to mention those interesting creative figures working in the sophisticated jazz/pop world (Arrigo Barnabé, Egberto Gismonti, Hermeto Pascoal and Naná Vasconcelos, for example), I would maintain that de Oliveira and Mendes are two of the most important individuals to emerge from the post-Villa-Lobos era.

The first appearance of the avant garde in Brazil came thirteen years before the death of its most famous composer: a manifesto known as 'Música Viva'

formally introduced the theories of Schoenberg into the country in 1946.¹ The composers involved with the manifesto were the German Hans Joachim Koellreutter (b. 1915), the leader of the group, Eunice Catunda (b. 1915), Cesar Guerra-Peixe (b. 1914), Edino Krieger (b. 1928) and Claudio Santoro (b. 1919). The manifesto called for a more 'universal' music, attacking 'false nationalism . . . which exalts sentiments of national superiority and encourages egocentric and individualistic tendencies which divide men, creating disruptive forces.'² It was the first official break with nationalism, a movement which had dominated Brazilian music for the previous 60 years. Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) was still alive and already a national institution, but he did not intervene in the polemic which arose. This mission fell to the composer Camargo Guarnieri (b. 1907) who, unlike Villa-Lobos, had systematised nationalism into a sort of school which eventually produced 'Little Guarnieris'. Guarnieri took the role of defender of Brazilian values against the Grupo Música Viva, advocates of a rather suspect universalism. This reached a climax in 1950, when Guarnieri published his 'Carta Aberta aos Músicos e Críticos do Brasil' (Open letter to the musicians and critics of Brazil), in which he called Koellreutter's ideas a 'heinous formalist and anti-Brazilian infiltration' and referred to twelve-note music as 'a refuge for mediocre composers'.

Soon after the Guarnieri-Koellreutter battle, those members of the Música Viva group who were also members of the Brazilian Communist Party (communism was later made illegal when a military coup on 1 April 1964 placed the army firmly in control) received an order from the Party to the effect that they should adhere to a 'national' music. The Party, sympathetic to the struggle of the USSR against the USA in the Cold War which had just begun, became the defender of Brazilian national values as the United States began its long and systematic invasion of the whole of Latin America. Nationalism seemed to be the only answer to imperialist intentions. Guarnieri suddenly found himself side by side with his former enemies.

In the 1950s, under the government of Dr Juscelino Kubitschek (who was responsible for founding the new city of Brasilia which has been the country's official capital since April 1960), Brazil began its massive industrialisation programme; as a consequence, the country became a prime area for multinational companies to set up their subsidiaries. It was here that the second wave of the Brazilian avant garde entered the scene, just as some large advertising agencies opened business to answer the needs of the multi-national conglomerates. It was in the demand for industrial production that the constructivist poetry project was born in São Paulo, the largest and most industrialised city in Latin America. And following the

example of the 'concretistas', a group of musicians later published the 'Manifesto música nova' in 1963.³

The influx of foreign capital brought with it an influx of foreign aesthetics, and the concrete poets (represented mainly by the brothers Haroldo and Augusto di Campos and Dessia Pimentare) were the first to grasp such areas as semiotics, information theory, cybernetics and structuralism. The musicians who were drawn to the 'concretistas' were those who felt frustrated by the narrow-mindedness of the nationalists, who were concerned only with music and ignored other important matters such as architecture, literature, cinema and urbanisation, and whose musical techniques were already worn out. The four protagonists in the new group were Damiano Cozzella (b. 1930), Willy Corrêa de Oliveira (b. 1938), Rugério Duprat (b. 1932) and Gilberto Mendes (b. 1922). The idea of forming a group came at the fifth Bienal de São Paulo in 1961, when all four had works performed in the same concert and realised that they had little in common with other composers of the day. The formation of the new group also marked the return to Brazil of serialism which had been abandoned in the early 1950s: no longer, however, the twelve-note serialism of Schoenberg, but that developed by Webern, Boulez and Stockhausen.

In 1962 the four composers went to Darmstadt to find out at first hand what was really happening in total serialism, and were shocked to discover that Europe had moved on. This shock appears to have been too much for Cozzella and Duprat, who returned to Brazil completely disillusioned and eventually abandoned 'serious' music altogether. De Oliveira describes the situation in the early 1960s as follows:

We were copying the gestures rather than the structures, because we didn't really know what total serialism was. We soon found out, and we all started importing all the books we could find on the subject. We learned about serialism from books and magazines – the writings of Stockhausen, Boulez and the like. And we thought: 'Well, it must be like that – culture is that.' So we studied it very deeply and went off to Europe in 1962. I remember that I had written a piece that was structured within the five elements – all the possible combinations – but when I arrived in Darmstadt, I saw that they were not doing that anymore. I was a little upset: for us the truth was serialism. But after that, when we saw that reality was not confined to the books we had read but to what we had seen in Darmstadt, we began to relax our serialism. In a certain way, we came back to the gesture, instead of the real structure. Part of the reason why Duprat and Cozzella left the group – and contemporary music – was that very shock of finding ourselves so behind our European counterparts. Gilberto and I continued to have faith in the 'structures', in the lessons which Europe was teaching us. But it was too much for Duprat and Cozzella to go to Europe firmly believing in total serialism and to find everyone there turning to Cage; we didn't even know who Cage was at that time.⁴

The four composers returned to Brazil and published their 'Manifesto música nova'. The departure of Cozzella and Duprat soon followed, however: Duprat to pursue a distinguished career in popular music as an arranger and conductor. Mendes and de Oliveira continued, developing their personal techniques. They were no longer writing serial music and became more and more involved with the concrete poetry movement and less dependent on Europe.

Willy Corrêa de Oliveira

De Oliveira was born in Recife in the north of Brazil. After travelling around the country for a while, he

eventually ended up in Santos (the port of São Paulo, an hour's drive from the city) and stayed with Mendes. Like the other three members of the 'Música Nova' group, he studied composition with Olivier Toni; later he worked in Europe with Henry Pousseur, although he was also especially influenced by Berio, with whom he became friendly. Many of his works are difficult, abstract, intellectual exercises, and they range from piano pieces (*Two Preludes, Impromptu para Marta, Five Kitschs, 3 Instantes*) to chamber works (*Phantasiestücke, Ouvir a Música*) to works for orchestra (*Signus and Divertimento*), not to mention numerous electronic compositions. Most of his choral works are based on, and structured by, concrete poems for a reason de Oliveira himself explains:

The concrete poets were interesting for me because they were interested in structures, not poetry, and I was interested in structures, not music. I was concerned with experiment more than with art.

Quite early in the sixties he started writing music for films, television and jingles: 'anything that came along – I needed the money'. In 1966 he started to direct films for the advertising agencies and stopped writing the music for them. He became a director of J. Walter Thompson and soon afterwards became director of the film and television department at Salles, one of the biggest Brazilian agencies. In 1969 he suffered a nervous breakdown and left:

My departure from publicity was wholly for political reasons. I could no longer face the contradiction I was living. This division is so set up within us in a bourgeois society that we can be on the left and at the same time work in advertising and publicity. I was always on the left in my political views; and there I was, working with the waste of the capital system. I was going to quit everything and go off to Europe when I received an invitation from the University of São Paulo to go and teach there.

He accepted the invitation and is still there today. His personal crisis seems not to have affected his music, although he gave up composing with the onset of his second nervous breakdown in 1981. Indeed, his politics and his art have led quite separate lives.

In 1965, de Oliveira had become interested in semiotics, and this interest was soon to take on the nature of something approaching religious devotion, resulting in the publication of a book on Beethoven which is also a fascinating introduction to musical semiotics.⁵

The Beethoven book was a kind of manifesto about the syntactic level of music . . . that this was the only salvation for music itself . . . that it be structural, that the structures be very clear, even though this may appear complex. I used semiotics to prove a number of theories on music and art, and I did it with a faith that would move any mountain.

Not long after this, in 1981, his faith in C.S. Peirce, Umberto Eco and the other leading figures of semiotics started to weaken. He discovered Hanns Eisler and started reading various Marxist writers on culture. At the same time he began working with a group of priests in the poverty-stricken industrial suburbs of São Paulo. He stopped composing and attending concerts and began spending more time among the workers and their organisations.

One of his last works is *Materiales* for soprano and percussion (1980), an extract from which is reproduced in Example 1. There is nothing in this setting of a poem by Héctor Olea to suggest the total break with composing that was to come shortly afterwards; in

Example 1 Willy Corrêa de Oliveira *Materiales*, pages 5-6 (extract)

J = 44

s *sotto voce (molto espressivo)* ci... la

b.a. *p* *M₄ > p* *f > p* *p*

K *sotto voce (molto espressivo)*

S. ar ci... cu... la ar en

b.a. ber. x-o o o-x x x o x

K *p sempre, ma presente*

S ci... cu... lo... os ci... cu... la... ar en

Cy w. *sotto voce (molto espressivo)*

K

S ci... ir... cu... los de (#) la pa... la... bra

Cy w. *< ff*

K *< f*

crot *< f*

glock

ch.

wbl *f*

- s soprano
- b.a. amplified berimbau
- (ber. unamplified berimbau)
- cy cymbal immersed in water
- w.
- k timpani
- crot crotales
- glock glockenspiel
- ch. chimes
- wbl woodblocks

Translation:
 to circulate
 to circulate in circles
 to circulate in circles of the word

fact, *Materiales* is reminiscent of his earlier works, both stylistically and structurally.

Having abandoned 'art', de Oliveira suddenly found himself alone. Those whom he thought were his friends turned out to be hostile to him and his new position. He found a kindred spirit in the writings of Cornelius Cardew and has recently spent much energy promoting his ideas. On 11 March 1984 the music page of *Folha de São Paulo* (Brazil's liberal daily newspaper) was devoted to an article about Cardew by de Oliveira. What is fascinating about this is not only that the *Folha* should give over its entire music page to Cardew, a composer hitherto unknown in Brazil, but also the fact that de Oliveira's article is a detailed shot-by-shot account of a film that does not, in fact, exist. In order that he might have the greatest impact, de Oliveira invented the documentary 'Cornelius Cardew', a homage to the composer allegedly made by the 'Roman Karmen Movie Team', which supposedly consists of Rod Eley, Tim Mitchell, Keith Rowe, John Tilbury and Rose Zetkyn. The film is imaginary, but de Oliveira's narrative is faithful to his subject's ideas, and he puts nothing into the mouth of Cardew which Cardew himself did not utter; most of the quotations come from the book *Stockhausen Serões Imperialism*.⁶

The article stands as a very good introduction to Cardew and his philosophy, and its publication caused quite a fuss. A whole series of articles attacking de Oliveira and Cardew was published: most of them used the usual, worn-out middle-class arguments; some even warned of neo-Stalinism. The most interesting of these was by de Oliveira's former colleague, Duprat, who took exception to composers 'coming down from on high' to write music for 'the people' when, he maintained, 'the people' are perfectly capable of writing their own music. Even though de Oliveira has withdrawn from Brazilian musical society, it seems he still manages to exert an extraordinary influence on that society, through his work at the University and in his writings.

Gilberto Mendes

Mendes, on the other hand, has had a more straightforward career. Born in Santos, he is some years older than his 'Música Nova' colleagues and was regarded as the leader of the group. He was the pioneer in Brazil of many contemporary techniques such as indeterminacy in music, concrete music, the use of microtones, new notations, music-theatre and 'visual music' (scores intended for looking at, rather than for performing). Although he is a life-long friend and colleague of de Oliveira, his music is much less cerebral. Indeed, his primary concern is communication, and his long association with the concrete poets has been a most fruitful one, resulting in some marvellous choral works. In the 1960s, he explains, 'there were a number of choirs around, and they offered us an interesting way of experimenting with "phonetic music" – the most exciting and creative thing to come out of that period'. Mendes' most experimental works are for voices: as well as *Nascemorre* (1963) and *Asthatour* (1971), a coughing and wheezing 'advertisement' for a holiday which cures asthma, two other works deserve particular mention.

These are *Motet em Ré menor* (Motet in D minor), a hilarious anti-jingle, written in 1966, on a poem by Décio Pignatari based on the various permutations of the words 'beba coca cola' (Example 2) and *Vai e Vem* (Come and go), a relentlessly exciting composition of

1969 for choir, pre-recorded tape, record player, and a paper and comb. The two words 'vai' and 'vem' are treated as two separate, sustained chords sung by the choir, with a long *crescendo* on one and a *diminuendo* on the other; these two chords alternate throughout the piece. Superimposed on this are various musical events, including bursts of the 'Jupiter' Symphony and fragments of a Renaissance song. The result is a mesmerising study on the present moment's relationship to the past. In many of his works, Mendes quotes passages from pieces which he likes and which have meant something to him at particular points in his life: 'autobiographical citations' he calls them.

One of Mendes' finest experimental works is *Santos Football Music* (1974), a work which clearly shows the importance that he gives to direct communication. On one hand, it can be described as an ambitious work for wind, strings and percussion: an atonal piece which involves blocks of sound and their transformation. On the other hand, it also includes tapes of broadcasts of football matches, audience participation as it plays an imaginary game of football with the orchestra (the conductor is the referee) and a kind of music-theatre as the musicians bring on a real football and kick it round the stage. These ingredients may point to procedures common to much contemporary music but, in the hands of Mendes and in a Brazilian concert hall, the piece takes on a new significance. Football in Brazil has the status of a religion, and Santos possesses the second-best team in the country. By writing a piece about football, Mendes was sure to reach a large audience. More important than this is the fact that he was able to allow an interaction between traditional musical elements and the 'musicality' of the football pitch. Enio Squeff, the critic and writer, has said:

To compose it [*Santos Football Music*] for conventional orchestra and for conventional theatres, asking the audience to shout, boo and sing, is to contradict the traditional idea of a concert . . . placing a football pitch in a concert hall corresponds to transforming the concert hall into a football pitch.⁷

As well as being a satire on traditional concerts, *Santos Football Music* also displays Mendes' desire to compose a 'popular' music, a music which can speak to as large a public as possible.

This concern can be seen in his other works of the 1970s, and in the surprising degree of popularity they have enjoyed: especially *Pausa e Menopausa* for three performers, coffee cups, spoons, medicine dropper and slide projection, based on a poem by Ronaldo Azeredo (1973), *Opera Aberta* (1976) and, more recently, *Vento Noroeste* for piano (1982), a pot-pourri of piano styles from 1800 to the present day with a liberal sprinkling of quotations throughout the piece. His move towards composing more instrumental music has resulted in the increased use of tonal elements in his works. At the moment, he is interested in tonality for political reasons. Although he is concerned with political music, he has not, as yet, come to the point of writing it. Political ideas have played a part in his approach to composition, but he is dubious about what Cardew referred to as 'revolutionary content'. He has used titles and texts with political overtones, but he maintains that music remains obstinately abstract, dealing in vague gestures. For example, a few years ago he composed a tango for the American pianist Yvar Mikhashoff; it is a straightforward tango, but it bears the title *Tres Padres* (Three priests), referring to the three priests in the Nicaraguan government.

Example 2 Gilberto Mendes Motet em Ré menor, page 1

1 5

S
A
T
B

co la
fff

ba be co la be ba coca ba be cola ca co ca co cola
fff

be ba coca cola ba be cola be ba coca ba be cola ca co ca co cola
fff

caco ca co cola
fff

10

be ba ca ca co la ba be cola be ba coca ba be cola ca co ca co cola
PPP

be ba coca cola ba be cola ca co ca co cola
PPP

be ba coca cola be ba coca ba be cola ca co ca co cola
PPP

be ba coca cola cola
PPP

15

ba
P

be ba coca ba ca co ca co cola
P

be ba coca ba be cola ca co be
PPP

be ba ca ca co la ba be cola be ba coca ba be cola ca co be
P PPP

Mendes has described his present position as follows:

It's a problem of the concert hall. This is why I'm interested in Cardew. The concert audience is middle-class – how should a political music be addressed to such an audience? Willy [Corrêa de Oliveira] has found a way out. By living in São Paulo, he has access to concentrated working-class areas where he can work – forming little groups, teaching etc. I have not yet found my way out.

Perhaps this 'way out' lies in the future of the Santos Festival of New Music, an annual festival which Mendes initiated in 1963 after the publication of the 'Manifesto música nova'. It has enjoyed great success with critics and public alike and has attracted composers and performers from all over the world, offering a platform for new music to be performed and discussed. It is evident, anyway, that Mendes still has much to contribute; in the opinion of many, he is the finest living Brazilian composer.

The place of 'art music' in a popular culture

It must always be remembered, when discussing 'serious' music in Brazil, that the audience for it is but a tiny fraction of the population and that the audience for contemporary 'serious' music is even smaller. Brazil's culture is essentially popular, and music plays a big part in that culture; the Brazilians are a naturally musical people. In addition to this, the commercial pop market has been booming over the past three or four years, and with a population the size of Brazil's, that means an enormous market: so big that many British and American pop groups sell more records in Brazil than they do in their native countries. Steve Reich, Terry Riley and other 'post-neo-ex-minimalists' are practically unknown here, but Philip Glass sells well on the pop market, partly because he has the good fortune to be signed to a record company with the marketing power of CBS. Glass is currently taking part in jazz festivals in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo; his opera *Akhmaten* will be seen in São Paulo in March 1988.

What place, then, for 'art music' in a country where a large percentage of the population can neither read nor write? Nationalism is still strong among Brazilian composers, even if wrapped up in contemporary techniques, but it has done nothing to reach a wider audience. It borrows much from Brazilian popular culture and turns it into an erudite artefact of an alarmingly elitist nature. Mendes has probably done more than anyone to confuse the barriers between the erudite and the popular, without feeling the need to go into the commercial pop market. De Oliveira, on the other hand, found it necessary to give up 'música erudita' altogether to concentrate on the urban factory workers and their songs of struggle. Given that the political face of Brazil is slowly changing (*very slowly*), it will certainly be interesting to see how these two composers proceed, in the light of the Brazilian people's increasing political awareness. It will also be interesting to see how the ideas of Cardew fare in Latin America.

¹ 'Manifesto 1946', published in *Música Viva*, no. 12 (January 1947), p.3.

² This and the following quotation from Guarnieri have been translated by the author.

³ Gilberto Mendes, Damiano Cozzella, Willy Corrêa de Oliveira and Rugério Duprat, 'Manifesto música nova', *Revista de Arte de Vanguarda Invenção*, no. 3 (June 1963), pp. 5-6.

⁴ All quotations (unless otherwise stated) come from conversations with the composers.

⁵ Willy Corrêa de Oliveira, *Beethoven – Proprietario de un Cerebro* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1979).

⁶ Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1974).

⁷ Enio Squeff, *Reflexões sobre un mesmo tema* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1982).

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