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BRAZIL'S 20TH-CENTURY CHORO ENSEMBLES: Their Historical and Musical Trajectory as Documented on Recordings

By Márcia Taborda

In the second half of the 19th century the city of Rio de Janeiro experienced a period of cultural expansion: emergence of musical societies, establishment of formal musical education through creation of the Conservatory, and consolidation of an international agenda of concerts with artists from different backgrounds, along with opera and dance companies. It was a period of great internationalization in which novelties brought from Europe were incorporated and transformed by local features.

Foreign dances were brought to Brazil by European artists, imported scores, theatrical companies, and piano and dance instructors. Square dances, waltzes, mazurkas, tangos, habaneras, schottisches, and polkas took over stages, court ballrooms, and coffee barons' palaces in the upper-class neighborhoods of Catete and Botafogo. All these dances, introduced by the social elite, were soon imitated by the people and slowly fused with old colonial forms—*cateretês*, *batuques*, *lundus*, *fofas*, and *fados*. As Renato Almeida (1895–1981), a Brazilian music historian from the old

generation, pointed out, all or almost all dances were adapted to the new environment, especially their musical component, generating new forms. Imported dances, particularly polkas, became more Brazilian.¹

Such adaptation developed as popular musicians learned the music by ear, using instruments they had been playing to accompany genres such as *modinhas*, *lundus*, and *canções*. By this route, the most original small group blossomed in Brazil: the choro ensemble. From the beginning the medium featured a soloist accompanied by guitar and cavaquinho. Typically, only one of its members could read music while the others improvised an accompaniment. This is the context that allowed the creation of *choro*, a genre of instrumental music that began in Rio de Janeiro, spread far and wide from the end of the 19th century to the present day, and still thrives.²

I. Genealogy of choro

Researcher Ary Vasconcelos was the first to divide choro's trajectory into periods. In *Carinhoso e etc: história e inventário*

do choro, he says that in the late 1970s and early 1980s he decided to undertake a survey addressing about three thousand choro works.³ He organized this repertoire and its composers into six generations.

The first generation flourished in the first twenty years of the Empire, and included composers such as Antônio Callado, Chiquinha Gonzaga, Ernesto Nazareth, and Viriato Figueira.⁴ The second



Batutas. In center, Pixinguinha (saxophone).

¹ Renato Almeida, *História da Música Brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: F. Briguet Cia, 1942), 154.

² The most complete source for choro groups between 1870 and 1936 is A. Gonçalves Pinto, *O choro: Reminiscências dos chorões antigos* (Rio de Janeiro: Author, 1936).

³ Ary Vasconcelos, *Carinhoso e etc: história e inventário do choro* (Rio de Janeiro: A. Vasconcelos, 1984), 10.

⁴ The Brazilian Empire began in 1822.

generation emerged with the Republic, which, in opening a new chapter of political history in Brazil, “served as a milestone from which a new and wonderful generation of chorões [choro musicians] begins to bloom.”⁵ The preeminent representative of this period was Anacleto de Medeiros. Between 1919 and 1930, the third generation of *chorões* found its greatest interpreter in Pixinguinha. Donga, Romualdo, Luperce Miranda, Luís Americano, and Bonfiglio de Oliveira also rose to prominence at this time. Established between 1927 and 1946, the fourth generation was linked to the emergence of electric recording and the success of singers like Francisco Alves, Carmen Miranda, and Orlando Silva. Unfortunately, due to the popularity of the vocal art, instrumental musicians in these decades operated in an atmosphere non-conducive to choro, according to Vasconcelos, and hence reached only a restricted audience. The highlight of this fourth generation was the creation of choro in São Paulo with the emergence of the Colbaz orchestra and musicians such as Armandinho, among others. The second half of the 1940s was “a much friendlier phase for the genre, 1945 to 1950 being almost a small golden age.” The fifth generation of choro groups flourished then, including Quarteto Brasil (Luperce, José Meneses, Tute, Valzinho), Os Milionários do Ritmo (Djalma Ferreira, Oscar Bellandi, José Meneses, Chuca-Chuca), and Severino Araújo’s Tabajara Orchestra. This was Abel Ferreira’s and Jacob do Bandolim’s (see below) generation. As for the sixth generation, Vasconcelos writes: “We arrive in 1975...and like Sleeping Beauty, choro seems to be waking up from its long sleep. New choro groups start developing and several existing ones are revived.” The Clube do Choro (Choro Club) appeared at this time. In São Paulo, the Conjunto Atlântico and Evandro’s group were active. In Rio, Os Carioquinhos (1976) was formed and also the Chapéu de Palha ensemble.⁶

Worth noting in Vasconcelos’s periodization is the absence of a common denominator in the establishment of generations. Instead, the cohorts are delineated either by the output of composers or the activity of performers, or even by an event such as the choro festival in the 1970s. From the viewpoint of style, Vasconcelos’s classification also falls short inasmuch as his chronology does not identify or consider the possibilities of the repertoire’s expressive characteristics as manifested in its various periods. Further complicating the issue, tradition and modernity coexist continually in choro. Consequently, works from the “first generation” have remained fundamental items of the repertoire from the late 19th century to the present.



Benedito Lacerda Ensemble. From left: Meira (guitar), Canhoto (cavaquinho), Dino (guitar), Popeye (pandeiro), Benedito (flute).

II. Chorões and their earliest recordings

Phonographic technology in Brazil developed due to the pioneering activity of Frederico Figner (1866–1946). Born in Czechoslovakia but based in the United States since 1882, he arrived in Brazil in 1891. Understanding that the talking machines were destined for vast industrial and commercial use, Figner started marketing Edison’s original phonographs. Data garnered from Brazil’s earliest recordings offer a glimpse of the musical environment that had been developing since the end of the 19th century. As expected, genres performed were those typical of the chorões’ repertoire: waltzes, schottisches, quadrilles, mazurkas, polkas, tangos, as well as popular songs, *canzonettas* and *lundus*, sung by voices accompanied by guitar, piano, bands, and choro groups. Guitar played a major role in the development of the new medium of sound recording. Indicative of the instrument’s centrality is the high number of recorded songs accompanied exclusively by guitar. The instrument was also integral to the work of soloists such as Américo Jacomino and João Pernambuco, artists who began recording their compositions in the 1910s, creating works that remain part of the current repertoire. Throughout the history of recording in Brazil, guitar offered essential harmonic support to choro groups.

Newspapers published the programming of radio stations daily. On January 3, 1932, for instance, the Sunday edition of *Correio da Manhã* announced: “From 7 to 8 p.m.: Rádio Clube’s regional group presenting Pixinguinha (flute), Tute (guitar), and Luperce Miranda (cavaquinho).” The name *conjunto regional*, or simply *regional* (regional group) began to be employed around this time to refer to the typical Brazilian orchestra. Regionals accompanied *modinhas* (also

⁵ The First Brazilian Republic began in 1889.

⁶ All quotes are from Vasconcelos, 17–51.

BRAZIL'S 20TH-CENTURY CHORO ENSEMBLES: (cont.)

called *serenades*, which included *sambas-canção*), *lundus*, *maxixes*, marches, and sambas.

III. Interpretive styles

Phonograph recordings made around 1910 allow us to identify in general terms the distinctive stylistic and interpretive features of choro literature.⁷ The mechanical phase of recording (1902–27) was significant for instrumental bands and choro groups, the latter being at that time a trio formed by a solo instrument plus guitar and cavaquinho. By listening to those early recordings, one can surmise that the choro trio modeled its sound on the style of contemporary wind bands, since most choro wind players also played in those bands. As stated, the guitar fulfilled the role of sustaining harmonies behind the soloist. The cavaquinho performed a rhythmic pattern almost always without variation. The solo instrument, despite the opportunity to enunciate the theme three times—choro's formal pattern was ABACA—did so without variation.⁸

Among the numerous ensembles performing in the period, those recorded on the Odeon label, such as Chiquinha Gonzaga (flute, guitar, cavaquinho), Terror dos Facões (two flutes, guitar, cavaquinho), Grupo do Louro (clarinet, guitar, cavaquinho) and O Passos no Choro (flute, guitar, cavaquinho) deserve special mention.⁹ Albums on the Favorite label came out between 1910 and 1913, produced in Europe for Casa Faulhaber. In the series numbered 1–450004, discs were made that contained a novelty in

interpretive style—counter-singing and improvisation—practices that would later inform choro performance.

Choro Carioca was a group comprised of Irineu de Almeida, euphonium and ophicleide; Bonfiglio de Oliveira, trumpet; and the young Pixinguinha, flute; with accompaniment supplied by Pixinguinha's brothers, Leo and Otávio, guitars; and Henrique, cavaquinho. Otávio was better known as “China.” In him, we have one of the first and very rare examples of a player of seven-string guitar, which he certainly played in these recordings. Choro Carioca recorded the polka *Nininha*, as well as *Dainéia*, *Albertina*, and the tangos *São João debaixo d'água* and *Morcego*, all composed by Irineu de Almeida. In the group's *Guará* polka, a dialogue is established between melodies played on Bonfiglio's trumpet and Irineu's brass. Meanwhile, Pixinguinha's flute improvises a continuous line, overlapping the other instruments. In *Dainéia*, conversation between flute and ophicleide seems to be the genesis of the later famous counterpoint between Pixinguinha's sax and Benedito Lacerda's flute, consecrated in their 1946 recordings.

A new direction in the trajectory of choro ensembles in the early years of the 20th century was effected by a populist wave that exhorted “what is ours.” Imbued with the spirit of spreading a “truly national” identity, choros started to appear in programs with regional themes. In April 1919, in the hall of the elegant Palais Cinema, located in the center of Rio de Janeiro, the premiere of the group Os Oito Batutas took place, formed by important musicians such as Pixinguinha, flute; Donga, guitar; Jacó Palmieri, pandeiro; Nelson dos Santos Alves, cavaquinho; Otávio da Rocha Viana (“China”), guitar and voice; and others. The group was so successful that it became an attraction more popular than even the movies. In no time it became renowned as the best group in Brazilian music and toured through several of the country's states. It traveled to Paris in 1922. The next season its members were in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where they recorded several albums, reissued in CD format in Brazil in 1994.¹⁰ The group's repertoire was anything but dull. Besides playing choros they presented a theatrical variety show comprised of “sambas, challenges [*desfiados*], country songs,” according to the ads. Although the core of the group was the trio of flute, guitar, and cavaquinho, its instrumentation evolved, due mainly to an increase in members.



Canhoto Ensemble. From left: Meira (guitar), Canhoto (cavaquinho), Dino (guitar) Altamiro Carrilho (flute), Gilson (pandeiro).

⁷ I use Robert Pascal's definition of style: “A term denoting manner of discourse, mode of expression; more particularly the manner in which a work of art is performed,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.27041.

⁸ Recordings from this period can be heard at the Instituto Moreira Sales's website: discografiabrasileira.com.br.

⁹ Brazilian records made between 1902 and 1964 are listed in A. Santos, G. Barbalho, et al., *Discografia Brasileira em 78 rpm, 1902–1964* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1982).

¹⁰ See the discography at the end of this article.

IV. Choro and jazz

It is often said that choro is Brazilian jazz, and jazz is North American choro. There is even speculation about the stylistic similarity between Scott Joplin's rags and Ernesto Nazareth's tangos!¹¹ Accordingly, much criticism was directed at Brazilian groups—Pixinguinha being a frequent target—accusing them of succumbing to the influence of the foreign genre. Mário de Andrade, one of our most important Brazilian musicologists, compared the interpretation style of the aforementioned Batutas to Louis Armstrong's Hot Five:

An album to highlight is “Urubu”, brilliantly performed by Pixinguinha...It can be mentioned here that such choros (I mean, such groupings) are the Brazilian equivalent of hot-jazz, which is also often sheer instrumental joy, even when blended to the voice, and a very violent movement, truly Dionysian, as in *Chinatown, My Chinatown* and *I Got Rhythm*, foxtrots, Gershwin's second, performed by Louis Armstrong's fabulous hot-jazz. They are, so to speak, hot-choros, to which the very improvisational character of the lines and sometimes the variation process, add still more character.¹²

The term *hot* was used in reference to the music of different types of jazz bands that emphasized qualities like intensity and passion—the Dionysian element that Andrade alludes to. In the 1920s, Louis Armstrong named two of his groups Hot Five and Hot Seven. The recordings mentioned by Andrade were made by Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, one of the era's most popular jazz bands, in 1931.

If a resemblance between choro and jazz groups existed, it was probably much more in form than content. Both the Batutas and Armstrong's ensemble staged an entertaining, sung-themed show in colloquial style. In *I Got Rhythm*, a very marked quaternary beat executed in fast tempo establishes the rhythmic basis that supports the melody. In turn, the melody is presented in a succession of instrumental timbres following the initial sixteen beats of the song. Space for free improvisation then opens up, one soloist at a time—trombone, sax, clarinet, trumpet, banjo, double bass, etc.—with soloists making no explicit reference to the theme. Then a dialogue of multiple voices begins, highlighting



Dino (7-string guitar), Canhoto (cavaquinho), Jacob (bandolim), Meira (guitar).

soloists who maintain the tune's joyful atmosphere until the end.

The choro titled *Urubu Malandro* by the Batutas displays a marked pulse, sustained especially in the banjo. The melody finds voice in Pixinguinha's flute, which goes on to perform variations, almost ornaments, always working around the main theme. In Armstrong's jazz the role of instruments in the group is well defined and each improvises.

In the Batutas there is no structural principle of organization, which years later prompted a comment by Radamés

Gnattali in an interview for the newspaper *Pasquim* that the Batutas were a “mess.”

V. Recording's electric phase

The year 1927 gave birth to recording's electric phase and saw the replacement of instrumental records by vocal repertoire, which the public preferred. This change culminated in the major successes of the so-called “golden age” of Brazilian popular music, defined by the cult of great voices that produced the first popular idols. The high point of the age was the union of recording and radio, which marked the advent of a great mass communication revolution.

The multiplication of radio stations resulted in a program change: in addition to classical repertoire they began to offer popular music, opening a vast field of work for singers and players. Initially, choro groups were almost exclusively dedicated to the performance of instrumental pieces. But in the 1930s they became main accompanists for many genres of Brazilian popular song, sambas and marches in particular, performing choro only sporadically.

The most important female figure of the time was singer Carmen Miranda. She built a brilliant career on both her personality and charisma, becoming a national idol and international star. Other notable singers were her sister Aurora Miranda, Aracy de Almeida, and Linda and Dircinha Batista. During the years 1931–40 samba was the most nurtured genre, and the number of recorded marches was also significant.

It is in this context that the career of Benedito Lacerda's ensemble flourished. Formed in the late 1920s as *Gente do Morro*, it was comprised of flute, guitar, cavaquinho, and

¹¹ E.g., www.ernestonazareth150anos.com.br/works/view/158.

¹² Mário de Andrade, *Dicionário musical brasileiro* (Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 1989), 137.

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Camerata Carioca. Seated: Joel Nascimento (bandolim), João Pedro Borges (guitar), Radamés Gnattali and Maurício Carrilho (guitars). Behind: Luiz Otávio Braga (7-string guitar), Beto Cazes (pandeiro), Henrique Cazes (cavaquinho).

percussion. Soon the orientation of the group changed, with its predominance of percussion reduced in favor of a lead wind instrument and accompanimental strings. Renamed Conjunto Regional de Benedito Lacerda, it set a model of organization and sonority that endured in Brazilian music, influencing future generations. Lacerda's reconstituted group featured flute, pandeiro, two guitars, and cavaquinho. One guitar was dedicated mainly to the bass with the other in charge of chords in the mid-high range. Guitar parts were synchronized to serve a purely accompanimental role, replacing improvisation with stricter rhythmic-melodic phrasing. In Brazilian music at this time, the cavaquinho performed varied rhythmic patterns—*levadas*—which became widespread through the performances of Waldirio Tramontano, nicknamed Canhoto. In general, the ensemble's song accompaniments consisted of a flute introduction, supported by totally engaged and complementary fretted-string harmony.

Beginning in 1937, Canhoto on cavaquinho joined Dino and Meira on guitars to establish a friendship and musical partnership that was of the utmost importance in formalizing the accompaniment style of Brazilian popular music. In decades of work, they performed with major composers and artists, even recording with Chico Buarque and Marisa Monte in the 1980s. In the 1950s, Dino began to use a seven-string guitar, and his brilliant work became a model for those who wished to play the instrument.

When flutist Benedito Lacerda left the group in 1950, it was renamed Regional do Canhoto. Canhoto's ensemble

had a direct musical influence on the work of the great composer Jacob (Jacó) do Bandolim,¹³ who in 1960 created a regional that was to become famous: *Época de Ouro*. The group included Jacob, bandolim; Dino, seven-string; Benedito César Faria and Carlos Fernandes de Carvalho Leite, guitars; Jonas Pereira da Silva, cavaquinho; Gilberto d'Ávila, pandeiro; and Jorge José da Silva, percussion.

Lacerda's and Canhoto's regional groups mainly accompanied singers, but Conjunto *Época de Ouro* had a repertoire almost exclusively dedicated to the purely instrumental choro music, reflecting a reaction that had set in against the hegemony of the recently emergent bossa nova style. When Jacob created *Época de Ouro*, bossa nova's domination of the scene resulted in regional ensembles losing favor with record companies. So they went back to their original métier: choro. Even the name *regional* was jettisoned. Jacob abhorred it and named his group *Conjunto*. Radamés Gnattali, who also formed a regional, adopted a more sophisticated name, Camerata Carioca, whose performances set new paradigms in the conception and execution of choro arrangements. The reason lay in the fact that Camerata Carioca worked from scores arranged by a conductor—a diametric change from the collective participation that characterized choro's previous method of creation.

VI. Conclusion

Since its outset, the learning and perpetuation of choro has relied essentially on oral transmission, especially for cavaquinho and guitar performers. However, a few years ago an important group of Rio musicians, assembled by guitarist Maurício Carrilho and cavaquinista Luciana Rabello, created the Escola Portátil de Música (Portable Music School), dedicated to the education of a large number of young musicians in choro and other Brazilian forms. This welcome development will further fuel choro's already very vibrant trajectory in Brazil and abroad, embracing all instruments and renewing itself daily through the contributions of countless artists.

Discography

Benedito Lacerda e seu conjunto regional. *Chão de estrelas*. Odeon, 11475, 1937.

discografiabrasileira.com.br/fonograma/34311/chao-de-estrelas

Choro carioca. *Dainéa*. Favorite, 145005, 1910.

discografiabrasileira.com.br/composicao/5709/dainea

Choro Carioca. *Guará*. Phoenix, R70653, 1914.

discografiabrasileira.com.br/disco/24000/phoenix-r-70653

¹³ Jacob Pick Bittencourt (1918–69), composer, bandolim player; famous for his choro compositions.

Grupo Chiquinha Gonzaga. *Atraente*. Odeon, 120.918 B, 1914.
discografiabrasileira.com.br/fonograma/12823/atraente

Grupo O Passos no Choro. *Saudade eterna*. Odeon, 121136, 1916.
discografiabrasileira.com.br/artista/2923/grupo-o-passos-no-choro

Jacob e seu conjunto Época de Ouro. *Ingênuo*. RCA Victor, BBL 1383, 1967.
immub.org/album/vibracoes-jacob-do-bandolim-e-conjunto-epoca-de-ouro

Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra. *Chinatown, My Chinatown*. Okeh, 41534, 1931.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDKra836bJs

Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra. *I Got Rhythm*, Columbia, 2590 D, 1931.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=smVldVtQaBQ

Oito Batutas. *Urubu*. Revivendo, RVCD 064, 1994.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=petuj9UJtLw

Radamés Gnattali e Camerata Carioca. *Tributo à Jacob do Bandolim: Gostosinho*, Atlantic, BR 20.555, 1979.
immub.org/album/tributo-a-jacob-do-bandolim-radames-gnattali-e-camerata-carioca

Márcia Taborda earned a PhD in Social History, and as Visiting Fellow at the School of the Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, she recently conducted postdoctoral research on Brazilian guitar music preserved on 78-rpm recordings. As a researcher she has been granted awards from the most important Brazilian institutions. Dr. Taborda is author of the documentary *The Guitar in the City of Rio de Janeiro* (viewable on YouTube) and the book *Guitar and National Identity*. She has also recorded the guitar works of acclaimed composer Paulinho da Viola. Altogether, Dr. Taborda's research, teaching, and performing have consolidated her status as one of the preeminent guitar scholars in Brazil.



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