SOUNDBOARD

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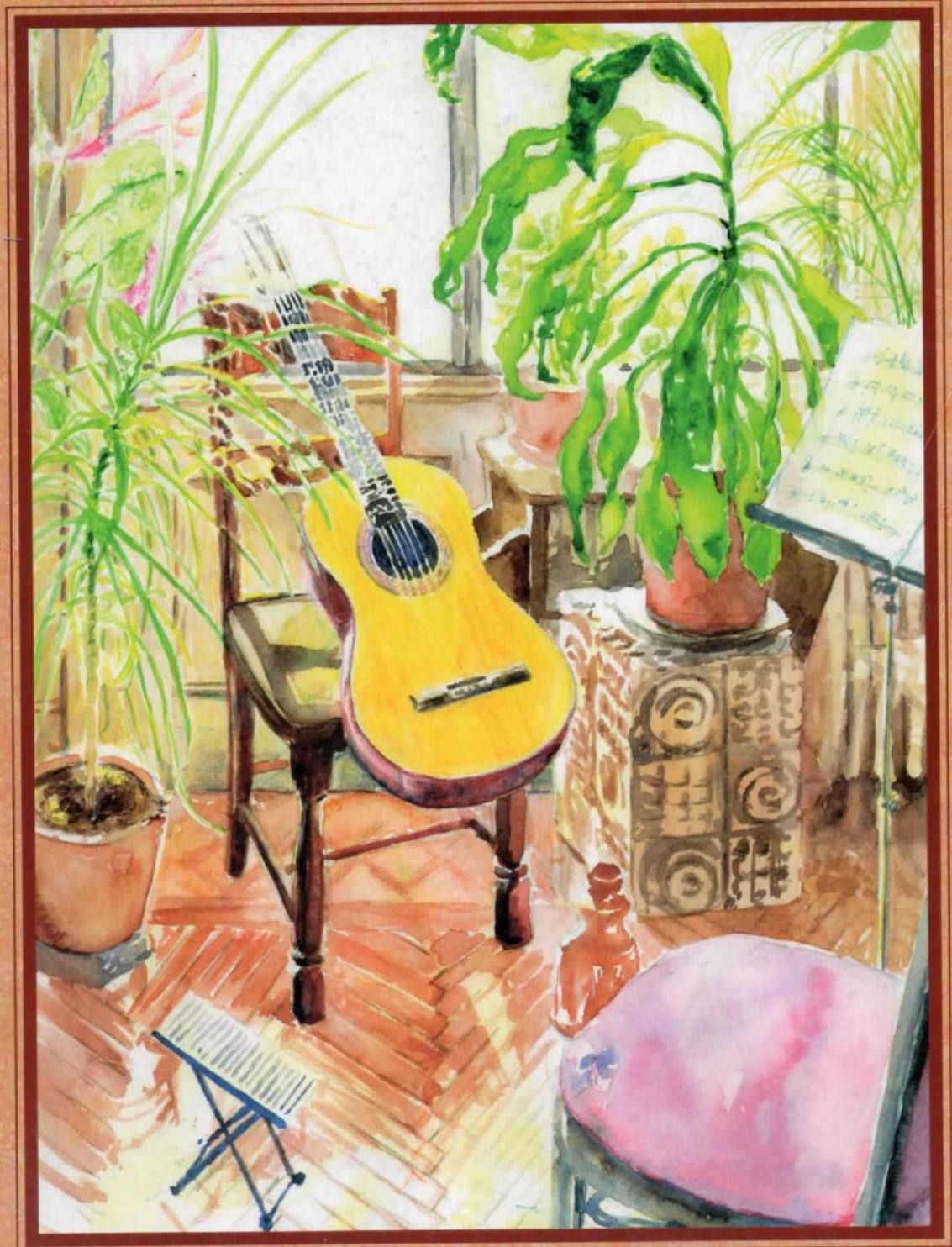

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The Birth of the Choro

by Marcia Taborda

The Roots

The guitar was introduced to Brazil in the sixteenth century under the name of *viola* or *viola de arame* (wire *viola*). It was a four-course instrument with three double strings and a single first string. In the following century, a fifth course was added and, in the second half of the eighteenth, yet another one. In this manner, it turned into a six double-string instrument. These later turned into single strings, requiring an increase in size so as to compensate for the lesser volume of sound. Thus, it became a big *viola*, named *violão* in Brazil.

Although the instrument probably arrived earlier, records of wire *violas* first appear in letters of the Jesuits, who came to Brazil in 1549 with Tomé de Souza, the first *governador geral* (general governor). It was the Jesuits who systematically brought *violas* and other European instruments into the country.

Some years later, in letters addressed to the Provincial in Portugal, Father Fernão Cardim[1] provides information on what he saw in the Jesuit missions he visited travelling across Bahia, Pernambuco, Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro and São Vicente (now São Paulo). Everywhere visitors were received by Indians, "some singing and playing in their manner," others "with a dance of shields in the Portuguese fashion, dancing to the sound of the *viola*, tambourine, tabor and flute."[2] In some villages, "schools were built, where priests taught the natives to read and write, count, sing and play music. They took everything well, and many could already play the flute, the viols, the harpsichords."[3]

Information on the *viola* in Brazil suggests that it was brought into the country in two ways: through the Portuguese settlers, most of whom belonged to the subordinate echelons of society, and through the Jesuits, who not only belonged to the dominant classes but represented the intellectual elite of the time. From a social point of view, the *viola* and the *violão*, which replaces the *viola* in urban areas from the nineteenth century onwards, already presents itself as an element through which the dominant colonial classes propagate the modern musical culture of the West to the subordinate classes, whether slaves or emancipated, and to those elements of the subordinate classes of the colony who did not belong to the two aforementioned sectors.

It should be added that the subordinate groups, in turn, began to exert their influence on the culture of the overall society at a very early stage. As the Cuban musicologist Leonardo Acosta observes in *Música y descolonización*, "since the seventeenth century, rhythms and dances such as the *zarabanda*, the *chacona*, the *fandango*, the *zambapalo* (or *samba*), the *kalinga* or *calenda*, the *tango*, the *habanera* and others, have started proliferating in Spain, very likely coming from the American colonies."[4] It is generally accepted that the *cateretê*, [5] accompanied by the wire *viola*, had been created in Brazil as early as the sixteenth century.

In the seventeenth century, we find the *viola* in the hands of Gregório de Matos,[6] who not only played the instrument but also built them. His first biographer presents to us the close ties between the guitar and the poet:

> Gregório de Matos was a very fine musician who played gracefully the best Portuguese songs, which at the time eclipsed all of Europe's. His favorite instrument was a viol, made of splinters by his curious hands, the instrument he entertained himself with during his works. He was never seen without this viol in public functions to which his friends invited him.[7]

In the poems of the "Mouth of Hell," we find one of the first references to the cavaquinho[8] in Brazil, together with the lively record of a cultural interaction process:

Ao som de uma guitarrilha,
que tocava um colomin
vi bailar na Água Brusca
as mulatas do Brasil.

Que bem bailam as mulatas,
Que bem bailam o paturi.[9]

To the sound of a small guitar,
which a little Indian boy was playing
I' ve seen dancing in Água Brusca
the mulatto women of Brazil.
How well do the mulatto women dance,
How well do they dance the paturi.

In the poem, Matos also mentions a dance named *paturi* (small wild duck), accompanied by the "cavaquinho." It is interesting to note the originality of the event: In the second half of the seventeenth century, there was, in Bahia, an urban dance with a Tupi name (the *paturi*) accompanied with an instrument of Portuguese origin (the *guitarrilha*), being played by an Indian boy (a *colomin* or *curumim*), danced by mestizos and mulatto women and watched by a "greenish-blue-eyed White"—as his biographer Manuel Pereira Rabelo describes him—who, we could well imagine, also participated in the spree with his *viola de cabaça* (calabash *viola*).

Gregório de Matos died in 1696. By that time, the use of guitars, cavaquinhos, flutes, tambourines, and a singer's accompaniment, with the employment of one, several, or all of these instruments together, was already extensive. In other words, the foundations were already set to what, in the 1870's, would be called "choro" (instrumental group).

In the eighteenth century, references to the *viola* continued to be plenty. As concerns popular music and nationality, the *modinha*, widely considered the first genre of Brazilian popular song, provides a starting point. Domingos Caldas Barbosa, a mulatto poet and *viola* player born in Rio de Janeiro from a slave mother, is the most important representative of Brazilian *modinha* in the eighteenth century. In 1770, he arrived in Lisbon, where he remained for the rest of his life. Caldas Barbosa published two collections of songs without the musical parts, the first in 1798 and the second, the *Viola de Lereno*, posthumously in 1826. Singing in Lisbon, with direct, uninhibited, and piquant lyrics, he marked—as attested by José Ramos Tinhorão, "an explicit breach not only with the old forms of song but also in the moral framework of the elites, which were represented by the messages contained in such old genres as the warlike *cantilena* (ballad)."[10]

In addition to the role they played in the development of the modinha, the mestizo *viola* players also made a fundamental contribution to the nationalization of a number of European dances that arrived here during the nineteenth century. Square dances, waltzes, mazurkas, tangos, habaneras, schottisches, and polkas took over the stages, the court ballrooms, the coffee barons' palaces in the upper-class neighborhoods of Catete and Botafogo, and all the places frequented by the "good" people. All these dances, introduced by the social elite, were soon imitated by the people and slowly fused with the old colonial forms, the *cateretês*, the *batuques*, the *lundus*, the *fofas*, the *fados*.

We quote Renato de Almeida, a reliable historian of Brazilian music:

> All or almost all (dances) adapted themselves to the new environment, especially in terms of music, generating new forms. The waltzes, the square dances, the schottisches and the polkas, particularly the polkas, became more Brazilian. We (Brazilians) created our own polka, our tango, and our round dance.[11]

But how did this adaptation develop? Popular musicians tried to learn the songs by ear, using the instruments they had, namely, the old instruments they had been using since the sixteenth century. These were the instruments used in the Jesuits' orchestra, in the *paturis* mentioned by Gregório de Matos—the flutes the Curumim Indians loved to play, caparisoned with feathers, with lip plugs in place, for the joy and pride of their parents.

The birth of choros group

This process was endowed with a symbo lic manifestation in the 1870s, when Joaquim Antonio da Silva Calado, a flute teacher in the Liceu de Artes e Ofícios, formed the Choro Carioca, an ensemble whose soloist (himself) was accompanied by the *violões* and *cavaquinhos* of popular musicians. This configuration became typical of such groups, which, in turn, established themselves as one of the pillars upon which popular music developed. The circumstances were described by conductor Batista Siqueira:

> Calado Júnior was a very active professional musician who performed in family balls and parties of all kinds. We know for sure that Calado studied passionately in order to overcome his initial difficulties and establish himself as a flutist. His programs were so eloquent and vigorous and his personality so unique that he formed in Rio de Janeiro a group named "Choro Carioca."[12]

Thus the most original small group blossomed in Brazil—Choro do Calado. From the beginning, the group had a soloist, two guitars, and a cavaquinho. Only one of its members could read music; the others were required to improvise the accompaniment. *Choro do Calado* was, therefore, a musical group—the initial connotation of the word "choro" in Brazil.

Alexandre Gonçalves Pinto, a humble postman, author of the first and until recently only book about choro, sanctions this sense given to the word: "his father was an eminent lawyer who would have the best 'choro' performed at his own house. Henriquinho (piccolo), Licca (bass horn), Goldino (cavaquinho), Felisberto (flute), Espíndola, and many others"[13] formed the capital's competent *choro.*

Besides meaning small orchestra or soirée (explicit also on the passage above), "choro" could also designate the genres played by the musicians at the soirées. Pinto, in his precious work, states: "(the group) played any easy *choro:* polka, waltz, square dance, schottisches, mazurka, *etc.*"[14] The choro's repertoire could in fact include any sort of instrumental music: "they play many American *choros* and also our own with great ease."[15]

Alexandre Gonçalves Pinto

The postman's book is almost the only and certainly the most complete source of information about the choro groups between 1870 and 1936, the year it was published. In his book, we could verify that most musicians were not registered as professionals. The norm was not the permanent group formation where instrumentalists had the habit of playing together. As a result, the accompaniment was improvised, especially because most string players, guitarists and cavaquinho players above all, did not know how to read music. When Pixinguinha, the greatest choro master, who read music, went to work at the Teatro Rio Branco around 1910, he became successful because people liked him and they liked especially the songs he came up with, since he was used to improvising in choro circles.

In these choro circles, the most valuable and appreciated accompanist's asset was the "hearing." By "hearing" we mean the ability to perceive a pitch, to have intuitions about the harmonic interlocking, to follow it in the low tones and its corresponding chords. The ability to enrich the harmony with various comments was also valued. Pinto, on almost every page, emphasizes these virtues in the artists he presents. Ventura Careca, "Famous guitar ... would not let anyone give him the key he was supposed to follow, such was his confidence in his trained ear."[16] An expression still very much in use is to say a person has "*a fine ear.*" When the accompanist could not grasp the soloist's harmony, one would say he had "fallen out" (*caído*). The expression as well as the occurrence was so common that they appeared on the titles of the polkas of the time— Viriato's "Caiu, não disse?" and Nazareth's "Não Caio Noutra."

This accompaniment technique initiated by creative musicians who played by ear had many adepts. The phenomenon was never carefully studied but the harmonizations made by this type of musician were clearly distinct from the traditional school of European harmony.

The choro's group rôle in the recording industry

Choro ensembles were put to use in phonographic recordings when, in 1902, the first disks were produced in Brazil. The ensemble was then designated as choro or, alternatively, as "group" or "ensemble." In the 1930s, a group might become known as a *conjunto regional* (regional group). As stated above, the original configuration of a choro comprised a soloistic intrument, two *violões* and one cavaquinho, with only one of the participants, the soloist, being able to read and write music. The others should be improvisers of the harmonic accompaniment, who played by ear.

The importance of these groups in the history of Brazilian popular music is immeasurable. The regional groups accompanied *modinhas,* (which were also called serenades and included *sambas-canção*), *lundus, maxixes,* marches and sambas. They also played boleros, foxes, Argentinean tangos, rumbas and even opera arias, when needed. The musicians with trained ears could come up with an arrangement for any type of music in five minutes without resorting to scores and with little rehearsal. Nobody took the sole responsibility for an arrangement—it was a collective task. Every musician

could contribute with his opinion, which was not always put into words: he would play a passage a certain way and if the others liked, accepted and followed it, the accompaniment was ready to be played at the microphone. These dynamics allowed the radio stations to flourish. They were busy places where singers of all genres would move in and out, where new singers would present all sorts of music in competitions, and where there was neither time nor money to spend in rehearsals and scores.

The *chorões*, that is, the performers of choro ensembles, were drawn almost exclusively from the lower middle classes—civil servants, especially officers of the customs, the railway system, the exchequer, the mint, the post, and municipal government public servants working in the local police force, the power plant, *etc.* The possibility of copyrighting music for sale on disks and the recording process itself led to the professionalization of various choro musicians, until then devoted to their instruments by the sheer pleasure of playing or being compensated by small fees from balls and birthday parties at family homes.

Before the establishment of Casa Edison, the first record company in Rio de Janeiro, the possibilities of making some money from music were scant, being limited to editing full scores into piano parts, working in music shops, doing orchestration jobs for foreign companies, and playing in orchestras and brass bands. It was certainly not by chance that the first hundred recordings made in Brazil had the *violão* as their single accompanist. An incipient industry had to minimize the risks involved in transforming music into a product. In the course of the subsequent widening of the job market, the *violão* marked its presence in our discography, as a solo instrument and within choro ensembles.

THE BEST ENSEMBLES

The most famous choro was called *Oito Batutas* and its first presentation happened in the elegant Palais movie theater's waiting room on April 7, 1919. The choro was formed by Pixinguinha (flute), Ernesto "Donga" dos Santos (guitar), China (vocal, guitar, piano), Nélson Alves (cavaquinho), Raul and Jacob Palmieri (guitar and tambourine, respectively), Luiz Pinto (small mandolin and rattle box) and José Alves Lima (mandolin and rattlebox).

The Oito Batutas were crowned with great success. Their performances were far from being commonplace for they presented a variety show as well. The repertoire included sambas, songs, and country tap dancing, as the advertisements proclaimed. Nevertheless, the basis was still flute, guitar and cavaquinho, headed by the patriarchs of choro.

Rio de Janeiro abounded with regional groups. A good instrumentalist always organized one for his performances. Pixinguinha (flute/sax), Dilermando Reis (guitar), Valdir Azevedo (cavaquinho), Luis Americano (clarinet) all directed regionals groups. Nevertheless, most of these groups did not last, and when they did, only one or two musicians would be kept, the others being transitory. A few long-lasting regionals with almost permanent staff existed—Rogério Guimarães (guitar) at Rádio Tupi and Dante Santoro (flute), for instance, kept the same personnel for decades—but the great, lasting regionals were not many. Besides these, the most famous were those of Benedito Lacerda (flute) and Claudionor Cruz in Rio de Janeiro. Work was more readily available in that city; the great record companies,

Os Oito Batutas

radio stations, theater companies and movie studios, the great divulgers of urban popular music were all established in Rio.

Benedito Lacerda's regional group, formed in the late 20's, was initially called Gente do Morro, a designation given by the *maxixe*'s composer Sinhô, after listening to the group's recording of the samba "No Sarguero." This group's percussion was inspired by the *escolas de samba* that began to appear at the time. Lacerda, Valdiro Frederico "Canhoto" Tramontano, Maurino, Bernardo and Doidinho were the members of Gente do Morro.

Soon after the group's orientation changed, the preponderance of the percussion was abandoned in favor of the wind and wood instruments, the old wood and string orchestra (flute, cavaquinho, and guitar). The name also changed. The new denomination was "Conjunto Regional de Benedito Lacerda." After some substitutions, the group finally settled into the formation that was to last about half a century: Lacerda (flute), Canhoto (cavaquinho), Dino (seven-string guitar) and Meira (guitar). When Benedito Lacerda retired in 1950, Canhoto became the leader of the group, which received yet another name: "Regional do Canhoto." The trio of Canhoto, Dino, and Meira remained the most important such accompaniment ensemble until Canhoto and Meira's deaths in the 1980's; they played together until the end, for fifty years.

In 1960, Jacob Pick Bitencourt, known as Jacob do Bandolim, created a regional that was to become famous: Conjunto Época de Ouro. The group consisted of Jacob (mandolin), Dino (seven-string guitar), Benedito César Faria and Carlos Fernandes de Carvalho Leite (guitars), Jonas Pereira da Silva (cavaquinho), Gilberto d'Ávila (tambourine) and Jorge José da Silva (percussion).

Above: Benedito Lacerda Ensemble
From left to right: Popeye (tambourine), Dino (guitar). Lacerda (flute), Canhoto (cavaquinho), Meira (guitar).

Below: Claudionor Cruz Ensemble

Where Lacerda and Canhoto's regional groups had been mainly invited to accompany singers, Época de Ouro had a repertoire almost exclusively dedicated to choro style music. In spite of that, each member achieved an incredible virtuosity either accompanying singers or performing instrumental choro. Nevertheless, in practice the division is the one we have noted, and this was not only true of Canhoto and Jacob's regionals. Actually, the choro groups

organized to perform choro music started to accompany singers in the 30s and played choro sporadically, because the public preferred vocal music. When Jacob created Época de Ouro, the bossa nova dominated the scene and the regional accompaniments lost favor with the record companies' directors.

The regional then returned to their original function: to play choro.

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Above: Rogério Guimarães Ensemble
Tico-Tico (cavaquinho), Guimarães (guitar), Arlindo (guitar), Not Identified.

Below: Canhoto Ensemble
Canhoto (cavaquinho), Dino and Meira (guitars), Altamiro Carrilho (flute), Orlando Silveira (accordion), Gilson (tambourine).

Endnotes

[1]Fernão Cardim (1548-1625), a Portuguese missionary, travelled through Brazil from 1583 to 1590. His *œuvre*, consisting of descriptions and letters, is priceless to Brazilian culture.

[2] Fernão Cardim, *Tratado da terra e gente do Brasil* (São Paulo, 1980), 145.

[3] *Ibid.*, 155.

[4] Acosta, 32.

[5] At the time, an Indian dance used by the Jesuits in the catechesis.

[6] The most significant poet of the Brazilian Baroque, Gregório de Matos Guerra (1633-1696) received the soubriquet "Boca do Inferno" (Mouth of Hell) due to the acerbic (and hilarious) criticisms and satires he addressed to the society of his time.

[7]Gregório de Matos, *Obra poética*, (Rio de Janeiro, 1990), II, 1263-1264.

[8] Also known as *machinho*, an instrument with four plucked strings, generally tuned to D-G-B-D; it is very popular in Portugal and Brazil, where, added to a solo instrument and a *violão*, it gave rise to the basic configuration of *choro* ensembles.

[9] Matos, II, 1263.

[10] José Ramos Tinhorão, *História social da música popular brasileira* (São Paulo, 1998), 34.

[11] Renato de Almeida, *História da música brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro, 1942), 154.

[12] Batista Siqueira, *Tres vultos históricos da música brasileira* (Guanabara, 1970), 97.

[13] Alexandre Gonçalves Pinto, *O choro: reminiscências dos chorões antigos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1936), 46.

[14] *Ibid.*, 30.

[15] *Ibid.*, 194.

[16] Pinto, 117.

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