

MACUNAÍMA OUT OF THE WOODS: THE INTERSECTION OF MUSICOLOGY AND ETHNOMUSICOLOGY IN BRAZIL

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I would like to propose an interpretation of the development of Brazilian musicology and ethnomusicology in the 20th century by using a metaphor derived from one of the seminal works in the Brazilian literary tradition: *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter* (Macunaíma, the hero without character), a fantastic mixture of novel and mythology written by Mário de Andrade (1893–1945), who was at once a musicologist, ethnomusicologist, poet, and cultural instigator.¹ The figure of Mário de Andrade is indispensable for understanding how Brazilian musicology and ethnomusicology (and, by extension, Brazilian culture in general) developed during the 20th century. This is particularly true because Andrade embraced wholeheartedly the cultural and intellectual syncretism that has characterized Brazilian culture throughout history, and endeavored to impress his views on music, nationalism, and cultural identity on Brazilian composers of the first half of the 20th century. I thought it appropriate, then, to use one of Andrade's most influential works as a metaphor for the parallel developments of Brazilian musicology and ethnomusicology, and for understanding the mutual influences between these two disciplines as they evolved within the context of Brazilian culture.

Macunaíma was published six years after the Semana de Arte Moderna in São Paulo (1922), which was the crucial event for launching Brazil into the modernist scene. Mário de Andrade himself was one of the main organizers and participants in the Semana de Arte Moderna, during which the works of Villa-Lobos were for the first time presented to a wider audience in Brazil. As the preeminent Brazilian composer, Villa-Lobos was becoming, by then, extremely influential as a musical and cultural ambassador of Brazil. He had just returned from a sojourn in Paris, and upon arriving back in Brazil he became involved in promoting and disseminating modernism in Brazil. By that time, Mário de Andrade had already achieved prominence as one of the most

¹ Written in 1927, in a creative frenzy that lasted six days, *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter* was initially published in 1928 by the Oficinas Gráficas de E. Cupolo in São Paulo. Only 800 copies were printed.

important cultural figures in Brazil, a role that is succinctly outlined in a recent article on his influence on Brazilian music:

As the undisputed leader of cultural modernism in Brazil, Mário de Andrade labored to define a vision to which artists could adhere, through generations and ensuing trends, and claimed that actualizing postwar European models of constructive modernist tendencies could make possible a similar renovation of Brazilian culture. When investigating the cultural production he influenced, it is difficult to isolate any particular dimension of Andrade's diversified perspective, but his vision narrowed gradually to two distinct and necessary emphases: 1) an ideological focus on Brazil's current social reality; and 2) the use of pure and essential native resources to achieve a unique nationalist aesthetic. The two platforms combined to form a new expressive stimulus, and a representational *brasilidade* (Brazilianism) became, for the musical modernist, the only legitimate inspiration for creative expression.²

The story of Macunaíma, this “hero without character”, dramatizes important issues in the process of formation of Brazilian cultural identity. Macunaíma was born deep in the Amazon jungle, during a silence so profound and so frightful, that it caused him to be born a very ugly child, as his mother was terrified by that silence. Very soon, Macunaíma began to display some interesting traits of character. He was a lively child, often mischievous and suspicious, and began to explore his world in rather unorthodox ways. At some point, one of the older Indians in his tribe gave him a stone, called *muiraquitã*, which was supposed to embody all the history and traditions of the culture in which he lived. That stone was later stolen by a mercenary and brought to São Paulo, the city in Brazil that most clearly symbolizes the cosmopolitan, hence civilized, environment. Macunaíma then decided to go to São Paulo in order to recover the *muiraquitã* and bring it back to its original context, thus reversing the colonization process, in which people usually go from the city to the jungle; in his quest, Macunaíma made a journey from the jungle to the city. On his way to the city, Macunaíma decided to leave his consciousness behind, because he imagined that he would not need it there. When he finally reached the city and recovered the *muiraquitã*, he underwent a series of remarkable transformations. In one of these fantastic metamorphoses, he became blue-eyed and blond after bathing in a lake. Then, his fellow tribesmen, seeing that astonishing transformation, decided to bathe themselves in the same lake in which Macunaíma had bathed, hoping to achieve the same results. But by then, the water was already tainted by Macunaíma's own color, and all they could achieve was a nondescript dirty blondness. After recovering the *muiraquitã*, Macunaíma returned to the jungle, only to realize that he was completely changed. He no longer understood his culture in the same way that he did before. He felt mutilated (and, in fact, he was mutilated by some fish who ate parts of his body), but a very old Indian woman eventually repaired his mutilated body and restored it to its former integrity as best as she could. However, Macunaíma was no longer satisfied with his sense of self, or no longer recognized him completely as himself. As compensation for his troubles and his mutilated self, he was then transformed into a constellation and, before he set out to occupy his permanent place in the firmament, he made a cryptic remark: he had not been brought into the world to be a stone.

² Sarah Hamilton-Tyrell, “Mário de Andrade, mentor: Modernism and musical aesthetics in Brazil, 1920–1945”, *The musical quarterly* 88/1 (2005) 8.

The predicament of Macunaíma, a hero without character who did not come into the world to be a stone, offers several interesting images and symbols through which one can approach the development of Brazilian musicology and ethnomusicology. In many ways, Brazilian musicology is still reenacting Macunaíma's journey, the process of coming out of the jungle and going to the city. Musicology, as a systematic discipline, is relatively recent in Brazil. Currently, there are only roughly a dozen graduate programs in Brazilian institutions devoted exclusively to musicology. This is a very odd situation, given the strong musical traditions of the country, both in the fields of art music and popular music, and most especially, the rich heritage of Brazil's traditional music. Mário de Andrade was the first to recognize that this very rich stratum of traditional music in Brazil should be tapped by art music composers, and his lifelong advocacy of nationalism as the defining compositional trend in Brazilian art music was a direct result of his beliefs. In part inspired by Andrade's views, some academic institutions began collecting, cataloguing, and preserving the traditional music of Brazil through several projects implemented during the first half of the 20th century. The most important of these projects was the Missão de Pesquisas Folclóricas (Committee on Folk Research), which was organized by Mário de Andrade in São Paulo in 1938. As part of the Missão, several musicologists, writers, technicians, cultural historians, and other scholars traveled through the north and northeast of the country, two regions that were considered to be the most important reservoirs of Brazil's traditional music, and which at the time retained a faintly exotic appeal. During their travels, the researchers collected and transcribed approximately 1500 traditional melodies, and documented traditional music practices in more than 600 photographs and several films.³ Before the Missão was created, Andrade himself had gone twice to the north and northeast of Brazil to collect and record traditional music, and some of this material was incorporated into his books and articles on the development of Brazilian music.⁴ His example encouraged composers to focus on similar research as a means of creating new cultural parameters within which to compose. Several composers took this lead in varying degrees, and sporadic research continued on several fronts, merging with important precedents, such as Villa-Lobos's trips to the north and northeast in the first decade of the 20th century, and Camargo Guarnieri's trip to Salvador, Bahia, in 1936, to observe the local culture.

In bringing these three names together—Mário de Andrade, Villa-Lobos, and Camargo Guarnieri—I want to establish a framework for reflecting on the intersection of composition, musicology, and ethnomusicology in Brazil. These three disciplines have developed in tandem throughout much of the history of Brazilian music in the 20th century, and they remain strongly related to this day. The development of Brazilian musicology was the result of increasing consciousness about the validity of the country's folk traditions. Furthermore, the inevitable merging of art music and traditional music in the works of so many Brazilian composers once again points to this ongoing interdependence among these three disciplines.

³ Some of this material was copied by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., in 1940 and is now part of its archives as well.

⁴ Andrade's extensive travels were chronicled through his column "O Turista Aprendiz" (The apprentice tourist), published in the *Diário nacional* in São Paulo. The column served to introduce the urban population of Brazil to the lifestyle of the several indigenous populations that Andrade encountered in his travels. One of the direct products of his explorations was the groundbreaking study *Ensaio sobre a música Brasileira* (São Paulo: I. Chiarato, 1928).

In 1937, a little before the inception of the Missão de Pesquisas Folclóricas, the German émigré Hans-Joachim Koellreutter (1915–2005) arrived in Brazil and began to establish a school of composition based on the latest European trends, particularly serialism. Koellreutter soon attracted the attention of several young Brazilian composers, and a conflict emerged between those composers who embraced a more traditional, nationalist school of composition, and the younger generation who favored a more cosmopolitan and avant-garde style. That conflict came to a high pitch in 1950, when Camargo Guarnieri published his famous *Carta aberta aos músicos e críticos do Brasil*, in the influential periodical *O Estado de São Paulo*. The main argument of the letter is summarized in this excerpt:

In this document, I want to alert you of the great threats to the musical culture of Brazil, due to our young composers' infatuation with progressive theories of music that are inimical to the true interests of Brazilian music.... These composers preferred to ignore the rich musical traditions of Brazil and produce music according to false and sterile aesthetic principles ... that favor improvisation and charlatanism, pseudo-science instead of original research, and scorn talent, culture, and the exploration of the rich experiences of the past, which are the bases of the true work of art.⁵

Throughout the letter, Guarnieri wrote very forcefully and critically about what he perceived to be a mistake on the part of the younger generation who embraced a school of composition which he saw as ideologically empty. He specifically stated that serialism and dodecaphonism represented the last resort of composers whose cultures had been impoverished by a continuous neglect of their folk traditions. Since their local traditions had become inert, reasoned Guarnieri, those composers inevitably embraced serialism as an acceptable alternative. Later, Guarnieri regretted the militant tone of the letter and would have undoubtedly toned it down after a less impassioned consideration of the matter, but the document's almost belligerent tone arose a great deal of controversy and continued to reverberate for many years afterwards. Ironically, after the initial passions had calmed down, Guarnieri himself adopted serial procedures in some of his works from the 1960s and 1970s, mingling those techniques with a musical vocabulary that was distinctly Brazilian.

Mário de Andrade was one of the main forces behind Guarnieri's wholesale embrace of nationalism as a compositional aesthetic. This interplay between composition and musicology is important. If one conceives of musicology as an analytical discipline, one that provides rational explanations about how musical works are constructed, it seems inevitable that the nature of the musicological discourse will be conditioned to some extent by the nature of the material it addresses, in a process more or less explicit depending on matters of methodology, ideological premises, or scholarly parameters. This multilayered approach can be discerned in the nature and scope of musicological publications in Brazil, a large percentage of which is concerned with the proper

⁵ "Através deste documento, quero alertá-los sobre os enormes perigos que, neste momento, ameaçam profundamente toda a cultura musical brasileira, devido ao fato de muitos dos nossos jovens compositores estarem se deixando seduzir por falsas teorias progressistas da música que são contrárias aos verdadeiros interesses da música brasileira.... Estes compositores preferem ignorar as ricas tradições musicais do Brasil, seguindo falsos princípios estéticos ... e instituindo a improvisação, o charlatanismo, a meia-ciência como substitutos da pesquisa, do talento, da cultura, do aproveitamento racional das experiências do passado, que são as bases para a realização da arte verdadeira." Originally published in *O Estado de São Paulo*, 7 November 1950; reprinted in Flávio Silva, ed., *Camargo Guarnieri: O tempo e a música* (Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Oficial/FUNARTE, 2001) 143–45.

analytical tools that can do justice to the specific language of Brazilian composers. This nationalist bent of musicology, to borrow a concept from compositional practice, can also be detected in the scholarly production of many other countries in which art music evolved in close connection with the preservation of traditional practices.

In the case of Brazil, the rhapsodic nature of the narrative of Macunaíma's life, with all the fantastic transformations and the constant shifts between the context of the jungle and the context of the city—that is to say, between the “unrefined” and the “civilized”—is similar to the paths followed by musicology and ethnomusicology in Brazil. In the same manner that a composer like Villa-Lobos, for example, felt compelled to merge Western art music with the specific elements of Brazilian folk traditions, Brazilian musicology today endeavors to adapt methodological premises derived from European conceptions of the discipline to the specific nature of Brazilian music. This approach informs most of the analytical studies about Brazilian composers and their music, and has been favored for much of the history of Brazilian musicology. Although it inevitably requires some methodological and analytical compromises, it derives its efficacy from the fact that, no matter how nationalistically inclined a composer may be, no one creates in a vacuum. Conceptions of musical form based on European compositional practices are widely emulated in Brazilian works, but judgments of excellence and accomplishment related to these practices must be qualified in light of the distinct musical language to which they are applied. The other alternative in Brazilian musicology is to develop a methodology based directly on the vocabulary and techniques of Brazilian music. One example of such approach can be found in the guidelines for the musicology program at the Conservatório Brasileiro de Música in Rio de Janeiro, which clearly states that the main purpose of the program is to develop specific methods and parameters for the study of Brazilian music. It is not its sole purpose, but unquestionably the main goal. The guidelines go on to state that the program also focuses on developing performance practices that would be appropriate to the interpretation of Brazilian music. This seems to reinforce the notion that the nature of the musical material calls for specific musicological parameters and methodologies, both theoretical and practical. If this methodological framework is applied to Brazilian music, it will inevitably create a situation in which musicology cannot be wholly separated from ethnomusicology, since a substantial part of Brazilian art music is deeply indebted to the folk traditions of the country. Specific folk materials are often fully embedded in the musical work, and therefore must be taken into consideration whenever that work is analyzed or interpreted.

Brazilian art music itself has been perceived, for many years, as somewhat exotic, representing a musical heritage that has evolved in the periphery of European music history. This repertoire is too easily heard as being informed by strange rhythms and melodies, difficult to account for or explain in light of standard parameters. This penchant for labeling Brazilian art music as “exotic” (which I call the “Carmen Miranda syndrome”) has been a very contentious issue for Brazilian composers. It represents a superficial kind of folklorization and exoticism, from which Brazilian composers, musicologists, and ethnomusicologists have tried to disengage themselves. There is no justification for labeling the use of Brazilian traditional music by Villa-Lobos as “exotic”, while the use of Russian folk melodies by Stravinsky is not labeled as such. There may have been a time when the novelty of such borrowings—both by Villa-Lobos or Stravinsky—could have been perceived as exotic, but now they are simply understood as part of the creative process of these composers. It remains true, however, that the ostentatiously exuberant

and overtly rhapsodic style of some of Villa-Lobos's greatest works, for example, cannot be adequately explained by applying traditional musicological and analytical methods. Strict adherence to such principles would inevitably lead to the conclusion that his works are less than accomplished, a judgment that would be patently absurd. Perhaps one should take a lead from Villa-Lobos himself when discussing his music. In 1970, the scholar Adhemar Nóbrega, who was a close friend of Villa-Lobos, presented a lecture entitled "The transfiguration of popular expression in the production of Villa-Lobos", in which he revealed a classification system devised by Villa-Lobos himself, who imparted it to Nóbrega in 1947. In this system, the composer divided his works into five groups, based on the relative importance of elements derived from or influenced by folk music: (1) works with indirect folk influence; (2) works with some direct folk influence; (3) works with transfigured folk material; (4) works with transfigured folk material but permeated by the influence of Bach; and (5) works written in a universal language devoid of folk material. One interesting feature of this classification is that it transcends chronological boundaries, as works from each group can be found throughout Villa-Lobos's career. This division is also significant in light of the fundamental dialectic between nationalism and universalism in Villa-Lobos's works, and which can be extended to any Brazilian composer who has embraced a nationalist aesthetic.

The perception of Brazilian art music as being exotic and fundamentally distinct from European musical cultures was sometimes fostered by Brazilian composers themselves. Among these was Villa-Lobos, who often talked about his music as a reflection of the tropical exuberance of Brazil. When he traveled abroad, he was fond of recounting his particular relationship to the Brazilian folklore, in a rhapsodic manner that recalls Macunaíma's narrative style. Often, when asked about the influence of Brazilian folklore on his music he would reply: "I am the Brazilian folklore". Such statements inevitably influenced the analysis of his music, as analysts focused on elucidating the traces of the Brazilian folklore embodied in Villa-Lobos's music, to the detriment of more cosmopolitan aspects that were equally important in shaping his style. On other occasions, in interviews preserved for posterity, he would state that, during his research trips in the Amazon he was captured and almost eaten by the local Indians, although these stories were never proved true in any way.

This same rhapsodic penchant can be found in some of the musicological and ethnomusicological discourse in Brazil. In recent conferences and symposia on musicology and ethnomusicology in Brazil, it is still common to stress the need to arrive at a scholarly methodology for both disciplines within the context of Brazilian academia. Coming at this late stage in the development of these disciplines elsewhere, such injunctions suggest that there is a need for countering a tendency towards rhapsodic discourse, the Macunaíma style of verbal narrative.

Macunaíma's symbolic journey from the jungle to the city is similar to the dual journey of Brazilian musicology and ethnomusicology, because Brazilian scholars are still responding to the need to balance universal parameters and methodologies with the individual flavor of Brazilian music. Ideally, it should be possible to recognize the validity of a highly distinctive musical tradition, one that does not necessarily have to be bathed in a magical lake (to borrow the metaphor of Macunaíma's transformation) and metamorphose itself into a blond, blue-eyed creature that is essentially foreign and whose identity is incomprehensible to its compatriots.

The development of Brazilian musicology and ethnomusicology, therefore, has been characterized by the inextricable mutual influences between these two disciplines. The status of Brazilian music as an independent and autonomous repertoire, worthy of study because of its very specificity, has increased and the label of exoticism has long been discredited in the scholarly literature. One sign that perceptions have changed is the evaluation of the work of major Brazilian composers by the international community. Today, no one would apply to Villa-Lobos's or Camargo Guarnieri's output, for example, the kind of ideologically tainted analyses that were still common in the first half of the 20th century. An important event in this changing of perception was Aaron Copland's tour of Brazil in the mid 1940s. He went to Bahia and, from there, traveled south through several states. He became acquainted with the music of Camargo Guarnieri, and wrote in surprise about the existence of such a thriving art music tradition in the country. He obviously did not expect that Brazil had anything of consequence to offer in the field of art music. Upon his return to the United States, he wrote in *The New York times* about the musical contacts he had in Brazil and praised the vitality of the country's musical scene.⁶

Returning to the subtitle of Andrade's book—"The hero without character"—and to the fact that Macunaíma did not come into the world to be a stone, it should be pointed out that Andrade was very specific about the subtitle of his book. He made it clear that the subtitle did not carry any judgmental or moral connotation, but was rather intended in the sense of something still undefined, unformed, and that did not color yet one's entire being. He compared it to a young person whose personality traits may all be there but cannot be clearly pinpointed or identified. The person needs to mature in order for these characteristics to emerge as defining features of one's personality. On the other hand, Macunaíma did not come into the world to be a stone, with all the implications of rigidity, contour, and well-defined boundaries. This seems to point to an ingrained characteristic of Brazilian culture, the relish of improvisation and exploration, of fluid boundaries that can be perpetually transformed through spontaneous growth and sheer exuberance.

It seems to me, then, that all the analytical, methodological, and academic parameters of musicology and ethnomusicology in Brazil are still in transformation, and if Macunaíma is definitely out of the woods, he may not have arrived fully in the city. And in the course of his journey, he has consciously ignored some events or dismissed some problems that have already been addressed and resolved for him. There are things that Brazilian musicologists and ethnomusicologists will not do, because these things have already been done for them. In the future, it will be interesting to see how and when Macunaíma fully conquers the city, the urban jungle that harbors as many problems as the jungle from which he came, but problems of a different kind, requiring different solutions.

⁶ Aaron Copland, "Composer's report on music in South America," *The New York times* (21 December 1947).

