

HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

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I have often heard it said that Villa-Lobos wrote too much music and the implication is that he never made time to construct a masterpiece!

But prolific outputs are known throughout the history of music and it could be said that people such as Haydn and Mozart produced so much so that not all of it is of the highest standard or appeal. Villa-Lobos would say that composition was not necessarily inspiration but a therapeutic necessity. If he did not compose he was ill. He simply had to write music.

Villa-Lobos was an ordinary man. It may be true to say that he was quaint or homely. He was not an arrogant man but a very hard-working musician. He pottered around his house with his hair all over the place, wearing curious slippers and often with an overweight cigar in his mouth. He also had domestic skills and one of the few composers who had a winning personality that both made and kept friends.



His mother, Noemia Umbelina was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1859 whereas his father, Raul, was born in 1862. Their marriage took place in 1884. Their first child, Bertha, known as Lulucha, was born in 1885. Heitor was born on the 5th March 1887 the year before slavery was abolished in Brazil. Carmen, nicknamed Bilita, was born in 1888. On 17th January 1889 Carmen and Heitor were baptised at Sao Jose Church in Rio de Janeiro. Later that year Brazil was declared a republic.

Raul was a scholar. He had to give up medical study owing to a lack of money and became a librarian. Sadly, he died young contracting malaria in 1899. Nineteen years later Heitor's electrician brother, Othon, died at the age of twenty one.

Heitor's first works, both for voice and piano, "Os sedutores" and "Dime Perche" appeared around 1900.

He entered Pedro II College on 3rd April 1901. Over the next few years he composed short songs and piano pieces and the Comedia Lirica. He attended the Instituto Nacional de Musica in Rio de Janeiro during 1906/7 and in 1910 took lessons with Agnelo Franca and Francisco Braga.

In 1912, his first substantial work, the Piano Trio no. 1 Op. 12, appeared. Between 1912/13 he earned his living by playing the cello. He was greatly influenced by the Ballet Russes' first visit to Rio de Janeiro in 1913. Later that year he married Lucilia Guimaraes and they lived in the house of her brothers. She was born on 26th May 1886 and was a teacher, a pianist and became a notable interpreter of her husband's music.

Villa-Lobos first concerto, the Cello Concerto no. 1, Op. 50 appeared in 1915 and on the last day of July his Suite Caracteristica for string orchestra was his first concert work to be performed in public. It was conducted by Braga. On the 13th November that year Villa-Lobos organised a concert of his own music.

The year 1916 was significant. It saw the completion of the String Quartet no. 2, Op. 56 and the String Quartet no. 3, the Sonata no. 2 for cello and piano and the Symphony no. 1, given the opus number of 112 in one catalogue, and subtitled O Imprevisto.

The first movement is leisurely but interesting with an occasional sinister feel about it. It is also lugubrious at times and pervaded by a melodic nullity. There is some very impressive orchestration which is incredibly well-balanced; it is full and fine but never thick or turgid. A slow movement of mystery and thoughtfulness follows. It evokes a peaceful but radiant day showered with musical iridescence. But despite its beauty it

does not get anywhere. It has more melodic nullity or, if you prefer to say, an endless melodic line. The third movement is a fun piece, light-hearted, playful, indeed mischievous. It is entertaining but never brash or vulgar. The finale does not come off. Is it an allegro or a slow andante? As often the case in Villa-Lobos' music there is a violin solo of great beauty but the music is ramshackle, bits and pieces, and it is not cohesive as a whole. Eventually it does try to break free.

The String Quartet no. 4 of 1917 is among his finest quartets. It shows a few influences of his native Brazil; the opening leisurely Allegro is full of both melody and expression. The slow movement is both restful and therapeutic and quotes from his ballet Uirapuru. The scherzo is sheer delight full of virtuosity and wit and it has also a strange feel of innocence. The finale is in classical form and its directness makes it all the more endearing.

The year 1917 was the year that Villa-Lobos became acquainted with the music of Stravinsky. One wonders whether the Russian composer's love of Paris influenced Villa-Lobos to find the pull of Paris irresistible. At this time Villa-Lobos was playing the cello in the Odeon Movie House and studying the orchestral treatises of Berlioz and D'Indy. He also produced three major orchestral works namely Amazonas, Uirapuru and Naufrago de Kleonikes.

The symphonies numbered 3 to 5 are a trilogy of war symphonies respectively called War, Victory and Peace. They were all begun in 1919.

The Symphony no. 4 is a splendid piece. At times, robust and, at other times, it has a childlike innocence and a folkstyle feel. The brief flutes and piccolo passage is unique in symphonic literature both startling and scintillating. There are tolling bells and a medieval brass texture which add to this rich tapestry of colour. It is brave music. The horn writing is stunning. The second movement has an uncertainty. Perhaps it is prophetic. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 did not conclude the problems following the German surrender. The French national anthem has a brief airing recalling the composer's love of France, and Paris in particular, and the music is busy with high piercing and very exciting woodwind, military brass, but not of the pompous sort or Shostakovich's machine gun fire variety, and swirling strings. There is a terrific tension. The peaceful moments still retain strength and integrity and has a beauty that occasionally hints at Brazil. The final chord is startling. The third movement emerges from the depths. A long oboe solo reminds me that Villa-Lobos was once asked, "Which instrument can't you play?", "Oh, I only can't play the oboe", was his response. The movement is a kind of sad processional evoking for me a picture of sad returning refugees. Here is true nostalgia undamaged by Edwardian pomp and nauseating sentimentality. The finale begins with a fanfare figure on muted trumpets. The music is subdued at first with a soaring violin melody of tremendous elegance. After all, victory brings peace and the subjugation of the enemy. I have often wondered whether Shostakovich knew these symphonies since in his own symphonies numbered 6 to 12 there are so many similarities with the Villa-Lobos trilogy. This finale introduces a perkiness and joy.

As we know from the music of Elgar and Walton triumphant music is not necessarily joyous music. Villa-Lobos's music is never over the top. All is in control. The final fugato begins on the brass and eventually gives the xylophonist an opportunity to shine. The end is sudden and makes for something of an anticlimax and with this in mind I have to say that this movement does not therefore come off. While I value the composer not going in for the kill or the overkill I think he has erred in the other direction.

Between 1920 and 1922 Felix Weingartner conducted music by Wagner in Rio de Janeiro and included two works by Villa-Lobos, Naufrago de Kleonikes and Danca Frenetica. Weingartner was an Austrian conductor well respected and admired who had the distinction of studying with Liszt. Weingartner wrote a treatise on conducting, seven symphonies, two concertos, five string quartets and a fascinating autobiography. He was noted for his Beethoven.

Following this the next distinguished visitor to Rio de Janeiro was Richard Strauss who conducted some of his own works.

In 1922 Villa-Lobos obtained a grant from the Brazilian government for a years study in Paris where he lived between 1923–24. At the beginning of 1927 he settled there again. On the 15th February 1924 he conducted a concert of his music in Paris. He did likewise in Lisbon in March and in Brussels in April. On 30th May he premiered his Nonetto in the Salle des Agriculteurs in Paris.

He was befriended by the French composer Darius Milhaud when the Frenchman was a secretary at the French embassy. It is curious that both composers wrote 12 symphonies (as well as Milhaud composing six little symphonies) and 17 string quartets although technically Milhaud wrote 18 but numbers 14 and 15 can be played together as a String Octet; they both wrote two cello concertos and a harp concerto. Milhaud wrote a Brazilian piece, *Saudades do Brazil* which was about the time he first met Villa-Lobos.

Arthur Rubinstein also befriended the Brazilian composer and championed some of his piano music.

Back in Brazil he began to compose his second two works in a series called Choros. He was to write sixteen works under this title between 1920 and 1945. Choros no. 10 for chorus and orchestra is a work of stunning beauty. It dates from 1925. Incidentally, the numbers do not conform to a chronological order. The first two to be written are known as numbers 2 and 7; the second two are numbers 4 and 10 and so on.

Villa-Lobos met Stokowski, Albert Wolff, Edgard Varèse and Florent Schmitt around 1927. In the following November Stokowski conducted Villa-Lobos' *Dancas Caracteristica Africanas* in Philadelphia and New York. It was probably the first time North American had heard any music from South America. Florent Schmitt thought highly of Villa-Lobos's music.

During 1929 he worked on *Momoprecoce*, a fantasia for piano and orchestra premiered at the Salle Pleyel, Paris, on 23 February 1930 with the Brazilian pianist Magda Tagliaferro as soloist. She had an amazing career but probably only remembered today for her recording of Saint-Saëns Piano Concerto no. 5 ('The Egyptian') under the direction of Jean Fournet in 1953. Born in 1893 she studied with Cortot and was still giving concerts when she was in her nineties. She was a legend in her lifetime but now, sadly, forgotten. She died in 1986. It is curious to note that Villa-Lobos did not write his Piano Concerto no. 1 until 1945.

They returned to Brazil in the middle of 1930 where he began his series of works under the title *Bachianas Brasileiras*. There are nine in all and they intentionally combine contrapuntal music in the spirit of Bach with Brazilian elements. *Bachianas Brasileiras* no. 2 of 1930 is famous for the movement *The Little Train of the Caipira* and *Bachianas Brasileiras* no. 5 of 1938 is also highly regarded. It is scored for soprano and eight cellos. The recording with Anna Moffo is highly recommended.

The October revolution of 1930 in Brazil lead to his increased interest in nationalist and cultural matters. Choral music became very important to him.

In 1932 the government made choral singing in municipal schools mandatory. Villa-Lobos was made the head of SEMA, head of musical education. He was in full time employment and had a regular wage packet. For a year he had the Villa-Lobos orchestra but lack of sponsorship caused it to cease.

But 1936 brought trauma. He attended the First International Congress for Musical Education in Prague and returned home to Brazil stopping in Berlin and Barcelona. Things were not happy at home and in May he left his wife. A few wilderness years follow. But his sights are set upon North America as a vehicle for his music and its promotion. *New York Skyline* for orchestra appeared in 1940. His American debut in Los Angeles in 1944 was not successful. He had to wait another eleven years for recognition in North America. But it was the year of his *Symphony* no. 6, his first symphony for twenty four years.

The opening movement is an *allegro non troppo* which moves at a moderate pace. The piece teems with ideas. Perhaps too many. The solo brass have a lion's share of melodic content. The very opening of the symphony suggests another well-known piece and we can detect some French influence within its pages, a

cross between glimpses of Debussy and Ravel. The climaxes are short-lived but momentarily brilliant. It must be remembered that Villa-Lobos loved Paris. There is a marvellous sense of musical argument although, as with most of Villa-Lobos's music, there is no clear sense of form as you would enjoy in Beethoven. The *lento* opens wistfully but it is good to record that none of his slow movements are weak or anaemic. There is a curious yearning with a constant upward sigh. Again there is no obvious development or structural clarity and episodic music can be disconcerting. But a good performance will yield to its many delights particularly in the final minutes which combines a strange beauty with a dark realism. The performance I have conducted by the usually reliable Antal Dorati misses the emotional content. The *allegretto quasi animato* is a typical fun movement with cascading notes, heraldic trumpets and an infectious vigour. But the music subsides and Villa-Lobos is afraid to be extrovert. This is a curious feature in much of his music. There is a splendid snarling end. The finale is a conflict and of all sorts of things, style and musical language included. There is a sense of elan, horn calls implying summons, warm and tender string writing and a tautness and, at times, an intimate chamber music feel. And, although many writers talk about the regular Brazilian influence in 'all' his music, which is not obvious to me, there are glimpses of that rhythmic energy here. But the music subsides again to profound *cor anglais* playing which is decidedly wistful with engaging descending triplet figures. There is a robust end. This is clearly a war symphony and among his very best.

He began a cordial friendship with Arminda d'Almedia, known as Mindinha, who was to become known as Arminda Villa-Lobos. She was born in Rio de Janeiro on 26th July 1912.

He founded the Conservatorio Nacional de Canto Orfeonico in 1942 and the Brazilian Academy of Music in 1942.

Intensity may be the best adjective to describe the String Quartet no. 9 of 1945. The scherzo is not a lightweight piece but highly complex. The slow movement is beyond words. Musicologists will want to be noseey and try to discover why it is so intense. But does it matter? The music is a class of its own. The complex finale is the work of a very clever mind. But we must not dismiss it as mere cerebral music. Its emotive and communicative skills are evident. By contrast the String Quartet no. 11 of 1948 is lighter and neo-classical in style. It ends with a very tender movement but marvel at the virtuosity that precedes it!

The first major illness was to strike him in 1948. He was admitted to hospital for an operation for cancer of the bladder. But he still composed at every opportunity and 1950 saw the completion of the Symphony no. 8. His large output of music for guitar is important and his Guitar Concerto was completed in 1951. The following year he chose the Hotel Bedford in Paris for his European headquarters, conducted the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and completed the Piano Concerto no. 4 and the Symphony no. 10.

In my view, this symphony is dreadful. It is subtitled *Sume Pater Patrium* and is a substantial work lasting just over an hour. The opening movement is curious with so many diverse elements which seem unrelated and these diversities happen in a short space of time. And the music is therefore episodic and in seemingly various styles. There are brief moments of drama, snatches of quasi-epic music, passages of tenderness and of grandeur with strong horn themes but still this pervading melodic nullity. There are glimpses of clever counterpoint, some humour and some banality making the music cheap and seedy. A distant fanfare opens the second movement which is followed by a glorious oboe theme the type emulated by Hollywood composers to depict a forlorn landscape. The wordless chorus briefly enters with ethereal music and a tremendous atmosphere is evoked. As the title suggests it has a religious feel but not particularly Catholic as presumably intended, but a Red Indian chant. The second choral entry seems to evoke a funeral procession. The tenor soloist briefly appears and the subsequent orchestral section is busy. The prospect of an howling gale or storm does not materialize and the women's voices enter. When the male voices enter it sounds like a Russian nationalistic song sung at full belt. A tenor solo with strange cries from the chorus which he later repeats and his quasi-declamatory passage seems absurd. The third movement goes on and on and on and on. It is weird. There are primitive choral glissandi which do not work and the mixture of styles simply does not work either. The music is confused. There is no coherence. It is not that we, the listeners, have lost the plot. There is no plot. There is no structure or form. The music is shapeless. The music just meanders and to add to the

malaise the music is often facile and juvenile. However, there are some moments of note including the slow passages of exemplary choral writing which sounds like a sad Polish folk song in the style of Dolina and there is a plaintive tenor solo. The final movement is tedious apart from the final alleluias.

The next few years saw the appearance of the String Quartet no. 14, Harp Concerto, the Cello Concerto no. 2, the Piano Concerto no. 5, the Harmonica Concerto, String Quartet no. 15 and commissions for a ballet inspired by Eugene O'Neill *The Emperor Jones* and a setting of Lorca's *Yerma* which was first performed in Santa Fe in August 1971. In 1958 MGM commissioned him to write the music for the film *Green Mansions*.

The Symphony no. 11 was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra for their 75th anniversary which fell during the 1955/6 season. It is dedicated to the memory of both Sergei and Natalie Koussevitsky. Other commissions were given to Samuel Barber, Bernstein, Copland, Dutilleux, von Einem, Hanson, Ibert (who died shortly after completing a movement of a proposed symphony), Milhaud, Petrassi, Piston, William Schuman and Roger Sessions. Villa-Lobos conducted the first three movements in Boston. The opening movement is somewhat rhapsodic but richly coloured with blazing horns and timpani one of whose notes is high. The slow movement is heart rending with a beauty both glorious and strange. Friends noted the tears in the composer's eyes while writing this. He felt this music. He meant this music. The solo violin writing is literally too beautiful for words. The third movement is a wisp of a scherzo but a real scherzo.

The year 1958 saw the first Inter-American Music Festival in Washington where the Juilliard Quartet premiered the String Quartet no. 15. This is a truly magnificent piece, a model quartet for would-be composers. It is intense, warm, mellow, intimate with outstanding melodic and thematic material. Fortunately I have a recording of this premiere and it is nothing short of sensational. The Festival also saw the premiere of the Symphony no. 12 played by the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington under Howard Mitchell.

This conductor was born in 1911 and studied the piano and the trumpet before taking up the cello at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore and then at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia under Felix Salmond. Mitchell was principal cellist of the Washington orchestra in 1933 a post he kept until 1946. He was associate conductor from 1940 to 1970 before becoming conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Paraguay.

The String Quartet no. 16 of 1955 is also a good piece although it says nothing new. There are some exquisite moments particularly in the slow movement. The penultimate movement is one of unmitigated joy and the finale has both character and vigour and not a little tenderness.

Ill health dogged Villa-Lobos now. He was admitted to hospital in Rio de Janeiro on 11 August 1959 with kidney problems. In September he was well enough to attend a concert which included his *Magnificat Alleluia* but died at his home on the 17th November aged 72.

It is difficult to sum up. His music is not as colourful as that of Revueltas or as structurally sound or original as Alberto Ginastera. Villa-Lobos wrote too much. Some of his music has no development and lacks coherence. By 1950 he had two and a half thousand works to his credit. His music is too eclectic within the pieces themselves and therefore confused. Occasionally he wrote a magnificent work. As for the rest, he just poured it out and, with respect, without giving due attention to its quality.

But then he is not the only composer to have done that.