

Averbach, Ricardo. (2022) *Villa-Lobos and Modernism: The Apotheosis of*

***Cannibal Music*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 377 pp.**

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Kenneth David Jackson

Ricardo Averbach's ambitious study of Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) and modernism, published during the centenary of the Week of Modern Art in São Paulo, presents a wide-ranging reconsideration of the music by Brazil's most prominent composer, from the perspectives of a performer, musicologist, and the conductor of the first recording of *Amazonas*, a tone poem.

Villa-Lobos did little to aid scholars, given his extravagant personality and often-eccentric, exaggerated tales and behaviour. During an interview with Lucie Delarue Mardrus in Paris, aimed to promote his influence with avant-garde primitivism,¹ he claimed to have been tied to a tree in the Amazon by cannibals and forced to listen to their music, which he then learned and repeated in his compositions. In Villa-Lobos'

¹"L'aventure d'un compositeur: Musique cannibal," *L'Intransigeant*, Tuesday, 13 December 1927, p. 1.

home city of Rio de Janeiro, circa 1917, he played cello in a popular *choro* ensemble. Averbach notes the composer's exposure to popular, folk, indigenous, and classical materials, which he combined within his compositions. For pianist Anna Stella Schic, Villa-Lobos came of age in Brazil at a moment of intense musical synthesis:

Pour Villa-Lobos, il était donc naturel de puiser à des sources populaires puisqu'elles étaient à l'origine de sa personnalité. De plus, sa propre fécondité y trouvait un aliment inépuisable. Il arrivait en un moment de l'histoire de la musique brésilienne où il était nécessaire de commencer une synthèse de l'énorme foisonnement donc elle était le siège, ceci à partir des diverses sources que lui avaient donné naissance. (Schic, 1987, p. 188)²

Villa-Lobos' scant formal study of composition, his reliance on natural musical intuition, and the diversity of sources in his musical style invited criticisms, including from the modernist writer and musicologist Mário de Andrade, many of which gained wide-spread acceptance. For Mário, Villa-Lobos was "an intuitive musician who lacked a refined composition technique"; while describing him as uncultured and deficient in his musical knowledge, Mário nonetheless praised his inventiveness, "admirable" orchestration, and instrumentation (Toni, 1987, pp. 53-57). Arthur Rubenstein raised

² In English: For Villa-Lobos, therefore, it was natural to draw on popular sources since they were at the origin of his personality. Moreover, his own fecundity became a source of inexhaustible nourishment. He came at a time in the history of Brazilian music when it was necessary to begin synthesizing the enormous proliferation it was experiencing, and this needed to draw from the various sources that had given birth to it. (Author's own translation)

similar criticism in his memoirs: “Villa-Lobos’s great opus is a vast improvisation, as are all his large orchestral poems. However, his immense gift for musical invention often compensated for the lack of form and his refusal of discipline” (Rubenstein, 1980, p. 252). More recent studies have reconfirmed Villa-Lobos’ role as a major international composer of musical modernism, such as the complete studies of Lisa Peppercorn (1992), Anais Fléchet’s account of Villa-Lobos in Paris (2004), David Appelby’s biography (2002), Gérard Béhague’s musical analysis (1994), Simon Wright’s profile (1992), and Paulo de Tarso Salles’ detailed study of the compositional processes (2022).

In this context, Averbach’s reassessment seeks to counter the claim that Villa-Lobos lacked a proficient composition technique. In this light, the composer’s almost inexplicable and intuitive affinity with modernist compositional techniques is one of the incongruities encountered in his development and early career. When Villa-Lobos began to compose in his early twenties (1908-12), he introduced themes and techniques that he would further develop in Paris in the 1920s, as in “Suite populaire brésilienne” for classical guitar (1908-12) or “Danças africanas” for piano and orchestra (1914-16). Averbach thus points to the avant-garde features of the piano piece *Polichinelo*,” from *A prole do bebê no. 1* (1918), which includes sound bands (multiple tones repeated very quickly to create a suspension of time with their timbre); chords in seconds, fourths, and fifths; parallel motion; pentatonic and whole-tone scales; emancipation of dissonance;

and quotes from the well-known nursery tune “Ciranda, Cirandinha” and a nineteenth-century street carnival song of mockery and debauchery, “Viva o Zé Pereira.” He also finds examples of cubism and futurism throughout the compositions, while his final chapter notes an affinity with surrealism by pointing to the way Villa-Lobos evokes the mythical unconscious of timeless Amazonian myths and their magical legends.

Averbach’s main achievement is his detailed musical analysis of the tone poems and ballets *Uirapuru* (1917-35), *Amazonas* (1917-29), the piano piece *Polichinelo* (1918), and the multi-sectioned *Suite sugestiva* (1908-12) for voice and piano. He introduces the respective legends from mythical folklore of both tone poems before launching into detailed musical analyses of each section of these major compositions. Agreeing with Gérard Béhague that Villa-Lobos used very little folk music, Averbach explores a connection with Wagner and Stravinsky through the composer’s dissonant and atonal development of the “Tristan chord” in *Uirapuru* and the “Augurs chord,” considered the foundation of *Le Sacre du printemps*, in *Amazonas*. He reveals structural details and sophisticated treatment of musical materials that he thinks constitute a definitive style and innovative contribution to musical modernism.

The most creative approach to Villa-Lobos as a modernist comes from linking “cannibal music” to the theory of *antropofagia*, from Oswald de Andrade’s celebrated 1928 “Manifesto Antropófago,” or “Cannibal Manifesto.” Oswald and Villa-Lobos were in

close contact in Paris; the composer was a friend and frequent guest of Oswald and the painter Tarsila do Amaral. At their receptions for the French avant-garde, he would improvise on the couple's Érard piano (Jackson, 2021, p. 193). Averbach reproduces a little-known poem by Oswald that depicts Villa-Lobos with humour and irony. He applies Oswald's *antropofagia* to Villa-Lobos's music with a contemporary reading of the manifesto that emphasizes the assimilation of foreign cultural values. In the arts, anthropophagic assimilation is a form of hybridity and incorporation in which difference becomes a material part of the artist's identity. The connection with *antropofagia* – for which Averbach accumulated a substantial bibliography -- represents an innovative new turn in studies of the composer (The text of the "Anthropophagous Manifesto" is included in an appendix to the book in English translation, with detailed notes and commentary).

Averbach distinguishes the primitivism sought by European modernists, in which materials taken from other cultures represent exotic otherness, from that of Villa-Lobos and other modernists, for whom the Brazilian primitive was not an "ultimate other," but rather merged with features of the artists themselves. Rather than borrowing from or appropriating Brazil's diverse cultures, *antropofagia* belongs to an attempt to uncover a new radical artistic vision about the country's elemental origins. The question of Villa-Lobos's diverse sources – whether Carnival songs, folk melodies, indigenous music

notated by Edgar Roquette-Pinto on the Cândido Rondon expedition, or quotations or borrowings from Wagner, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Gershwin – is transformed by *antropofagia* into what Averbach calls the “genuine article”. As Villa-Lobos expressed the cultural hybridisation of his own identity as an artist, he created a soundscape for the country by exercising his well-known artistic liberty.

An unexpected angle on the theme of *antropofagia* is what Averbach calls “self-cannibalism,” since the tone poems *Uirapuru* and *Amazonas* were revisions of previous compositions. These were based on (and often repeating) a trilogy of Greek mythological themes which premiered in Rio de Janeiro on 15th May 1918. *Uirapuru* is largely taken from *Tédio de Alvorada*, enhanced with a more sophisticated orchestration influenced by Wagner, as well as a completely new narrative. Meanwhile, *Amazonas* transfers the mythical setting of *Myremis*, now lost, to the Amazon. Although Villa-Lobos dated both tone poems as 1917, it is probable that *Amazonas* was finished in the 1920s before its launch on 30th May 1929, at the Maison Gaveau in Paris, and *Uirapuru* before its first performance at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires on 25th May 1935.

Averbach proposes that rather than reflecting existing depictions of Brazilian culture in music, Villa-Lobos is redefining the country in his soundscapes, creating a musical idea of Brazil; the subtitle of the piece *Nonetto* that he finished in Paris is “Quick impression of all of Brazil”. Poet Ronald de Carvalho, who also participated in the Week

of Modern Art, took an even wider, continental perspective in his 1926 poetry collection, *Toda a América*. The theme of cannibal devouring drawn from the manifesto explains how the composer's notorious borrowings of musical materials operate and justify his hybrid style. Villa-Lobos' music reveals a bridge between classical and Brazilian popular music, including folk music, through compositions that displace the wave of modernist primitivism from Europe to Brazil and the Americas. His pictorialism painted a soundscape of Brazilian nature and of its diverse peoples and music that would be imprinted in the collective imaginary.

For Averbach, the multi-layered textures of *Uirapuru* and *Amazonas* form a soundscape that could be summarised as "an erotic version of carnival brought into the Brazilian jungle" (Averbach, 2022, p. 184). By applying *antropofagia* to Villa-Lobos' music, Averbach's book adds an important dimension to the concept, beyond the fields of art and postcolonial studies. His detailed musical analyses, which for some readers may require a thorough review of music theory, testify to Villa-Lobos' remarkable proficiency as a modernist composer. To assist the reader, he includes a glossary of musical terminology in an appendix. Additional terms not included, such as interval, modal, diatonic, ostinato, hemiola, and tritone might also be helpful for the general reader.

Averbach's book joins those of other scholars of Villa-Lobos in presenting a varied and fascinating story of the composer's life and adventures, many of them the products

of his irrepressible imagination. This book makes a valuable contribution to the cultural history of modernism and the development of a Brazilian style in the arts, while his detailed analyses of compositional techniques will be of relevance to the fields of musicology and music theory.

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