

BRAZILIAN PORTRAIT—VILLA-LOBOS

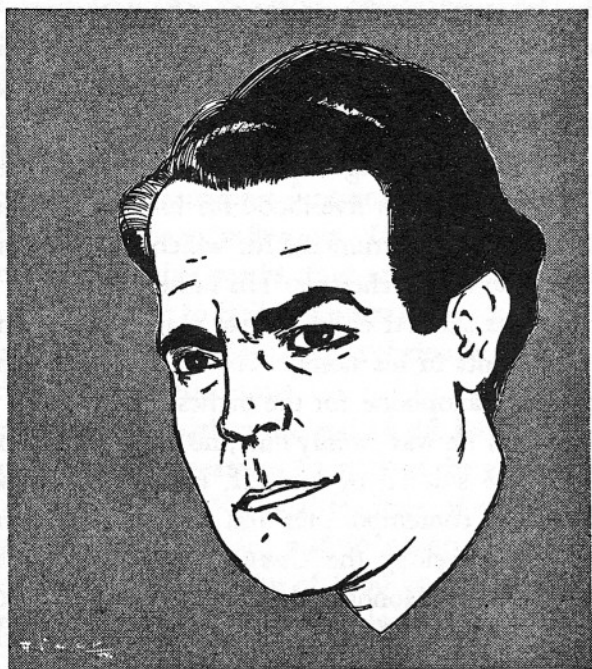
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MY first recollections of Villa-Lobos date from 1914, when as a child I came to Rio de Janeiro to study with Henrique Oswald. At that time, Oswald's home was Rio's musical center. I remember Villa-Lobos as a dark young man, with an exceedingly intent face and deep black eyes, who walked about with hands clasped behind his back at Oswald's musical Saturday evenings. I still recall the startled look that came to his eyes on one of these occasions, when my father, who delighted in playing jokes, dropped some ashes from his cigar into the cupped hands of Villa-Lobos, as, in great preoccupation, he strode up and down.

In this circle, Hector Villa-Lobos was considered a composer of talent, but eccentric and strange. His impatience with academic training was known and so his work was received with much head-shaking as to the validity of its harmony and counterpoint. On the whole he was not taken seriously.

His untamed spirit, fiercely independent mind, and general air of superiority and confidence, made it impossible for him to endure the rigid harmony training of books. For a very short and inconsiderable period he studied with Agnello Franca, and Francisco Braga. But everything Villa-Lobos really knows, especially about orchestration, he has learned by himself.

Very little is known about his antecedents. He likes to refer to his father as a well-known writer; on the other hand he also boasts of his common heritage, the fact that he stems directly from the masses. But that is Villa-Lobos. His mind is endowed with a rich fantasy, fluid and powerful, which works on the detail of his every-day life, molds and makes it function, much as it does with the form and style of a composition. The story, for instance, of his capture by a man-eating tribe during a search for primitive tunes in the Brazilian interior has been so often repeated that Villa-Lobos has come to believe it himself. Most source material gives the year of his birth as 1890 or 1892; he was born, however, in Rio de Janeiro, on March 5, 1881, and is thus a contemporary of



VILLA-LOBOS
Drawing by
ALCU PENNA

Stravinsky rather than of Prokofieff. Despite the general obscurity that surrounds his origins it seems clear that he must derive from sources reaching deep and far into the life of Brazil. For how otherwise than by a long, intense integration can one account for such kinship with the soil and the spirit of a country? Villa-Lobos is, in my opinion, the first nationalist composer of the Americas; one must not only be native to a country, but must also possess genius to evoke the sound and feeling of a whole people and its culture. He is as unmistakably Brazilian as Moussorgsky is Russian.

At his father's death, Villa-Lobos who was then eleven, put an abrupt end to his schooling by getting expelled for general rebellion. Then began a long struggle to win a livelihood for himself and his family. At first he played the various instruments for which he has such an amazing aptitude in theatre and cafe orchestras. His father had begun to teach him the cello when he was six. At eight he had mastered the embouchure of several wind-instruments in his home. This skill served him well, when he began playing the saxophone for the orchestras of Rio.

Until 1910, when he was twenty-nine, no exact details of his life are known except that he studied by himself, examining the scores of old masters and European contemporaries and also that he composed incessantly. To this period belong the *Confidencias*, for voice and chamber orchestra, with words by Honório de Carvalho, (1908); *Crianças*, for chorus, words by Lauro Sales (1908); and *Pequena*, suite for cello and piano (1910). These early pieces, while not so characteristic as his later work, already indicate the path he was to take.

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Undeniably the year 1912, when he joined a scientific expedition into the interior of Brazil to study the customs and music of Indian tribes, marked the great turning point in his life. For a temperament like that of Villa-Lobos, inclined to the strange, fantastic and exotic, such direct contact with a primitive culture would lead naturally to a new path and a new goal. Only one other composer, Bela Bartok, has to my knowledge made a similar investigation into the folk-music of his country. Villa-Lobos not only recorded, learned and absorbed, but he merged what he found with that which he recognized as his own. The result was a fusion of all the elements in his own nature.

After these researches into primitive Indian melodies, he proceeded further to make an all-embracing study of the folk, popular and indigenous

music of Brazil. This feat in itself is without comparison in the story of any great musical career.

The creative fruits of that work appeared in 1914: the *Suite Popular Brasileira*, for viola or guitar; *Cirandinha*, a cycle of twelve pieces for piano; *Danças Características Africananas*, a series of three pieces for piano; and the first *Sonata Fantasia*, for violin and piano. The *Danças* are based on tunes of the Caripunas African-Indians in Matto Grosso, and are scored for African and other exotic instruments.

In 1915, Rio heard its first all Villa-Lobos concert. Shortly afterwards, to confound his critics, who maintained that he could not compose in the larger forms, in four months he turned out the opera *Izabt*, which reflects Puccini and Debussy influences. In the next six years he wrote, among a multitude of other works, four more operas of which *Malazart* represents his one attempt to build an operatic structure on Indian, Negro and Brazilian material. But Villa-Lobos is obviously more at home with the symphonic than the dramatic forms.

The year 1914 also marked the end of the less known period of his life. Returning from his researches he married the virtuoso pianist Lucília Guimaraes, a teacher at the National Institute of Music, who has been a devoted interpreter of his music, and in general a beneficent influence on his career. Since the revolution of 1930 he has been an important national figure, a center of interest not only for Brazilians but for artists and intellectuals all over South America. Today he is one of the great contemporary Latin-American personages. Despite his growing fame, which took on international proportions after his European travels in the 1920's, Villa-Lobos lives in self-imposed seclusion in a house in Rio which is simple, with not too many modern comforts.

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When Villa-Lobos came to Europe for the first time in 1922, on a scholarship granted by the Brazilian government, he was already a man of forty-one years. He was not entirely ignorant of the musical movements then agitating Paris and other centers; the works of Debussy, Ravel, Roussel, Ropartz, were known to him, and also the music of Satie and other avant-garde composers. In 1918-1919, when Milhaud was in Brazil on a government commission, Villa-Lobos received first-hand information about *Les Six*. Indeed, one may say even now, that the part of Villa-Lobos which is not Brazilian, that is, native, Indian, Portuguese,

is impressionist and post-impressionist French. The resemblance between Satie and Villa-Lobos goes beyond a penchant for clever titles; there is the same quest for originality as an end in itself.

But this French influence, which was of course perfectly natural since no one culture of the same epoch can be entirely separated from another, is in the final summing up of Villa-Lobos, a surface effect. He was a composer already formed when he came to Paris; his musical compulsion was more powerful and rich than that of most Europeans. He arrived with curiosity but supreme confidence; his attitude was, "I didn't come to study with you, I came to show what I've done."

He is that rare phenomenon, a composer who composes as a worker works at his trade. With him it is not a question of time, mood, feeling, or inspiration, but rather of necessity. His music is a continuous, spontaneous, abundant pouring forth. He is perhaps the only modern composer who creates with complete abandon and unselfconsciousness. Not at all perturbed by rigid innovations, or by problems of style and form, he creates like a god – without question and with sure confidence. Each work has a form, a color, a style and vigor of its own. It is possible perhaps that such an amalgamation of contending forces – indigenous, primitive, Portuguese, European and African – could spring only from a country like Brazil with its great unexplored forests, its mountains, its rivers and vast skies. Whatever the sources, the music is Villa-Lobos.

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Early poverty and struggle have accustomed Villa-Lobos to work amid the greatest noise and bustle. He can compose while his friends are all about him or while he is listening to music. He once confided in me that he can go to a cafe, and during the playing of a Viennese waltz, write something in an altogether different style. One half of the suite *Caixinha de Boas-Festas* (Magic Windows) was finished, orchestrated, and the parts scored, all in the course of a single evening. He had promised this for one of my Saturday afternoon Youth Concerts; the Thursday before, it was not yet done. He wrote all that night, surrounded by friends. A pupil in the next room playing the composer's symphonic poem, *Amazonas*, heard him suddenly cry out, "That is a G-b in the bass!" The next morning on Friday, the first half of *Caixinha de Boas-Festas* was ready for rehearsal. This work is in my opinion one of the most transparent and perfect examples of orchestral color.

His amazing ability to master the technic of any instrument with

such speed, works both to his advantage and disadvantage. I think the frequent instances of thickness and strange balance in his orchestration are to be explained not only by his being entirely self-taught, but by this versatility with the orchestral instruments. He appears always tempted to yield to their individual prerogatives in the general orchestral scheme. This susceptibility, together with his self imposed maxim "Better poor of mine, than good of others," may account for the bizarre, the apparently unprepared effects in many of his works. He has however now evolved an orchestral style and color as personal as Debussy's. It is also to this intense desire for originality, this never-ceasing interest in experiment that we owe some of the most extraordinary chamber music ensembles in all music literature – the *Choros Number 4*, for three horns and trombone; the *Choros Number 3*, for men's choir, clarinet, saxophone, three trumpets, and trombones; *Noneto*, for flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, bassoon, celesta, harp, battery, and mixed chorus; and the *Quartet* for harp, celesta, saxophone, and women's voices.

His inordinate love of the saxophone seems to dominate his entire musical existence. He has been known to use it for a Beethoven symphony when the bassoon was lacking. And at one time he even worked his way out of a jail in the interior of Matto Grosso by playing his beloved instrument for the chief of police.

On the other hand he has written some of his most creative, satisfying and finished work for the piano, an instrument which is not his own. After Debussy and Ravel, Villa-Lobos is the outstanding modern composer for the piano. As far back as eight years ago he had already, according to his own record, written about three hundred piano pieces. (He is undoubtedly the most prolific of writers – thirteen hundred is, I believe a modest estimate of the number of his works, many of which have been published.) Compositions like *Prole do Bebe*, *Carnaval das crianças brasileiras*, the *Cirandas* and *Rudepoema*, are outstanding achievements for the instrument. All have endings so highly characteristic and individual as to constitute a musical signature. They are also perhaps the most difficult in modern piano literature – apparently with intention. When I reported that the Brazilian pianist Claudio Arrau had played his *Rudepoema* at sight, he exclaimed, "Impossible! I'll simply have to write something harder."

A genuine musical creator can usually be recognized by the melodies he writes. They will not be the simple working-over, or re-arrangement of folk tunes, or abstractions rising apparently from nowhere; they will manifest strength and power and assimilation with his time and culture.

Villa-Lobos is such a creator. His real scope as a composer, however, is exhibited best in the smaller forms. Here his thematic and rhythmical material finds its most logical and happy effect. In the larger forms, because of their size, he is apt to become entangled in the almost impenetrable forest of his ever-changing ideas.

The *Choros, Number 8*, a work of tremendous dimensions for large orchestra and two pianos, is a case in point. In the last big crescendo near the end, there is the sudden introduction by the pianos of a theme which would be suitable in the finale of a symphony. But just as the pianos are playing in a 6/8 syncopated and exotic rhythm, the orchestra enters in 2/4 time with a force that completely overshadows it.

Number 10, for chorus and orchestra, is probably the greatest of the fourteen choros. A performance of this work, when it meets the difficulties imposed on the choir (they are enormous) has the power to evoke the most intense emotion.

Another important facet in Villa-Lobos' range of interests, is his preoccupation with Bach. He has long studied that master's works and claims familiarity with over four hundred. Since 1932 he has written five suites, called *Bachianas Brasileiras*, which are not so much evocations of Bach in a contemporary manner, as an attempt to transmit the Bach spirit, which to Villa-Lobos is the universal spirit, a source and end unto itself, into the soul of Brazil. This may at first appear to be a contradiction of the composer's general viewpoint, but it can be resolved quite simply. His admiration for Bach has not led him to imitation, but rather to a rendering of his style in the Brazilian idiom. The third movement in *Bachiana, Number 1*, for eight cellos, is a fugue called a "chat," based on a native Brazilian rhythm; the harmony and treatment throughout is original Villa-Lobos. The Aria from *Bachiana, Number 5*, where the voice is used as an instrument and the principal melody is first intoned on a vowel, then sung and finally hummed, is, in its melodic line, at once austere and passionate. It is in scope and intensity of feeling, that he approaches the spirit of Bach.

Villa-Lobos' latest work is a series of three symphonic suites made from his 1937 score for the film, *The Discovery of Brazil*. They are for large orchestra, and the music is of descriptive character.

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Less known in the United States but famous all over South America is Villa-Lobos' achievement as director of musical education in the

schools of Rio de Janeiro. The composer had long cherished a desire to contribute directly to the cultural development of the Brazilian people. In 1931, when the government sought a man to fill the new post of Supervisor and Director of Musical Education, knowing Villa-Lobos' wish I suggested him as logical for the task. It was an entirely new field, and he approached it, as was characteristic of him, unhampered by a-priori theories, but with his enormous intelligence and creative imagination. The results have been far-reaching in their effect.

The first step was to form a choir of school teachers, who were required by decree (this was a revolutionary period) to work with him two or three times a week. They became the nucleus for all his experiments, the vehicle for spreading his work to the schools. He then devised an altogether new system of musical notation, which was designed to teach children in less than the usual time, and also to lessen boredom and interference with the pleasure of singing. The system is an ingenious method of hand signs with a movable *do*. The five fingers of the hand in raised position are *do, re, mi, fa, sol*, and *la, si, do* are the first three fingers lowered. I have often seen Villa-Lobos lead school children through the most interesting improvisations in two voices, in this manner. Using his choir, he has also experimented along the same lines with Gregorian chants and the works of Palestrina, Haydn and Mozart; he has even applied it to instrumental music. This system is now being introduced all over Brazil.

As a contribution to this work, he has also compiled an enormous collection of folk and popular music to be used in the schools. This now represents one of the world's great musicological achievements. It has not only been arranged and classified for orderly presentation; it has also been analyzed to its original Indian and African sources and ethnological affinities with Portuguese or other European nationalities, and even for indications of what Villa-Lobos calls *Sincretismo*, the fusing of native with all outside influences.

It is impossible to overestimate the future influence of this dissemination of musical knowledge and application of musical experience. Dr. Francisco Curt Lange, the eminent Uruguayan musicologist who has conducted researches in Europe and the United States, and in all of South America, says of Villa-Lobos' work "It is the world's greatest achievement in the field of practical musical pedagogy. Brazil will in a short time have a generation of young lovers of music, who will form the basis for the future of musical art in South America."