



# THE FRENCH CONNECTION: FROM CHOPIN TO CHORO

## BY MARILYNN MAIR

HISTORY

"Paris for Brazilians was not simply a city, but the cultural capital of the world that from the 19th century on acted as a reference point for Brazilian culture" - Rafael Jose De Menezes Bastos, "Brazil in France, 1922" - Latin American Music Review (2008).

In 1807, the Portuguese royal family fled Napoleon, relocating their court from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro, and transforming Rio from a colonial outpost to the capitol of Portugal. Throughout 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, Paris was the acclaimed center of culture, and soon the social elites of Rio became infatuated by all things French: literature, fashion, art, and music. Foreign dance styles popular in Paris migrated to Rio. The music of Chopin flourished in Rio salons. Brazilian artists went to Paris to complete their education. French style, free from the stigma of Portuguese colonial submission, imprinted itself on the Brazilian psyche.

France sent three Cultural Missions to Brazil from 1816 to 1840. And as French social music established itself in Rio, it began to adapt to local tastes. Before the century was over, the imported polca had morphed into the maxixe, the first original style of Brazilian urban dance music, and one of the roots of choro. Brazilian composers were inspired to write in a more national style, but feared that doing so would lose them the patronage of their urban elite, who considered European music the universal standard. And so a hybridization process in music began, mixing popular with classical, and Brazil with Europe. Seeds of French-Brazilian cross-pollination can be heard in the early compositions of Ernesto Nazareth, Pixinguinha, Heitor Villa-Lobos, and other Brazilian composers, as they helped create choro, a vital new musical style that would challenge the validity of accepting the values of Europe as superior to those of Brazil.



Ernesto Nazareth (1863-1934) is regarded today as an early Brazilian nationalist, but in his lifetime he was a strong supporter of the preeminence of European style. Nazareth never studied in Paris, but he was taught the works of Chopin (1810-1849) as a teen-ager by Lucien Lambert (1828-1896), his first professional piano teacher. Lambert was a freed African-American musician, originally from New Orleans, who moved to Paris in 1853, and then to Rio in the 1860s, to escape racial discrimination. Lambert had a music store in Rio, and was so identified with French music that he was thought to be French. As Nazareth began to compose, his melodies were inspired by Brazilian folk and popular tunes, but his forms and harmony reflected his classical training with Lambert. His valsas show the use of rubato, found in abundance in Chopin. His tangos and polcas add characteristic Brazilian syncopation to European forms, foreshadowing the beginning of choro.



Pixinguinha (1897-1973) was a Brazilian musician who found success in Paris in 1922. His trip there with his band, Os Oito Batutas, was sponsored by Arnaldo Guinle, a proponent of Brazilian national music. Pixinguinha would soon become known as a great composer of choro, but at the time, the band's music was considered folklore, nacional brasileira, and many felt it was unworthy to represent Brazil on the world stage. Nevertheless, Pixinguinha and Os Batutas performed in Paris from February to August, playing samba, maxixe, and polcas. Their music was praised over other styles of dances exotiques that filled Parisian clubs, and was considered the equal of North American jazz. Pixinguinha's success in Paris secured his fame at home, as a composer of authentic Brazilian music, and a conquerer abroad.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) arrived in Paris in 1923, expecting to win acclaim there, as he had in Rio, for his French-influenced avant-garde music. But in Paris, his works were considered old-fashioned and too similar to Debussy and Ravel, earlier French Impressionist composers. In Rio, Villa-Lobos had earned his living as a cellist in a social orchestra, and had also played music with Rio's street choro musicians, although his classical training set him apart from them. In Brazil, at the start of his career, adding influences from popular music to classical compositions had been discouraged, but arriving in Paris, he discovered that was no longer the case. So in Paris, Villa-Lobos began to seek a path between the French style, highly regarded in Rio, and a more nationalistic Brazilian style, considered exotic and popular in Paris. He incorporated his Brazilian musical influences into a context the French would admire and respect, and thus, outside of Rio, Villa-Lobos began to create the body of nationalistic choro-influenced music he would ultimately become famous for.

Today choro is internationally acclaimed, praised as the earliest music style to establish a national Brazilian identity. It combines the disparate sources of Brazilian culture and, depending on the tune, shows influences from the African lundu, Portuguese modinha, native Brazilian music, and North American jazz, as well as elements of its French heritage. As we move ahead through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the strands of culturally-identifiable music have been plaited so often and so well, that today it is nearly impossible to untwine them. But to compare the music of Chopin and Debussy, with that of Nazareth, Pixinguinha, and Villa Lobos, is to clearly hear that they are family.