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Northeastern Brazilian music features in *Ascensão*

Helder Alves de Oliveira¹



1. INTRODUCTION

Musical elements from Northeastern Brazil served as a source for Brazilian nationalist art music. Its principal representatives are Villa-Lobos and Camargo Guarnieri. According to José Maria Neves, “Brazilian nationalism [a musical movement] is essentially neoclassical with respect to formal principles and language: it employs classical forms (suite, sonata, variations, etc.) and traditional melodic and harmonic structures using elements of Brazilian folk music. It also shares characteristics with romanticism, such as a belief in inspiration, and a desire to communicate with the audience” (Di Cavalcanti, 2006, 7). Elements of folk music might be themes, motives, rhythms, modes, and forms (Di Cavalcanti, 2006, 9). In this poster, I will present some details about how the structure, themes and rhythmic accompaniment of my composition *Ascensão* (Rise), for symphony orchestra, are related to the folk music from Northeastern Brazil. This is the birthplace of Virgulino Ferreira da Silva (1898–1938) who is well known as Lampião, the King of *Cangaço* (banditry). *Ascensão* succinctly narrates Lampião’s history.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research universe: some traditional musical types from Northeastern Brazil, including *aboió*, *toada*, *xote*, *xaxado*, and waltz.

Data collection methods:

- Bibliographic research:** theoretical references on musical genres and their rhythmic patterns;
- Documentary research:** audiovisual records of musical works whose themes, formal structure and rhythms inspired the new composition.

3. RESULTS

| Section | Genre | Tempo |
|--------------|-----------------------|----------|
| Introduction | <i>Aboio</i> | Slow |
| A | <i>Toada</i> | Moderate |
| B | <i>Aboio</i> | Slow |
| C | <i>Xote</i> | Moderate |
| D | Waltz | Moderate |
| E | <i>Aboio</i> | Slow |
| F | <i>Xote</i> (regular) | Moderate |
| G | <i>Xaxado</i> | Fast |

3.1. Introductory Section

According to Fialkow (1990), *aboió* is “a cattleman’s song of the Northeast, characterized by the slow, amensural, chant-like quality of the melody sung by the cowboy as he rounds up cattle” (p. 71). Then, no sequenced rhythmic pattern was emphasized in the construction of the themes and accompaniment in this section. Other devices were utilized: pedals and changing meters for no perception of metric (see Fig. 1). The beginning of Theme 1 is based on the ostinato of “*Meu bem querer*,” performed by *Cordel do Fogo Encantado* (see Fig. 2).

Figure 1: Themes and accompaniment in the *Ascensão* (Introduction), by Helder Oliveira

Figure 2: Citation in the beginning of Theme 1 in *Ascensão*, by Helder Oliveira

3.2. Section A–C

- Section A:** a *toada*. Rocca (1986) considered this term as a musical genre with tempo 66–72 bpm.² Its rhythmic cell attack points were distributed to some instrumental layers to elaborate the accompaniment for the Theme 2 (Fig. 3).
- Section B:** an *aboió* that contains Theme 2 varied with counterpoint voices and the return of pedals.
- Section C:** the second half presents an accompaniment based on northeastern *xote*, a “Brazilian style of dance music. [...] The *xote* is a slower tempo music, and the upbeat, that is, the intervals between beats, are very emphasized” (Fernandes, 2007, 478). Like in Section A, the rhythmic cell attack points of this genre according to Rocca (1986) were distributed to some instrumental layers as presented in Fig. 4. This author states that the tempo of this genre is 76-80 bpm, however Section C moves at 66 bpm.

Figure 3: Distribution of *toada* rhythm in *Ascensão*, by Helder Oliveira

Figure 4: Distribution of *xote* rhythm in *Ascensão*, by Helder Oliveira

3.3. Section D–G

- Section D:** Theme 2 is varied and presented in the context of a waltz.
- Section E:** an *aboió* that contains Theme 1 varied without accompaniment.
- Section F:** a fugue whose accompaniment is based on *xote* in the ordinary tempo (78 bpm).
- Section G:** inspired by a song from the 1960 film *A morte comanda o cangaço* (Death commands banditry) by Carlos Coimbra. This song is a *xaxado*, which is a common dance from Pernambuco State. Oliveira (2018) says, “The *xaxado* was spread by the *cangaceiros* in the early 1920s, [and] was used as its rallying cry and victory song. [...] The leader drew the lines that were answered by the group with a chorus”³ (translated, p. 14–15). In *Ascensão*, the responsorial part has the oboist as the leader, and sometimes the clarinetist. The accompaniment of Section G is based on the rhythmic cell of *baião*, another musical genre. The difference between this genre and *xaxado* is the tempo (*xaxado* is faster) and the responsorial procedure is present only in *xaxado*. The rhythmic cell attack points of this genre according to Ray (1999) were distributed among various instrumental layers as presented in Fig. 5.

Figure 5: *Xaxado* type in *Ascensão*, by Helder Oliveira

4. CONCLUSION

Ascensão derives its structure from some traditional Northeastern Brazil musical types: *aboió*, *toada*, *xote*, *xaxado*, and waltz. Some characteristics of nationalism appear in *Ascensão*, e.g. traditional melodic treatment, the use of themes and formal structure inspired by folk music, and rhythmic cells as the basis for accompaniment. These elements were chosen to communicate well with the audience and make reference to the birthplace of Lampião.

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2. Although Reily (1992) defines *toada* as a generic word for a song or tune (p. 356), in this work I use Rocca’s definition.
3. “O xaxado foi difundido pelos cangaceiros no início da década de 1920, o xaxado era usado como seu grito de guerra e canto de vitória. [...] O líder puxava os versos que eram respondidos pelo grupo com um coro.”