

Villa-Lobos' *Cello Concerto no. 2*: the Crystallization of a Late Period Instrumental Language

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Lars Hoefs

Universidade Estadual de Campinas – larshoefs@hotmail.com

Abstract. Villa-Lobos' late period instrumental works have suffered from a lack of understanding and appreciation in general, but also from a failure on the parts of musicians and scholars to examine and comprehend the musical and instrumental languages employed therein. This study examines the *Cello Concerto no. 2*, composed in 1954, focusing on the unique cello language developed over the composer's career and crystallized in his final years. By approaching the topic through the perspectives of music history (WRIGHT, 1992; PEPPERCORN, 1994), analysis (SALLES, 2009 and 2018), and especially cello performance (PARISOT, 1962; AQUINO, 2000; PILGER, 2013), I hope to reveal the wealth of invention and artistry latent in Villa-Lobos' late period cello writing and contribute to a much-deserved awakening of exploration and investigation into his late period instrumental works.

Keywords. Villa-Lobos. Late period. Concertos for cello and orchestra. Cello performance.

Título. *Concerto nº 2 para violoncelo de Villa-Lobos: a cristalização da linguagem instrumental no período tardio*

Resumo. As obras instrumentais do período tardio de Villa-Lobos têm sido mal compreendidas e pouco apreciadas de modo geral. Em parte, isso se deve pela falha por parte dos músicos e estudiosos ao examinar e em compreender as linguagens musicais e instrumentais empregadas nessas obras. Este estudo explora o *Concerto para Violoncelo no. 2*, composto em 1954, cinco anos antes da morte do compositor, com foco em sua linguagem violoncelística singular desenvolvida ao longo da carreira do compositor e cristalizada em seus últimos anos de vida. Ao abordar o tópico através das perspectivas da história da música (WRIGHT, 1992; PEPPERCORN, 1994), da análise (SALLES, 2009 e 2018) e, principalmente, da performance (PARISOT, 1962; AQUINO, 2000; PILGER, 2013), espero revelar a riqueza de invenção e da arte latentes na escrita para violoncelo do período final de Villa-Lobos e contribuir para um merecido despertar da exploração e investigação de seus trabalhos instrumentais do período tardio em geral.

Palavras-chave. Villa-Lobos. Período tardio. Concertos para violoncelo e orquestra. Cello performance.

1. Introduction

Villa-Lobos composed the Cello Concerto no. 2 in 1954, 5 years before his death. He achieved a refined synthesis with his late style in general, and his unique and personal writing for the cello in particular¹. Three broad characteristics coalesced to form this late period instrumental language exclusive to the cello:

- implied polyphony, similar to Bach's cello suites and influenced by guitar writing;
- combination of late period zigzag figurations² of unidiomatic intervals with natural idiomatic cello writing; and
- consolidation of national Brazilian references (*desafio*, *Bachianas Brasileiras*, *berimbau*) within a universal classical canvas to form a seamless whole.

Misunderstanding and underappreciation abound among musicians, scholars, and audiences with regard to Villa-Lobos' late works. Through this paper and further studies, along with my own performances both past and future of the late cello repertoire, I aim to contribute towards a remedy of the lack of scholarship and informed performance of Villa-Lobos' altogether worthwhile and indeed brilliant late works.

2. Late Period – Classification and General Style

In dividing Villa-Lobos' life and works into periods, scholars disagree both in the number of periods as well as the year when a new period begins. With regards to the final period, there exist two schools of thought – those who see the late period beginning in 1945, and others in 1948. I am of the former group, preferring to delineate periods relative to the roles Villa-Lobos performed and the kinds of music he provided to fulfill those roles. When the world reopened in 1945 after World War II, Villa-Lobos was in the perfect position and moment of his career to step into the role of Brazilian musical ambassador to the world. He had achieved renown for his works that celebrated Brazilian folk and popular identities as well as evoking the mystery and exoticism of South America's wild nature. Commissions poured in from all over, but mostly from the USA. As a result of the kinds of commissions he received, Villa-Lobos utilized classical models and structures as witnessed in his production of 9 concertos, 6 symphonies, and 9 string quartets.

Regardless of where we divide the periods, there will always be a few years of overlap, with tendencies and characteristics of the two adjacent periods spilling over. Salles sums it up well:

Most commentators of Villa-Lobos quartets incorporate the idea that the later works bring something special, like a kind of synthesis and improvement that, in the style

of the composer and according to the vision of these authors (like Estrella, Mariz, Behague, Tarasti, Fermer and Riedel), implies the adoption of a language purified of excesses, with austere simplicity and with a more universal character (SALLES, 2018 p. 292).

Peculiar to instrumental works of Villa-Lobos' late period are some curious characteristics of figuration, gesture, and prevalent intervals. We find an overabundance of zigzag variant patterns; and we note the preference for intervals of fourths and fifths as well as dissonance such as the tritone. Villa-Lobos had been tooling with zigzag patterns throughout his career, but they take on a life of their own in the late period. And while unusually dissonant intervals as well as broken 4ths and 5ths are suitably idiomatic to wind instruments, Villa-Lobos surprisingly applies these indiscriminately for string instruments as well.

Drawing an unlikely parallel with Beethoven and his late period, we discover in Villa-Lobos' late period large-scale works a refined aesthetic and indeed a new language: first movements are generally more abstract, concentrated and compact; slow movements are more reflective; and Scherzos and final movements are given free rein to exuberant playfulness.

3. A Late Concerto Template

Villa-Lobos' late period concertos for solo instrument and orchestra were commissioned by different virtuosi: 5 for piano; 1 each for guitar, harp, and harmonica; and the *Cello Concerto no. 2*, a commission from Brazilian cellist Aldo Parisot, who was professor of Yale University. In fact, the only proper concerto for solo instrument and orchestra by Villa-Lobos before 1945 was his *Grand Concerto for cello and orchestra*, composed back in 1913 when he was still unknown.

Villa-Lobos adopted a general template for these 9 concertos composed in his final years, that of a four-movement structure:

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo with Cadenza
- IV. Allegro

The four-movement mold is already unusual for a solo concerto, which traditionally was in three. (Those for guitar and harmonica take exception to this template, being in only three movements but still with cadenza.) Still more unusual is the inclusion of a Scherzo. The Scherzo has been a regular fixture of large-scale sonata form instrumental

works since Haydn began substituting it for the Minuet, but it never figured prominently in the solo concerto. The presence of a cadenza is nothing unusual, though for Villa-Lobos' template the cadenza tends to be disproportionately long, and quotes themes from previous movements in a kind of cyclic form.

4. Scholarship on Late Period Concertos

Early research on Villa-Lobos was rather dismissive and ignored much of his music. Scholars would study one work within a genre and dispense with the others. Vasco Mariz (2005, p. 201) for example wrote of the Cello Concerto no. 2 only one sentence, "The instrument is treated more as obligato than as soloist" a claim that I find to be entirely false. This lack of scholarship was due to the enormous amount of music that Villa-Lobos produced, as well as to a slow development of research devoted to his music. As a result, many late period works have yet to receive considerable attention, but thankfully some excellent studies have been underway in recent years and the wave of intelligent and conscientious scholarship is now growing exponentially.

British scholars have been among the most harshly critical of Villa-Lobos – they seem to delight in crafting elegant turns of phrase in destroying a work. Simon Wright (1992, P. 119) wrote: "Understandably, the quality of his music suffered, and there is a noticeable falling off in the inspirational level of much music of his later years... producing, among a plethora of ill-considered note-spinning, just a handful of mature and strikingly forward-looking works." Peppercorn (1992, p. 95) was less caustic but nonetheless dismissive of his later works, "...most, though not all bear witness to a decline of creative power."

The most condescending, brutal, and indeed artfully hilarious of English attacks on a late Villa-Lobos work came from the critic of the *Musical Opinion*, reporting on the world premiere of the *Piano Concerto no. 5* in London's Royal Festival Hall in 1955, the same year as the premiere of the *Cello Concerto no. 2*:

When a composer is as prolific as Villa-Lobos...the quality of the writing is bound to vary, and in this instance the invention is poverty-stricken, if not bankrupt. The Concerto is in four movements, but the work is short...which in the circumstances is perhaps its chief virtue. The themes are more suitable for the cinema than the concert hall, they are unredeemed by any originality of treatment, and the score is often so heavy as to render the soloist inaudible. Moreover, the piano writing is unexpectedly unenterprising; it is too consistently percussive, there is a superfluity of chords and octaves...and only occasionally are there passages that a self-respecting pianist would enjoy tackling. For the rest it most nearly resembles a piano tuners' orgy (WRIGHT, 1992, p. 121).

More probing studies have gone deeper. Tarasti (1995, p. 339) states that in his concertos Villa-Lobos “draws back from folklore...adopts a kind of universal musical style.” Heller (1989) writes, “What is most unusual about Villa-Lobos’ concertos is his unorthodox use of form as well as the extensive cadenzas he wrote; in some cases they are complete movements on their own.”

Wright even redeems himself with some very interesting observations and ideas:

Those concertos which succeed all achieve a cohesion, a fusion between soloist and orchestra, in which the creation of one defined mood is the chief objective. That mood is constantly Villa-Lobos’ dominant theme of isolation within a landscape. None of the concertos offer programmes or extra-musical pictorialism, and the theme of isolation is never overtly stated. The solitary human being is always the soloist, moving in vast, sectional ‘soundscapes’ which represent, we realize, the immensities of unnamed jungles and sertões. Rather than employing traditional concerto structures, or variants of them, as had Bartok and Prokofiev, Villa-Lobos uses his favoured multi-sectional technique developed through the Choros, and adds (as he had done in the later works in that series) the soloist as explorer, commentator, and in a very real sense, dramatic hero (WRIGHT, 1992, p. 122).

And writing of the *Piano Concerto no. 1*, but applicable to all the late concertos, Wright states,

All the movements thus fall into the structure preferred and perfected in the Choros: a mosaic-like series of musical blocks, with each section containing material that is then developed, and finally discarded in favour of the next section. Villa-Lobos’ melodic invention appears limitless, as often he evolves sweeping, heroic themes from the tiniest of motifs, or huge orchestral climaxes from insistent repetition of rhythmic fragments. Much material is, however, related, and thereby lends the work a certain unity. The massive cadenza with which the third movement ends summarizes and extends several of the concerto’s important ideas (WRIGHT, 1997).

Salter supports Wright’s observations of form in the piano concertos:

(...) structural procedures are essentially episodic, with constant abrupt, sometimes bewildering, changes of mood, character, rhythm and sonority, and with climaxes that burst out as unexpectedly as volcanic eruptions. This kaleidoscopic construction is colourful, often fascinating, and the sheer prodigality of his invention and his colossal energy, with extravagant textures and instrumentation, are extremely striking (SALTER, 1997).

Brazilian cellist Antonio Meneses, who has performed the Villa-Lobos cello concertos with orchestra more times than anyone, remarks “The cello repertoire leaves a little to be desired in the formal aspect. An incredible moment comes and for the next ten minutes you are wondering where he wants to go. This leads me to believe that he does better in smaller forms; in the larger forms, he has a tendency to get lost” (PILGER, 2013, p. 88).

There is a consensus among scholars that Villa-Lobos’ late concertos come off as wandering and unfocused, though still offering much to appreciate and enjoy, and even

approaching a balance of spontaneity and ambiguous formal unity. I contend that we have yet to truly crack the code, to speak the language of Villa-Lobos' late period. Refined, abstract, and oddly-dissonant at times, the late style like any language requires long-term immersion to achieve fluency and comprehend the essence of what is being expressed.

5. *Cello Concerto no. 2*

The Villa-Lobos Museum's manuscript claims the piece was composed in Rio in 1953, but Parisot relates otherwise:

He wrote the Concerto in New York in 1954. I used to go every day, for one week, to his hotel in New York and practice in his apartment. He asked me to play scales, etudes, sonatas, concertos etc. so he could hear my playing and write a work that was tailor made, so to speak. I remember that while he was writing passages of the Concerto he would show them to me and ask me to try them. Many times he would demonstrate to me how he wanted the passage played. As you know, he was a cellist...If I remember correctly, he finished the concerto in one week (PEPPERCORN, 1994, p. 137).

Besides clarifying where and when Villa-Lobos composed the *Cello Concerto no. 2*, Parisot's testimony provides fascinating insight into the composer's creative process while underlining his intimate connection to the cello. The work was premiered Feb. 5, 1955, at Carnegie Hall in New York, Aldo Parisot the soloist with the New York Philharmonic and Walter Hendl conducting. Parisot would later make the first recording with Gustav Meier and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra for Westminster label released in 1963.

I. *Allegro non troppo*

True to Wright's observations, the first movement evades any strict form and is in 5 sections with related material. Aquino identifies the influence of Brazilian *desafio* folk music from the solo cello's opening, with its recitative-like declamatory nature (AQUINO, 2000, p. 33).



Example 1: Opening *desafio* motive

The introductory section gives the impression of being free of tempo and improvised, through constantly shifting time signatures and note-values. Implied polyphony is foreshadowed, as the cello plays 3 descending phrases that in fact outline two different

voices in the composer's signature zigzag figuration. Here and elsewhere in the movement, zigzag patterns feature the unidiomatic tritone interval.

Section 2 establishes a regular *Allegro* tempo, and here the cello launches into the most pronounced exhibition of the work's unusual and innovative characteristic of implied polyphony. The cello outlines 2 or 3 voices in writing similar to that of Bach's *6 Suites for solo cello, BWV 1007 – 1012* (Example 2).



Example 2: Characteristic excerpt from Section II: Bach-like implied polyphonic cello writing and zigzag separated by tritones.

Section 3 seems to present new material in a quicker *Piú mosso* tempo, but it is actually a reinvention of the opening *desafio* motive, now dancelike, playing around with different zigzag figurations. Lien finds in this section a fleeting reference to the *Embolada* of *Bachianas Brasileiras no. 1* in the rhythmic diminution of a three-note motif (LIEN, 2003).

Section 4 recasts the *desafio* motive in large triplets, and intensified instrumental virtuosity breaks out into overt polyphony – 2, 3 and even 4 voices are traced in solo cello multiple-stops, acquiring irrepressible inertia.

Section 5 serves as a coda continuing the push to the finish – the *desafio* motive gets faster still, and opens up into outright polyphony of 3 voices with clear guitar-like writing in an exhilarating rush to the finish.

II. Molto andante cantabile

“I had hoped Villa-Lobos would write a slow second movement similar in expression to his famous *Bachianas* for eight cellos and voice. When he finished the concerto the resemblance was remarkable, even to the melody of the soloist accompanied by the pizzicati of the strings imitating the sounds of the Brazilian *violão* or guitar” (PARISOT, 1962).

As per Parisot's request, we hear self-reference to Villa-Lobos' best-known work, *Bachianas Brasileiras no. 5, I. Aria-cantilena*. This reference is demonstrated in the similar shape of the opening cello solo melody, and even more prominently at rehearsal 5, *Piú mosso moderato*, with pizzicato cellos in the orchestra and the solo cello's tied-over melody clearly

evoking the famous *Bachianas*. Any cellist would recognize the reference, and Aquino and Lien duly demonstrated these findings in their theses. I was surprised to discover, however, how similar this slow movement sounds next to that of Villa-Lobos' *Piano Concerto no. 5*, composed around the same time. Certain phrases and melodic shapes seem to be cut from the same cloth. As with many of his late period slow movements, here Villa-Lobos conjures a suspended timelessness – a spontaneous, seemingly improvised cantilena. The time signature shifts between 3/4 and 4/4, with phrases of uncertain length or subdivision. The *Bachianas* reference notwithstanding, Brazilian elements are subsumed within a broader universal texture and aesthetic.

III. Scherzo

Villa-Lobos clearly felt an affinity with the lively spirit and humorous character of the *Scherzo*, imbued in both this and the final movement of the concerto. Aquino shows how the cello's principal motive in the short *Scherzo* is a reference to the *berimbau* instrument and Brazilian *capoeira* (AQUINO, 2000); Salles likewise finds similar *berimbau* references in Villa-Lobos' late string quartets (SALLES, 2018). Perhaps it's my imagination, but do I also hear a bit of R. Strauss' *Dance of the Seven Veils* from *Salome*?



Example 3: *Berimbau* motive

Cadenza

Here the instrumental language is completely idiomatic and natural – it could only have been written by a cellist! Multiple-stop passages and sequences of chords are chosen more for sonority and resonance of the cello than for functional harmony, and he indulges in idiomatic glissando sound effects, one even with a double-stop trill. The *Cadenza* revisits themes from the concerto's first three movements in a kind of cyclic form (Example 4).



Example 4: Excerpt near end of Cadenza showing quotations of 2nd mvt. (Largo) and 3rd mvt. (Vivace).

IV. Allegro energico

The final movement is replete with still more good-natured musical joking around. Rhythmic *brincadeiras* abound, and I am reminded of the off-kilter jumping of the one-legged *saci* of Brazilian folklore that Villa-Lobos portrayed in the finales of his *String Quartet no. 1* and *Bachianas Brasileiras no. 1*. Some moments of implied polyphony emerge amidst a general playful abandon. The *berimbau* Scherzo figure returns at the very end, but transformed by wild virtuosity, losing control and accelerating to a fantastic finish.

Parisot made considerable changes to the solo cello part despite the composer being a cellist, and claimed that Villa-Lobos approved the changes (AQUINO, 2000). As Parisot's recording was realized after the composer had passed, we cannot be certain as to how many of the changes Villa-Lobos indeed approved. I compared Parisot's recording with the published Max Eschig edition of the work and found an astonishing 41 modifications that Parisot made to the score. I will publish the complete detailed list in another article where more space is allowed. In general, Parisot often plays passages an octave higher; he occasionally eliminates the bottom line of a double-stop passage; he rewrites many passages in the Cadenza; and generally sometimes plays notes different than as printed - most interestingly, in the slow movement where it causes the greatest change, he plays a different note in three different spots, begging the question whether Eschig published those notes erroneously.

6. Conclusion

Villa-Lobos' synthesis of a late period instrumental language is evidenced in his writing for all instruments across the late works; for strings in particular we witness it in the *String Quartets nos. 9 - 17*. But this instrumental language would enjoy the greatest maturity and the most natural application on the cello, which was the composer's instrument after all. This is most vividly manifested in the *Cello Concerto no. 2* (1954) and the *Fantasia Concertante for orchestra of cellos* (1958).

I performed a series of concerts of the complete works for cello and orchestra of Villa-Lobos in 2014, some with accompaniment of orchestra and some with piano, furiously practicing the works for two years. Recently I've returned to these pieces, and practicing Villa-Lobos' cello concertos daily during the quarantine has been one of my salvations. After years of this intimate and daily contact I find that I'm finally understanding, and beginning to speak, the language of Villa-Lobos' late period.

Additional topics of study not approached here but deserving future attention regarding the *Cello Concerto no. 2* are: orchestration and balance between soloist and orchestra; harmony/tonality; motivic interrelationships; and a more detailed accounting of Villa-Lobos' intense activities during his final period.

The number of works produced in those few final years is extraordinary and we have only begun to discover their remarkable qualities, fruits of the crystallization of a lifetime of musical invention, creative vigor, and untiring playful experimentation.

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Notes

¹ The cello was the instrument closest to Villa-Lobos. He learned to play the cello from his father at age 6, gigged as cellist in cinema orchestras and cafes as a teenager, and performed some of his early cello works in public.

² For more information about zigzag figurations, see Salles, 2009, p. 114.