

FERNANDO LOPES-GRAÇA
(17 December 1906 - 27 November 1994)
By Nancy Lee Harper

Fernando Lopes-Graça, or Graça as he became known, was born in central Portugal, in Tomar, on 17 December 1906. He became one of Portugal's most important composers and certainly one of its most polemical musical figures. He seemed to swim upstream for most of his life and, in doing so, created some of the most significant Luso music of the 20th century, which, although not mainstream, is recognised for its originality, cultural contribution, and genius. With his innate talent for composition, he naturally championed new music; and as composer of more than 250 works, he logically became a promoter of concerts of the cultural patrimony. Ethnomusicological musings, reminiscent of a Bartók or a Kodály, bore abundant Portuguese fruit in his works, while literary gifts, like those of a Schumann, marked Graça's his path as critic, writer, and musicologist.

Graça's non-musical parents were the owners of Hotel Nabão, whose in-house piano afforded the young boy an opportunity for musical exploration. Initial musical studies completed in his home town, he went to Lisbon where he furthered his knowledge at the National Conservatory (1924-1931) with Adriano Mereia and José Viana da Mota (Piano), Tomás Borba (Composition) and Luís Freitas Branco (Musical Sciences), as well as at the Lisbon University. He taught at the Coimbra Academy of Music from 1932-1936, after which he went to Paris in 1937 to study Musicology with Paul-Marie Masson at the Sorbonne and Composition and Orchestration with Charles Koechlin. Upon his return to Portugal in 1939, Graça taught Piano, Harmony, and Counterpoint at the Academy of Music Amateurs in Lisbon and became its Artistic Director. In 1942, he founded *Sonata*, a musical organisation for the promotion of concerts of contemporary music, which was highly successful until 1960.

Victim of the time and place in which he lived, Graça resisted any attempt to conform to the ideological and cultural paradigm of the Portuguese New State (headed by the National Secretary of Propaganda, António Ferro), which would have meant artistic death for him. This resistance brought imprisonment more than once; became the reason for refusing a professorship at the National Conservatory (1931); caused him to reject a study grant in Paris (1934); prohibited him from leaving the country to be on the Bartók International Composition Competition in Budapest (1949) and became his interdiction to teach, by ministerial orders (1954). (Peixoto; Bastos, 2)

As a composer, Graça passed through three stages: 1) until 1936; objective style with influences of Stravinsky, Schenberg, Bartók, and Falla, while also using Portuguese elements such as prosody and folk music (Variations on a Portuguese Popular Song, for piano).; 2) 1937-1960; nationalistic style, based on the Portuguese folk music with its rich melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic features (Piano Sonata, n° 2; Piano Quartet); 3) 1961-1994; universality with less clear use of Portuguese folk music and ampler tonal-rhythmic-structural tendencies (Chamber Concerto, commissioned by Rostropovich). Traditional, although transformed, elements – from hymns to Beethoven or Chopin - have their place in Graça's music, described as possessing “a conspicuous rhythmic and harmonic drive, a clear phrase and sectional structure, a refined thematic manipulation, and a rich and creative timbre palette, resulting from the application of the most varied compositional techniques based on traditional foundations.” (Bastos, 1, Introduction)

Graça won many prizes for his works, including first prizes from the Circle of Musical Culture (1st Piano Concerto -1940; *História trágico-marítima*, 1942; *Sinfonia per orchestra*, 1944; 3rd Piano Sonata, 1952); the Prince Rainier III of Monaco Prize (1st String Quartet, 1965). Possessing a predilection for the piano and for the voice, he composed for every genre, leaving only that of opera unfinished. His abundant vocal and choral arrangements leave an indubitable Portuguese folk-fingerprint.

As a pianist, Graça entered the virtuoso class of Viana da Mota. Abdicating the life of a concert pianist, his time was absorbed with composition, research, writing, teaching, administrating, and conducting. Nevertheless, from archived programs, he did perform, often as accompanist. His predilection for the piano is undeniable, as his immense output indicates.

As a writer and musicologist, Graça's publications remain an invaluable part of the Portuguese musical heritage. His work with Tomás Borba on the two-volume *Dicionário de música* (Lisbon, 1956-1958) – a work that integrated general music history figures with those of Portugal – is only today, fifty years later, being supplanted. His compilation, *Canção popular portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1953), with Michel Giacometti, remains an important and unsurpassed collection of Portuguese folksongs from all regions. His biographical insights – on such subjects as *José Viana da Mota* (Lisbon, 1949), *Chopin* (1949), *Bartók* (1953), *Mozart* (1956) – are unique, while his writings on theoretical, historical, and esthetical aspects of music (such as *Introduction to Modern Music*, 1942, and *Theoretical Bases of Music*, 1944, and the magazine *Gazeta musical*, begun 1950-1) reveal his high intelligence and profound knowledge.

Notable recognition came after the Portuguese democracy (24 April 1976) when Graça was bestowed several awards: Order of the People's Friendship (USSR, 1976); *Grande Oficialato da Ordem Militar de Santiago da Espada*; *Grã-Cruz da Ordem do Infante D. Henrique*; and *Ordem de Mérito Cultural*. My own city of Aveiro had a place in Graça's life. The University of Aveiro conferred upon him a *Doutor Honoris Causa* in 1986; supported the recording of his 6th *Suite memoriam à B. Bartók* (Nancy Lee Harper, *Numérica* 1086, 1999); and published his piano sonatas and sonatinas in 2006 (UA Press: Patrícia Lopes Bastos, editor; on CD by pianist António Rosado, *Numérica*, 2004). As well, Aveiro's Gulbenkian Music Conservatory professor, Paulo Amorim, has recorded Graça's entire guitar works (*La Mã de Guido*, 2005). For more information, the Ministry of Culture of Portugal has a commemorative site: www.lopes-graca.com. Graça died near Lisbon, in Cascais, on 27 November 1994.

References

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