

José Vianna da Motta (1868-1946)

By Nancy Lee Harper

The rich legacy of Portugal's premier pianist of the first half of the 20th century, José Vianna da Motta¹, would be difficult to recount in this short space. A world-class musician – who enjoyed several facets to his career as a performer, pedagogue, writer and editor, conductor, administrator, and composer – da Motta carried on the Beethoven-Liszt spiritual legacy. He did this in two ways: 1) directly as a pupil of Liszt and 2) indirectly as editor and performer respectively of Carl Czerny (1791-1857) and João Domingos Bomtempo (1775-1842). His penetrating erudition elevated the musical climate around him. No less than the Parisian pianist, Alfred Cortot (1877-1962) considered Vianna da Motta as “one of the top three minds in Europe.”²

As a pianist, da Motta was one of the last pupils of the legendary Franz Liszt (1811-1886), who briefly visited Lisbon in 1845 before da Motta was born. No doubt, da Motta heard about the “Lisztmania” that was generated by this visit. Recounting from his teenage eyes, da Motta left for posterity amusing and enticing written accounts³ about Liszt, his teaching, and performance practice of the times. Liszt's link to Beethoven was through Liszt's teacher, Carl Czerny (1791-1857). Commemorating this lineage, da Motta performed the entire cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas in 1927 for the Beethoven centenary, the first time this feat had ever been accomplished in Portugal.⁴ “The connection is further cemented by the fact that da Motta became himself a great Lisztian and above

¹ He preferred this spelling to the shortened version of Viana da Mota. For more information, see Pipa....

² Elvira Archer, ‘Vianna da Motta em Portugal’ in *José Vianna da Motta, 50 Anos Depois da Sua Morte (1868-1948)* Lisbon: Museu da Música, 1998, 20, in Luís Filipe Barbosa Loureiro Pipa, *From the Romantic Tradition to the Modern School of Pianism: The Legacy of José Vianna da Motta (1868-1948) A Practice-Based Study Illustrated Through Recordings and a Commentary*, 2004, PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, U. K., 25.

³ *Vida de Liszt*, 1945, Porto: Edições Lopes da Silva ; *Música e músicos alemães*, 2 vol., 1947, Coimbra: Coimbra editora.

⁴ Da Motta was not yet sixty years old when this occurred. Continuing da Motta's “fingerprints” were the Beethoven piano sonata cycle performances in Lisbon by Fernando Laíres (1925-2016) at age 19, who performed the complete Beethoven violin-piano sonatas with Antonino David the following year. See Nancy Lee Harper (2005) “Saudades de Portugal: Fernando Laíres”, *Flores Musicais, A Festschrift in Honor of Fernando Laíres on his 80th Birthday, Journal of the American Liszt Society*, Vol. LIV, LV, LVI (2003-2005) triple issue, edited by David Butler Cannata, 8-23. See also Nancy Lee Harper (2010) “Fernando Laíres” in *Enciclopédia da Música em Portugal no Século XX*, vol. C-L. Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores/Temas e Debates, dir. Salwa Castelo-Branco, 1683-1684. The third Portuguese pianist to accomplish this herculean feat was the female pianist, Florinda Santos (1907-2005), when she performed the Beethoven cycle in 1970 at the Academia de Amadores de Música in Lisbon for the bi-centenary of his birth (<https://www.publico.pt/1999/03/18/jornal/a-eterna-pianista-130987>, accessed on 25 August 2018). Teresa Cascuo has erroneously omitted the performances of Laíres in her biographical article, “José Viana da Mota” in *Enciclopédia da Música em Portugal no Século XX*, vol. L-P (2010). Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores/Temas e Debates, dir. Salwa Castelo-Branco, 821-823. Cascuo lists Santos as the second pianist to perform the Beethoven cycle and in 1965, which, according to one source was a course on the interpretation of the Beethoven sonatas (<https://www.publico.pt/1999/03/18/jornal/a-eterna-pianista-130987>).

all a great Beethovenian not to mention a defender and a committed editor of some of Czerny's most relevant sets of Studies.”⁵

Da Motta also performed works by his countrymen. The inclusion of Bomtempo in his repertoire was a mark of respect, one that was again noted when da Motta took the symbolic name of “Bomtempo” when he joined Freemasonry in 1895.⁶

Da Motta frequently appeared with orchestra and as a collaborative pianist, accompanying singers, violinists, and others. Some of da Motta's performances may be heard on piano rolls (*Welte Mignon*, 1928), YouTube, and the Portuguese radio archives. Sometimes criticized for being too intellectual in his approach, da Motta's pianism was universally recognized as possessing a solid technique, brilliant tone, clarity of execution, and a rigor in the interpretation of the classic repertoire.⁷ This rigor was due in part to the long hours he practiced. One report in 1911 declared that da Motta practiced up to ten hours daily.⁸ He possessed a stupendous memory. Even before he performed the Beethoven cycle, that same report also mentioned that he had memorized four hundred pages of music. His prodigious memory was verified when he performed some 112 pieces from memory in a tour of Argentina within a space of twenty-four days. These included large works, such as sonatas of Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt, plus *Kreisleriana*, *Estudos Sinfónicos*, and *Carnaval* of Schumann, as well as the *Prelude, Choral, and Fugue* of Franck.

As a pedagogue, da Motta created a school of pianism in Portugal that endured for the remainder of the century. This legacy was imparted to his piano pupils in the Virtuosity class of the Lisbon Conservatory (which he created), such as Fernando Lopes-Graça (1906-1994) and Eurico Thomaz de Lima (1908-1989). Liszt's “aura” was often present in da Motta's counsels to his pupils and in assisting their interpretations. The precision with which da Motta thought about pedagogical problems and their possible solutions revealed his keen intellect. Once when asked how he managed to play so fast, da Motta responded: “First I practice slowly, then even more slowly, and finally even more slowly.”⁹ Da Motta valued the piano individual lesson the most, rather than the group lessons done in Masterclasses and Interpretation courses. Besides documenting his studies with Liszt, da Motta wrote a small volume about his studies in 1887 with Han von Bülow (1830-1894), Liszt's former

⁵ Pipa, 19.

⁶ Pipa, 24.

⁷ Cascudo 822.

⁸ *A Capital*, 15 Feb. 1911, in João de Freitas Branco (1987) *Viana da Mota, Uma contribuição para o estudo da sua personalidade e da sua obra*, 2ª ed., Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 85.

⁹ Freitas Branco, 111.

son-in-law.¹⁰ These studies done in von Bülow's Interpretation Class contribute to da Motta's own Beethoven interpretations. Da Motta categorized music teachers as: 1) "artists who cannot teach, because they don't know what they do"¹¹; 2) "there exist others who only teach what they know"¹²; and 3) "there are even others who are not content with the study of the laws of the execution of the piano, but who, based on their discoveries, find new means to attain the end."¹³

Naturally as a pedagogue, fingering that would permit a secure performance was a crucial consideration for da Motta. According to him:

Fingering is of great importance to the execution of any work. Everything depends on rational fingering: not only safety, clarity and equality, but also memory, articulation and phrasing. One can judge an artist's musicianship through his fingering. In order to choose a correct fingering it is necessary to have fantasy and imagination. Fingering is also an act of creation.¹⁴

An observer remarked:

[da Motta's fingerings] were frequently true findings, ingenious solutions which, once learned, seemed as Columbus's egg. The distribution of the notes between the hands, changing some from the right to the left, or the other way around, facilitated a great deal the execution of particularly transcendental passages.¹⁵

As a writer and editor, da Motta contributed greatly to the literature about music, its musical figures, and its interpretation. From 1897 onward, he published around 30 articles in musical magazines in Germany and Portugal.¹⁶ He explored in depth aspects of interpretation, such as performing ornaments in Bach and Beethoven works.¹⁷ His literary works on Liszt and von Bülow have been mentioned. Additionally, he wrote about the Portuguese poet, Camões (c. 1524-1580), after exploring his poems to set as songs, in his symphony *Sinfonia à pátria*, and other works.¹⁸

Da Motta's numerous editions of music are a wealth yet to be explored. They range from Bach to Alkan, including works by Beethoven (op. 7, op. 31/2) Czerny (op. 299, 740, 849), Heller (op. 45, 46, 47) Liszt (10 volumes for Breitkopf & Haertel), Schumann (*Kinderszenen*, *Album for the Young*),

¹⁰ *Nachtrag zu Studien bei Hans von Bülow von Theodor Peiffer*, 1896, Berlin, n. e.

¹¹ Freitas Branco, 128.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ José Vianna da Motta (1924) 'Foreword' to Carl Czerny A Arte de Desligar os Dedos, Op. 740 Lisbon: Sassetti, 2, in Pipa 85.

¹⁵ Freitas Branco, 111-112, in Pipa 85.

¹⁶ Cascudo, 823.

¹⁷ Cascudo, 822.

¹⁸ *Pensamentos extraídos das obras de Luís de Camões*, 1919, Porto: Renascença Portuguesa.

Chopin (Waltzes and Nocturnes), and others. To adequately penetrate the mind of da Motta, a careful study would need to be made of his writings, editions, annotations, and correspondence.

As a conductor, Vianna da Motta took up the baton as a secondary role. Unfortunately, the Portuguese public did not receive him as a conductor as they did a pianist.¹⁹ Partially to blame for this was the immense popularity of the former conductor of the *Orquestra Sinfónica de Lisboa*, David de Sousa (1880-1918), who had recently died prematurely from the “Spanish influenza”.²⁰ Da Motta assumed de Sousa’s duties at the Teatro Politeama. Even though da Motta had had experience as a conductor, the Lisbon post did not last long. At age twenty-four, he conducted Bach’s cantata *Christ lag in Todesbanden* in Heidelberg²¹, later conducting sporadically in Europe while maintaining his piano concerts as his primary vocation. Later, in Geneva, he was offered the head of orchestral conducting at the Conservatoire.²² In Lisbon, da Motta followed the newer tradition of Liszt, who insisted that to beat time – 1, 2, 3, 4 – was tantamount to being incapable of breathing life into the music.²³ Thus, by not beating time, da Motta had trouble maintaining unity in the orchestra, one that was already fragile given their work environment was less favorable than that of Weimar. Their under-rehearsed performances were risky at best. After two incomplete seasons and thirty-two concerts, da Motta handed over his baton, or the lack of it, to a military musician, Joaquim Fernandes Fão. Da Motta’s experiences as a conductor in Brazil were much more favorable, being deemed “remarkable” by a São Paulo music critic.²⁴ Without a doubt, da Motta’s experience as a conductor went on to influence his interpretations as a pianist.

As an administrator, he assumed the reins of both the Geneva and the Lisbon Conservatories, the latter of which was founded by Bomtempo in 1835. At the Lisbon Conservatory where he served from 1919-1938, he undertook significant and progressive reforms that resulted in positive changes and a vitality that had previously been missing²⁵. One of these was the creation of a Beethoven Prize for the best performance of Bonn master’s works. Upon his return to Portugal in 1917, after thirty-six years abroad, da Motta founded the Lisbon Concert Society (the one earlier founded by Bomtempo was no longer in existence), in order to “revitalize the capital’s musical life”.²⁶

¹⁹ Freitas Branco, 131.

²⁰ Freitas Branco, 205.

²¹ Freitas Branco, 192.

²² Freitas Branco, 204.

²³ Freitas Branco, 133.

²⁴ Freitas Branco, 144.

²⁵ Freitas Branco, 127.

²⁶ Pipa, 24.

As a composer, da Motta may well be considered the first nationalistic Portuguese composer,²⁷ although Victor Hussla (1857-1899) and Alexandre Rey Colaço (1854-1928) were also composing Portuguese-inspired music. Da Motta's contributions in this field range from symphonic, chamber music, songs, to instrumental works, including arrangements and cadenzas.²⁸ Amongst his many youthful works are found a composition for piano-6 hands and a piece for left hand alone. He composed for three decades, from his youth in 1875 until 1908, leaving composing because he disagreed with the current European compositional trends.

Incorporating Portuguese elements into his works, da Motta “differentiated the use of traditional songs with the expression of the feeling of nationality, which evidenced both through the use of the Portuguese language and in programmatic music.”²⁹ With the latter, he often followed the Lisztian model. His *Balada, op. 16* (1905), his *obra-prima* for piano, clearly evokes the Hungarian master. Based on a “Tricana d'aldeia” from Aveiro, this theme and variations in the grand Lisztian manner closes with a reverent “Ave Maria”. His large two-movement *Fantasia dramática* (1893), composed after his Piano Concerto in A Major (1886-1887) – coincidence of key with the Hungarian master's second piano concerto? – presents a program linked to freeing tyranny and a savior king, all presented in youthful exuberance and Lisztian grandeur. Some other programmatic examples are found in his symphony, *Sinfonia à pátria* (1894), in which each of the four movements uses texts by Camões as epigraphs programmatically and *Invocação dos Lusíadas* (1897, revised in 1915 and again in 1938);

Da Motta's foray into Portuguese traditional music is explained to his former pupil, Lopes-Graça, in 1933:

My esteemed ex-disciple I was very pleased to note your interest on my compositions of national character and I can give you the precise date in which I entered that path. Before coming to Portugal in 1893 I had already a rhapsody on Portuguese motifs [presumably 1891]³⁰, but it was only after spending a few months here that I started to write original pieces of national character: *Cantiga de Amor*, the first *Chula*, *Valsa Caprichosa*, Vito. **All motifs to these pieces are my own, though many believe they are popular.** ³¹They were written between 1894 and 1896. In 96 I wrote the *Sinfonia à Pátria* [Symphony to the Motherland] in which Scherzo I **used popular motifs**. It was then that I wrote the six songs with Portuguese words. After 97, I wrote *Dança de Roda*, *Adens Minha Terra*, *Chula do Douro* (1906) and the Three

²⁷ Cascudo, 821.

²⁸ Da Motta's arrangements and cadenzas include: Alkan *Prières pour Orgue, Op. 64*, arr. for piano 1901 Paris: Costallat & Cie; Alkan *Benedictus op. 54 pour Piano à Clavier de Pédales*, arr. for 2 pianos 1903 Paris: Costallat & Cie; Alkan *Virtuosity Exercises Extracted from the Works of Ch. V. Alkan, arr. for piano* 1908 Paris: Costallat & Cie; Mozart *Fantasia for piano*, four hands, arr. for 2 pianos, 4 hands – Autograph; Mozart *Cadenzas for the piano concerto in D minor, K. 466* – Autograph.

²⁹ Cascudo, 823 (translation by author).

³⁰ According Teresa Cascudo, this is the first Portuguese Rhapsody, presumably of 1891. (Cascudo 1998b, 68), cited in Pipa 27.

³¹ Author's emphasis.

Impromptus (1908 or 9) **freely developing popular motifs** as well as the *Balada* (1906) in the form of variations on two popular melodies. In 1904 or 5, I wrote 5 more Rhapsodies, of which only the 4th was published. I believe that before 1893 nothing had been made in Portugal in that sense.³²

The examples cited above by da Motta are pieces from his *Cenas portuguesas* series, with the exception of the *Balada*, Symphony, songs, and the Portuguese Rhapsodies.

Vianna da Motta was not born in continental Portugal, but rather in São Tomé on the western equatorial coast of central Africa. His father, José António da Motta, went to establish a pharmaceutical business and there married Inês Joaquina de Almeida Vianna. José Vianna da Motta was the first of six children of the couple, with four surviving infancy. Because of the father's ill health due to the local climate, the family moved to the Portuguese continent when José was only a year old. The family first settled in Colares and later moved to Lisbon when José was seven so that he could begin his conservatory studies there.

A precocious child, José's musical abilities manifested early at age three.³³ At age four, he was pointing out musical errors in a local band's performance. At age five, he composed his first song, which his father, an amateur musician, wrote down. As luck would have it, a church harmonium was temporarily installed into the household. On it, the young child could play anything he heard even before having lessons. His father then had a smaller version adequate for a child to be built for him. Because of his extraordinary musical gifts, José's father took the six-year old child to the Countess Edla and to King D. Fernando, who promised assistance to the young child for music study first in Lisbon and then abroad.

In 1881, at age thirteen, José, who already composed many works and played many recitals, was presented to Sophie Menter (1846-1918), Liszt's favourite female pupil. She encouraged the youth to study with the Scharwenka brothers at their conservatory in Berlin. Completing his conservatory studies in 1881 "with commendation", da Motta wisely took some time to learn rudimentary German before embarking on the next phase of his life.

From 1882-1914, Berlin became Vianna da Motta's base. He enrolled in the Scharwenka conservatory at age fourteen. At age fifteen, he performed Weber's *Concertstück*, in which one critic compared him to Mozart. At the end of this academic year, José was distinguished as a model of

³² Fernando Lopes-Graça (1984) 'Viana da Mota. Subsídios Para Uma Biografia Incluindo 22 Cartas ao Autor' in *Opúsculos* (3) Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, pp. 9-94. 63 in Pipa, 27-28.

³³ Biographical information taken from João de Freitas Branco *Viana da Mota, Uma contribuição para o estudo da sua personalidade e da sua obra*, 2ª edição. Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1987.

“intelligence and application”. On the pretext of needing to study with Liszt in the summer of 1885 before returning for a temporary stay to Portugal as required by his patron, José left Xavier Scharwenka. He subsequently matriculated to the class of Karl Schöffner, feeling that his studies with Scharwenka had been inadequate. Not long afterwards, Liszt died. “Vianna da Motta himself wrote that the principal reason that led him to Liszt was the fact that he was the greatest Beethoven interpreter that ever existed, recognizing that the impressions he received from the master would guide him throughout his entire life.”³⁴

The musical life in Berlin was a stimulus that was undeniable. Da Motta heard Brahms perform his own first piano concerto. Other performances must have thrilled the young student, such as those by Anton Rubinstein (1829-1894), Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), Eugene d’Albert (1864-1932) in the premiere of Richard Strauss’ *Burlesque* that was conducted by Bülow, and others. Later, da Motta became friends with Busoni (1866-1924), whom he met in New York in 1892 at the home of another Liszt pupil, Carl Friedheim (1858-1909). Da Motta sometimes prepared the program notes for Busoni’s concerts. The two exchanged musical ideas and correspondence, as time permitted.

Da Motta’s personal life began with his collaboration as a teenager in Berlin with the singer Margarethe Lemke. They concertized frequently and finally married in 1898 when da Motta was thirty years of age. The marriage was short-lived when Margarethe died in her sleep in 1900. The following year, da Motta married contralto Irma Harden, with whom he also concertised. This marriage lasted until 1911. In 1912, da Motta married his third wife, Berta de Bivar. His first daughter, Leonor, was born in Buenos Aires later that year, followed by a second daughter, Inês, in 1913, in Berlin.

Given the outbreak of WWI, da Motta left Berlin for Geneva in 1914, where he accepted a permanent position at the Conservatoire. There, he enjoyed prestige as a pianist and pedagogue.

In July 1917, da Motta returned to Portugal where he would reside until his death in 1948. During his career as a pianist, he performed approximately 1600 concerts in Europe, North and South America. In 1920, da Motta was bestowed *Grande Oficial* or Grand Officer (GOSE) in honor of his stature as a pianist and teacher. He was the first musician to receive this honor in Portugal. In 1938, in honor of his 70th birthday, da Motta was bestowed the Portuguese *Grã-Cruz* or Great Cross award (GCSE). To date, there is only one other pianist to have received this award, Maria João Pires (b. 1944).³⁵

³⁴ José Vianna da Motta (1947) *Música e Músicos Alemães*, vol. I (2nd edition) Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 183, in Pipa, 18.

³⁵ Miguel A. F. da Silva Campinho (2015) *Óscar da Silva (1870-1958), Life and Solo Piano Works*. D. M. A. Dissertation, Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford, 84.

On the subject of interpretation, da Motta affirmed:

A true objectiveness, that is, the absolute realization of the author's intentions without the interference of the performer's personality, appears to me not even to be possible, nor as well desirable, for if that were possible, there would only be one form of execution for each work and it goes without saying that thus it would become pointless to listen to other than the artist who had the unprecedented fortune of owning that single correct interpretation. That would simply mean the death of every musical activity in the field of interpretation.³⁶

In spite of a brilliant career not only as a pianist but as a pedagogue, writer, conductor, and administrator, da Motta's last years were sometimes disappointing and certainly not easy. The important reforms he optimistically initiated at the Lisbon Conservatory in 1919 were radically changed in 1930. More than once he wished to perform the cycle of Beethoven piano concerti but ill health did not allow. One of his last major performances in 1945, the *Totentanz, Paraphrase on Dies irae, S. 126* of Liszt with the National Symphony Orchestra of Portugal, conducted by Pedro de Freitas Branco, performed in 1945 when he was seventy-seven, may be heard on YouTube. It is a thrilling testament to the great pianist he was.

Da Motta's pupil, Lopes-Graça, was "one of the few who accompanied his master through his last 'sad and afflicted' years, marked by disease and financial problems that 'forced him to sell some of his scores and working materials from his archive.'³⁷

Like many of the greatest of Portuguese artists, Vianna da Motta was a victim of the incomprehension, meanness and small-mindedness of a society that could not measure up to his uncommon stature. They denied his talent, disputed his glory, plotted outrageously against him, made his life miserable, drove a hard bargain over his modest performer's fees, tried to lay upon him the vile stone of oblivion, left him to die in terrible loneliness and isolation and, even after his death, attempted to prevent his true artistic and intellectual distinction from being revealed in all its glory.³⁸

José Vianna da Motta died during the early hours of 1 June 1948, a victim of pulmonary tuberculosis. He was the last living pupil of Liszt. Frederic Lamond (1868-1948), also born in the same year as Vianna da Motta and another Liszt pupil, had passed away just months earlier on 21 February.

Today, there remains an international piano competition in Lisbon, founded in 1957 by a former da Motta pupil, Sequeira Costa (b. 1929) – *The Vianna da Motta International Music Competition*.

³⁶ Graça, 38 in Pipa, 44.

³⁷ Graça, 23-24 in Pipa, 25.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Since 1964, the competition has been held every four years and attracts major talents from around the world. However, not always is a First Prize awarded. Nevertheless, the competition remains a living tribute to Portugal's premier pianist of the first half of the 20th century.