



Native Brazilian Music

An appreciation

Fabricio Mattos

Native Brazilian Music: an appreciation

There are times in life when, either while passionately researching a theme or in wild flights of fantasy, we find ourselves imagining how it would be to be in a room with some of our idols and heroes, how we would address them or what questions we would ask. For those aficionados of Brazilian music, such a moment actually happened. The room was on a ship docked in Rio de Janeiro, and it did not last only a few moments, but two whole nights! It was witnessed by a handful of tourists, reporters, and young musicians, some of which probably aware that they were witnessing one of those unique moments in history that joined personalities from many social classes and cultural backgrounds under the idea of friendship and collaboration.

The event occurred during a tour of South America by the world-renowned British conductor Leopold Stokowski and his All-American Youth Orchestra. Apart from performing with his orchestra, Stokowski had been assigned by the US government to gather as many 'native' musicians as possible and make recordings that would show the true face of South American culture to a local audience, hungry for novelties and eccentricities. Not surprisingly, there was also a political dimension: the project was part of the so-called 'Good Neighbour Policy', instituted by the US government to strengthen relations with the nations of the south, and in which personalities such as Walt Disney and Orson Welles would also become involved in the following years.

Apart from any political implications, Stokowski was aware of the huge challenge that such an endeavour would impose. An admirer of Brazilian music, the maestro knew where he should go for help, when the pressure of putting together such an enterprise proved to be almost impossible for an outsider. One month before his tour began Stokowski contacted his friend Heitor Villa-Lobos, a Rio resident with whom he had collaborated for many years. He asked the Brazilian maestro for local musicians who could provide a wide and authentic idea of the past, present, and future of the music in Brazil. Villa-Lobos then enlisted the support of Donga, an iconic figure in Rio's music scene and who assembled 'la crème de la crème' of local musicians to perform in two intense and varied night sessions in the improvised studio aboard the SS Uruguay.



Names such as Pixinguinha, Donga, João da Baiana (the so-called 'Holy Trinity' of Brazilian music) were joined by musicians such as Cartola, Zé Espinguela, Villa-Lobos and others, in order to make what is one of the most important records of Brazilian music ever made. The genres and styles included in the 'Native Brazilian Music' project (hereafter NBM) were as varied as they could be. They ranged from native indigenous music in the voice of classical singers, to ritual music with deep roots in Africa, as well as contemporary developments of the



samba and other genres from other parts of the country, particularly the North-eastern region. With this in mind, I thought that offering an appreciation of these recordings would be a better idea than analysing the historical, political, and social contexts involving the NBM project. The subjects that I have explored still offer an open ground for serious research in their many aspects; it is important to note that many of these have already been widely explored by researchers such as Daniella Thompson, who, through serious and passionate work, bravely offered many answers and raised many questions about the NBM project. This article is heavily based on her findings and publications, for which we as Brazilian musicians, and aficionados of Brazilian music, are deeply grateful. The Museu Villa-Lobos, in Rio, has also recently published a 'virtual exhibition' in celebration of 80 years of the NBM recordings, which has also proved very helpful in the creation of this article. Links for these can be found in the references list at the end.

I have divided the selected recordings of the NBM project into three sections: Indigenous Music, Language & Rhythm, and Samba. Each of these may present complex issues when considering the cultural pillars of a nation such as Brazil, a relatively young country that possesses diverse cultural roots reaching back millennia in human history. The chosen subjects relate, direct or indirectly, to the constitutive elements of Brazilian culture and society: the indigenous, the European, and the African, each with their own formative history, multi-influenced culture, and relative importance in the gradual construction of Brazilian identity as we know it today. As I mentioned earlier, my intention is to offer an exercise of attentive listening of these recordings, commenting on historical, musical, technical, and other interesting aspects. I would recommend listening to them with good headphones, and with an 'open mind', considering that these were made in a single session (and probably single takes), and in conditions that are far from what nowadays would be considered ideal. Lastly, in case you are not one of the very fortunate collectors to own a copy of the NBM records, all the tracks are available on Soundcloud at the time this article was written. Each track is linked **in red**; just click on the title of the songs and open it in your browser. The link for the complete playlist can also be found in the reference list. That said, let us begin our journey!

Indigenous Music

Long before the European officially arrived in the early 16th-century, the Brazilian territory was populated with hundreds of indigenous tribes, with cultures spanning thousands of years. These native communities developed, in higher or lower degrees, relationships that could be friendly or war-like as in any human society. The European presence meant the imposition of a foreign culture, without mentioning the spread of new diseases; furthermore, the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised would more often than not be based on violence of some kind. In colonised Brazil, death was not only a physical reality for the indigenous peoples, but also a cultural fate. However, apart from all the historical attempts to eradicate the native indigenous cultures in Brazil, many aspects of them are still present in our everyday life, such as our cuisine, our language and, of course, our music.

When Modernists such as Mário de Andrade tried to establish an original ‘national identity’ in Brazilian art and literature in the first half of the 20th century, some of the main sources of material were the cultures – even if often highly fantasized – of a few native tribes that survived the test of time and made it into the modern age. In music, Villa-Lobos was one of the most important artists who contributed to an ethno-musicological approach to Brazilian traditions. Based on his own exploratory field trips – some of which, according to some researchers, did not happen at all! – and material collected by other researchers, Villa-Lobos used many indigenous themes, forest sounds, or folk songs as inspiration for much of his composition output, from solo pieces to massive orchestral works.

Teiru is a funeral chant collected by Roquete Pinto in 1912, and it also features, in a much modified way, in Villa-Lobos’s ‘Três Poemas Indígenas’, for voice and piano. In the version recorded for the NBM project, the composer opted for a unison version of the theme, sung by a quartet of the Orfeão Villa-Lobos, a group of classically trained singers directed by the maestro himself. Here, there is a clear intention to be as close to the original as possible, different from the voice and piano version, which has layers of ‘modernity’ applied to it. Some simple dynamic and octave changes occur in the gravely intoned chant, and it is interesting to hear the slight struggle of the singers in dealing with the prosody and accentuation of the indigenous language.

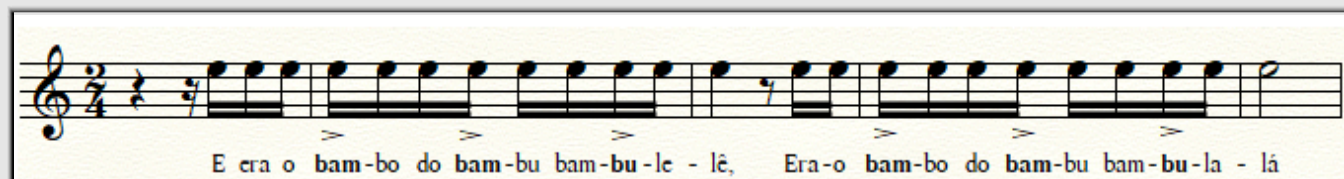
Canidé loune was collected by the traveller Jean de Léry in 1553, and appears here in a harmonized version by Villa-Lobos. This recording, in contrast with Teiru, presents a heavily modified version of the original. Apart from the half-tone drop in relation to the initial key of the recording (from 2’00”) – which can be excused for being a very difficult a cappella arrangement performed in inhospitable conditions – the singers’ commitment to bringing out the inner strength of the piece is incredibly touching.

Language & Rhythm

One aspect that is often overlooked when analysing the formative elements of Brazilian music is the experimental use of language as a rhythmic drive. The Portuguese that is currently spoken in Brazil is known as a creative mix of the three constitutive cultural elements as mentioned previously. However, each of these roots, in their turn, derives from other linguistic sources. The Tupi was the ‘general’ root of the languages widely spoken in Brazil by a large number of different indigenous tribes. The Africans brought with them their own languages and dialects – particularly from Bantu origins. The Portuguese brought their Latinised language with clear hints of the Arabic, a consequence of the Moors who were present in the Iberian Peninsula until the early 17th century. Considering all these factors, it is not surprising that the Portuguese spoken in Brazil is a language full of twists, with slang and everyday expressions

being deeply rooted in our cultural history. Such richness of linguistic expressivity, combined with the Brazilian pre-disposition for improvisation, generated an interesting output of music exploring some intricacies of the Brazilian Portuguese.

Bambo do Bambu, composed by Donga, is here interpreted by Jararaca & Ratinho, two artists particularly famous for their highly developed skills on improvised and tongue-twisting songs. This genre is called *embolada*, and it is typical from the north eastern region. It is interesting to note that, when the refrain is sung with the proper accents – on the first and fourth semiquavers of the first group, and on the third semiquaver of the second group, as indicated on the example below – a typical feature of the 'swing' of much of Brazilian music can be heard, which often goes unnoticed due to the extremely natural way in which it is performed.



Example of the use of prosody and accentuation in 'Bambo do Bambu'

o bambo do bambo, bambo-lê-lê
 ra o bambo do bambo, bambo-lá-lá-
 eu quero ver dizer três vezes
 bambo-lê, bambo-lá-lá

Fui a um banquete na casa
 A mesa tava no sereno
 Pirá todo mundo cabê
 Tinha de toda qualidade
 Tinha mais home q
 só não tinha



An aspect of the ‘liveness’ of this session can be heard at 01’20”, when one of the singers comes in at the wrong moment, and gets confused with the text! The ‘slip’ is quickly corrected without any break, and the quality of the take remains intact. Another interesting musical aspect lies in the guitar playing by Laurindo de Almeida, who was only 23 years old at the time of this recording. Some years after these recordings were done Almeida moved to the United States, where he built a solid career as a jazz musician, composer, and arranger. His guitar playing here is exquisite, showing an absolute control over the rhythmic patterns of the style, allied to a pristine technique of his training as a classical guitarist. For those with ‘well-tuned’ ears, at the end, after a fast solo, one can hear a chord on the guitar that one could say ‘does not belong’ to the genre. It is in fact a G13 chord, widely used particularly in jazz music and in the bossa nova genre that would arise in Brazil many years later. In my understanding, apart from signalling the way in which his career as a guitarist was being shaped, this kind of musical gesture shows how Laurindo de Almeida was already working to further develop the harmonic language of our native music through his guitar playing.

Sapo no Saco, composed by Jararaca, is also interpreted by Jararaca and Ratinho, and presents much of the same linguistic attributes of the previous song. The interesting aspect here is that, although this was included in the Columbia release, this track was actually recorded in 1929. The reasons for its inclusion, as far as I know, are unknown; it remains, however, another very good example of the linguistic ‘stretches’ that contributed so much to the future of Brazilian music.

Samba

Arguably the most celebrated of the Brazilian genres, the *samba* has a history that reaches back to the roots of the African communities from whom it originated. Even though nowadays the genre has spread among all levels of society, being interpreted in other languages and having absorbed many other influences, the spiritual origins of the *samba* lie in the rituals and ceremonies performed by Africans forcibly brought and enslaved in the Brazilian lands, and their descendants. A considerable part of the Brazilian culture came to be as a result of such intense socio-political happenings, and the *samba*, as one of our most recognizable cultural assets, is a living testimony to this fact.

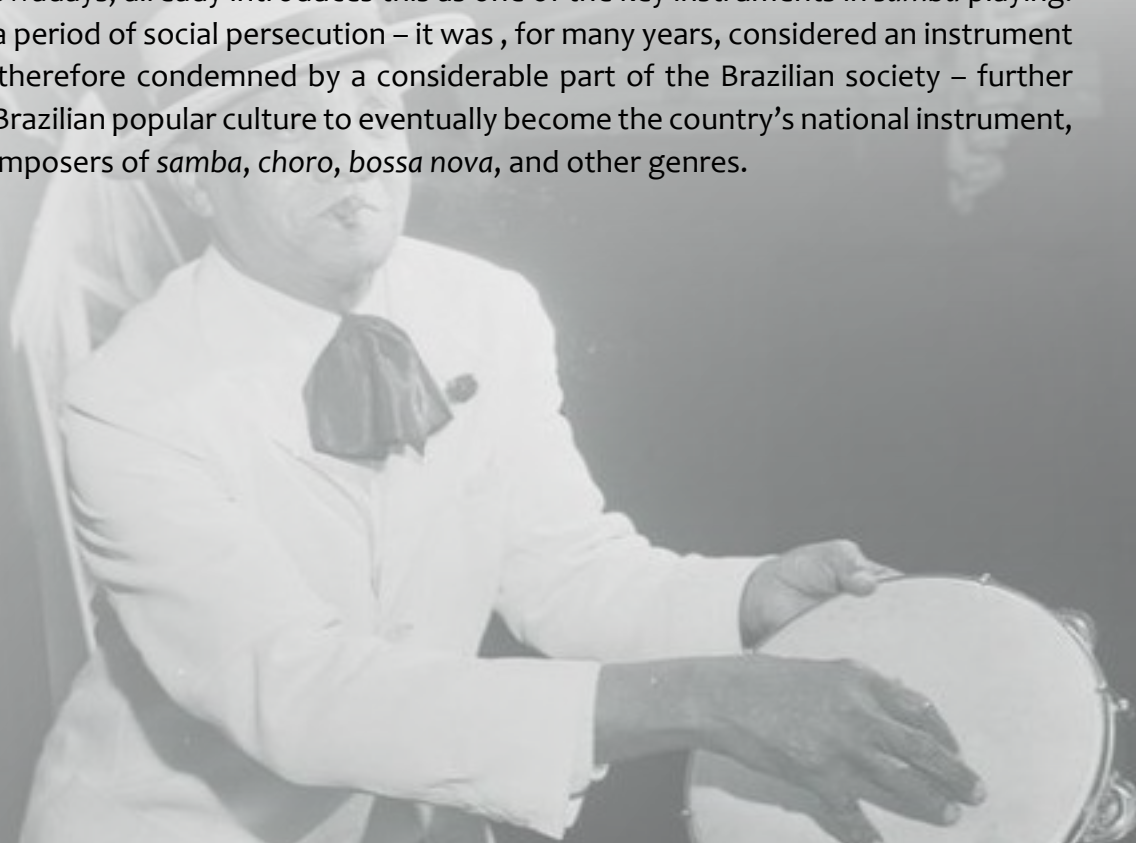
The genre has endured, in one way or another, all sorts of challenges in its long history, from the displacement from its original grounds to political repression and social intolerance. Its survival is mainly due to the deep feeling nurtured towards it by its Afro-descent heirs, allied to certain openness to other cultures and styles in more recent times.

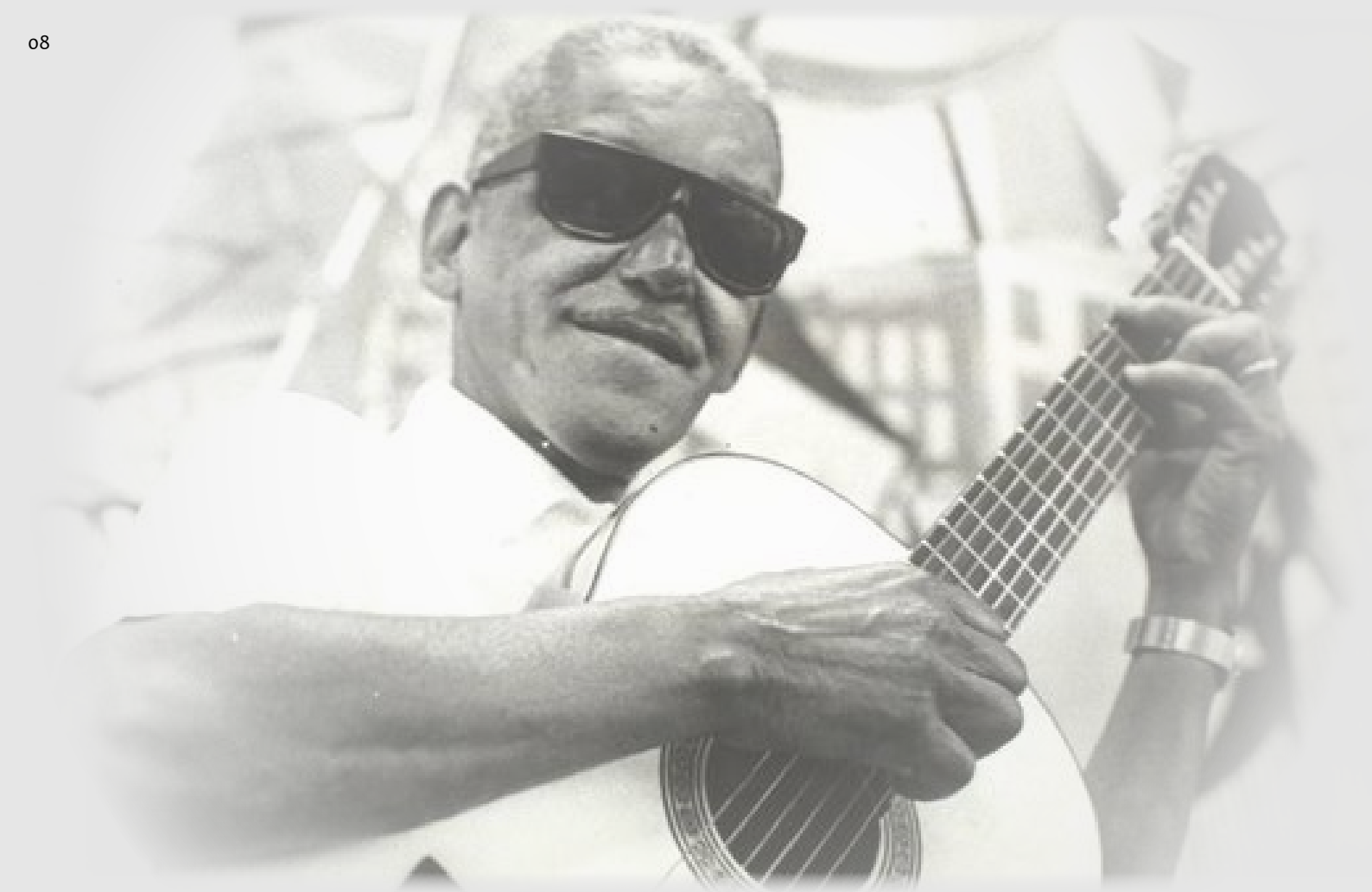


This variety, flexibility, and accessibility, allied to its deep historical roots, provided the *samba* with much of its current strength, and places such as Rio de Janeiro and Salvador are unique ‘galleries’, where its various historical stages are still exuberantly displayed in the streets, terreiros, nightclubs, botecos, rooftops, concert halls, backyards, and living rooms. The NBM recordings bring very fine examples of some of these stages, performed by legendary names that uniquely contributed to the further development and reach of the *samba* genre that we enjoy today. I have selected three distinct styles that showcase the development of the genre, starting with its African ritualistic origins and finishing with what was the contemporary style of the genre in the 1940s.

Macumba de Oxóssi, by Donga and José Espinguela, performed by José Espinguela and the Grupo do Pai Alufá, is a *macumba* characterized by a very strong rhythmic pattern, and is here accompanied by percussion, female singers and clapping. This relatively unmodified clapping pattern remains, in fact, a strong element in the *samba* playing up to today, thus exemplifying the connection between the past and the future of the genre. Another example of this strong connection to the past are the repeated patterns in drumming and singing, along with the short calls in Yoruba, all working together towards the creation of trance-inducing musical moments in which it is difficult to identify beginnings and endings.

Caboclo do Mato, by Getúlio da Silva, is a *corima* performed by João da Baiana, Janir Martins & Jararaca. This is already a new stage towards what we today know as *samba*. The main characteristic that connects it to *Macumba de Oxóssi* are the short phrases generating a repetitive character that, even if far from being ritualistic in intention, might point to the trance-inducing style from the *macumba*. Here, however, one can already observe other elements that will help transform the genre, while keeping the essence of its African origins. The first striking element is the percussion accompaniment by João da Baiana, who brought into the *samba* the unique sound and rhythmic patterns of his virtuosic pandeiro playing. Although the accents and the ‘groove’ are rather different from today, João da Baiana is considered one of the main precursors of this instrument, helping to shape its technique and leading the way to what is now a Brazilian excellence in the world. Another interesting aspect is Pixinguinha’s flute ‘comments’ throughout the whole song, which signal a tendency to the improvisatory character that genres such as the *samba* and the *choro* would assume in the coming decades. The last element that I would like to call your attention to is the guitar accompaniment that, although different from the way guitarists usually play nowadays, already introduces this as one of the key instruments in *samba* playing. The guitar would, after a period of social persecution – it was, for many years, considered an instrument played by ‘malandros’, therefore condemned by a considerable part of the Brazilian society – further increase its presence in Brazilian popular culture to eventually become the country’s national instrument, played by virtually all composers of *samba*, *choro*, *bossa nova*, and other genres.





Quem Me Vê Sorrir, by Cartola and Carlos Cachça, is interpreted by Cartola and a group of singers ('pastoras') and instrumentalists from the Estação Primeira de Mangueira *samba* school, co-founded by Cartola himself. Here the key constitutive elements of what would become the *samba* known in the whole world are gloriously presented, with virtuosic and energetic performances of all involved. The instrumental group is already much more related to what we usually have nowadays in *samba* circles, with the percussion ensemble assuming its place as the guiding force of the genre. The absolutely exquisite guitar playing style, here illustrated by Aluísio Dias, together with the use of more 'exotic' instruments such as the *cuíca* and a further development of the melodic lines and singing style, are prime examples of what would become some of the quintessential aesthetic elements in Brazilian music.

Another interesting aspect to be noted here is the melancholic style of the text. Already at the beginning Cartola sings...

"Whoever sees me smiling thinks that I am happy, but my smile is just for consolation"

... which resonates with what Vinícius de Moraes would write years later:

"To make a beautiful *samba* it is necessary a pinch of sadness"

Listen to this

What else can be said about such a meeting of musical personalities and styles? How can we further express our admiration for those whose singing, drumming, plucking, and clapping, kept our music alive and with it an important part of our history? How can we express our gratitude for those who exposed their warm blood to tell, with musical notes, stories that books and publications tend to approach with cold partiality?

First of all we need to acknowledge our history. Ignorance is at the root of the worst form of disrespect that can be perpetrated on a people's cultural history. Brazilian musicians, independently of the genre in which they work, need to urgently and intensely acknowledge the historical importance of the Native Brazilian Music project, even if the ones who sponsored it did not at the time. Today we have, thanks to the work of researchers such as Daniella Thompson and a few others, access to materials related to our unique cultural history; a virtual national museum that will only be lost to flames due to our own carelessness.

The second step is to look around us and recognize the elements from the NBM project that are still present in our lives, particularly in relation to the roots of our language. A large number of cities, neighbourhoods, and important places in Brazil are named using Tupi words. Getting to know what at least some of these mean is a good way to understand our own native cultural identity by the way of thinking of our indigenous people. Likewise, we should acknowledge and be proud of our extremely rich vocabulary that often joins the indigenous, African, and European roots to express complex ideas, feelings, and concepts. Listen to these.

We should also open our ears to new ideas in old sounds, and old ideas in new sounds. Genres such as the *samba* have strong historical roots that cannot be ignored. Our music crossed the centuries having endured some of the worst and most shameful turbulences in human history, helping those struggling to find a few moments to forget the pain and injustice perpetrated on them. Some of these people survived to tell their stories, others survived in our blood. We should also acknowledge the beauty of mixing our music with other styles, other languages, and feel how much it is still ours. Our music is living proof that variety makes us stronger, and it can express a vast array of themes spanning from complex philosophical concepts to culinary recipes. Listen to it.

And last, but not least, let us recognise ourselves in what we are listening. We have been bombarded for many years by false ideas that our music is not good enough if compared to the music created by the 'European' tradition. This is a fallacy. Some indigenous tribes, such as the Kamayurá, count with an incredibly complex and rich music tradition that would add a great deal to the training of musicians around the world. We have refined musical instruments that offer unique timbres used by many contemporary composers within their works. Our *choro* groups are prime examples of a deeply rooted chamber music tradition, achieving a level of listening and reaction that the best string quartets take many years to develop. Listen to them.

The variety of our music styles makes it hard to believe that they all belong to the cultural background of a single country, and yet they do. Our football matches are accompanied by strong, intricate, and extremely synchronized rhythmic patterns created by the deafening percussion groups of organized crowds. In our carnival parades, a feast for the senses, everyone is punched in the stomach by the moving air generated by hundreds of drums, making one move even if not motivated. Our Villa-Lobos, and his unspeakably beautiful melodies and powerful emotions. The violent and unashamed sounds of our forests. Our drunken *bossa nova* in the living room at 3am. Our protest songs. Our national anthem.

This is all Native Brazilian Music. Listen to this.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Page 02: *Villa-Lobos introduces Donga to Stokowski*

Source: http://daniellathompson.com/Texts/Stokowski/Stalking_Stokowski.htm

Page 03: *Pixinguinha*

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Page 05: *Jararaca and Ratinho*

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Page 07: *João da Baiana*

Source: http://daniellathompson.com/Texts/Stokowski/Stalking_Stokowski.htm

Page 08: *Cartola*

Source: Google images

Page 09: *Original cover of Columbia's 'Native Brazilian Music', from 1942.*

Source: Bernardo Simões' archive.

ONLINE REFERENCES

Daniella Thompson's website (accessed in March 2021):

<http://daniellathompson.com/Texts/Stokowski/Stokowski.htm>

'Virtual Exhibition' from Museu Villa-Lobos (accessed in March 2021):

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/native-brazilian-music-80th-anniversary/9gLC2-gLJSxsJQ>

Complete playlist of the NBM tracks (accessed in March 2021):

<https://soundcloud.com/caio-marcellos-bezerra/sets/native-brazilian-music>

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