

Portuguese Music in the Last 100 Years: Searching for an Identity

It is, in my view, very interesting to renew the discussion about national tradition, nationalism and music composing, at the present Portuguese musical life.

1 – First of all, because the Portuguese democracy is already 37 years old, born after the 1974th revolution against Salazar's right wing dictatorship. The myths, the encomiastic discourse, the persons of those harder times, are already history. It is important to notice that, between the forties and the eighties, nationalist concepts in music were often confused with ...

a) the fascist nationalism - the adulation of a new, somehow constructed, Portuguese culture that could equal the so called "Portuguese race";

b) the left wing nationalism, underground in the dictatorship - the attachment to and the use of all that was originally rural, traditional and oral culture;

c) for the more obedient communists and their avant-garde opponents, nationalism in art was confused with or integrated in socialist neo-realism.

2 – Secondly, it is very interesting to awake this discussion because the avant-garde of the sixties and seventies, corresponding to serialism and post-serial composing as well as the Cagian experimentalism, is already an historic moment of the past.

New ideas appeared, renewed technical and aesthetic proposals of the past continued their evolution or were recycled, the different musics of the world seem to interact and to foster new models, new identities. It is very interesting the renewed international curiosity for music with religious or mystic connections, or for composers such as the Chinese Tan Dun and the Argentinian Osvaldo Golijov.

3 – And at last, this discussion seems to be really important in Portugal now, because this small and peripheral country has much more than 35 composers of the so called "art music", counting only the living ones, with more than 30 years old, with very good technical knowledge and composing without major interruptions in the last decade; some of them have been played worldwide, and, although not sufficiently, all of them have been played in Portugal.

The "Problems of Portuguese music": the forties and fifties, searching for an identity

The composer Fernando Lopes-Graça (1906–1994) is a central personality in this discussion. He had a very interesting view on Nationalism and Portuguese (national) music. Influenced by republicans and democrats, but also a person discussing with the most advanced intellectuals of his time, he considered that the creation of a Portuguese music could lead to different problems. He wrote:

"The point is not to create a popular art, in a demagogic sense considered by those persons that, wanting to serve the people by music, they serve only themselves, flattering the people with mediocre choices and less enlightened taste." (Lopes-Graça, 1989, p. 60)

In this text first published in 1941, the composer and author was referring to an attitude of some composers and government personalities, trying to create a kind of Portuguese music with a mixture of light –*vaudeville* like - songs, the popular Lisbon song *fado*, and some instruments and harmonic means of the classical heritage. He continuous:

"Nor to create a popular nationalism, meaning a music that, under the umbrella of the national, isn't else than the conscious exploitation of superficial, vulgar, insignificant, irresponsible means of the folklore; (to create) an art that has as supreme goal to sing the picturesque aspects of the people's life." (Lopes-Graça, 1989, p. 60)

Examples are, perhaps, the Luis de Freitas Branco *Suite Alentejana* n° 1, of 1919. Lopes-Graça reaffirms his convictions, rejecting any kind of simple folklorism:

"(...) the music that we will have to set as «Portuguese Music» has to be defined by an essentially aesthetic criterion, understanding aesthetic criterion as a criterion that enables us to characterize a work of art as a superior product of culture." (Lopes-Graça, 1989, p. 61)

He was quite aware of the cultural and technical foundations of the classical – and romantic – canon and also of the emergence of the so called national schools, their importance to create a new musical tradition, and the immense quality and geniality of many «national» composers:

“Pergolesi is very Italian by the voluptuous character of his melodies; Chopin is profoundly linked to Poland by the umbilical cord of the popular song and dance, conferring to his music a unique rhythmic and melodic quality; Alban Berg is deeply German in his tortured romanticism and the speculative character of his harmonic language.” (Lopes-Graça, 1989, p. 43).

“All music is, by principle, national, as it is the expression of a geographic, ethnic and cultural reality; and the idea - quite expanded – that music is an universal art – the universal art by excellence – was never more than a myth. By essence, the Italian, German and French schools were as national as, in our times [1948] the English, the Russian or the Czech school: there’s only a difference of grade, not a difference of essence, as the universality of the Italian, German or French music is a consequence of historical circumstances that favored their development and expansion. (...) Missing the tradition of a high artistic level music, they [England, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary] replaced it by folklore, which, in its own way, is also a tradition.” (Lopes-Graça, 1992, p. 179).

“National by its foundations and by its psychological premisses, any music has to aspire to be universal, if not by its meaning, at least by its validity. Poetry, literature, and painting don’t assume a specific quality unless the effort of several generations; in the same way, a national music will not have the status of an individualized art unless it has a tradition.” (Lopes-Graça, 1992, p. 180).

But Lopes-Graça was rather ironic concerning countries s. a. Portugal that, unlike England, Czechoslovakia and Poland, were far from creating such a tradition.

“Will be those countries, without an ancient musical tradition or a tradition recently stratified, condemned to impotence, to creative infertility? Should they resign to never see stars in their culture such as Janacék, Szymanowsky, Bartok or Falla? (...) nothing in the artistic level is impossible.” (Lopes-Graça, 1992, p. 182).

It’s worth noticing that Lopes-Graça was the major composer of the 20th century in Portugal, a communist severely persecuted by the regime but highly appreciated (and very often played) by musicians, a kind of Portuguese Bartok for his use of melodies inspired by rural folklore, but also an adversary of the national song *Fado* – a kind of urban folklore song. Lopes-Graça was, also, one of the first to search and to record music of the oral tradition in rural Portugal. For him, to study the Portuguese folklore was a personal and a social and cultural need. To use folklore was not a goal, but perhaps an option, and an important one. Because ...

“The last criteria to define an work of art are always aesthetic criteria; and the expression “Portuguese Music” must be taken, therefore, in an essentially aesthetic sense.

I said above, however, that the formula “Portuguese Music” expressed an ethnic-aesthetical relationship. (...) Does the ethnic factor have any importance for the definition of the concept of the expression “Portuguese Music”? (...) Yes it really does — but it is not in any way a definitive one. Or it can be definitive, after being reduced or assimilated to the aesthetic factor” (Lopes-Graça, 1989, p. 41).

It is worth saying that Lopes-Graça, a militant of the underground Communist Party, was sufficient heterodox to criticize in music reviews Prokofiev and Shostakovitch for their lack of new musical ideas (Lopes-Graça, 1986, p. 171).

The sixties and after: avant-garde and the citizens of Europe

The next generation of Portuguese composers was dominated by the influence of the enormous energy of Jorge Peixinho (1940–1995).

A follower of the new avant-garde of Boulez, Stockhausen and Nono, his attitude towards a Portuguese musical tradition was completely different. The fact that he was born in Portugal and that he belongs to a national cultural cluster was seen as a mere coincidence. And, in 1968, really a difficult handicap.

“Frankly I believe I am unanchored from Portuguese society. Eventually, I’ll take part in many of their anguishes and many of their hopes, but it doesn’t destroy the almost tragic state of isolation and dissociation in which stands my «creative process» in relation to *all* Portuguese reality, which is terribly insular, anti-European or simply a-European.” (Peixinho, 2010, p. 228).

For him – and for the new generations and young avant-garde composers – there was no more place for a music that was clearly influenced by a particular – local or national – folklore.

There wasn’t even place for a particular national style or technique, as the world was open to various and multiple musical influences – we could call it, in 21st century, globalization. He wrote:

“Portuguese music began and finished with Lopes-Graça, the only composer exploring folklore with a rational - we would say scientific – method. The others were amateurs. Even Lopes-Graça had to use international compositional procedures (...). We young composers, we are not interested in making the so called “national music”. But the fact that we have this or that nationality has some importance, for the basic conditions we are submitted. We can have a cosmopolitan education, but this education only gives us the tools and not the complete method. What is the meaning of national? Folklore, we know, has common roots in various countries.(...)” Interview to the newspaper *Globo*, in Brasil, 1970. (Peixinho, 2010, p. 274).

“Lopes-Graça doesn’t match to an active present. We could say that Lopes-Graça, on the national level, would be a conservative composer that would have no place in Europe nowadays, but who would have his place and his moment in Portugal, meaning that he could correspond to the Portuguese present. (...)

Lopes-Graça doesn’t fit to any [aesthetic, technical] tendency: conservative, pseudo-progressive or progressive. Never conservative – for obvious ideological reasons - nor progressive, as they are apart from the values that Lopes-Graça has always defended and still defends.” Interview to the periodical *Crítica*, 1971. (Peixinho, 2010, p. 309-310).

Jorge Peixinho was the face of avant-garde in Portugal for his appearances as a musician and director playing music of Stokhausen, and John Cage, for his pieces full of avant-garde manners, and for his insistent defense of the new – shocking – music.

He was also an active citizen against the right-wing dictatorship, close to the Portuguese Communist Party – but never a militant. He complained, in an interview, against...

“misunderstandings in all spheres, aggravated by voluntary ignorance, by senseless myths such as “popular music”, “music for the people” or “music of the people”, demonstrating the complete absence of an aesthetic and a sociological perspective towards an open and unlimited view of the world and of culture.” Interview to the periodical *Diapasao*, 1972. (Peixinho, 2010, p. 292).

The sixties and seventies were, in Portugal, more European than national. The intention was to get out of the tidy Portuguese limits, to conquer the world – at least the European avant-garde music festivals – and not to reaffirm an idiosyncratic – peripheral - culture. Peixinho defended an international perspective in culture, giving also the example of Emmanuel Nunes (1941).

Peixinho made some music using in an ironically manner traditional music: Spanish sounds (“*Llanto por Mariana*”, with a text of Garcia Llorca) and Portuguese songs (piano’s *Study IV*, where traditional songs are played in the strings of the piano).

20th - 21st turn of the century: a critical position

Among the new composers appearing in the eighties and nineties, just a few used Portuguese traditional music: Filipe Pires – an eclectic composer born in 1934 - and the younger Fernando Lapa (1950), Eurico Carrapatoso (1961), Sérgio Azevedo (1968), Jorge Salgueiro (1969) and myself.

These composers used – sparsely – Portuguese traditional music. The post-serial composers, close to the moods of the avant-garde of the sixties – were – for aesthetic and technical reasons – far away from modal music, from repetitive *metrum*, from traditional – immediate – expression. The few others, more conservative neo-classic or progressive post-modern, seem to neglect Portuguese tradition,

- having difficulties on surpassing the “problems of Portuguese music” as Lopes-Graça explained thoroughly,

- or just wanting to be more universal – more European than Portuguese – wanting to take part in the contemporary music festivals around the world.

Interesting is the position of António Pinho Vargas, a composer – and a *Jazz* pianist – defending post-modern music since the nineties. He recently published a book where he studies the absence of Portuguese Music in European Festivals. He argues, quoting Taruskin, that

“Portuguese music is the result of a kind of intern colonialism, in which the European capitals exported the [aesthetic, technical] currents using constantly updated local agents.” (Vargas, 2010, p. 91).

Considering “Portuguese Music” as all kinds of art music made in Portugal (excluding pop, Jazz, light music, rock, or even the so called Portuguese examples of world music), he wrote that

“The way cultural planning is made in Portugal seems to continue the opening of the country to the exterior, recurrent in several historic periods, being the last one [after the revolution] in 1974. At that time, the context impelled to react against the «splendorous isolation» characteristic of Salazar’s regime; and that reaction created a kind of trauma throughout different generations, in which any critic to cosmopolitanism (...) frightens the cultural elites.

The shadow of Salazar’s provincialism and, inversely, the cosmopolitan drift that provoked, didn’t vanish from cultural imaginary, even now, after more than three decades.” (Vargas, 2010, p. 494).

“Facing the presence of an European *other*, considered modern, advanced, looking to a familiarity with the *small Europe*, Portuguese public, specially from the elites, assumes temporarily, in this special musical field (contemporary music), the illusion of being himself in Europe, of being modern, and of having a taste as exquisite as any European. So he imagines himself in the center, identifying himself with the values of the center, and learning to deviate his eyes far from the frontiers identity.” (Vargas, 2010, p. 496).

Here and now: searching for an identity and a place

Nationalism is not an issue now in Portuguese contemporary music, still divided in post-serial followers and post-modern ones. But seeing the newer generations, far from the ancient aesthetic and cultural trauma, and the big success worldwide of Portuguese *fado* singers and world music groups s. a. Mariza, Madredeus, etc., it seems that Portuguese traditional music has something unique that can influence Portuguese art music composers.

And the nostalgic *fado*, considered by Lopes-Graça and others as a somehow artificial national song, seems now much more important, influencing Portuguese music by its immediate, suffering, profound expression; if not in a conscious way, at least in an unconscious one.

Some of Antonio Pinho Vargas’s music, as well as pieces of Carlos Marecos, Luis Tinoco, Eurico Carrapatoso, Luis Soldado and other (post-modern) composers of the so called art music, seem to have that sadness, that nostalgic mood of past empires, melted or not with Portuguese melodies or characteristic rhythms. And perhaps this nostalgia and its national music symbol – *fado* - is a fundamental characteristic of the Portuguese way of being; and *fado* is now being proposed to be part of the immaterial legacy of the humanity.

A contemporary art music made in Portugal, assuming its cultural (or sub-cultural) idiosyncrasy, can never neglect this discussion, their subsequent products in the last century, and the importance of such matters in our present days.

References:

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Santrauka

Pastarojo šimtmečio Portugalijos muzika: identiteto beiškant

Spartus trijų pastarųjų dešimtmečių Portugalijos muzikinės kūrybos augimas prilygsta bene tik XVII šimtmečio aukso amžiui, ir šį pakilimą reikėtų vertinti kaip savitos XX a. vykusios evoliucijos rezultatą.

Pirmoje XX a. pusėje Portugalijoje, panašiai kaip Ispanijoje, Vengrijoje, Brazilijoje, Meksikoje ir kitose šalyse, buvo plačiai diskutuojama apie specifinės nacionalinės kultūros ir išskirtinės muzikos, galinčios atspindėti tautą (net ir vadinamąją portugalų rasę), kūrimą. Šioje diskusijoje ypatingą vaidmenį suvaidino F. Lopes-Graça (1906–1994) – komunistas, persekiotas dešiniųjų diktatūros, valdžiusios šalį 1926–1974 m., ir bene žymiausias savo kartos kompozitorius, tradicinės liaudies muzikos tyrinėtojas, B. Bartóko muzikinių idėjų puoselėtojas ir gausaus kūrybinio palikimo autorius. Nors kiti kompozitoriai ir fašistinė valstybė propagavo populiarių melodijų ir ritmų naudojimą nacionalinėje muzikoje, jis rašė, kad tai nėra tikroji portugalų muzika, nes nėra aktualios portugalų muzikinės produkcijos, diskusijų ir kūrybos; kad portugalų muzikos nėra, nes nėra įdomaus ir gyvo Portugalijos muzikinio gyvenimo.

Šeštojo ir septintojo dešimtmečių avangardistinis judėjimas priešinosi populiarių simbolių naudojimui muzikoje. Ryškiausias to laikotarpio kompozitorius J. Peixinho (1940–1995) rašė, jog tai, kad jis yra portugalas, – tiesiog atsitiktinumas, kad jis jaučiasi esąs visavertė europietiškos profesionaliosios muzikos tradicijos dalis.

Visai neseniai postmodernizmo atstovas kompozitorius A. P. Vargas (g. 1951) savo išsamiaame veikle „Muzika ir galia. Portugalų muzikos iškritimo iš Europos konteksto sociologija“ nagrinėjo avangardinio serializmo ir postserializmo svarbą muzikos festivaliuose kaip pagrindinę šio hipotetinio iškritimo priežastį. A. P. Vargaso kūrybai jokia aiški portugalų simbolizmo įtaka nėra būdinga.

Pranešime aptariamas specifinės nacionalinės portugalų muzikos klausimas, remiantis Portugalijoje vykusia diskusija apie „portugalų muzikos problemą“ ir trimis minėtais autoriais; įvairių tradicinės muzikos elementų (melodijų, ritmikų, instrumentų) profesionaliojoje muzikoje panaudojimas siekiant išsaugoti kitas nacionalines istorines ir kultūrinės vertybes, galinčias vienaip ar kitaip veikti šiuolaikinę portugalų muziką ir pasitaikančias kai kurių mažiau tautiškų kompozitorių kūryboje.