



Appropriation in reverse; or, what happens when popular music goes dodecaphonic (communication version)¹

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Abstract:

The problematic current situation of music can be detected in its propensity to generate misnomers. “Classical music” is at best a metonymy, the part for the whole; “erudite,” a falsification; “serious,” a neutralization; “popular,” the greatest untruth. Perhaps only “folk” music corresponds to a minimally accurate denomination, but this may be because its referent, unmediated collective composition/singing, no longer really exists – for its “living” counterpart the infamous “ethnic” was coined. This difficulty to name is also present in the single instance where it should actually obtain, namely in mixed artifacts, whose origins include apparently incompatible, often contradictory, trends or traditions. This is exactly the case of Brazilian “popular” composer Arrigo Barnanbé, the most formally-oriented member of the so-called Vanguarda Paulista (São Paulo Avant-Garde), a term that, taken rigorously, represents another misconceptualization. What is unique to the movement is that the exchange here between the popular and the erudite takes the opposite direction of what normally happens.

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The problematic current situation of music can be detected in its propensity to generate misnomers. “Classical music” is at best a metonymy, the part for the whole; “erudite,” a falsification; “serious,” a neutralization; “popular,” the greatest untruth. Perhaps only “folk” music corresponds to a minimally accurate denomination, but this may be because its referent, unmediated collective composition/singing, no longer really exists – for its “living” counterpart the infamous “ethnic” was coined. This difficulty to name is also present in the single instance where it should actually obtain, namely in mixed artifacts, whose origins include apparently incompatible, often contradictory, trends or traditions. This is exactly the case of Brazilian “popular” composer Arrigo Barnabé, the most formally-oriented member of the so-called *Vanguarda Paulista* (São Paulo Avant-Garde), a term that, taken rigorously, represents another misconceptualization. What is unique to the movement is that the exchange here between the popular and the erudite takes the opposite direction of what normally happens. In the history of “serious” music, there are various examples of composers turning to popular musical manifestations as a way of revigorating an exhausted tradition, or as a means in their search of the new – not to mention often less laudable, extra-artistic attempts to foster nationalistic politics. The paradigmatic instance of the former is perhaps that of Bach’s suites, of the latter those of Bartok and Kodaly, and, in Brazil, Villa-Lobos, especially his *Choros*.⁴ But Barnabé carried out an appropriation in reverse: from within the field of “popular” music he incorporated several of the techniques belonging to repertoire of modern “classical” composition such as polyrhythm, multi-tonalism, and dodecaphonism.

The meaning and implications of this gesture, however, can only come to the fore once we dispel a widespread notion, namely that “popular” music is something derivative or inferior to what would be its “classical” counterpart. An offspring of the twentieth century and inconceivable before that, the “popular”

⁴ In fact, Villa-Lobos could also stand as an instance of the last case in point, for his music was caught in the tension between artistic independence and nationalism, similar but with opposed valences to Shostakovich’s case – Villa-Lobos was never officillay reprehended.



song emerged in Brazil with the rise of urbanization and technical developments in recording (see Napolitano 11-15). Granted, there is no denying its greater compositional simplicity of the popular song when compared, say, to a Mahler symphony; nevertheless, this simplicity should not be evaluated in a vacuum, as if the musical material could be absolutely mastered by, or reduced to, abstract rationality. For it is in the nature of (organized) sound that it addresses the listener, a process that under the name of interpellation (Althusser, Butler, Laplanche) has acquired a wide theoretical currency. Either as an invitation to dance, or a trigger to cry, popular songs cannot be viewed as self-sufficient; indeed, it is tempting to think of them as half- or quasi-objects, tone/word composites inciting that *something* be done by those who listen to them (even if just talking). This constituent performativity, as it were, is both the result of and precondition for what is central to the “popular” song: a feeling of closeness and intimacy, of concrete interaction. And herein lies the fundamental contradiction, for this proximity corresponds to what is most utopic and infamous in the popular song, its potential for the creation and strengthening of communities, on the one hand, and for the manipulation (even conditioning) of affects, on the other.

In Brazil, this tension is all the more dramatic due to the absolute supremacy of the popular song, which has relegated other musical manifestations such as the “erudite,” and the *real* popular to a quasi non-existent, statistically negligible position. The success of the “popular” song attests the victory of the project of conservative modernization in the country brought about by the military dictatorship in the 70s (Ortiz 2004), the contradictory movement of changing everything for the perpetuation of the same. The *Vanguarda Paulista* emerged in this context (Fenerick 2007); as a result of the consolidation of the Brazilian public university system, formal knowledge of advanced compositional techniques became available to musicians steeped in the tradition of the popular song. Groups as the *Língua de Trapo*, *Rumo*, *Premê* (*Premeditando o Breque*) and musicians



like Itamar Assumpção, brought to the popular song an unheard-of degree of formal elaboration and stylistic self-consciousness.

Barnabé was the sharpest case of this clash between rigor and spontaneity. Following the lead of the Tropicália movement, he wanted to carry out a transformation in popular music he saw as incomplete, for Tropicália revolutionized the lyrics, making them more complex and “literary”, at the same time that it put forward a more total view of the song, which now comprised a theatrical-philosophical sense in itself. From the point of view of the organization of sounds, however, it did not advance much, if at all. Barnabé’s project was to further musical experimentation without abandoning the conception of the song as a multiple event, or the contestatory substratum that pervaded a great deal of the Brazilian tradition. Having appeared in 1980, *Clara Crocodilo* remains Barnabé most ambitious and important album; all the eight songs in it have serial elements, five of which – “Acapulco Drive-in,” “Orgasmo Total,” “Instante,” “Infortúnio” and “Office-Boy” – use partially or fully the twelve-tone technique (Cavazotti 2000, p.9). And in terms of the appropriation of dodecaphonism, the opening song of the album, “Acapulco Drive-in,” is exemplary.

But before proceeding to the analysis of the musical treatment in the song, it is important to call attention to the reason why it should still be considered popular and could not be simply inserted in the tradition of “erudite” music – unlike Barnabé’s last CD, a Requiem that has nothing to do with popular music at all, and which in fact calls attention to how Barnabé’s initial project in particular and that of the Vanguarda Paulista as a whole did fail and could not live to its own potentials (Durão 2007). Though it is impossible to develop this claim here, we should mention that the eclipse of the Vanguarda Paulista’s project of musical renewal – popular *and* theoretically/formally sophisticated – can be profitably interpreted in the (very) broad context of the bankruptcy of Third World modernization agendas (see Kurz 1992).



In “Acapulco drive-in”, Barnabé deals more with the tension between rhythm and pulse than with poly-rhythm in its strict sense. Even though some important changes in measure take place (4/4, 2/4, 3/8, 6/8, 9/8), something quite unusual in the popular song, (if not in the recent tradition of instrumental music in Brazil, as in Hermeto Pascoal or Egberto Gismonti), they do not happen vertically, i.e. simultaneously, but rather in the flux of sounds, which is constantly interrupted. In the first 18 bars, for example, Barnabé composes an asymmetrical rhythmic structure based on 3 blocks of 6 bars each, varying rhythmic patterns in this order: 3/8, 4/4, 2/4, 3/8, 4/4, 2/4. However, a “polyrhythm effect” does emerge when he makes use of the 4/4 measure in order to create a repetitive, regular and constant rhythmic nucleus on the bass (followed by the drums, which are not marked on the score). This regular pulse remains through all rhythmic variation in the song, giving it a sense of “stability,” even if a tense, for there is an unavoidable clash between pulse and the song’s rhythm. By means of this “effect,” Barnabé manages to keep the song within the sphere (or field) of popular music – the pulse makes “Acapulco drive-in” regular and fit for dancing – at the same time that rhythmic asymmetry breaks the normal pattern of repetitions in the popular song: it’s a hybrid that combines constant pulse and continuously interrupted rhythm.

The dodecaphonic series does not rule supreme. Unlike in Schönberg and his disciples, it is not first presented and then worked out and through; it rather surfaces on the background of the pulse and its repeating notes, on the one hand, and against the foreground of the voice and its theatrical enunciation. Concerning the latter, it is important to call attention to unprecise character of the score, not because of lack of training, but as a strategy to open up space for improvisation. Laughs, horns (cars’, not instrumental), interjections and *Sprechgesang* are all present but not circumscribed; they are part of the interpretation. What would be called, then, the treatment of the musical material is thus as if squeezed between the voices and the bass, being elaborated either in the piano or the metals (a few time in the bass), which are also the instruments that improvise. The conflicting



hybridity here then has to do with the superimposition of three layers: the in-itself-contradictory pulse/rhythm, an appeal for the body to move; the sandwiched musical material, the locus of elaboration and rationality; the voices and their theater, in what is clearly a criticism of mass culture, of which “Acapulco Drive-In” is itself a complex example and refutation.

The musical description should of course be more precise and detailed. Nonetheless, what has been said so far is enough to substantiate what we would like to suggest as a conclusion: namely, that the most interesting aspect of all the mixtures of “Acapulco Drive-In” lies in its relationship to the establishment of distance and community-effect we have posited as inherent of the popular song. For distance is both fostered and shunned and the listener is placed in a difficult position of either connecting to the song through its pulse, voice and theatricality – in which case the musical elaboration is perceived as noise – or conversely, resist the song’s interpellation and concentrate on the organization of dissonances. – Or rather try to listen to this tension itself, which is revealing of what is at stake for the song as a popular genre in the age of its digitalized transmission.



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