

# The Keyboard Music of Heitor Villa-Lobos

## *Piano Suite “Prole do Bebe”*

MingChih Hsieh <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Music, Zhaoqing University, Guangdong, China*  
Email: fhsieh1125@aol.com

### ABSTRACT

The Brazilian Composer Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) is an influential composer and ethnomusicologist in the early twentieth century. As a prolific composer, he has composed vocal works, symphonies, operas, chamber and instrumental works. He has also devoted himself in music education by developing music curricula for the public schools in Brazil. His musical style combines frequent use of folk materials with improvisatory nature. Unlike many other conservatory-trained composers, he has never received any formal classical training, but though self-taught he can manage to play several musical instruments fluently. As a musicologist, he spent many years of his life traveling throughout Brazil and Europe to gather folk songs, the most significant contribution is the *Guia Pratico*, published in the 1930s, contains six volumes of folk songs put together by Villa-Lobos over decades.

Compared to his instrumental and chamber works, which are popular and frequently performed, his piano music seems unfamiliar to those piano students and publics. Although he has composed a great deal of piano works, most of them are for professional pianists to perform on stage instead of being used as teaching materials for beginning or intermediate students. His piano music are mostly character pieces with descriptive titles, they are colorful, highly complex in rhythm and technically demanding. One of the legendary concert pianists in the twentieth century, Arthur Rubinstein (1887-1982), a close friend of the composer, admired his talent and introduced his piano music to the worldwide audience, ever since then his piano music has been much respected and appreciated. Among these wonderful piano repertoires performed by Rubinstein, the piano suite “Prole do Bebe Vol.1” (The baby’s Family Vol.1) is considered the most popular and accessible one, and the seventh piece of the suite entitled “O Polichinelo” was often played by Rubinstein as an encore piece to his performing program.

In this article, several areas regarding to the composer and his piano music will be discussed, and these are: The Life of Heitor Villa-Lobos, The Musical Style in General, List of His Significant Piano Works, the Background and Stylistic Features of “The Baby’s Family Vol.1”.

**Keywords:** *Heitor Villa-Lobos, Keyboard Music, Piano, South American Music, 20<sup>th</sup> century Music, Prole do Bebe*

### 1. THE LIFE OF HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

Heitor Villa Lobos, the dominant spirit behind twentieth-century Brazilian nationalism, was born in 1887 in Rio de Janeiro. Trained by his father to play the cello, he grew up working with the popular musicians of Rio de Janeiro, and his adventuresome spirit eschewed both the discipline and constriction of formal education. At the age of eighteen he spent seven years traveling throughout Brazil and neighboring countries, absorbing

popular and folk music. Upon his return to Rio de Janeiro, he began to establish a reputation as a composer. In 1923, he received support from the state and a group of wealthy individuals to work in Paris. The pianist Arthur Rubinstein was an admirer of Villa-Lobos and had a significant impact on his career, both as a performer of his music and as a friend who introduced him to wealthy patrons. An introduction by Rubinstein to a wealthy Brazilian, Carlos Guinle, resulted in a sponsorship that made it possible for Villa-Lobos to make his trips to Europe to perform and publish his music there). Villa-Lobos spent seven years in Paris,

where his music became very fashionable, being heralded with enthusiasm by both audiences and the press [1].

In 1930, Vila-Lobos returned to Brazil. The remainder of his career was spent composing and guiding music education in Brazil in all levels, from developing curricula to be used in primary and technical schools to establishing the Brazilian Academy of music in Rio de Janeiro. He made frequent trips abroad to oversee performances of his works and to conduct, mostly to France, the United States, and other South American countries. He became the most celebrated Brazilian musician of his day, receiving an honorary doctorate from New York University, the French Legion of Honor, and the title of Commander in the Brazilian Order of Merit. His funeral in 1959 was attended by celebrity guests such as the president of Brazil as well as a host of national and municipal authorities [2].

## **2. THE MUSICAL STYLE IN GENERAL**

Villa-Lobos's musical style combines frequent use of folk material with improvisatory freedom. The most frequent source of melodies in Villa-Lobos's works is the *Guia pratico*, a practical guild to Brazilian folk music organized by the composer. Published in the 1930s, the six-volume set contains music collected over several decades. According to Villa-Lobos's own commentary on the collection, many of these melodies were sung in public schools and were of European origin. If we take a close look on these folk melodies, we can notice that they share some common characters among each other- these melodies are easy, sing-able and do not carry wide range of notes; they are mostly based on pentatonic scales; and certain notes of a melody are used repetitively. He is fond of highly complex rhythms and sonorities, creating bold splashes of exotic, often dissonant sound. Villa-Lobos also borrowed with great facility from the other composers with whom he came in contact. Thus, he has been accused of using too many contemporary features with too little discipline [3]. The enduring freshness and energy of his music, however, have served to establish an ongoing circle of admirers among both musicians and the public.

### ***2.1. List of His Significant Piano Works***

Villa-Lobos is a prolific composer, although many think the quality of his works are uneven. He wrote music in various genre and forms, including dramatic music (he has two operas- *Izath* (1958), *Yerma* (1956) and several ballet music; many choral music; orchestral music (he had 12 symphonies), chamber music, and solo works for voice or instrument. Among his piano compositions, the most important and popular are:

Two volumes of "The Baby's Family" (1918, 1921) the first volume dedicated to various kind of dolls; the second volume dedicated to the baby's animals. The second volume is much more dissonant and complex compare to the first one.

Rudepoema (Rough Poem; 1921-26) is a single movement of about twenty minutes in which there is no clear repetition of thematic material, one section growing out of the other much like an extended improvisation. The piece is held together by its seemingly inexhaustible display of coloristic sonorities and complex, driving rhythms. The work is dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein.

Alma Brasileira-Choros No.5 (1925) is from the series of fourteen instrumental works entitled *Choros*, and only No.5 is for piano

Bachianas Brasileiras No.4 (1941) this huge collection contains nine sets of suites inspired by the music of Bach is for various instruments, only forth set is for solo piano. It consists of an introductory prelude followed by three short pieces, "Coral," "Aria," and "Dansa."

He also wrote some wonderful teaching pieces based on folk materials such as, Three Marias (1939), Cirandinhas (1925) has 9 pieces and Cirandas (1926) has 16 pieces [4].

## **3. THE BACKGROUND OF "THE BABY'S FAMILY"**

The *Baby's family*, one of his best-known piano works, was a suite of eight character pieces dedicated to his wife, Lucilia Guimaraes Villa-Lobos (1886-1966). This work was written in 1918 and was first published that same year by Arthur Napoleao, one of Brazil's oldest publishing firms. This work was first performed in Rio de Janeiro on July 5, 1922, by the pianist Arthur Rubinstein. Rubinstein's premier performance consisted of seven of the eight movements ("Mulatinha," the fourth movement, was omitted). Rubinstein reversed the order of the last two movements and concluded with "O Polichinelo." In Rubinstein's biography, Rubinstein relates a colorful, although somewhat inaccurate, account of a lunch with Villa-Lobos at which composer told him about a set of pieces he had written for his wife. According to Rubinstein, Villa-Lobos sent him the music next day. Rubinstein was quite amused at Villa-Lobos's exaggerated manner of speech and quotes him as saying that he had traveled throughout Brazil gathering folkloric materials and that he discovered the "secret soul" of his country [5].

Villa-Lobos's home country Brazil is a multiracial society with a rich ethnic diversity. It is not unusual to

find Brazilian families in which the skin colors of family members range from near white to almost completely black. The doll family depicted in this collection represents the ethnic diversity of such a family, and the baby enjoys all of the dolls. According to Dona Maria Augusta Machado, Musicologist at the Museu Villa-Lobos (the principal repository of the Villa-Lobos's manuscripts), it is important to remember that in spite of different skin colors in families, ethnic differences still may result social differences, and the child plays with her dolls during the period of her life when maternal consciousness and awareness of social differences are beginning to develop [6].

The titles of the first six movements of "The baby's Family, No.1" indicate the ethnic or folk character of each doll in the baby's collection. The subtitles indicate the type of doll (such as porcelain, papier-mache, clay, rag, rubber, etc.).

### **3.1. The Stylistic Features of "The Baby's Family"**

Branquinha (The Little White Doll)- At the time Villa-Lobos composed this work, white porcelain dolls (portrayed in the first movement) were usually quite expensive, since they were imported from France and had human hair. This was a doll to be admired, not loved, and to be handled with great care. The opening mood of the aristocratic doll piece is set in a four-measure phrase beginning with quarter-note chords. The first complete folk tune quotation was not used until measure sixteen. Usually Villa-Lobos avoids complete melody quotations, but the lullaby "Dorme, nene" (Sleep, Baby) appears several times in the piece. The first time, the theme is to be played detached; Villa-Lobos adds the instruction "as sung by a small child". When it reaches the end, the theme occurs again, two octaves higher, followed by a series of powerful rapid chord progressions that end the piece.

Moreninha (The Little Brunette Doll)- A papier-mache doll is not a thing of beauty. Easily obtainable in any of Rio's numerous small shops, papier-mache dolls are relatively inexpensive and are made of the same materials used for masks and many other Carnival decorations. The jovial mood of the piece indicates the carefree attitude of a child playing with doll that can be handled, loved and cuddled without the apprehension needed toward the porcelain doll, which would be expensive to replace and is not a play doll. Papier-mache dolls are often ugly, some actually grotesque, since their makers are not concerned with making a work of art. Children have fun playing with them, and the bouncing mood of this piece describes the joy of the child playing with a brunette doll. This piece is very much like a virtuosic etude or toccata, that requires complex finger works, and the fast moving tremolo is

the fundamental element that appears throughout the entire piece.

Caboclinha (The Little Copper- Colored Doll)- The word caboclo has many different meanings in Portuguese, the most common being "copper colored," or person of Indian and Portuguese descent. The feminine diminutive form, caboclinha, is used here for a small, copper-colored clay doll. The musical setting is in duple meter, the most common meter for Brazilian urban music, and the rhythmic pattern within the duple setting is 3+3+2, one of the most typical Brazilian rhythms.

Mulatinha (The Little Mulatto Doll)- is made of rubber, is a reminder of the largest segment of society and is soft to the touch. A Kaleidoscopic series of tempo and texture changes and the alternation of metrical sections and cadenza-like figurations convey the idea of playfulness, fun and childhood freedom. To depict the character of a doll made of rubber, there are parts in the piece that suggest the flexible and bouncing texture and mood. The folk melody, introduced in measure twelve, is "Vem ca, Bitu," a melody that has persisted in Brazilian folk song literature in various forms. The melody is also used with a text sung on St. John's Day, "Cai, Cai, balao" (Fall, Fall, Balloon). St. John's Day is a religious festival observed on June 24 every year. A major event of the festivities is the release of hot air balloons, which fill the sky as observers dance and sing the song "Cai, cai, balao." The repeated references to this song in "Mulatinha" depict a child's recollection of happy memories of St. John's day.

Negrinha (The Little Black Doll)- made of cloth, represents the poorest children that are a part of the ethnic family. The black doll is represented by a joyous and lively motive in rapid sixteenth notes. In this piece, Villa-Lobos quotes the opening melody of the folk song "Uma, duas angolinhas, "translated as "One, Two Angolinhas." The angolinha is a guinea hen, a pheasant-like bird. The 16<sup>th</sup> notes represent the rapid run of guinea hen. The sonority of this piece is quite dissonant and modern, and the driving rapid sixteenth-note motive is presented repetitively all over the whole range of the keyboard for the entire piece.

A Pobrezinha (The Poor Little Doll)- is the one that must be loved and held all the time by the baby. In this movement, the shortest of eight, Villa-Lobos shows himself a master of creating mood with a minimum of musical materials. Villa-Lobos introduces a melody that duplicates the intervallic outline of "A canoa virou". The melody is a melancholic song about an overturned boat and the piece is the only slow and lyrical movement in the suite that depicts the longing mood from the doll.

O Polichinelo (The Punch Doll)- This movement is unquestionably the single-most popular piano piece

written by Villa-Lobos. Often performed separately and usually played as the closing movement of the whole set. This movement contains a quotation of “Ciranda, cirandinha,” a well-known Brazilian folk tune. The extremely rapid tempo at which “O Polichinelo” is usually performed creates a mood of joyous buffoonery and depicts the enjoyment of a child remembering the chief character in puppet show. Also, the technique involved the alternation between both hands may illustrate the fight between Judy and Punch [7].

**Bruxa** (The Witch Doll)- Brazil’s African heritage is steeped in spirits, and Brazilian religious culture has combined elements of animistic religion and Roman Catholic belief in a unique and colorful way. Bruxa reminds the child of this world of evil spirits, in which witches and evil spirits abound. While this world is frightening, protection is usually nearby in the arms of a mother or African nursemaid who understands witches and evil spirits. Witches have long been the favorite subjects of composers, and Villa-Lobos’s portrayal evokes visions of sudden, mysterious appearances; unexplained disappearances; and whimsical changes of mood through changes of dynamics and tempo. In this movement Villa-Lobos shows himself a master of imagination and the world of evil spirits [8]. Also, strange chromatic passages, whole-tone sonorities, chords in the texture of polytonality, rapid chains of augmented chords, and a rich palette of unusual harmonic effects create an atmosphere of the mysterious world inhabited by witches and evil spirits.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

His earlier piano works show clear influence from these French impressionistic masters such as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, yet later on he was able to establish his own unique style by adopting folk and pop-music elements in his music writing. As a musician, he is experimental to create music that is innovative and original, on the other hand his strong connection to his Brazilian tradition and heritage makes him the most important nationalistic musical figure in Brazil. These inspiring qualities are the reasons that his music has still been respected and appreciated these days, and people enjoyed listening to his music not only for his extraordinary talents, but his devotion to his own culture and people. His remarkable musical spirits and achievement have inspired many later-generation composers in Brazil such as Gnattali (1906-1988) and Guarnieri (1907-1993), and such tradition set by Villa-Lobos and his followers has become one of the most important and influential contemporary musical trends of South America in the twentieth century. To conclude the article, I would like to quote the introduction that Rubinstein said to Carlos Guinle “Right here in Brazil lives an authentic genius, in my opinion the only one on the whole American continent. His country does not

understand him, but future generations will be proud of him [9].”

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