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Cantos da Floresta (Forest Songs) : exchanging and sharing indigenous music in Brazil

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Conclusion

This thesis deals with the processes I passed through when developing the *Rupestres Sonoros* project, studying the audio archives of Brazilian indigenous music and then making the *Cantos da Floresta* journey to the Amazon with Mawaca in direct contact with indigenous groups. The basis of the *Rupestres Sonoros* project was developed searching the relationship between the different types of indigenous songs, which includes narrative stories, ritual songs, shamanic blessings, songs for dances and instrumental music, as well as various iconographic forms that include rupestrian art, petroglyphs, painted facades of ceremonial houses and baskets as well as rapids, rocks and other features of the landscape understood in graphic terms. With this in mind, I created new versions of indigenous songs of Kayapó, Paiteir Surui, Ikolen-Gavião, Huni-Kuin, Txucarramãe and performed them with Mawaca in different places.

I have reflected mainly on the frictions caused by the uses and 're-readings' of traditional tunes performed by indigenous musicians transposed to new contexts and transformed into arrangements for theater performances, in a process of cultural appropriation that attempts to respect and highlight the indigenous cultures.

Before explaining the whole process of this project, I exposed, in the first chapter, the difficulties of accessing Brazilian indigenous sound archives and the many prejudices around the amerindian population caused by the colonization process. Brazilian society still considers indigenous musicality 'inferior' and 'primitive' and does not recognize its importance. Then, I painted a historical panorama of the Brazilian musicians that were involved with native music at some moment of their career, among which Villa-Lobos, Caetano Veloso, Egberto Gismonti, Marlui Miranda, Sá Brito and many others. Each one had a different approach with their specific esthetical purposes.

Considering the third mode proposed by Bartók of working with traditional music i.e. 'transmuting it into modern music', we saw that Villa-Lobos was the one who most used indigenous music in his oeuvre making use of native tunes as quotations or *leitmotifs* for symphonies and also transformed them with tonal and modal accompaniments for choir pieces. After thirty years, Marlui Miranda created projects involving not only re-creations of indigenous songs but also performances together with natives. She engaged in a sensitive and vehement manner, shedding light on a repertoire completely unknown to the Brazilian audience. Her position clearly shows that even with a well-defined aesthetic program, the political question is present all around. Caetano Veloso, when using the melody of a Yudjá flute melody to put lyrics over it, did the first virtual 'collaboration', without permission, between indigenous and non-indigenous musicians. With 'Asa' songs produced for his very experimental LP *Jóia*, he worked in the key of the Tropicalist/anthropophagic, 'regurgitating' the tune in a concretist poem, connecting the old and the new.

Egberto Gismonti was inspired by his experience with Yawalapiti and got influenced by Xingu's way of life and philosophy. He clearly states he does not feel comfortable playing Xingu music and prefers to pay tribute to Sapaim, a shaman that he met in the village, mixing different references from jazz and northeastern music in his anthological LP *Sol do Meio Dia*.

Milton Nascimento, after he had contact with indigenous groups in Acre, produced the LP *Txai* which put together indigenous tunes alternated with his own songs. During the military dictatorship, the Brazilian political situation was heavy and there was no space to talk about the country's social problems, but Milton Nascimento was an important voice having addressed the indigenous issues and problems around the world.

Sá Brito sought a groundbreaking and unique project in the history of Brazilian music, promoting a virtual collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous musicians through the overdubbing process made in a studio. He recorded songs in Kayapó and Mehinaku villages which were published under the title of 'Ethnic CDs', as well as producing new recordings using that field material in a CD called 'Fusion CD' with the participation of different popular musicians.

In these more than five hundred years of existence as a nation, we can count no more than a dozen musicians who have used or were inspired by Brazilian indigenous tunes. After this multi-faceted panorama, there is a question that remains unanswered: Why so few Brazilian musicians have been interested in indigenous musical material? For a while we could imagine that it would be the lack of access to audio collections, or the difficulty to get in contact with indigenous groups, but in reality, with so much progress in this field, indigenous peoples are still 'exiled' from Brazilian culture. It is as if they don't exist. It seems like it was part of a remote, old-fashioned and outdated past that needs to be left behind. Since the 1960s, critics and musicians believed that the link with the indigenous element would leave their works 'tied' to the past and that Brazilian music, thus, would never be renewed. And so, the national intelligentsia and the cultural elite disregarded the indigenous issue, putting it aside, not recognizing it as a high-profile driving force. Indigenous culture and music were seen as part of a 'national element', under a patriotic bias, when in reality it was always the element of resistance.

If the indigenous populations were experiencing and showing their music, it would be natural for us not to worry about that, but in front of the genocides and dreadful situations experienced by thousands of people, we should bear in mind that the indigenous element of the 'Brazilian cultural triad' (European, African, Amerindian) is unsteady. Is this simply complete disdain or a burden resulting from the colonial process?

With this historical panorama, I reflected on my purpose in working with indigenous music: questions of musical appropriation, the friction between tradition and change, collaborative dialogues, and the problem of copyrights when referring to traditional material converted to CDs and DVDs.

I emphasized the importance of the dialogue with other areas of knowledge, based on my own experience that merges music, archeology, rupestrian images, graphisms, traditional-modernist-futuristic concepts, ethnopoeetry and others. It can be considered an 'anthrophophagic experience' of regurgitating what we ate in the past and transforming it into 'something else'. In this sense, a conciliation of interests is needed, based on a perspectivist approach as proposed by Viveiros de Castro.

The creative process makes the creation of layers possible that provokes exchanging aspects of different areas of knowledge. My artistic research is clearly based in hybridism, supported by the 'inter', the 'in-between space' as formulated by Homi Bhabha:

the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exotism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-

between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. [...] And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (BHABHA, 1994: 38-39).

Answering the questions raised in the introduction of this thesis – “Is it possible to play a song that is part of the rituals of other peoples?”; “How to transpose an idea to the stage while maintaining respect for indigenous communities?”; “Are these performances a way of throwing light on the indigenous communities looking for a strategy of decolonization?”; “How is it possible to develop musical projects that respect the differences?” – I suggest there are infinitely many ways to work with traditional songs through a new approach respecting the indigenous way of being. It is important to have in mind the problems caused by the colonization process, and in this light, we cannot ignore the indigenous peoples. In my opinion cultural projects can be of great value if they have indigenous authorizations. Artistic projects can be a tool for social-political consciousness.

The third chapter presented some reverberations after the project *Rupestres Sonoros* and *Cantos da Floresta* tour. The encounter with the indigenous communities was a turning point for me. Working with them in their villages was an extraordinarily enriching experience. Besides the aesthetical interest there is also a worry to combine music with a social-educational approach that includes the writing of books based on indigenous themes, activities in music education, and music workshops that disseminate knowledge of the indigenous repertoire in schools. There are many reflections aroused during this process as the re-elaboration of the concept of multiculturalism, becoming better understood as interculturalism – a dialogue between different groups and culture – supported by an involvement that connects affect, music and politics. Therefore it is important to link music education to ethnomusicology, having in mind the big cultural diversity of Brazil that still is very unknown to most Brazilian teachers. This is not a nationalist feeling but a way to get in touch with deeper “Brazils”. The objective is mainly opening spaces for their culture, giving visibility, that is, ‘shedding light on’ the indigenous culture, even if it is only in the cultural or political sphere.

Postscript

During the period between 2005 and 2018, I heard and read a lot about Brazilian natives. From violent aggressions to the most interesting forms of artistic expression, which consistently changed my paradigms as a citizen and as a musician. Many texts and reflections completely transformed me. It was a time where I faced terrible truths which triggered great changes in my way of thinking, making it evident to me how we have been colonized even in our minds and the horrors this has caused, and continues to cause, to indigenous populations.

It took us centuries to realize the damage caused by the “discovery” of the New World, and of western attitudes against forms of thinking not based on accumulation and consumption. Still, we continue to ignore what the peoples of the forest say and give no heed to other ways of being that are possible on Earth. The truth is that we know little about the Brazilian natives, and the more time passes, even with the growing number of anthropological works, ethnographic documentaries, dissertations, international projects and actions, Brazilian society increasingly makes them invisible, ignores them completely or practices complete intolerance towards them. When a native leaves his village, he (or she) is no longer considered a native, but a ‘wretch’ who hinders the development of the country.

Following the many concepts presented in this thesis, I refer to Deleuze to think of the role of music in redefining this paradigm. Due to the fact that it is an abstract art, impalpable, frugal and sensorial, music is too complex of an ‘object’ to be indicated as a trace of ‘indigenusness’, but it still represents a promise — something “invisible”, but no less effective. For Deleuze, a ‘promise’ is a being whose multiplicity is its main characteristic, standing between two terms, heterogeneous, “that which is opposed to what is stable, eternal, identical, constant.” Deleuze considers that mathematics and music helped elaborate these multiplicities (DELEUZE, 1997: 19). Deleuze’s concept of rizome is like the banyan tree which different from an oak or apple



Banyan tree. Photo: Thomas/Flickr

tree – with a single trunk with branches splaying outwards towards distant peripheries – has a multiplicity of aerial roots that sustains a centreless organic system. The tree of knowledge has a plurality of roots, and structures of knowledge are grounded multiple times in the earth: the body of knowledge is a single organic whole, no part of which is dispensable from any other. Knowledge is a single organic whole, no part of which is dispensable from any other.

Thus, I multiply myself in the roles of musician, researcher, teacher writer and I seek, through attentive hearing of this indigenous music, to find myself in different ways of viewing or rather hearing the world. The spoken art of the indigenous peoples, with all its complexity, is in the memory of wise elders, keepers of ancient and complex knowledge, but has been rarely 'performed' because the pressure of the outside world is too great, and this lessens the frequency of the rituals.³¹⁹ I also observe the constant diminishing of shamans, whose role is to connect the spiritual with the material world and exercise an important function in these cultures, for "they have the role of making concepts sensitive or making intuitions intelligible" (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1996: 117).

Despite resisting the aggression initiated by colonizers, the indigenous peoples are trying to live in a self-sustaining way, even when faced with the growth of cities, farms, mining zones and hydroelectric dams on their lands. With a deforestation rate of almost 55 thousand hectares in 25 years³²⁰, they are the ones who suffer the most, and their voices are rarely heard. Yet one, of many, could have his voice heard all over the world: Davi Kopenawa. Known as an important Yanomami leader, he recounts in his book *A Queda do Céu* (The Fall of the Sky) the decimation process created by squatters and the mercury water poisoning suffered by the Yanomami, but he believes that as long as there are shamans singing, "the sky shall not fall" (KOPENAWA, 2016). The chants have the fundamental role of keeping the sky firm, suspended. That is why they should sing, talk with the *xapiri* – animal and forest spirits – to keep nature balanced. The book was released in France, in partnership with the French anthropologist Bruce Albert and "threw Davi's words to far away places".

This is why I want to send my words far away. They come from the spirits that accompany me, they are not imitations of 'skins from images' I have seen. It has been a long time since Omama and our ancestors deposited them in our thoughts and since then we have guarded them. They cannot end. If we listen to them with attention, maybe the white people would stop thinking we are stupid [...] At the same time, in the silence of the forest, we, shamans, drink the dust of the *yãkoana hi* trees, which is the food of the *xapiri*. They then take our image to the time of dreams. *That is why we are capable of hearing their songs and contemplate their dances while we sleep. This is our school, where we learn real things.* [...] We are inhabitants of the forest. Our ancestors inhabited the river springs long before my parents were born, and long before the birth of white peoples' ancestors. A long time ago, we were many and our houses were large. Then, many of us died when these foreigners arrived with their epidemic smoke and rifles. We were sad and felt the rage of mourning too many times in the past. Sometimes we even feared that the whites wanted to finish us off. However, despite all this, after we had been crying a lot and sending away our ashes on the back of the sky, where hunting is abundant, and parties never end. That is why, despite all this mourning and tears, our thoughts calm down eventually. We can hunt and work on our lands again. We can begin again to travel through the forest and make friends with people of other houses. We start to laugh again with our children, sing in our *reahu* parties and dance with our *xapiri* spirits. *We know they stay by our side in the forest and we continue to keep*

³¹⁹ See *A arte oral Paiteer Suruí*, MA dissertation (PUCCI, 2009)

³²⁰ According to an analysis by PNUMA (*Programa das Nações Unidas para o Meio Ambiente* – United Nations Environment Program), it is estimated that, from 1990 to 2015, Brazil recorded a reduction of almost 50.000 hectares of the size of its forests (UNITED NATIONS, 2016).

the sky in place (KOPENAWA, 2015: 76, my translation, emphasis added).

Resistance resumes all the efforts made to transform this reality. During this process of artistic research, in which hybridity is the main axis, I felt divided between the musician/artist and researcher, pressured and oppressed by purist academics, unsatisfied with artistic life “outside the box”, worried about music education; I saw myself in crossfires and was accused of ‘stealing’ what the indigenous have that is most precious, their culture, including their music. It has not been easy to stay confident.

I inhabit the frontier of knowledge and action, but I have gained a great respect towards this land’s first inhabitants. Our debt is immense, and I will do whatever is in my power to collaborate, whether through music, books, research, teaching, in whatever is necessary. There are many paths and the journey is long. I will continue to transform these small musical treasures with the intention of raising awareness and bringing this music to more people. To continue with Davi Kopenawa:

The image of Omama says to our ancestors: “You will live in this forest I created. Eat your fruits from your trees and hunt your animals. Open lands to plant banana trees, manioc and sugar canes. Throw great *reahu* parties! Invite each other, from different houses, sing and offer much food to your guests! (KOPENAWA, 2016: 76).

The invitation is mine as well. I invite all of you to always throw *reahu* parties to empower our multiplicity.

I end this thesis with a traditional proverb from Mexico: “A waterdrop can make a hole in a rock. Not through force, but through persistence” which brings to mind Lao Tzu’s saying: “Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. This is another paradox: what is soft is strong” (LAO TZU, 2015).

May the silent rocks be our guides and show us the invisible worlds hidden among the forest songs.