

Villa-Lobos' *Fantasia* for Soprano Saxophone

by
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When one thinks of soprano saxophone, the first classical piece that comes to mind is the *Fantasia* for soprano saxophone and chamber orchestra by the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959). This concerto, written in 1948 for the French virtuoso Marcel Mule, stands as the cornerstone of the rather limited repertoire for soprano. It is without a doubt the most popular piece for this member of the saxophone family.

This article will cover Villa-Lobos the man and composer, his writing of this piece, and some insights into performing the work. It is hoped that this information will be of value in preparing the *Fantasia* for performance.

Villa-Lobos: Man and Composer

David P. Appleby begins his book, *Heitor Villa-Lobos: A Bio-Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1988), with a short, yet complete biography of the composer. He states that Heitor Villa-Lobos was born on March 5, 1887 in the Laranjeiras (Orange Groves) section of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Nicknamed "Tuhú" as a child, Villa-Lobos was the one of eight children born to Raul Villa-Lobos and Dona Noêmia Umbelina Santos Monteiro Villa-Lobos.

Raul earned his living working in the National Library. Appleby describes the father as, "...a man of conservative political views and great intellectual curiosity. He wrote several books on various subjects under the pseudonym Epaminondas Vilalba, had a keen eye for drawing portrait sketches, and was a fine amateur cellist. Soon aware that Tuhú had a precocious musical talent, he personally undertook the boy's instruction in ear training and on the cello."

Heitor later began to study the clarinet and guitar, as well as gaining skill as a cellist. He wrote his first composition around the age of 12. This was a brief song he called "Os Sedutores," which he subtitled "Cançoneta" (Little Song).

Raul Villa-Lobos died during a smallpox epidemic in July 1899, leaving the mother to find employment to support the large family. Following Raul's death, Heitor began playing a type of popular, improvisatory music called "choros." Appleby writes, "The term is related to the verb 'chorar,' to weep, and was used for the amorous melancholy type of music performed at 'serestas' or serenades. The term was also used for groups performing this kind of music." From 1920-29, Villa-Lobos was to write fourteen compositions using the title *Chôro*.

At age 18, Villa-Lobos left Rio de Janeiro and began a six-year journey, traveling to some of the most remote parts of his country. His travels were only interrupted in 1907-08 when he returned to Rio de Janeiro to attend the National Institute of Music. Villa-Lobos left after only a few months, preferring his own study of Brazilian folk and popular music to the formal training he received at the Institute. He was most interested in the music of northeastern Brazil and this style influenced the writing of many of his later compositions. Interestingly enough the period from 1899 to 1911 netted forty-three works, mainly short songs, guitar and piano works, a few chamber pieces, and compositions for band or choros.

Villa-Lobos married Lucilia Guimarães, a graduate of the National Institute of Music and a pianist, on November 12, 1913. This was a useful, as well as romantic union, since Lucilia eagerly and aptly presented Villa-Lobos' piano music in public performance.

Probably the greatest boost to Villa-Lobos' career was his friendship with the internationally acclaimed pianist Arthur Rubinstein. Villa-Lobos met the pianist in 1918, when Rubinstein performed in Rio de Janeiro. It was Rubinstein who convinced Brazilian patrons that Villa-Lobos was a composer of major talent. His efforts led to funding, which allowed Villa-Lobos to travel abroad.

Villa-Lobos' first European trip was in 1923. On May 30, 1924, he presented a concert of his works at the Salle de Agriculteurs in Paris. Included on the program was his important chamber piece *Nonetto* (chorus, flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, bassoon, harp and percussion) and *A prole do bebê No. 1*, a piano suite performed by Rubinstein. This concert was well received by the audience and critics alike. Villa-Lobos remained centered in Paris from 1923 to 1930, with several trips back to South America, as well as to such musical centers as London, Vienna, Berlin, Brussels, Madrid, Amsterdam, and Lisbon. Villa-Lobos quickly became an international musical figure.

He returned to Brazil in 1930 and immersed himself in educational reform. He was appalled by the state of music education in the country and presented a proposal to totally reorganize public school music instruction. This proposal was accepted and Villa-Lobos spent the next dozen years helping to implement his program. During this time, he was appointed director of the Superintendencia de Educação Musical e Artística (S.E.M.A.) in Rio de Janeiro. He helped organize public demonstrations of music (one including thirty thousand vocalists and one hundred thousand instrumentalists) to help gain popularity for his reforms. In 1932, Villa-Lobos was appointed director of the Curso de Pedagogia de Música e Canto Orfeônico, a school for the preparation of teachers.

Though busy with educational reforms, he continued to compose. Included in this period are *Ciclo brasileiro* for piano (1936), four orchestral suites *Descobrimento do Brasil* (1937), and several of his *Bachianas brasileiras*, works which included both Baroque and Brazilian influences. Villa-Lobos wrote frequently for his own instrument, the cello, and produced probably his most popular work for a group of these instruments in his *Bachianas brasileiras* No. 5 (eight celli and soprano vocalist).

Villa-Lobos traveled to the United States first in 1944, when he was fifty-seven. His music was presented in Boston, Chicago and New York and was well received. In 1948, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. After surgery to remove the bladder, Villa-Lobos continued to live the active life of a composer and conductor. Appleby concludes his biography of Villa-Lobos with the following.

"In 1959, the last year of his life, he traveled in Europe and continued his schedule of composing, arranging, and conducting until July, when his physical condition required hospitalization at the Hospital dos Estrangeiros in Rio de Janeiro. He died in his apartment on Rua Araújo Porto Alegre in downtown Rio on 17 November 1959."

Composing the *Fantasia*

In Eugene Rousseau's book *MARCEL MULE: His Life And The Saxophone* (Etoile Music, 1982), Mule reflects on meeting Villa-Lobos. "Villa-Lobos and I met in Paris in the twenties at the point in my career when I was performing a great deal but had not yet begun to use the vibrato to enhance my tone. We hit it off very well, and he liked my sonority despite the fact that it was *senza vibrato*. I met him when I played in an orchestra for which he was the guest conductor. He was a nervous man and sometimes became enraged at certain members of the orchestra when he felt they were not performing to the best of their abilities. At any rate, when he returned to Paris several years later we performed a work that included saxophone. At this time I was using the vibrato as a part of the sonority, and Villa-Lobos did not at all hide the fact that he liked it. You know, many of his works include parts for the saxophones. Anyway, a few years later he sent me the manuscript for his *Fantasia*, which he had dedicated to me."

Villa-Lobos wrote the *Fantasia for soprano saxophone, 3 horns and string orchestra* in 1948, so it must have been around that time that Mule received his copy. (The full score indicates that the work was written in "New York, 1948," while the piano reduction lists "Rio, 1948. It is unsure whether this is an error, or if the orchestral version was written in New York, and the piano reduction in Rio.) Rousseau's interview of Mule continues as follows.

Rousseau: "Did you perform it?"

Mule: "No, I never did. I discussed it with several conductors, but no one seemed interested. Somehow the piece didn't excite me at that time."

Rousseau: "And the manuscript, do you have it?"

Mule: "No, I don't. I have no idea where it is. You know, when we moved from Paris to Sanary, many things were lost or misplaced."

Rousseau: "Did you have any correspondence with Villa-Lobos?"

Mule: "Yes, but I no longer have any of his letters."

The year, 1948, was an interesting one for Villa-Lobos. In that year he was admitted to New York's Sloan-Kettering Memorial Hospital, diagnosed with bladder cancer, and subsequently underwent an operation. When reviewing his compositional output for that year, one finds that he wrote four works for voice and piano (one of which, *Big Ben*, he also arranged with orchestra), his *Concerto No. 2* for piano and orchestra, and the *Fantasia*. It seems remarkable that in this year of writing music for traditional instruments, Villa-Lobos would create a work for the seldom-heard soprano saxophone. It is especially remarkable considering that Villa-Lobos had no premiere planned or even a formal commitment from Mule.

According to Appleby, the *Fantasia* received its premiere on November 17, 1951, with Waldemar Szilman as soloist and Villa-Lobos conducting a chamber orchestra. The concert was held in Rio de Janeiro at the Auditório do Ministério da Educação e Cultura.

Peer International (now a part of Southern Music) published the piece in 1963. (A miniature orchestral score is available for sale and the parts are available on rental.) The piano reduction was titled *Fantasia for soprano or tenor saxophone and chamber orchestra*. (The orchestral score merely lists *Fantasia for Saxophone, 3 F Horns and String Orchestra*, and the score indicates the part for B-flat saxophone.) One wonders if Villa-Lobos ever truly envisioned this work for tenor. Since it was dedicated to Mule, one of

the finest soprano saxophonists ever, it is assumed that this was the instrument of choice. In fact the piece loses much of its charm and delicacy when played on the tenor saxophone, which sounds a full octave below the soprano. Listing it for tenor may have been a purely financial decision by the publishers. There were very few people performing classical solos for soprano saxophone in 1963, so the publishers possibly thought sales would be better if they simultaneously offered it for tenor.

Suggestions and Corrections

In preparing this work for performance, one is struck by many issues. Since Marcel Mule never played the piece, it stands to reason that the *Fantasia* may have been finished without the advise of a knowledgeable classical saxophonist. This collaboration between composer and performer is essential to the refinement of a work prior to publication. Without that input, several issues regarding tempo and articulation seem unresolved. Had Mule performed the work, it is likely that he would have suggested some alterations to the piece to make it more readily accessible.

Having performed this piece myself for over twenty-five years, both with orchestra and piano, I am constantly faced with numerous concerns. The first is that of tempi. Movement I is clearly marked *Animé* with a half-note equal to 112. This tempo fits the exciting opening well and I recommend that performers aim for this mark. The bulk of the movement, however, is merely indicated with the term *Moins*, which means *less*. Due to several awkward arpeggios, I suggest the tempo of a half-note equal to 56-63, or around half the tempo of the opening section. I also take the liberty of adding a gentle *rallentando* into rehearsal number 11, followed by an *a tempo*, to make this ascending figure more dramatic and graceful.

The second movement, marked quarter note equal to 54, is an effective contrast to the outer fast movements and I perform it at that tempo. Curiously, Villa-Lobos begins the piece with an indication of *Lent* (slow) and then marks the music *Lentement* (slowly) at rehearsal number 2. These terms are basically the same, so I make no change in tempo there. Three measures before number 3 contains an unfamiliar abbreviation, *affrett.*, which is probably short for *affrettarsi* (to hurry). I let the sixteenths push ahead gradually here and make the *rallentando* quite broad into the *a tempo* at 3. (The pianist, or violist in the orchestral version, may want to do the same in the second through fourth bars of rehearsal number 1 for consistency.) The last three notes of Movement II are marked *anim.* (animated or sprightly) and work best if played as an *attacca* directly into the third movement.

Few if any players could achieve the printed 152 metronome indication for Movement III. I prefer a more controlled 132-138 mark and I still have to alter many articulations to perform the movement convincingly. The *Très animé* (very animated or spirited) is indeed that, even at this modified tempo.

The second concern, and one closely related to tempi, is that of articulation. Villa-Lobos was obviously fond of rapid articulations and used them freely in this work. There are numerous articulation suggestions and corrections worth mentioning.

In Movement I, you must add a slur over the eighth notes in the sixth measure of 1. This is left out of the piano reduction, but is clearly marked in the orchestral score. I also recommend that the third bar of 10 and the fourth bar of 12 be the same. I assume the second instance to be a misprint and choose to slur the first three notes of beat 2 in both cases.

Movement II only has one articulation error. The entire measure at number 4 should be slurred the same as two bars before 4. This is an omission in the piano reduction.

The final movement presents the greatest challenges. Unless the performer is a gifted and accurate double-tonguer, it may be impossible to perform the piece as written. In my earlier years, I studied Eugene Rousseau's marvelous Deutsche Grammophon recording of the *Fantasia*. His creative reworking served as an excellent model for me to use in my own articulation decisions for this movement. I will share those choices with you now with the understanding that the score and piano reduction are consistent in their markings. Following those printed markings, however, creates many unplayable passages, even at a revised tempo!

Add a slur in the sixth bar of 1 over beats five to seven. At 2, make the four-sixteenth-note patterns all two slurred, two tongued in bars 1 and 2 (only through beat four here). Also slur the last three beats in the second bar of 2, starting on the low G. I also use the two-slurred, two-tongued articulation on the last beat of two bars before rehearsal number 4. In the second measure of 4, slur beats one and two, and beats five through seven, starting with the middle F[#]s. Use the same pattern for the third bar of 4. In the second measure of 10, add a slur between the second and third sixteenths in beat seven. In bar 3, I begin this pattern— one tongued, three slurred; two slurred, two tongued; two slurred, two tongued. Continue this pattern for beats four, five, and six. Beginning on the seventh beat of bar 3, I maintain the one-tongued, three-slurred pattern until rehearsal number 11. In the first bar of 11, I use the reverse of three slurred, one tongued for the entire bar. Any playable variations on these suggestions can work. Just be sure the

piece can be accurately performed at a maximum tempo to achieve the desired result of energy and excitement.

As with any printed music, there are the inevitable errors in the parts. In Movement I, the saxophonist should play D-flats in the fifth bar of number 1 (the flat has been omitted only in the solo part). The fourth bar of rehearsal number 6 should be marked *forte*, followed by a bar at *pianissimo*, and concluding at number 7 at a *mezzo forte*. (This creates a nice echo effect over these three bars. The piano part should be similarly marked *mf*, *pp*, and *mf*.) The orchestral score indicates that the third bar of 8 should be *pp*, not the second, as marked in the piano part. (The saxophonist must keep this second measure of 8 full to make this echo effect more startling.) A *ritardando* is obviously missing in all parts in the second bar of 13. Otherwise the *a tempo* in the third bar would be meaningless. The inclusion of a *ritardando* also fits with other occurrences of this passage. The dynamic for the saxophone in the third measure of 13 should be *pianissimo*. Since this is the same material heard at number 5, which was marked *p*. I choose to repeat the *piano* volume.

The second movement presents no mistakes in the saxophone part and only a few in the piano. One bar before rehearsal number 6 has incorrect piano chords in the right hand on beats three and four. The eighth-note chords should be D, G, C-flat; F, C-flat, E-flat; D, G, C-flat; and, C, G-flat, B-flat. For some reason, the person who made the piano reduction also changed the last three measures. In the orchestral version, the moving eighth notes heard in the fourth bar from the end continue through the last measure. I recommend that pianists repeat this figure. This does present a problem, however, in the third bar from the end, where the triplets occur. If these triplets are moved up an octave, they avoid the moving eighths in the bass and create a good replica of Villa-Lobos' original writing.

In the third movement, the saxophone part has several discrepancies. Although not necessarily an error, the movement is plagued by dynamic sameness. Use expressive and creative dynamics to give more color and variety to these lines. To correct the first true error, add an accent mark over the last note at rehearsal number 3 (the quarter note G). The sustained lower A in the fifth bar of number 7 is not in the orchestral score. It does, however, occur in the piano score and may have been an earlier omission. Both this note, if played, and the middle E at number 7 are dissonances with the bass solo and are best faded away to allow that solo voice to dominate. The first note in the third bar of 11 should be a dotted half note. (This is incorrect in both parts of the piano reduction.) I wonder if a tie wasn't omitted from the fourth bar of 11, which would make it match the horn tie as done in the previous bar. The fifth bar after number 11 should be marked rehearsal number 12. (This is also missing from both parts in the piano reduction.) The written saxophone glissando in the last bar occurs only in the piano reduction, so was presumably added later. The orchestral score shows no fermati over the last two chords, so this option must have been added later, as well.

The third movement piano part also needs attention. The initial *sfz* to *mf* marking in measure one should also be repeated in bars three and four. The melodic figure at number 7, marked *mf*, should be repeated at this level at each statement from 7 to 8 to bring out the melody. The orchestral dynamic at number 8 is marked *forte*, indicating a continued growth toward this climactic point. I suggest the pianist grow with the energy of the line and drop down to *piano* two before number 9. Again, though not an error, I recommend that the pianist play the four measures before number 10 with a gradual *rallentando* to avoid making this section sound hectic. It also comes closest to the expressive quality achieved by the strings in the same section of the orchestral version.

Heitor Villa-Lobos blessed the soprano saxophone with a unique composition in 1948. Although this may not be the first concerto for this instrument, it certainly has become the most well known. There is no doubt that the *Fantasia* will remain the staple of soprano saxophonists for years to come.