"A little popular, a little classical..." - An Interview with Antonio Guerreiro de Faria

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A little popular, a little classical…” – An Interview with Antonio Guerreiro de Faria

Antonio Guerreiro de Faria is professor of composition at UniRio, the University of Rio de Janeiro, the only institution of higher learning granting the doctorate in music in the state of Rio de Janeiro, located in Urca, very near the famous Sugarloaf, where he is a colleague of David Korenchendler. His article “Guerra-Peixe and the stylizing of folklore” appeared in Vol. 21, no. 2 of the Latin American Music Review. We talked (in Portuguese) in Rio in July of 2001.
TM: Let's start at the beginning of your life in music. How did you get your start as a musician and composer?

AGF: It was late, quite late. I began as a popular musician, and as a popular musician I didn't know music very well — I would play a lot by ear.

TM: What instrument?

AGF: I played electric guitar, electric bass, I played rock, I played everything, MPB (Música Popular Brasileira), but only later did I begin to study formally with Guerra-Peixe.

TM: Where?

AGF: Guerra-Peixe had a course called “Seminars in music” at the Museu de Imagem e Som. That was in 1970, and there I learned to read and write music, later I had classes in harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, for two and a half years. Then I stopped because I ran out of money. I had to stop, and then I started as a student again in 1981. In the meantime I studied harmony and counterpoint with Helio Senna, a professor at UniRio who had studied at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow for six years, and there I had more formal instruction in modal counterpoint and harmony. In 1981 I went back to study with Guerra, and completed my studies.

TM: How did you get your start as a popular musician? Where did you grow up? Here in Rio?

AGF: Here in Rio.

TM: In which neighborhood?

AGF: I was living in Leme, and it was there that I began to be part of popular music groups.

TM: When?

AGF: 1965, when I was 16.

TM: Tell us a little about what pop music was like at the time.

AGF: There were two things going on, jovem guarda, which was the Brazilian rap of the period, and on the other side the people of Música Popular Brasileira — Tom Jobim, the festivals of song that were happening. There were those two directions that were bumping into each other. On one side the rockers, who are were tagged as alienated, and on the other side the people of Música Popular Brasileira, who were more politically oriented. And that was the panorama in the sixties here in Rio. Everything happening, getting old, lots of new stuff happening, because that was the age of the song festivals, where every year there were new things. Because that is where Chico Buarque, Milton Nascimento, Caetano Veloso appeared. It was filet mignon — these days there is nothing happening any more.

TM: Did you begin by writing popular songs? Or just playing?

AGF: I began by playing in a band. I worked in an orchestra, and later when I learned to read I accompanied all sorts of singers, including Tim Maia. I was in Tim's band in 1971, 1972. In that century I met Laura (Laura Ronai, professor of flute at UniRio) She wasn't my student, but my colleague [Translator's note: the interview
took place chez Ronai. Ronai frequently tries to get the interviewee’s goat by telling others that she studied with him (and hence that he is much older than her).]

TM: Talk a little about your beginnings in classical music.

AGF: I composed a little, and not very well. Because I thought that a classical composer doesn’t like popular music. That was something bad that Mario de Andrade did. It was him who imported that idea — erudite/popular. (Translator’s note: the usual term for classical music in Brazil is música erudita — erudite music). As if to appreciate a piece by Chopin, Buxtehude, or Bach, one would need a great deal of erudition, which is not true. You don’t need to be very erudite to appreciate the music of Bach. And so to move from popular music to classical music is not such a big deal, because I don’t make any distinction between classical and popular.

TM: I think this lack of separation between the two is something that is typically Brazilian, since in the United States there seems to be a clear distinction, though it’s starting to blur.

AGF: I know that ten or twenty years ago there was a rigid separation between classical and pop. In Brazil this is gradually changing as well. There’s nothing harder than making a recording of new classical music. If a young person has just graduated from the university there’s very little chance that someone will record his music with a classical pianist, because every one that likes classical music is closed off. There’s only one producer, one hall, who are only doing re-recordings of pianists who have already recorded Bach or Beethoven, because these will be profitable. So the chances of a young instrumentalist, in this country, or anywhere in the world, after years of systematic study, five or six years, to record a CD of classical music are minimal.

TM: Could you tell us about some of the more important of your early compositions?

AGF: I began to compose seriously in the nineties. The fact that I was a student of Guerra-Peixe didn’t make me into a nationalist, and he himself gave total liberty to go in whatever directions might be best for them. Guerra-Peixe didn’t impose any kind of commitment to nationalism on his students. And so I began to compose very freely my concerto for saxophone and orchestra. It was played last year (2000) in Curitiba; it has been performed three times here in Brazil. In my style there is popular (folk) music, urban popular music and classical music, and I try to
make a mixture. A little popular, a little classical, using techniques from concert music, even some folk music, but without doing research into folklore, because if we are realistic about it, folklore in Brazil is coming to an end. A museum piece.

TM: But the musical activity of the urban population…

AGF: Is more attractive, more present than of the population which is making folk music. I think one can make a mixture between elements from urban culture, which is very strong in this country, and all over the world, and the processes of classical music, because classical music by itself is heading for extinction. The only successful classical music is music for films. That’s the way things are in the United States.

TM: Earlier composers from Princeton (for example) might have had commissions from foundations. Now they may go to Hollywood to write film scores.

AGF: With the sort of market that remains for classical music, what else can they do?

TM: Is the score for the saxophone concerto published?

AGF: No. It’s in Finale. There is someone who wants to record it now, an American.

TM: There are not many publishers for classical music in Brazil.

AGF: Here in Brazil there is no interest in publishing classical music, not at the present.

TM: Does it need government funding?

AGF: What we need is a culture. It is much easier to publish popular music than classical music here in Brazil. The well-known authors from the Baroque and Romantic, and a very small amount of modern music.

TM: Was the concerto recorded?

AGF: It was recorded, and broadcast on television in Paraná, on TV Cultura. This year I have had various pieces performed: a series of preludes and toccatas here in Rio by the pianist Ruth Serrão. There were performances of a flute duo in the U.S by Julie Koidin. A chorale called “Brasil Ensemble” is going to record a piece of mine (Tutu marambá) for chorus this week, a work that has already been recorded four times. This will be the fifth.
TM: And who are the lyrics by?

AGF: The piece is based on folklore because it was written for a competition that I entered in 92, a competition for choral music in Belo Horizonte. I entered the piece, it didn’t win any of the prizes, I heard that it had been given honorable mention, and now it will be on its fifth CD.

TM: Can you tell us a little about your esthetic? Atonality, twelve-tone?

AGF: Let’s be real here, because I am a realist with his feet on the ground. I think that twelve-tone music is dead and buried. No instrumentalist that I know has a twelve-tone piece in their repertoire. Seriously. Perhaps some professors have a twelve-tone piece for their students to study as a sort of museum piece. “A long time ago someone decided to write music like this. Isn’t it ugly?” and they play it, and the students play it. The reality is this: no one plays twelve-tone music any more. You can use atonality in film music, in music for television as a sort of special effect. It’s like a sort of linguistic code. If I suddenly decided that I wanted to make a speech, were I to be elected President of Brazil some day, would I make my inaugural speech in Chinese? What Brazilian would understand it? Well, Schoenberg decided to change the code, just like that, makes a series of twelve tones that is not going to be understood or assimilated by anyone, no matter who. It was a code imposed from outside. I think that every time the academy decides to come up with a new system of composition it goes far from the popular taste. It’s a code that is a closed system; it would be very difficult for that code to be accepted.

TM: When a student begins to study composition, at UniRio, for example, does he need to be trained in twelve-tone technique?

AGF: Ordinarily the professor is going to train the student in this in some way, but chances are that he is not going to write twelve-tone music, because his contact with the labor market, which is for popular music, is going to turn this composition student into an arranger. But not into a composer, because there’s no space for that here.

TM: Could you say a little about foreign influences in classical music in Brazil? You have influences from the US in film, television, rock. Brazil has more cultural independence that many countries. In terms of classical music the United States is still to some extent a European colony. Do you see influences from figures like Steve Reich and Philip Glass in Brazil?

AGF: Depends on the tribe, on the context. If you are in the university context you could say that there is an influence of Philip Glass, but not if these composers are working in a popular context. In some aspects these composers who are products of the universities are being influenced
by the United States, or by Europe via the United States. People in popular music are directly influenced by American popular culture. I think our country is a culture of fusion, just as the United States is also a culture of fusion. You took various elements without any xenophobia, mixed them up and made your own thing. In Brazil — although we mixed things together — all of Brazilian popular music is a product of the fusion of European currents and African things — made here, realized here, as soon as Brazilian popular musicians are only trying to imitate music from outside, without trying to make a fusion, this is bad, this is really bad. But I think this is a moment of transition for Brazilian music. Everything is very complicated, it's really a moment where there's a melting pot, a cauldron, we're only going to be able to see the results when we are farther down the road. Some composers don't know which way to go, they simply don't know. They are confused, thinking “Do I want to be a classical composer? What's in that for me? Should I be a popular composer, write arrangements, film music?” OK. But what kind of market is there for film music in this country? There isn't any. Television? Maybe there's a way out there. This is something that's not only happening here, it's happening in the United States too, as far as I know, in France, Germany, Italy. This turbulence is a world-wide thing, a product of the globalization that is already a reality. It wasn't along ago that I saw a film with a ton of Chinese eating Big Macs in McDonald’s in Shanghai. Wait a second, where am I? That's the way it is in 2000.

TM: In the US Brazilian music is still a recognized brand.

AGF: With its own characteristics. What is going on with Brazilian classical music is a process of fusion and transformation that's not finished yet. Because of globalization there is a great deal of information for composers. I have already defined my own language based on urban music, taking advantage of urban elements that I know, and translating and stylizing those elements. I can't do research into folklore, because folklore is at an end, all over the world, or it is being transformed. It's still strong in some places in Brazil

TM: What sort of training do the students at UniRio have? Classical or popular?

AGF: Eighty-percent popular, and only twenty-percent have classical training. That's the reality.

TM: So when they arrive at the university they have to absorb a classical music that is alien to them.

AGF: They have to absorb in a very short period, and many times they can't do it. I don't know if this is happening in the U.S.

TM: Milton Babbitt told me that he has students that don't know the Beethoven symphonies.

AGF: A hug for Milton Babbitt! (In English) The same thing is happening here, OK?

TM: When the students get their degrees, will they be writing classical music, popular music, film music?

AGF: The majority of my students that graduate in composition, and only a few manage to graduate, head to arranging popular music. Very few decide to write classical music.

TM: For lack of professional opportunities.

AGF: Being a composer in Brazil is not a profession. Eighty percent of Brazilian composers are going to agree with me.

TM: But they are still composing.

AGF: It's natural — throughout the whole world you find composers composing.

TM: But there are commissions for composers in Brazil.

AGF: There are — I am working on three.
TM: Please tell us about them.

AGF: One is a trio for piano, oboe and horn, for the Trio Uni-Rio, another is a piece for bassoon and string quartet commissioned by Elione Medeiros, the bassoonist. And the other is a brass quintet, which I am working on at the moment. All drawing on urban popular elements, in a more classical style, but without compromising the communication.

TM: Who commissioned your piece for flute and piano, Madrigal and Dance?

AGF: Guerra-Peixe, to be published by Vitale. It was published by Vitale; I wrote it 85, 86. And although you enjoyed it, I don’t know if I would write it that way now.

TM: It’s very original, but at the same time easy to assimilate.

TM: I take care to write music for the people who are going to play and the people who are going to listen to it, so it can’t have a language that is all its own. If you have a language that is all your own, you are not communicating. Do you understand? Communication is important. I wrote the piece here, and you enjoyed it there in the United States. If I use my own code, I am not going to communicate. That’s how I think.

TM: Other projects for the future?

AGF: I have a group that recorded all of the popular music of Guerra-Peixe.

TM: What’s it called?

AGF: “Take your finger out of the pudding.”

TM: It played in Niterói.

AGF: It’s going to play in Rio in August.

TM: How many popular pieces did Guerra-Peixe write?

AGF: Fifty or sixty, more or less. And we chose seventeen to record. From the forties, fifties, sixties, even from the eighties.

TM: Are they known here in Brazil?

AGF: Some of those are well-known chorinhos. There are marches, sambas, marches for Carnaval. In addition to the element of variation which is common to jazz and popular Brazilian music, we will add development, which is something that I think that no one has thought of before.