

New sources for the study of early opera and musical theatre in Brazil

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O Voltaire, forgive your sacrilegious translator! [. . .] Here are Zaire, Nérestan, Châtillon, Lusignan; they all have sworn to outrage the great man. But the galleries are applauding... I don't want anything better, and I do like the galleries: — Bravo! Bravissimo! — Why would I be different?¹

Jacques Arago's witty description of a typical evening at the Real Teatro São João in the late 1810s does not diverge essentially from a handful of acrimonious, when not puritanic remarks by European travelers. Writing about theatre and music in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth-century, Louis François de Tollenare, Ferdinand Denis, and Victor Jacquemont mentioned pitiful spectacles, cynical dances, and execrable orchestras, often comparing them to those in small provincial theatres back in their homeland. Even more so, they echo northern European impressions of Portuguese society, morality, tastes, and even its racial configuration.

In that sense, Brazil would look like an extension and an exacerbation of everything that French, English, and German visitors found strange and bizarre in Portugal. After all, Brazil was a colony of one of the most peripheral and—to northern eyes—backward looking states in Europe. All efforts by kings Dom João V to make Lisbon a new Rome, and Dom José I to place it at the artistic forefront of Europe, at a time when the inflow of Brazilian gold seemed endless, did not mean much for the colony. Press was forbidden, universities did not exist, and most manufactured goods had to be imported from Portugal—the only country with which Brazil was allowed to trade.

Everything would change in 1808. Although his wife hated each one of the thirteen years she spent in Rio de Janeiro, Dom João VI loved his new capital. Soon the newly arrived aristocracy's huge entourage along with the local elite would try to replicate there, with more or less success, some forms of entertainment and Royal adulation. From the years 1760 to 1829, three opera houses rise and fall in Rio de Janeiro. The history of these buildings, their owners and their productions help us understand the development of opera in Brazil as a musical genre, as well as its social and political uses from the last decades of the colony to the first years after the independence.

1. Rather than being sponsored by an enlightened elite, opera in Portugal, especially *opera seria*, was the product and reflection of a conservative society, occupied in justifying and legitimizing the absolute regime. In conformity with that, a 1771 petition of a group of middle-class citizens to open a society aimed at managing public theatres in Lisbon sounds as if it was taken from Metastasio's own writings. For them an opera house was²

¹ Jacques Arago, *Souvenir d'un aveugle, voyage autour du monde* (Paris: Hortet et Ozanne, 1839), vol 1, 129: *O Voltaire, pardonne à ton sacrilège traducteur! . . . Voici Zaire, Nérestan, Châtillon, Lusignan; ils ont tous fait serment d'outrager le grand homme. Mais les loges applaudissent... je ne demande pas mieux, et je faire comme les loges: — Bravo! Bravissimo! — Pourquoi se singulariser?*

² Quoted by Nireu Cavalcanti, *O Rio de Janeiro setecentista* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2004), 170.

A public school, where the nations learn the healthiest precepts of politics, moral, love, motherland, value, zeal, and fidelity with which they should serve their sovereigns.

To instruct in a pleasurable way and to impose the moral values under the pretext of entertaining: Dom José I understood better than any other Portuguese king the role opera could play in promoting his ideology. Yet, no matter how much Dom José I tried to set himself apart from his father’s religious ventures, important ties between theatre and Church would still endure.

Beyond the representational nature of the Catholic liturgy, a peculiar, almost theatrical form of religiosity characterized by feasts, processions, and religious dramas thrived in the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America. Moreover, it has been noted that instrumentalists, singers—except for women—composers, and adapters who provided music for liturgical ceremonies and religious feasts in Brazil’s main cities were essentially the same ones who worked in the *casas de opera*. If in colonial Brazil theatre was regarded as a place for entertainment as much as for moral and political indoctrination, forms of circularity were at play inside Church buildings. People looked for fun there too. Expressions of dislike about all the flirting that used to go on during the Mass and official regulations against secular music—even dances—inside churches serve only to confirm how common they were. Besides, the very place of music in the liturgy, the spatial disposition of singers and instrumentalists, the division of Mass sections into arias, duets, ensembles, and choruses, not to mention the vocal virtuosity of singers, would help giving the audiences the same sense of spectacle they would feel inside an opera house.

2. Not as deep as most of his works on sacred music in Minas Gerais, Curt Lange’s 1964 article on opera in Colonial Brazil is one of the first serious attempts at tackling the issue, along with the historical surveys by Galante de Sousa and Ayres de Andrade.³

Relying on box rental invoices, official records of feasts, and even score fragments he collected during decades of research, Curt Lange came up with a list of dozens of plays staged in Vila Rica, Cuiabá, and Rio de Janeiro.

Alberico em Roma	Joaninha
Amor artífice	Junio Bruto
Amor e obrigação	Locandeira
Amor saloio	Maomé
Antígono	Mafoma
A Peruviana	Maridos Parortas [?]
Aspásia na Síria	Mundo na Lua
Belisário	Mentiroso
Bons amigos	Olímpia
Chiquinha	Oratória
Ciganinha	Ourene perseguida e triunfante, ou Irene
Cleonice	Parnaso obsequioso

³ Francisco Curt Lange, “La opera y las casas de opera en el Brasil colonial”, *Boletín interamericano de música* 44, nov 1964, 3-11. José Galante de Sousa, *O teatro no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Nacional do Livro, 1960). Ayres de Andrade, *Francisco Manuel da Silva e seu tempo* (Rio de Janeiro: Secretaria da Educação e cultura, 1967).

Conde Alarcos	Peão fidalgo
Córdova	Quatro nações
Desparate	Quejeira
Dido abandonada	Rico avarento
Doente fingida	Romaria, Comédia da
Dom João (Don Juan de Espina)	Saloio cidadão (<i>entremez</i>)
Dona Inês de Castro	Semiramis
Encantos de Medéia	Serva Amorosa
Enjeitada	Sete namorados
Escapim	Sganarelle (<i>entremez</i>)
Estalajadeira	Tamerlano
Escola de casados	Tancredo
Ezio em Roma	Tutor enamorado (<i>entremez</i>)
Farnace	Velho Sérgio
Feira de Malmantil	Vencer ódio
Filho contra vontade	Vinda inopinada
Focas, ou Cíntia em Trinácia	Vologeso
Herdeira venturosa	Zaíra (tragedy)
Herói da China	Zara
Inconstâncias da fortuna	Zenóbia no oriente
Indústrias do serralho	Zoroastro
Ipermestra	

Table 1: Curt Lange’s list of “operas” staged in Vila Rica, Cuiabá and Rio de Janeiro between 1770 and 1795 (some spelling is standardized).

It should be stressed that, while the term *opera* in Colonial Brazil referred usually to a dramatic representation interspersed with musical numbers, often there was no music at all. Lange’s list also shows that the *casas de opera* featured genres as diverse as the *entremez*, *comédia*, and *opera seria*. If further research may reveal that special dates and feasts played a role in the choice of repertory, in some contexts *opera seria* was subjected to certain modifications in order to conform to the Portuguese taste, whilst contributing to the effacing of boundaries between drama and comedy.⁴ It was not unusual, for example, that Metastasian *libretti* arrived in Brazil as *literatura de cordel*, or string theatre—cheap booklets that vendors displayed in the streets by hanging them from a string fixed to a wall or to a door. That was the last stage of a process of adaptation that began in Lisbon’s popular theatres such as the Bairro Alto—famous for its puppet theatre performances that included recitatives, arias, sang minuets, ensembles and choruses. While the earliest productions of the Teatro do Bairro Alto were comedies by the Brazilian-Jewish lawyer Antonio José da Silva (1705-1739), it became customary after his death (he was burned by the Inquisition) to present spoken versions of Metastasian and Goldonian *libretti* interspersed with musical numbers. Translated to Portuguese and subjected to cuts and other adaptations—mainly the inclusion of comic characters—Metastasio’s dramas, such as

⁴ Some of these were compiled in the collection *Óperas segundo o gosto e costume português*, by José Joaquim de Sousa Rocha e Saldanha, published in 1761.

Achille in Sciro, Adriano in Siria, Didone, La Semiramide riconosciuta, Zenobia, and La isola desabitada were then staged as puppet theatre.⁵

How much of the repertory listed by Lange received that sort of treatment is not known, but in the second half of the eighteenth century the staging of such works by companies featuring Black actors and singers seem to have been the norm, at least in Brazil. A century earlier, writings by Gregório de Mattos also show how performing arts in Colonial Brazil were mainly a business of Blacks.

To what extent were the musical scores of these plays brought from Europe or written by local composers is a question that still remains open. Lange has pointed out to an eighteenth-century payment record of 1786 detailing expenditures for “three operas and two dramas”, which included money for costumes, sets, machinery, and prompter. One entry detailed a payment to Florêncio Furtado da Silveira for the “composition of music”, though it is not clear whether *composição* means here an activity or a musical score. Lange also argues that Brazilian poet Cláudio Manuel da Costa hardly would have thought of sending the libretto of his *Parnaso Obsequioso*—staged in 1768—to be set to music by a European composer.⁶

More recently, Lorenzo Mammì has suggested other ways in which local composers could participate in operatic productions. When using scores by Perez and Jommelli, written for some of the best singers in Europe, such as Raff, Ghizziello, and Caffarelli, some adaptation should have been necessary. Besides the simplification of some arias, Mammì thinks of a collage of numbers by different composers, the insertion of newly composed arias, a mixed staging with spoken dialogues and some musical numbers.⁷

Local practices and different vocal ranges and qualities might have played a role in these adaptations as well. Indeed, while *castratti* were not usual in Brazil, it seems that Black women took their roles in most productions. Curt Lange named four Black women who used to sing in Vila Rica’s stages, and Nireu Cavalcanti listed no less than ten women—among them the famous Black singer Joaquina Lapinha—who were active in Rio de Janeiro from 1789 to 1810 as singers or actresses.⁸

One among a few fragments of operatic scores that Curt Lange collected in Minas Gerais in the 1940s and 1950s, the *basso* part of the tragedy *Zara* shows how theatrical activity would have been more intense than archival research suggest: whereas a note in the score reveals it was performed at the “theatro do Rio de Janeiro” in November 18, 1778, no other record of the staging of *Zara* was ever found; nor does it appear in the comprehensive study by Ayres de Andrade.

Even focusing his research in the post-1808 period, Andrade was able to find records of two operas staged in Rio de Janeiro in the eighteenth century and absent of Lange’s list. However, the main virtue of his work was to offer a clear picture of musical life in Rio de Janeiro under Dom João VI and Dom Pedro I. Life in early Rio, its culture, society, and politics could no longer be studied without considering the role opera played as artistic expression, elite entertainment, royal power display, and even source of jobs.

⁵ Manuel Carlos de Brito, “Der theatralische und literarische Erfolg Metastasios im Portugal des 18. Jahrhunderts”, *Opernheld und Opernheldin im 18. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Wagner, 1991), 166-73.

⁶ Curt Lange, *op. cit.*, 7-8.

⁷ Lorenzo Mammì, “Teatro em música no Brasil monárquico”, in *Festa: cultura e sociabilidade na América portuguesa* (São Paulo: Edusp, 2001), 37-52.

⁸ Nireu Cavalcanti, *O Rio de Janeiro setecentista* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2004), 412-14.

<p><i>from 1769 to 1790</i></p> <p>Os Encantos de Medéia (Silva/Teixeira?) Italiana em Londres (Cimarosa) Piedade de Amor (Millico)</p> <p><i>from 1808 to 1831</i></p> <p>1809 Le Due Gemelle (Garcia) 1811 L’Oro non compra amore (Portugal) 1812 Artaserse (Portugal) 1814 Axur (Salieri) 1817, 18, 20, 27 La Vestale (Pucitta) 1817 Merope (Portugal) 1818 Coriolano (Niccolini?) 1818 Camilla (Paër) 1819, 22, 27 La Caccia di Enrico IV (Pucitta) 1820, 26, 27, 28 Aureliano in Palmira (Rossini) 1821, 22, 26, 27, 29 La Cenerentola (Rossini) 1821 Pamella Nubile (Generali) 1821 Il Segreto (Mayr?) 1821, 22, 26, 27 Tancredi (Rossini) 1821, 22, 26, 27, 28 Il Barbiere di Siviglia (Rossini) 1821, 22 Don Giovanni (Mozart)</p>	<p>1821, 22, 27, 28, 29, 30 L’Italiana in Algeri (Rossini) 1822 La Prova d’una Opera Seria (Gnecco) 1822 Elisabetta, Regina d’Inghilterra (Rossini) 1823 Adelaide di Borgogna (Rossini) 1824, 26, 27 L’Inganno Felice (Rossini) 1826, 27 Timonela, ou O Tutor logrado (Il Tutore Burlato, Soler?) 1826, 27 Adelina (Generali) 1826 Il Filosofo (Mosca) 1826 O Sapateiro, ou As Damas trocadas (Le Donne Cambiate, Portugal) 1827 La Pietra del Paragone (Rossini) 1827 O Califa e a escrava (Basili) 1827 Roberto, chefe dos ladrões (?) 1827, 28, 29 Agnese (Paër) 1828 Adina, ou O Grão-Duque de Granada (Adina o Il Califfo di Bagdad, Rossini) 1828 Otelo (Rossini) 1828 Le Due Gemelli (Guglielmi?) 1828, 29 L’ aio nell’ imbarazzo (Donizetti) 1828, 29 Ser Marc’ Antonio (Pavesi) 1829 Corradino Cuor di Ferro (Pavesi) 1829 Matilde di Shabran (Rossini) 1830 La Festa della Rosa (Coccia) 1830, 1831 La Gazza Ladra (Rossini)</p>
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Table 2: Ayres de Andrade’s list of operas staged in Rio de Janeiro between 1770 and 1831

Rarely disclosing his sources, Ayres de Andrade has done some archival research at the Arquivo Nacional and the Museu Histórico Nacional. Yet, he relied mostly on newspaper articles and advertisements to compile his lists of musicians who were active in Rio from 1808 to 1865 and operatic works staged from 1769 to 1865.

A change of taste is visible from the arrival of the Portuguese Court in 1808 to the abdication of Brazil’s first independent ruler in 1831. We see more and more Italian comic opera, along with French-influenced “fantasy” operas featuring rescue plots or Turkish themes. From 1820 on, Rossini appeared as the new standard in both *opera seria* and *buffa*. To some extent, his popularization was due to the creation of an Italian opera company in late 1821, the first one to promote an actual opera season in the city, with regular performances throughout the year. The fire in the São João theatre in March 25, 1824 explains the lack of productions till 1826, when it reopened with a new name: Imperial Teatro São Pedro de Alcântara.

Ayres de Andrade has found no record of any complete opera being staged in Rio from 1832 to 1843, three years after the coronation of Dom Pedro II. The following year, a new Italian opera company, lead by the soprano Augusta Candiani, produced six operas by Donizetti, four by Bellini and two by Rossini, totaling 74 performances.

Perhaps, what is more striking about this list is the almost total absence of Brazilian composers—the only one being a false entry. Even Marcos Portugal, chief Portuguese opera composer of the period, appears only in four productions. Considering that in sacred

music the picture was so different—the majority of works performed at the Royal Chapel and other churches around town was composed by Brazilians or Portuguese—it seems that local composers would take some time to familiarize themselves with the changing features of Italian opera. Of course, to a great extent the choice between what would and what would not be staged was determined by the preferences of the Italian company that almost monopolized the operatic scene in those years. Still, it is rather curious how at first the new Italian operatic style influenced Brazilian sacred music, while a new type of Brazilian opera would emerge only in the late 1850s.

3. Groundbreaking studies, interdisciplinary in their approach and dealing with issues such as power, society and the urban space, started appearing in the late 1990s.⁹ Several articles and a just released book by architect Nireu Cavalcanti unveiled a whole set of new documents concerning the history of opera houses and companies, organically integrating them in a comprehensive urban history of Rio de Janeiro.

Cavalcanti also compiled a small list of operas staged in Rio de Janeiro before 1810, drawing it primarily from sources not known by Curt Lange and Ayres de Andrade.

Felinto exaltado (1746)	Desertor espanhol
Santa Catarina (1748)	Encantos de Circe
O Precipício de Faetonte (1765)	Italiana em Argel
Didone abandonata (1765)	Italiana em Londres
Ciro reconhecido (1765)	Romeu e Julieta
Adriano na Síria (1765)	Nina
Encantos de Medéia (1769)	Ouro não compra amor, ou Louco em Veneza
Oratória a São João (1782)	Piedade do amor
La buona figliuola (1782)	Triunfo da América
Chiquinha	
Desertor francês	

Table 3: Nireu Cavalcanti’s list of stage works with music in Rio de Janeiro between 1746 and 1810.

More interesting is the connection between these plays and the companies and houses that produced them, something that was possible only after the surfacing of documents regarding the rise and fall of the three main opera houses in Rio before the independence. That may be the starting point for future research on the evolution of the genre as well as its social and political unfolding.

Cavalcanti has shown that the origins of the so-called *opera velha*—old opera—could be traced back to a *presépio*, or puppet theatre, set up in 1719 by an artisan, a painter and a composer turned into impresarios. Also a puppet theatre in its early days, the *opera velha* ran by Padre Ventura, actually Boaventura Dias Lopes, existed from as early as 1748, as a note by a French traveler implies. As Cavalcanti has shown, that was the same building later referred to as *opera dos vivos*, after live actors replaced the real-size puppets.

⁹ Lorenzo Mammi’s assessment of opera and politics during the colony and second Empire concentrates in the genre’s changing shapes and functions in Brazil, though it curiously skips Dom João VI and D. Pedro I rules. In his book *A Corte no Exílio* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000), social historian Jurandir Malerba produced a comprehensive essay on semi-dramatic works honoring Dom João VI and the Royal lineage.

The *opera velha* was similar in size and repertory to Lisbon's Bairro Alto theatre, whose earliest puppet-theatre productions were staged in 1733—all by Brazilian playwright Antonio José da Silva. The almost simultaneous emergence in Brazil and in Portugal of a genre of musical theatre so identified with the figure of one single person is something that is yet to be explained.

In 1776, the *opera velha* was engulfed by fire during the staging of Silva's *Os Encantos de Medéia*. From then on, till the arrival of the Portuguese Court, opera in Rio would be staged only at the *opera nova*, built before 1760 and also ran by Dias Lopes. His brother Luís Dias de Souza took over in 1772 and from 1775 to 1812 it was managed by Souza's partner Manoel Luiz Ferreira, as Cavalcanti has shown.¹⁰ Black artist Leandro Joaquim, probably the most important painter in Colonial Rio de Janeiro, was the house's scenographer and painted the stage curtain featuring Neptune riding seahorses at Guanabara Bay. Besides the Portuguese arms above the Viceroyal box, no symbols of power were visible.

A more conspicuous presence of Royal power would be felt after 1808. The *opera nova* was then named Teatro Régio, or Royal Theatre, and it began staging operas by Marcos Portugal and *licenze*, or encomiastic cantatas honoring Dom João VI, written by local poets and composers. Nonetheless, the newly-acquired importance of the city as capital of the Portuguese Empire would demand a new, larger and flashier opera house.

Under Royal protection, the Real Teatro São João opened in 1813—it was the largest in South America. Contemporary reports place its capacity around 1.200 people in the main auditorium, plus 112 boxes arranged in four rows. José Leandro da Costa painted its stage curtain, depicting the Portuguese fleet approaching Guanabara Bay. Theatre was now a privileged space in which representations of power, society, and life itself, worked to legitimize and perpetuate the status quo of a small elite.¹¹

4. Insightful as these approaches are, there are still sources that remain almost untouched. No study has been done on the musical sources prior to 1850, and with some exceptions, researchers still overlook literary sources and even libretti.

The collection of Italian libretti at Rio de Janeiro's Biblioteca Nacional, brought by Dom João VI in 1808, includes many of the titles listed in the tables above. Most of these bring information regarding premieres, first performances in Portugal, composers, and singers.

Amor Contadino	L' Artaxerxes
Antigono	L' Olimpiade (2 ex.)
Axur Re di Ormus	L' Italiana in Londra
Ezio	La Buona Figliuola
Fetonte	La Cameriera per Amore
Il Filosofo Amante	La Pieta di Amore
Il Mercato di Malmantile	Le Cinesi
Il Tutore Ingannato (2 ex.)	Le Due Gemelle
Il Vologeso	O Mercado de Malmantile
Ines de Castro	Semiramide (2 ex.)
L' Amore Artigiano	

¹⁰ Cavalcanti, *op. cit.* 174-6.

¹¹ See Jurandir Malerba, *op. cit.*

Table 4: Matches between tables 1, 2, 3 and the Biblioteca Nacional libretto collection.

The score of what seems to be the first opera composed by a Brazilian, *Le Due Gemelle*, by Father José Maurício Nunes Garcia, has long since disappeared and no record of its staging has ever been found. Yet, we still might get some clues on some of its features by analyzing its probable libretto.

Despite Ayres de Andrade's assurance that *Le Due Gemelle* was staged in 1809, most scholars agree that its score should have been written between 1813 and 1821, and probably never performed. Before that, its libretto has been set to music several times by composers such as Pasquale Anfossi (1784), Pietro Guglielmi (1786), Giuseppe Gazzaniga (1807), and Giuseppe Niccolini (1808).

There is no doubt that it was a comic opera, featuring seven characters played by six singers (the twins are played by the same singer). Stereotyping is visible in some names—Don Polidoro, Don Nasturzo and Don Procolo being the male roles—but not as much as one would find in an Italian *intermezzo*. There is a lot of action and only a few arias, which are discernible in the text by the poetic structures. Even these arias are not quite like those found in opera seria, for they have longer texts and not much of repetition. Thus, they are more syllabic and do not offer many places for melodic ornamentation; as it was usual in late-eighteenth-century comic opera, the vocal parts would not be as demanding as in *opera seria*.

Since comic opera is much more realistic than *opera seria*, a character who plays the guitar in *Le Due Gemelle* offers a convenient pretext for the composer to include a musical number without losing verisimilitude. That is why characters who are music teachers or wannabe-composers are so common in comic opera and *intermezzi*. Furthermore, when these genres are performed, the stage is the perfect space for transgression: aristocrats are satirized, husbands are lured, and servants outsmart their masters.

In Brazil and Portugal, that space was first occupied by Antonio José da Silva's puppet theatre, with all its political and social critique that eventually led to his execution. By the end of the eighteenth century, the *entremez* became the most popular and provocative form of musical theatre.

Perhaps due to that, Garcia's foremost scholar, Cleofe Person de Mattos expressed some puritanic thoughts about the source of his opera. She could not conceive that Father José Maurício would have written a comic opera on such a "jocular and dramatically complicated" libretto as the one set to music by Guglielmi.¹²

The fragments of opera scores mentioned by Curt Lange—namely one basso part of *Zara* and one first violin of *Peão fidalgo*—could tell us, for example, how much of the libretto was set to music, how demanding were the instrumental parts, how sophisticated was the instrumentation, to what extent were they handled, was there a continuo part, and so on. Unfortunately, after his articles of 1964 and 1966 Lange has never returned to the subject, and these scores are not listed in the catalogues of the Ouro Preto so-called Curt Lange collection—one among many.

¹² Cleofe Person de Mattos, *Catálogo temático das obras do Padre José Maurício Nunes Garcia* (Rio de Janeiro: Ministério da Educação e Cultura, 1970), 378.

Unlike most dramatic music of the period, complete scores of several encomiastic cantatas performed between 1809 and 1817 survived in Rio de Janeiro's archives and libraries: *Triunfo da América* and *Ulisséia* by José Maurício Nunes Garcia (Vila Viçosa); *Juramento dos Numes* by Bernardo José de Souza Queiroz (UFRJ School of Music); *A Estrela do Brasil* and *O Último Cântico de David* by José Joaquim de Souza Negrão (Biblioteca Nacional). These *licenze* approach the style of *opera seria* in their recitatives and not-so virtuosic arias, though their choral numbers seem closer to patriotic anthems.

Loose arias—like the Aria de Dardane and other numbers by Damião Barbosa de Araújo in Salvador's city archive—keep surfacing throughout Brazil, but complete scores of operas or entremeses composed in Brazil during Dom João VI rule are quite rare. So far, only one tragedy and two entremeses by Bernardo Queiroz were unveiled.

- *Zaíra*. Tragedy, Bernardo José de Souza Queiroz (scores at the Ajuda and Vila Viçosa palace libraries)
- *Os doídos fingidos por amor*. Entremez, Bernardo José de Souza Queiroz (score at the UFRJ School of Music)
- *Entremez da Marujada*. Entremez, Bernardo José de Souza Queiroz (score at the Vila Viçosa palace library)

5. *Zaira* is probably not the first complete opera ever written in Brazil, but it is the earliest one whose score survives. If Marcos Portugal had some of his operas staged in Brazil under Dom João VI, he composed them all in Europe, with different musical forces in mind. Ernesto Vieira, who in 1900 saw the score at the Ajuda Library in Lisbon, was sure its composer was Brazilian, adding that Souza Queiroz's work was of little value. Largely ignored by Brazilian musicologists, his name does not appear in any of the mainstream books on Brazilian music history, although theatre historians mention him quite often. As for Souza Queiroz's origin, a note he wrote in the dedication of his opera shows he regarded Lisbon as his hometown. Yet, he seems to have spent most of his life in Brazil.

Important parallels between Souza Queiroz and Marcos Portugal might suggest some sort of professional relationship. Both studied at the Seminário da Patriarcal in Lisbon during the rule of Dom José I, who died in 1777. Nine-year-old Marcos Portugal was admitted in 1771, when Davide Perez was still alive and active as a composition teacher. However, it was João de Sousa Carvalho, not Perez, who became his and probably Souza Queiroz's instructor. Both seem to have come to Rio at the same time, both were musical directors of the same theatre, and both had works staged there in important dates. Marcos Portugal died in 1830, and the last notice about Souza Queiroz appeared in 1829.

Although the score of *Zaira* bears no date, it was copied in 1815 or earlier, as Souza Queiroz thought of staging it at the birthday of Queen Dona Maria I, on December 17. Since Dona Maria died in early 1816, the staging of *Zaira* would have taken place in some 17th of December between 1809 and 1815. No record of the staging of *Zaira* has been found so far, though there are mentions of other productions celebrating Dona Maria's birthday:

December 17, 1811: *L'Oro non compra amore*, by Marcos Portugal (comic opera, Lisbon, 1801)

December 17, 1812: *Artaserse*, by Marcos Portugal (*opera seria*, Lisbon, 1806)

December 17, 1814: *Axur*, by Antonio Salieri (*opera seria*, Vienna, 1789)

If *Zaira* was ever staged, we still have the years 1809, 1810, 1813 and 1815 to think of. Besides, there still is a possibility that Souza Queiroz composed the opera for the years 1811, 1812 or 1814 and Marcos Portugal prevented its staging in favor of another production, maybe one of his own. Finally, it is unlikely that *Zaira* would have been performed after Dona Maria's death. *Zaira* would have sounded so old-fashioned even in the early 1810s that it is hard to believe that it could have pleased a later audience familiar with Mayr, Paër, Pucitta, and Rossini.¹³

What would be the likely places for the staging of *Zaira*? In September 25, 1810, Souza Queiroz received from Dom João VI an annual stipend of 240\$000 to “prepare the musical compositions as determined by [Dom João's] order” [fazer as composições de musica que lhe forem por ordem [de Dom João] determinadas].¹⁴ If the commission of *Zaira* followed that designation, Souza Queiroz probably thought of staging it at the Manuel Luiz's Teatro Régio, or Royal Theatre.

If *Zaira* was staged after 1813, the most likely place would have been the new and much larger Real Teatro São João. For reasons still unknown Souza Queiroz, not the internationally acclaimed Marcos Portugal, composed the music for its opening October 12, 1813. The allegorical drama *O Juramento dos Numes*, preceded by an orchestral overture and interspersed with arias and ballets, all composed and directed by Souza Queiroz, received a positive review in the *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro*.

Souza Queiroz still composed at least two *entremeses*: *Os Doidos Fingidos por Amor* and the *Entremez da Marujada*. As it was usual in many theatrical *entremeses*, and following early models of transgression in musical theatre, the latter included a *lundum*, for the dislike of foreign travelers who found tremendously obscene the choreography of this African-Brazilian dance.

Souza Queiroz had a long and active life, for in 1829 he was still musical director of the same theatre, now called São Pedro de Alcântara, in honor of Brazil's first independent ruler.

Zaira's orchestral score and instrumental parts, written by at least three copyists, helps us understand something about the dynamics of opera production, types of voices then available in Rio, and processes of composition and revision of the scores, generated by local or last-minute needs. Some violin parts show fingering marks, and some parts appear in two or three different copies by different hands. If that suggests a performance—or at least that a rehearsal was being planned—all parts are in an amazingly good shape, showing little or no sign of use. Several cuts in the orchestral score and in the instrumental parts were probably due to the huge size of the arias—even without the simple recitatives, a performance of *Zaira* in July 2003 took almost three hours.

Souza Queiroz used a type of through-composed aria structure commonly found in the Neapolitan-influenced Portuguese school, mostly in three sections, either in progressive tempo or two fast tempo sections framing a cantabile middle section. If that model seems to anticipate the *scena drammatica*, it actually hinders the dramatic continuity. During the

¹³ In 1811, an opera named *Zaira* was staged at Vila Rica's small opera house, but no record of authorship was found so far.

¹⁴ Cleofe Person de Mattos, *José Maurício Nunes Garcia: Biografia* (Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca Nacional, 1997), 245 n167.

almost ten minutes of a typical aria, the singer delivers only eight to twelve lines, and very little or no action happens.

Local circumstances or tastes might have played a role in the choice of an all-tenor setting for the three main male roles (the fourth one is an unusually high-register baritone): changings in vocal tessitura—from bass to tenor—were among the most common ways in which Jommelli operas were adapted for the Lisbon court decades earlier. The profusion of duets, ensembles and choral numbers in *Zaira* can be explained by the Portuguese taste too, which costed Jommelli a lot of work, as he complained in 1769.¹⁵ Moreover, rather than showing a supposed link with sacred music, they seem to reveal some influence of French *tragédie* and Italian *comic opera*. Likewise, in Spain Metastasian *libretti* were adapted to feature ensembles, choral numbers and even comic characters, influenced by the local form of comic opera, the *zarzuela*.¹⁶

As one would expect in an opera with an Oriental theme, there is some stereotyped exoticism, conveyed by some standards of the European so-called “Turkish music”: I-V alternating harmonies or harmonic stasis, and repetition of very simple rhythmic patterns. Other typical features of this style—chromaticism, use of piccolo and percussion, for example—are not found in *Zaira*’s score.

The libretto source—Voltaire’s *Zaïre*, of 1732—remained popular still in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The plot takes place in a Jerusalem serail during the crusades and became the inspiration for several plays and “Turkish” operas, especially during the second half of the eighteenth century. Souza Queiroz used the same libretto revised by Giuseppe Caravita for Marcos Portugal’s productions of 1802 and 1804, in Lisbon’s São Carlos theatre. While Souza Queiroz himself realized that *Zaira* was hardly the best option to celebrate the Queen’s birthday, her personal preference or even the presence in Rio of Persian envoys and the curiosity it stirred up in the population could have inspired the choice. Moreover, being *Zaira* an opera about exile and rescue, it is not hard to find a link with the Portuguese court’s exile.

There is a strong message about paternal law and loyalty to the family and the religion in the libretto—indeed, its alternative title, *Il trionfo della religione*, hints at a moralistic Christian plot. Voltaire’s main point—the danger of religious intolerance—is totally lost in these adaptations, replaced by a biased vision of the evil or weak-minded Muslim. It is interesting to see how these literary adaptations and dramatic works helped perpetuating a stereotype of the jealous, violent Arab man that still persists.¹⁷

The increasing number of “Turkish” operas staged in Rio de Janeiro, as well as the popularity of “Turkish marches” for piano and for wind bands after the arrival of the Portuguese court prompts some thought about exoticism in peripheral countries and their colonies.

The strong Arab presence in the Iberian Peninsula, still visible after the *reconquista*—in the art, architecture, folk music, and language—besides the large population of Black slaves in Lisbon and Seville has conveyed a non-Western feel to Spain and Portugal from the sixteenth century on. Similarly, the Iberian colonies in Latin America experienced a kind of identity search around the time of their independences. They have

¹⁵ Marita McClymonds, *Niccolò Jommelli: The last years, 1769-1774* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 127-50, 600-1.

¹⁶ José-Máximo Leza, “Metastasio on the Spanish stage”, *Early Music* xxvi/4 (November 1998), 623-31.

¹⁷ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 118-9.

that striking Native and African presence, while ruled by an elite that still wanted to emulate their colonizers and ancestors, in other words to look Western—even if their concept of Western was seen by the people north of the Pyrenees as really exotic. To a large extent, Latin American culture is born out of that conflict.

Whose exoticism is it anyway? The staging of Oriental plots in Brazilian theatres would help the local elite to forget what they saw in their own streets—the space of Blacks and mestizos—and to identify themselves with the European culture by choosing a common other. However, that did not work quite well, because actors on stage were usually Blacks, even when performing European roles.

Besides, Brazilian scenographers used to display a peculiar, utterly creative view of unknown cultures; today we would call it carnivalesque, if not *brega*. Arago's report of a staging of *Zaira* at the São Joao theatre (after 1817) depicts Orosmane's costume as an unbelievable collage of styles:¹⁸

Orosmane est coiffé d'une toque surmontée de vingt cinq ou trente plumes de diverses couleurs, et deux énormes chaînes de montre promenant jusqu'à micuisse de monstrueuses breloques avec un cliquetis pareil à celui du trousseau de clefs d'une tourière en inspection. De gigantesques bracelets ornent ses bras nerveux, et de charmants et coquets favoris en virgule parent ses tempes et viennent caresser les deux coins de sa bouche. La pièce d'étoffe qui pèse sur ses épaules n'est ni un manteau, ni un casaque, ni un houppelande, ni un carrick; mais elle tient des quatre espèces de vêtements à la fois et ne peut se décrire dans aucune langue. C'est à effrayer le pinceau le plus oseur du caricaturiste.

Blacks on stage, especially in mixed castings, also disgusted some French travelers. Whereas the famous Italian soprano Augusta Candiani played Norma at the São Pedro de Alcântara theatre in 1844, the French Lavollè was dismayed by the sight of her sons, two Black kids.¹⁹ For the local audience—all-white and gender separated—that was nothing strange. After all, the performing and visual arts in Brazil had been always dominated by Blacks. Besides there was that element of transgression in theatre, so visible when *entremeses* were performed, always closing with the provocative *lundum*.

In Colonial Brazil opera is part of that spectacle of power, of political and social representation, borrowing and adapting European forms, views and uses. Symbols and allegories are at play here—as they are in the numerous feasts and processions throughout the year. Social hierarchies are replicated in the audience and stylized or even inverted on stage. So disgusting that it was to northern European observers, that very mixture of the allegorical, the exaggerated, the obscene, the anachronistic, was at the core of the nascent Brazilian *ethos*.

¹⁸ Jacques Arago, *op. cit.*, 129.

¹⁹ Alfredo de Taunay, *Rio de Janeiro de antanho* (São Paulo: Editora Nacional, 1972), 276-7. Quoted by Mammì, *op. cit.*, 49.