

# The influences of European Melodrama in Brazilian Concert Music with Recited Text

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**Abstract.** The melodrama is an art form defined by the joining of music with a recited text. In European music history, the genre first became prominent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and, since then, many generations of composers and librettist contributed with melodramatic works. Over time, the methods employed for combining music with declamation became more complex and diverse, and, with that, the ways the composers write for narrator or reciter in the music score became more detailed, with more instructions on rhythm and intonation, for example. In Brazilian music history, however, the practice of combining music with a recited text in a composition is more recent, with all the examples with such practice found during the research for this publication dating from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Nevertheless, as detailed in this article, those more recent Brazilian compositions have similarities with the European melodramas from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least when it comes to the methods employed by the composers for writing music combined with a recited text, which provides a first glimpse of the influences of the melodrama in Brazilian concert music and to what extent the melodramatic characteristics are indeed present in it.

**Keywords.** Music, Classical music, Melodrama, Brazilian music.

## 1. Introduction

The Melodrama, described as “pieces for narrator and piano or narrator and various instrumental combinations” [1] is a musical genre with a well established tradition within the European music history, the first examples dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s dramatic work *Pygmalion* (1762) with music by Horace Coignet [2] [3]. Since then, the idea of composing a dramatic piece combining music with the recited text was explored by many renowned composers and the ways that these combinations were done varied through the European music history. The goal of this publication is to look at different Brazilian compositions with a recited text and to analyse the different methods employed by the composers for incorporating this element in their musical work, as to begin to understand the presence of Melodramatic characteristics in Brazilian music, comparing the musical examples gathered with European melodramas.

## 2. Methodology

The first step taken for this research was to search

for Brazilian pieces with narrator. That was achieved by looking into Brazilian composers’ catalogues, the research libraries from University of São Paulo and University of Campinas and the archives from *Academia Brasileira de Música* and the *Musica Brasiliis* Institute. From those sources it was possible to gather so far the music examples presented in the next section of this publication, all of them dating since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, for each piece, an analysis of the methods employed by the composers for writing music with a recited text was made, being the main points of this analysis the presence or absence of a specific part for the narrator in the music score and how are the instructions on rhythm, dynamics and intonation for reciting the text given, when those are given by the composer.

At last, with this information, it was discussed how the different methods employed by these Brazilian composers relate to the methods employed by the European melodrama composers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 3. Musical examples

Here follows a brief description of the Brazilian musical examples gathered and how each composer

deals with combining the recited text with music.

### 3.1 Brasília, Sinfonia da Alvorada (1959)

*Brasília, Sinfonia da Alvorada* is a piece for orchestra, choir and narrator composed by Tom Jobim with text written by Vinicius de Moraes. It was ordered by the 21st president of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek to celebrate the construction of Brasília, the new capital city for Brazil, inaugurated in 1960 and replacing Rio de Janeiro [4].

This piece is described as a tone poem and the text, which is not written in the score (with an exception for the last movement, where the text is written to be sung by a choir), is a program accompanying each of the five movements of the music, talking about the landscape where the city was built, the people who first explored the central portion of Brazil, the people who came to work on the construction, the construction and the city itself.

In the score there is no mention to the text or any instruction on how to perform the music with the narrator at all, thus it is somewhat common the music to be performed without the text, and there is also no indication of intonation or rhythm for reciting phrases and words, the only instruction for the narration given is on the text for the third movement, which is about the workers that came to the construction from all different regions of Brazil. In this section of the text, there is a part where the author lists many different Brazilian cities from where the workers came, and for this part two narrators must recite the cities' names alternately and Moraes indicates that with "*Dois locutores alternados*" ("two alternate reciters" in English; all translations from Portuguese were made by us).

Nevertheless, in the first recording of the piece (Columbia Records, 1961) we have a practical example on how the piece can be performed with the recited text, and it is worth mentioning that this recording was conducted by Jobim himself and narrated by Moraes, so the performance's choices were made by the creators of the piece. In this first recording the text is recited over specific sections of the music that are repeated while the narrator speaks, although those repetitions are not written in the score.

### 3.2 Lettre de Jérusalem (1973)

*Lettre de Jérusalem* is a piece for soprano, narrator, piano and three percussionists composed by Almeida Prado, its text in French and Latin comes from the Bible and Catholic Hymns.

In this piece there is a clear distinction between the recited text in French and the sung text in Latin. The sung text is for a soprano who represents in stage the figure of the Virgin Mary, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene in each of the three movements accordingly and the recited text is a narration, not a character.

Almeida Prado doesn't write the recited text using

rhythmic figures or notes at all, there is no part for the narrator, its is written over the score when it is supposed to be recited with no indication on intonation, but he does gives some instructions regarding the synchronization of these text with the music, for instance, there are passages where he specifies that a specific note should be sustained (figure 1) or a specific measure should be repeated while the text is recited or he indicates that the text should be recited over a pause with fermata. Nevertheless, there are also sections where the text is simply written over a musical passage without indications like the ones previously described, in those cases the text must be recited over the music, which just follows the score normally.



Fig. 1 - Almeida Prado's *Lettre de Jérusalem*, first measure of the third movement. (All the figures in this publication comes from material in public domain or it was used with permission from the composers or its descendants)

### 3.3 Auto de Todo Mundo e Ninguém (1981)

*Auto de Todo Mundo e Ninguém* is a piece for narrator, tenor, choir, timpani, rattle and cymbals composed by Camargo Guarnieri in 1981, with text from Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem *Todo Mundo e Ninguém* (1977), which is an homage to the play *Auto da Lusitânia* (1531) by the Portuguese playwright Gil Vicente, using a more usual vocabulary to present days. There are also some changes in the text made by the composer himself.

Vicente's work is considered part of the renaissance humanism literature movement and has a characteristic satirical social criticism which is also present in the passage used by Drummond de Andrade in his poem and Guarnieri in his music.

In the piece by Guarnieri there are three characters: the *Belzebu* ("Beelzebub" in English), who is played by a Basso Profondo narrator, *Todo Mundo* ("Everybody"), played by the choir, and *Ninguém* ("Nobody"), played by the tenor singer.

The narrator part is entirely recited, and the composer uses a staff for it but without notes, there are only rhythmic figures, determining the rhythm for each syllable recited (figure 2). For the tenor and the choir there is actually sung text, but in some small sections he indicates a text to be recited for them as well, writing in the same way he did for the narrator.

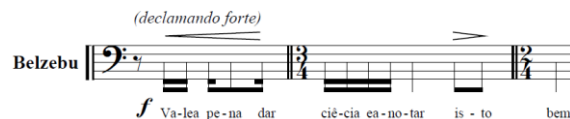


Fig. 2 - Camargo Guarnieri's *Auto de Todo Mundo e Ninguém*, measures 34-36, narrator part.

### 3.4 Meninos Carvoeiros (2001/2013)

*Meninos Carvoeiros* is a piece for orchestra, bass clarinet soloist and narrator composed by Tadeu Taffarello in 2001 but adapted and re-orchestrated in 2013, when it was premiered. The text used by the composer is the poem *Meninos Carvoeiros* (1921) written by the Brazilian modernist poet Manuel Bandeira. The text is about the children who works in harsh conditions in charcoal piles and transporting charcoal, it is a short and sad poem which depicts subjects such as child labour and struggle and poverty during childhood and it sets a contrast between the harsh conditions those boys live through and their ingenuity as children, with verses describing them playing and dancing while working.

Taffarello writes the text on the score without using notes, he writes a part for the narrator using a one-line rhythmic staff, but he doesn't specify the rhythm for each syllable, he writes portions of the verses over each rhythmic figure as to indicate only where the narrator should start and finish reciting a verse while not limiting the exact pronunciation of the syllables (figure 3). Although he doesn't give precise instruction on intonation, he does write dynamics for the narrator and he is careful when dividing each text section, making sure not to affect the correct prosody of the poem. For instance, he always makes sure that the stressed syllables of a word fall at the beginning of the compass with the downbeat.

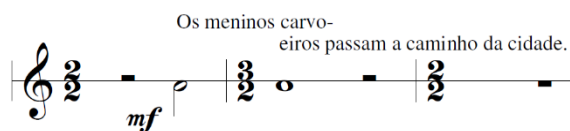


Fig. 3 – Tadeu Taffarello's *Meninos Carvoeiros*, measures 27-29, narrator part.

### 3.5 Rapsódia Pássaros de Papel (2022)

*Rapsódia Pássaros de Papel* is a piece composed for, as it stands in the music score cover, instrumental ensemble, 2 sopranos and choir by Jônatas Manzolli in 2022. The piece is a rhapsody based on Manzolli's opera *Pássaros de Papel* (2018) with text from Mario de Andrade's modernist novel *Macunaíma* (1928) and text written by Manzolli himself based on the novel.

Although the piece doesn't have a part literally designated for a narrator, one of the sopranos' part is not supposed to be sung in a traditional sense, but "recited with a singing voice", which Manzolli describes as *Sprechgesang*. However, the way he employs this technique differs from the way Arnold Schoenberg did, writing notes with an "x" on the stems (figure 4). Manzolli doesn't write a traditional five-line staff with a treble clef for this soprano, he writes a three-line staff without a clef and states at the beginning of the score that the three lines should indicate only contrast between a high, medium and low intonation, not any notes (figure 5). As for the rhythm for pronouncing the words, there are sections where the composer just writes long

rhythmic figures and a small portion of the text or even a single word to be recited while the figure lasts, similar to Taffarello's writing, as well as sections where the rhythmic for each syllable is specified (figure 6).



Fig. 4 – Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, Nacht, measure 4-5, reciter part.

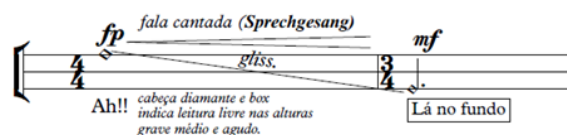


Fig. 5 – Jônatas Manzolli's *Rapsódia Pássaros de Papel*, first two measures, part for soprano using *Sprechgesang*.

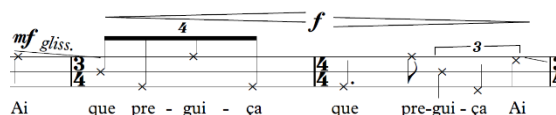


Fig. 6 – Jônatas Manzolli's *Rapsódia Pássaros de Papel*, measures 46-48, part for soprano using *Sprechgesang*.

## 4. Relations with the European Melodrama

Looking at the different ways Brazilian composers wrote for the narrator at the examples presented before, one can notice the relations with the European melodrama.

In Brazil, the term melodrama is usually employed with other various definitions, often as a synonym for opera or any form of drama accompanied by music. The only reference found during this research of a Brazilian writer mentioning this term with the meaning of music with a recited text was on a note from the book *Pequena História da Música* by Mário de Andrade, who was one of the main figures of Brazilian modernism: "Com a universalização da palavra 'ópera', tempo houve em que 'melodrama' passou a designar o gênero bastante espúrio de poesias declamadas com acompanhamento de orquestra. Rousseau, Benda, Marschner, Beethoven o tentaram." ("With the universalization of the word 'opera', there was a time when 'melodrama' designated the very spurious genre of recited poetry with orchestral accompaniment. Rousseau, Benda, Marschner, Beethoven have tried it.") [5].

This citation is an evidence that, although Brazilians authors may recognize this definition of Melodrama, the term is not usually employed by them with this denotation and Andrade even shows a disregard for the idea of melodrama as a still relevant genre by the time he wrote his book when using the word "spurious" to characterize it. But, despite of that, it is safe to say at the very least that a defining characteristic of the melodrama, according to the



definition by Mauro and Lucy [1], is present in the examples gathered, the narrator, and the methods used by Brazilian composers for writing music with narrator are comparable to the ones used by European melodrama composers.

In the early European melodramas from the 18th century, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1762) or Jiří Antonín Benda's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1775), the composers did not write a narrator part in the music score. Benda, as an example, wrote the text for each character between music measures (figure 7). Furthermore, in these first examples of melodrama the text was not supposed to be recited during the music, the text and music almost always alternate as there was the idea that, as soon as the play begins, the music should be subordinated to the text and not interrupt it at all and this is mentioned by Johann Christian Brandes himself, who was the librettist of Benda's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. [3]



Fig. 7 - Jiří Antonín Benda's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, measures 20-22.

The absence of a proper narrator part is common to both Jobim's *Brasília, Sinfonia da Alvorada* as well as to Almeida Prado's *Lettre de Jérusalem*. As discussed previously, Jobim gives no indication in the score at all on when or how the text should be recited, but in the first recording the text is actually recited over specific sections of the music that are repeated while the narrator speaks or pauses between movements.

In Almeida Prado's piece, however, the narrator's text is written on the score, although without a part for it, and in the measure 93 of the second movement, the composer specifies that the text should be recited over a pause with fermata, this happens again in the measures 19 and 20 of the third movement (figure 8) creating an alternation between the music and the recited text similar to the early European melodramas. Of course this does not mean that Jobim and Almeida Prado composed for narrator in the same style that Benda did, it is important to mention that both of these compositions have sung text as well, the already mentioned choir in the last movement of *Brasília, Sinfonia da Alvorada* and the soprano part during the whole *Lettre de Jérusalem*, and even in Almeida Prado's composition, which has a more similar style in the way the composer writes for narrator in the specific sections mentioned in this

paragraph, there are also moments where the narrator speaks while the music is playing.

Fig. 8 - Almeida Prado's *Lettre de Jérusalem*, measures 19 and 20, third movement.

This is the case in the end of the first movement, where Almeida Prado writes the narrator's phrase over a music material that should be repeated while it lasts, and the way he indicates that on the score is writing a repetition bar for a measure with an arrow that becomes a dotted line with a fermata and the text to be recited under it (figure 9). The idea of repeating some specific measures is present as well in the European melodramas, but not the ones from the 18th century. The text being recited while the music is playing was unusual by that time, but in the 19th century especially it became more common. That is the case in the melodramas from many renowned composers such as Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, Zdeněk Fibich and Richard Strauss and, with that, came the challenge of synchronizing the recited text with music. One of the various ways composers dealt with that challenge was to write measures to be repeated as many times as needed while the narrator speaks. This is the case, for example, in Franz Liszt's *Lenore* in which he gives this exact instruction writing repetition bars over music measures or small sections (figure 10), comparable with the repeating measure from Almeida Prado's *Lettre de Jérusalem*.

Fig. 9 - Almeida Prado's *Lettre de Jérusalem*, measure 114, first movement.

Fig. 10 – Franz Liszt’s *Lenore*, measures 11-14.

Most of the times however the text was simply written over the score and it should be recited while the measures it is written over are played, this is well observed in melodramas from Zdeněk Fibich, for example (figure 11), although he uses other writing techniques as well, specifying rhythm for the narrator many times.

### I. Výstup.

OPONA. PELOPS, (v obleku cestovním, po boku má krátký meč za ním)  
 VORHANG. PELOPS, (tritt auf in Reisekleidern, ein kurzes Schwert an der Seite.)

Fig. 11 – Zdeněk Fibich’s *Námluvy Pelopovy*, Act I, *Výstup*, first three measures.

It was only in the late 19th century that it became more common for the composers to specify the rhythm and intonation for the recited text. One of the most important examples from this period is the Engelbert Humperdinck’s melodrama (the composer later wrote an opera version of the piece) *Königskinder* (1897), in which the narrator has a proper part in the score with determined rhythmic for each syllable, what Humperdinck called a “gebundenes Melodrama” (“bound melodrama” in English), and specified inflection, pitch and accentuation writing notes on a staff, but with a “x” head, indicating that it is not supposed to be literally sung, the composer asks for a combination of the singing and reciting technique, which he called *Sprechnoten* (figure 12). This would be an important step towards the development of the *Sprechgesang* technique in the 20th century by Arnold Schoenberg. [3] (figure 4).

Fig. 12 – Section from the melodrama *Königskinder*. Example of the *Sprechnoten* technique employed by Humperdinck.

Guarnieri’s *Auto de Todo Mundo e Ninguém* is an example of the *gebundenes Melodrama* writing, since there is a part for the narrator with a specified rhythm for each syllable (figure 2). The same can be said about Manzoli’s *Rapsódia Pássaros de Papel*, which has some sections where the rhythmic for each syllable is also specified and, on top of that, has indication on contrast of intonation using the *Sprechgesang* technique on a three-line staff (figure 6).

There were also subtler ways in which European composers specified some kind of rhythmic for the narrator. In Max von Schillings’ *Das Hexenlied* (1902), for example, the text was simply written over the score, but in some specific sections with rhythmic figures over it as well, sometimes to indicate where to start reciting the text with a pause before it, for example, but other times specifying the rhythm for each syllable as a *gebundenes Melodrama* (figure 13). It is possible to trace a parallel here between the first case and Taffarello’s *Meninos Carvoeiros*, in which the narrator has a part with a rhythmic staff, but it is also not a *gebundenes Melodrama*, the rhythmic figures are not for each syllable, but for small sections of each verse, and the purpose of them is only to indicate where the narrator should start and end reciting each portion of the text (figure 3).

Fig. 13 – Max von Schillings’ *Das Hexenlied*, measures 80-83.

## 5. Conclusion

The methods employed by the European composers from the 18th to the 20th century for joining the recited text with music when writing melodramas

have many similarities with the methods employed by Brazilian composers for writing music with narrator, and this extends from the earliest melodramas examples, in which the music alternates with the recited text, to modernist works with atonal music material and recited text combining declamation and singing techniques. These relations found are an important step towards understanding the influences of the European melodrama in Brazilian concert music and to what extent the melodramatic characteristics are indeed existing in it. To properly answer this question however it will be crucial to look at other topics as well which constitutes other research opportunities that we hope to further address, especially the relations between the parallel-sounding music and recited text which developed in European music in the 19th century and became an intrinsic value of the melodrama.

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