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## **Musical meaning in the piano piece The Little Cloth Bird by Heitor Villa-Lobos: interpreting musical gestures in search of characteristic traits**

Prof. MSc. Walter Nery Filho

Doutorando em Música pela Universidade de São Paulo - USP - Brasil

Membro do PAMVILLA (Perspectivas Analíticas para a Música de Villa-Lobos)

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/8153672412320259>

E-mail: [waltinhonery@gmail.com](mailto:waltinhonery@gmail.com)

**Resumo:** Este artigo propõe uma investigação do fenômeno que ocorre no compasso final da peça para piano *O Passarinho de Pano* de Heitor Villa-Lobos. A peça integra o ciclo *A Prole do Bebê Nº. 2* de 1926. Por não se encontrar em afinidade com as demais estruturas harmônicas da peça, o trecho em questão habilita uma análise sobre o ponto de vista da Teoria dos Conjuntos seguida de uma interpretação que se alinha com uma possível intencionalidade evidenciada pelo título da obra e refocilada por marcações de dinâmica e agógica.

**Palavras-chave:** Villa-Lobos, *A Prole do Bebê Nº. 2*, Teoria dos Conjuntos, Significado Musical.

## Introduction

Villa-Lobos was undoubtedly the most prominent Brazilian composer of all times. His significant musical production exceeds the amount of one thousand compositions, as cataloged by the museum that bears his name. Born in 1887 in Rio de Janeiro, lived for 72 years until his death in 1959. More than seventy books have been released about the composer, most part of them with a laudatory content. In a nationalistic sense, a distorted image of the composer was created to serve a musicology that wanted to build a character that would provide a collective image of the Brazilian nation. In spite of this scenery, the fact is that it was perfectly suited to the composer's ambitions with regard to its national and international projection.

The three last decades seem to have been decisive in the sense of uncovering the real processes involved in his compositions. Brazilian researches as Jamary Oliveira, Maria Lúcia Paschoal, Rodolfo Coelho de Souza and Paulo de Tarso Salles, just to name a few, have investigated and tried to find some specific traces and constancies that could bring to light the techniques and procedures related to the Villa-Lobos's compositional skills. At this point is also very important to mention the work of Gerard Béhague *Heitor Villa-Lobos: The Search for Brazil's Musical Soul* from 1994 and the well known Professor Eero Tarasti's book *Heitor Villa-Lobos: the life and works, 1887 – 1959* that spans the whole composer repertoire analysis and considerations as well as historical matters under which his music has been created.

In my master's degree course I dealt with the analysis of the compositional processes involved in the *Baby's Family* second series composed between 1921 and 1926. Three out of nine pieces were covered at that time. Now for the PhD I keep working on the rest on this repertoire that is one of the most representative piano works from his modernist phase. As well documented, this period represents the rupture of the composer with the European musical tradition prevailing in Brasil as well as with his mentors at the National Institute of Music in Rio de Janeiro. Those compositions, among other important ones enabled the feat of international recognition in the first half of the twentieth century, aligning himself with such composers as Stravinsky, Bartók and Varèse.

During this research I have had the opportunity to get in touch with writings on Peircean semiotics, semiotics applied to music as well as interpretation and meaning in music. Some authors have shown to be of remarkable importance in this direction and it is worth mentioning the names of Kofi Agawu, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle and Eero Tarasti among others. Through their thoughts these authors enabled me the possibility of trying to employ these ideas in this current work and to envision new perspectives regarding a future engagement with different works of Villa-Lobos.

## **1. Theoretical Approaches**

### **1.1 The Set Theory**

One of the most important segments of musical signification has its source in the relationships between musical figurations forged within the culture, built through complex historical processes and cultural - the so-called topics - and the issues related to musical syntax. In the classical sense, the idea of syntax has a direct link to the traditional harmony functions. In the case of *Baby's Family* second series, this relationship is affected because all pieces have a post-tonal character, so devoid of classic harmonic structures. Then in the present work, the Set Theory is presented as a quite appropriate alternative for the investigation of the non-conventional harmonic structures and their relationships.

### **1.2 The Search for Characteristic Traits in the Music of Villa-Lobos**

How already well observed the universe of old traditional songs and serenades are very present in the composer's work. Acacio Piedade, a researcher on Brazilian and Villa-Lobos topics, named them as "golden era" topics. Piedade alleges this is a way of rescuing and incorporate into his compositions the authentic brazilian music through specific figurations. According to Piedade:

Topics are rhetorical figures in music and understand them involves to take music as discourse and to assume the communicative interest of the composer. Certain figurations are employed in the musical narrative in order to be understood, otherwise there is a communication failure that is equivalent to lack of expression (PIEDADE: 2009: 127).

The acoustic guitar piece called *Chôro No. 1* shows some examples of this kind of procedure:

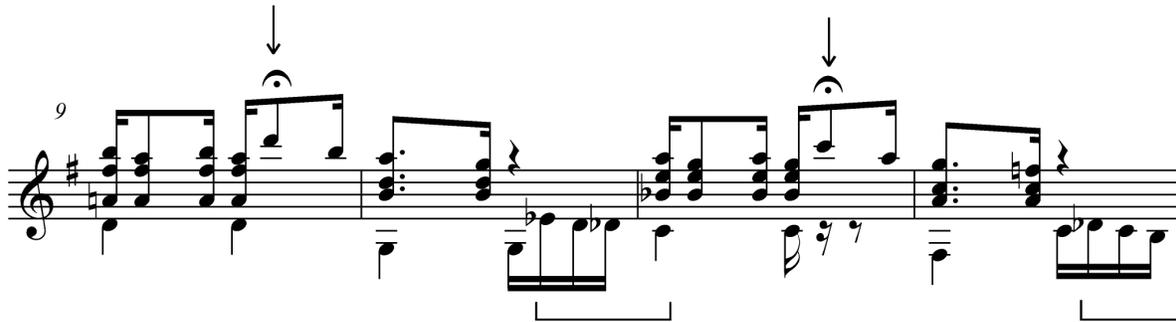


Figure 1. *Chôro No. 1*, mm. 9 – 12 (Source: Piedade: 2009: 128).

Still in consonance with Piedade's opinion, the retention caused by *fermatas* at measures 9 and 11 are emulations of lyrical *rubato* singing used in late XIX century Rio de Janeiro's serenades. The descending bass lines at measures 10 and 12 are also very common in this music style and serve as connectors between thematic segments. Rodolfo Coelho de Souza assesses that one way found by Villa-Lobos in solving structural problems was the alternation and mixture of topics, a feature imported from the classical style (SOUZA: 2010: 157). The following (fig. 2) is an example of this mixture. The melody is typical from the Brazilian northeast, forming a northeast topic while in bars 10 and 11 we have the descending bass line featuring the "golden era" topic.

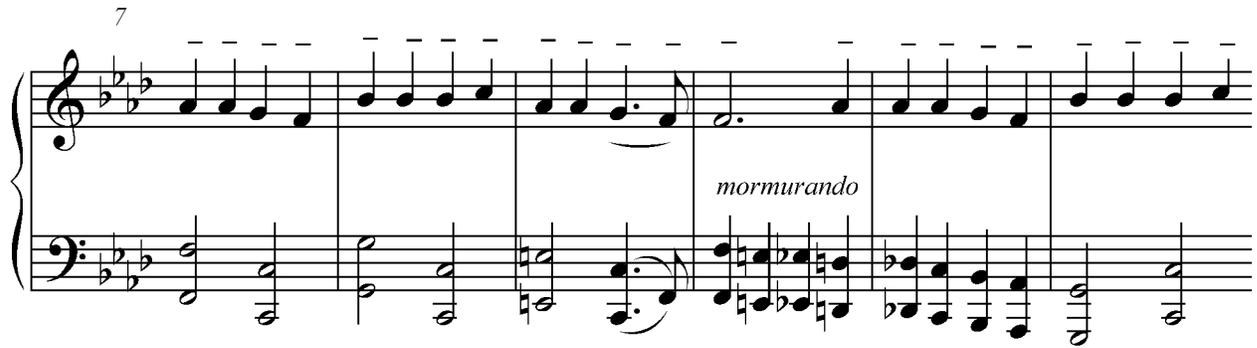


Figure 2. *Bachianas No. 4, Ária*, mm. 7 - 12 (Source: Piedade: 2009: 128).

Souza states that the path trodden by Villa-Lobos was the hybridization of classical principles of organization with the idiomatic syntax of post-tonal music, which has become a stylistic trait of the composer that made him different from his contemporaries Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky.

## 2. Interpreting Musical Gestures in *The Little Cloth Bird (O Passarinho de Pano)*

### 2.1 Introductory Arguments

This is the seventh in a total of nine pieces from the collection *The Baby's Family No. 2*. His suspensive initial character is imposed by the *tremolo* C# - D#, a major second interval that is established since the beginning as an ostinato base. The following figure represents an intervallic overview (in semitones units) from the first measures that is responsible for the sound impression of almost the whole piece.

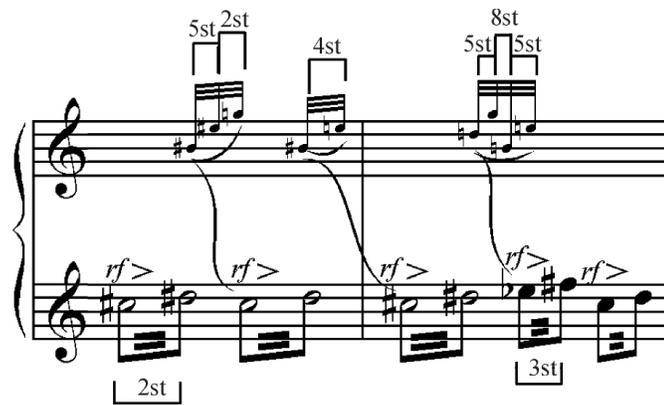


Figure 3. Intervallic network formed in the the introduction of *The Little Cloth Bird* (mm. 2 –3).

Villa-Lobos, in his dialogue with the past, emulated the singing of birds in a close way to the the figuration used in *Spring* from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*:

The image shows a musical score for measures 61-65 of Vivaldi's Spring from The Four Seasons. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Violin Partita (VI. pr.), Violin I (I), Violin II (VI. II), and Bassoon/Cello (B.c.). The Violin Partita part starts with a measure number '61' and a 'canoro incanto' marking with a wavy line above the staff. The Violin I and II parts have 'CANTO D'UCELLI Solo' markings. The Bassoon/Cello part has a whole note chord. The second system continues the Violin I, II, and B.c. parts, with the Violin I and II parts featuring trills ('tr') and rapid sixteenth-note passages.

Figure 4. *Spring* from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (mm. 61 – 65).

Also uses the concept of repetition and reiteration as a way to emulate the birds singing (fig. 5). This idea arises since the first bars of *The Little Cloth Bird* and has its deployments throughout the music. In the case below we have a sistematic repetition of the A5 note.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We will take the nomenclature of the Acoustic Society of America as reference, which considers the middle C of the piano as C4, whose frequency is approximately 261.6 Hz.



Figure 5. *The Little Cloth Bird* first measures (mm. 6 – 8).

The repetition along with tremolos is not an exclusive Villa-Lobos gimmick in the simulation of the birdsong and can be easily found in musical literature. The following example deals with this idea in Beethoven's No. 6 Symphony, the *Pastoral*.

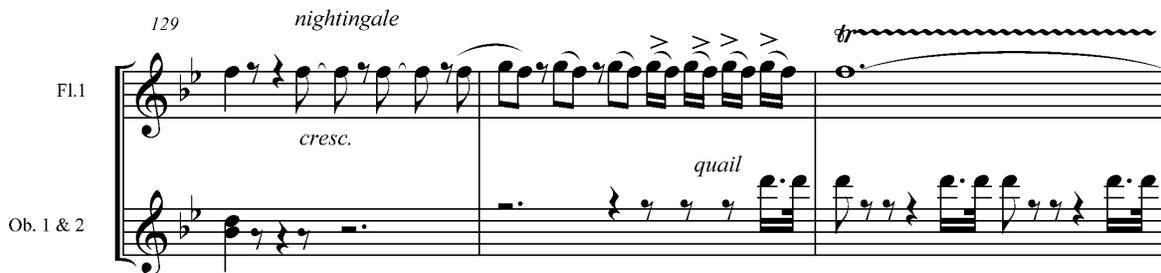


Figure 6. Beethoven, Symphony No. 6, op. 68, 2nd movement flutes 1 and oboes parts (mm. 129 – 131).

## 2.2 A Possible Interpretation for The Little Cloth Bird

The last measure of the work provides an alternative proposal for the understanding of the Villa-Lobos' vision on the world of passerines where he interposes two apparently antagonistic moments. For a better understanding, we have included a couple of measures earlier to have an outlook of the moment before this point.

8<sup>va</sup>

88

*p*

3

3

3

*dim.*

*e*

*allarg.*

*poco*

*a*

*poco*

6

6

8<sup>va</sup>

90

3

*pp*

*f*

*animato e rall.*

*sec dim.*

*pp*

sans pedal

Figure 7. *The Little Cloth Bird* last measures (mm. 88 – 91).

The first structure that appears at bar 91 generates a sensation of repose and is actually a confluence of sounds that were being rarefied rhythmically from the bar 88. This structure was build up with the notes D#, E, B, A and D. However, the upward gesture is formed by harmonic structures that do not have a direct relationship with this “chord-repose” or with any other structures that were present throughout the work. A more accurate observation on these structures can be made through the Set Theory, which allows us to establish a mean of comparison between them.

5-14 [9,11,2,3,4]

5-13 [3,5,6,7,11]

5-10 [1,2,4,5,7]

5-3 [10,11,0,2,3]

5-32 [5,6,9,11,2]

91

*pp*

*f*

*pp*

*animato e rall.*

*sec dim.*

*sans pedal*

Figure 8. Harmonic organization at the end of *The Little Cloth Bird* (mm. 91).

These five-note structures form five different sets with a considerable diversity of pitch classes that would permit only a weak relationship between them. A more precise way to compare these structures is by considering their interval vector (FORTE: 1977: 13). The interval vector is a set of six interval classes which expresses all the intervallic relationships between the set components.

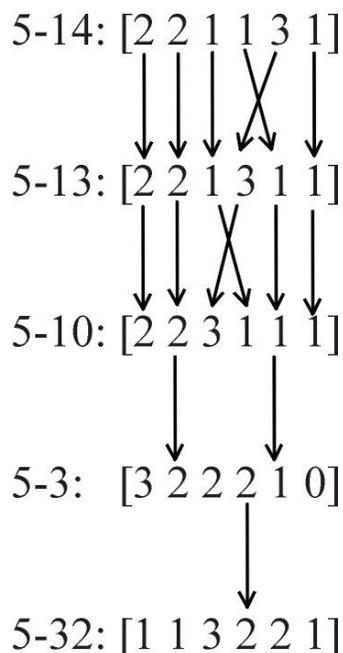


Figure 9. Gradual shift away of intervallic content between the last sets of the last measure (mm. 91).

## Conclusion

If we take the set 5-14 as a reference, we can establish a gradual shift away line in terms of intervallic content as the sets move away toward the end of the music. Observe the presence of a maximum similarity with interchange of entries between the 5-14 and 5-13 sets and between the 5-13 and 5-10 sets (FORTE: 1973: 48) that fades towards the latter. It is interesting to see how Villa-Lobos handles dynamic issues in order to simulate an effect with three-dimensional aspects. This is provided by the conjunction of three factors: directionality of the ascending gesture within a range of dynamics from *pp* to *f* in a very short time, coupled with the indication *rallentando*. An overview leads to an interpretation that suggests two things: first the idea of repose (landing), reinforced by the *fermata* that supports the structure 5-14 and a subsequent fading (taking off), stimulated by the condition of the later structures.

**Abstract:** this article aims to investigate the phenomenon that occurs in the last measure of the piano piece *The Little Cloth Bird* by Heitor Villa-Lobos. This piece is part of the cycle *Baby's Family No. 2* from 1926. In disagreement with the other harmonic structures of the piece, the work in question enables an analysis under the point of view of Set Theory followed by an interpretation lined up with a possible intent evidenced by the title of the work and corroborated by dynamic markings and agogic.

**Keywords:** Villa-Lobos, Baby's Family No.2, Set Theory, Musical Meaning.

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Attachments

# O Passarinho de Pano

Os Bichinhos

H. Villa-Lobos

Piano

5

8va

9

13

Editado por Walter Nery  
em 6 de novembro de 2011



The image displays a musical score for piano and violin, spanning measures 37 to 50. The score is organized into five systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) for the piano and a single staff for the violin.

- Measures 37-39:** The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents.
- Measures 40-42:** The piano part continues with dense, rhythmic textures. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents.
- Measures 43-44:** The piano part continues with dense, rhythmic textures. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents.
- Measures 45-48:** The tempo and mood change. The tempo marking is **Vivo (M: 126 = ♩)**. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents. The piano part has a rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and accents.
- Measures 49-50:** The piano part continues with dense, rhythmic textures. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents.

Key markings include *8va* (octave) and *mf* (mezzo-forte).

4

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of five systems of staves. The first system (measures 53-56) features a right-hand melody with repeated eighth-note patterns and a left-hand accompaniment of chords. The second system (measures 57-58) shows a more complex right-hand melody with a wide intervallic leap and a left-hand accompaniment. The third system (measures 59-63) has a right-hand melody with a long note and a left-hand accompaniment. The fourth system (measures 64-68) features a right-hand melody with a long note and a left-hand accompaniment. The fifth system (measures 69-72) shows a right-hand melody with a long note and a left-hand accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *rf >*, *mf*, and *g<sup>ma</sup>*.



6

83 *fff*

Très vif

83 *fff*

8<sup>va</sup> bassa

(M. 63 =  $\text{♩}$ ) *Comme avant*

85 *mf*

8<sup>va</sup> bassa

8<sup>va</sup>

88 *p*

*dim.* *e* *allarg.* *poco* *a poco*

8<sup>va</sup>

90 *pp* *f animato e rall.* *pp*

*sec dim.*

sans pedal

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