



NAZARÉ

His fluid, intriguing and sad style

helped me better understand

The Brazilian soul.

– Darius Milhaud –

At the time, the electric tram was the latest thing in technology. Men still waxed the tips of their mustaches and linked time to a pocket watch. Hurrying was frowned upon.

In private clubs in the city of Rio, in its elegant cafés, or in some house where poets, painters and musicians convened, Ernesto Nazareth charmed his listeners at the piano. All were fascinated to hear music that possessed the refinement of European musical art but at the same time sounded Brazilian. And how well it was received, among so many polkas and waltzes and scottischs and Italian arias that saturated everything, all the time.

Nazareth in his compositions had achieved a perfect balance between musical elements of various origin. A mix of sound that was the reflection of the racial composition of Brazil. The great Villa-Lobos – a big admirer – said of him: “He was the true incarnation of the Brazilian musical soul. He admirably and spontaneously conveys the vivid emotions of a people ...”

In Chopin's harmonies he drank of the languor; that nostalgia which is so natural to the Brazilian musical soul – ‘saudade’ (a longing) born from the ‘modinhas’ (sentimental songs) – and wove into them some very typical melodies, which almost always tend to go from high to low, in minor keys, full of sweetness and elegant simplicity. All that harmonic-melodic finesse flowed naturally on a rhythmic ‘sandungueo’ that could have no other origin than Africa.

Syncopated sandungueo owed much both to lundú – the dance that is the Portuguese fandango against an African drumbeat – as the habanera, that arrived from Cuba - where it was called contradanza - and in arriving there already transported black influences from its journey from France, via Haiti and New Orleans ... There was also some polka in his pianism.

Nazareth called his compositions Brazilian tangos. Many say they were just maxixes and certainly there are many commonalities between his tangos and the 'mestizo' dance born in the second half of that century, in his native Rio. The difference is in the level of artistry that Nazareth created.

He turned those pieces into concert music, music to be listened to more than anything else; consistently setting those characteristic melodic formulas, those harmonic structures and rhythmic

cells on which he based his tangos. Maxixes are danced, Nazareth's tangos should be listened to. And when they are played, the interpreter must find that delicate balance between the danceable and the subtleties of sound, of phrasing; between the stability of the tempo and the flexibility imposed by expression.

It is said that in soirées of the wealthy families of Rio, every time a girl gave a piano recital – delighting the audience with Chopin waltzes, Bach preludes, Brahms intermezzos, or songs without words by Mendhelsson – without fail at the end some would call for a golden encore finale: “... and now, please, play us a little tango by Nazaré?”

In Havana, Ignacio Cervantes was composing his exquisite domestic dances for piano, that would make him go down in history. In Paris, Alphonse Mucha, worshiper of the feminine principle of Creation, used the images of flowers and women as symbols, to create a style with his lithographies.