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*Darius Milhaud
and His French “Saudades” of Brazil (1917-1919)*

ABSTRACT: *This article evaluates the relationship between French composer Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) and his experiences in Brazil (1917-1919). By examining the socio-political environment of Brazil during and after Milhaud’s stay, its impact on the composer’s music produced thereafter, and the internal pressures of French cosmopolitan musical aesthetics acting on the composer, it argues that the connections between Milhaud and his time in Brazil can be viewed as a complex dynamic of cultural discourse and synthesis, which challenges the existing frameworks of cultural hegemony used to interpret post-colonial history.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; France; Brazil; Darius Milhaud; Les Six; music; samba; inter-war art; post-colonial studies; discourse theory*

Introduction

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) was an itinerant French composer whose music can best be described as a kaleidoscopic blend of tuneful melody with jarring harmony and orchestration. Nowhere else in his *œuvre* is this more apparent than in the works from his youthful 1917-1919 period when he served as an assistant to his friend Paul Claudel (1868-1955), a playwright, dramatist, and the French ambassador to Brazil. Milhaud and Claudel’s pilgrimage to Rio de Janeiro during a time when both France and Brazil were in the middle of World War I provides unique insight into the ways in which inter- and post-war French art music saw itself, and how it incorporated influences that were exterior to the traditional canon of French composers like Jean-Philippe Rameau, Georges Bizet, Jules Massenet, and Camille Saint-Saëns.¹ The narrow band of time and place which occupies this article can be taken as a significant—and typical—proxy for the larger frame of “art music” as a whole. The struggle with anti-authoritarianism and rebellion, taste and style, cultural appropriation, and the search for the “new” is a theme shared by many artists both in Milhaud’s time and today.

While in Brazil, Milhaud and Claudel collaborated on an experimental ballet, *L’homme et son désir* (“Man and his Desire”), and after the conclusion of the war and his return to France, Milhaud wrote another ballet, *Le bœuf sur le toit* (“The Cow on the Roof”) and his more popular suite for piano, *Saudades do Brasil*

¹ Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) was a leading French musical theorist and composer; Georges Bizet (1838-1875) composed the famous opera *Carmen* (1874); Jules Massenet (1842-1912) taught a generation of composers from Gustave Charpentier (famous for *España*) to Reynaldo Hahn; and Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was a patriarch of French music in his last decades, famous for decrying the premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps* (1913). See J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 10th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

(“Longing for Brazil”), each of which demonstrates different stages in Milhaud’s adoption of Brazilian culture.²

This article focuses on the influence of Brazilian culture and style on Milhaud’s music in the context of postcolonial cultural transmission, appropriation, and discourse theory. Milhaud wrote prolifically during his stay in Brazil, and his collaboration with Claudel demonstrates the ways in which he sought to incorporate the sounds and rhythm of his environment into his music. Written documentation of Milhaud and Claudel’s stay in Brazil in the form of contemporary interviews, a comprehensive body of correspondence, lectures and articles, and Milhaud’s own autobiographical writings serve as tangible sources to interpret the complexities of both the interwar Brazilian *Zeitgeist* and Milhaud’s own internal machinations.³

While there have been efforts to examine Milhaud’s canonical position as a member of *Les Six*,⁴ as well as efforts to understand the complex dynamics internal to Brazil with regard to art and class awareness, none so far have looked to use Milhaud-as-composer as a vehicle to examine the relationship between Brazil and cosmopolitan Europe. This article seeks to do just that, exposing both the dangers of essentialized cultural appropriation as well as the power and agency exercised by both—or, rather, all—parties in the discourse of participating in art culture, such as with local Brazilian musicians and composers like Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) and Ernesto Nazareth (1863-1934).⁵ This article argues that the exchange of art culture between Brazil (and by proxy other colonial properties) and France is not as simple as the unilateral appropriation of colonial culture by a dominant cultural hegemony; instead, it is a discourse, an ongoing dialogue where power structures and symbols of status are contested and altered. This discourse

² See Darius Milhaud, *L’homme et son desir* (Vienna: Universal Editions, 1966); Darius Milhaud, *Le bœuf sur le toit* (Paris: Éditions Max Eschig, 1969); Darius Milhaud, *Saudades do Brasil* (Paris: Éditions Max Eschig; London: Schott, 1922).

³ See Darius Milhaud, *Ma vie heureuse (My Happy Life)* (first published 1962; New York: M. Boyars, 1995), as well as his early autobiographical essay *Études* (Paris: Éditions Claude Aveline, 1927); and Madeleine Milhaud and Roger Nichols, *Conversations with Madeleine Milhaud* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996). For Milhaud’s time in Brazil from Paul Claudel’s perspective, see Paul Claudel, *Correspondance, 1899-1926*, ed. André Gide and Robert Mallet (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

⁴ *Les Six* was a loosely bound group of young composers, consisting of Georges Auric (1899-1983), Louis Durey (1888-1979), Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983), and Milhaud. The movement’s figurehead was Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) at first, but the group was later adopted by Erik Satie (1866-1925).

⁵ See Barbara L. Kelly, *Tradition and Style in the Works of Darius Milhaud 1912-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003); Richard Graham, *A Century of Brazilian History since 1865: Issues and Problems* (New York: Knopf, 1969); *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Robert Levine and John Crocitti (first published 1999; Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (first published 1978; New York: Vintage Books, 1979); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Carly Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271-313.

is complex and multilateral, and in Milhaud's case it illustrates how artists are able to live on the periphery of one adopted culture while simultaneously bringing new life to their own.

First, this article examines the events of Milhaud's stay in Brazil and what types of music he heard in order to explore the internal dynamics of Brazilian art culture as it existed during the early twentieth century. Next, it considers the French perspective on interwar art and the goals associated with that view – masculinity, restraint, and the mixing of the two “French” identities, using examples from before and after World War I. Lastly, it looks to the contents of Milhaud's musical output most directly related to his time in Brazil, namely, his two ballets and his piano suite, *Saudades do Brasil*.

I. *Nossa música*

Milhaud's arrival in Rio de Janeiro in 1917, alongside Claudel, was a jarring experience for the composer in more than one way. Their steamer ship arrived on the first of February, with winds bearing a Southern Hemisphere weather which according to Milhaud was a “blazing hot day like midsummer.”⁶ More than the weather and the royal fan palms which were “sometimes more than two hundred feet in height and crowned with swaying fronds,” however, his impressions of Brazilian music were even more astonishing:⁷

For six weeks the whole populace is passionately given over to dancing and singing. There is always one song that wins more favor than the others, and thereby becomes the “Carnival Song.” Thus “Pelo Telefone,” the Carnival song for 1917, was to be heard wherever one went, ground out by little orchestras in front of the cinemas in the *Avenida* [...] whistled and sung after a fashion in every house – and it haunted us all winter.⁸

The music Darius Milhaud heard during his stay in Brazil was a cacophony of different styles. They were not just traditional Brazilian genres either – as a Southern Hemisphere metropolis, Rio de Janeiro had music from all over the globe. Songs by Glauco Velasquez and Ernesto Nazareth meant for the *Carnaval* were, of course, very popular, but there were also performances by the *Ballets Russes* which were wintering in Rio, and private performances of music by Milhaud's own French contemporaries such as Erik Satie by other members of the Brazilian *élite* like Nininha Veloso-Guerra.⁹ Milhaud was receptive to (and often participated in) everything he heard in some fashion – not just one idealized or

⁶ Darius Milhaud, *Notes without Music: An Autobiography*, trans. Donald Evans (New York: Knopf, 1953), 69.

⁷ Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 70.

⁸ Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 74.

⁹ Satie was a French composer, graduate of the *Schola Cantorum de Paris* (a rival of the Paris *Conservatoire*), and father-figure to many in the new generation of composers emerging from the period of 1910-1925, such as Milhaud, Poulenc, and Auric. Satie famously provided the incidental music to Cocteau's *Parade* (1917), which also featured set design by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and choreography by Léonide Massine (1896-1979).

stereotyped version of Brazilian music which he thought might be reproduceable overseas.

Milhaud's contact with Brazilian culture during the *Carnaval* left a lasting impression, particularly in the ways he noted the trends and popularity of the music instead of its musical characteristics. While Milhaud was given to occasionally indulging in armchair musicology, his autobiographical writings are strangely void of concrete details about the music he heard. He was by no means an *amanuensis*, but in the end the composer needed something more tangible than just his ear to make use of his Brazilian experience in his own compositions. Specifically, this came in the form of published songbooks. "Pelo Telefone," the particular song referenced by Milhaud in the passage above, was a *samba* by the Afro-Brazilian artist Donga (Ernesto Maria dos Santos). As a musical practice, *samba* was rife with its own internal complexities concerning musical ownership, and the question of *nossa música*, or "our music," was by 1917 a burgeoning debate inside Brazil concerning the role of Afro-Brazilian influence in the oncoming "golden age" of Latin music.¹⁰ In point of fact, the term *samba* itself was hotly contested when it came to its application as a musical genre: "Pelo Telefone" is musically a *maxixe*, but the term *samba carnavalesco* came to represent a wide variety of different popular Brazilian music through the 1920s, irrespective of the music's previous taxonomy.

Since the overthrow of the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II in 1889, the First Republic of Brazil had maintained a delicate balance, a struggle which reached from the seats of power all the way down to the music-making on the streets and in private homes. Between traditional monarchists, the vast but diffuse polity of rural and agricultural communities, and the equally vast *latifundios* of wealthy Brazilians, the Republic had not emerged pristine from some national cocoon from the previous order. Instead, the shaping of the new national identity was a complex discourse, of which the *samba* was only a part.¹¹ The revolts against the First Republic beginning in 1924 were an indication that this balance of power, both racially and socioeconomically, was not permanent or static. Populist movements like the *tenente* movement, rooted in a need for social reforms like public education and secret ballots, brought together the two necessary components for a successful revolt: an awareness of the discrimination caused by *coronelismo* (the Brazilian term for the stratified system of patronage on the *latifundios*) and the popular support necessary for the movement to gain meaningful traction.¹² Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul, Brazilian provinces

¹⁰ Marc A. Hertzman, *Making Samba: A New History of Race and Music in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 94.

¹¹ See Roger A. Kittleson, *The Practice of Politics in Postcolonial Brazil: Porto Alegre, 1845-1895* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

¹² Robert Scheina, *Latin America's Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2003), 130. See also Neill Macaulay, *The Prestes Column: Revolution in Brazil* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974).

which had long existed in an unstable so-called “coffee with milk” diplomatic alliance with the much wealthier São Paulo, led the 1930 coup to install Getúlio Vargas, thus ending the First Republic and signaling a rejection of the status quo. Liberalism, constitutionalism, and class consciousness were not always aligned in Brazil as they were in other places, and the 1930 coup reflects this: São Paulo was associated with coffee oligarchies and *latifundios*, but also urbanization and liberalism, while Minas Gerais wielded both the new political capital of Marxism and the discontented cattle oligarchs of Brazil’s rural southern parts.¹³

This complexity was reflected in the country’s musical culture. *Nossa música*, the wide musical umbrella under which the forging of the new *samba* genre fell, was a process that had begun long before “Pelo Telefone,” but which the 1917 *Carnaval* song had helped to shape. The process continued into the 1930s during the ascension of Vargas’s regime, and it eventually shaped a phenomenon of the 1950s and 1960s which Brazilian musical scholar Sean Stroud has called the “MBP,” the “Música Popular Brasileira.”¹⁴

Fortunately for the rest of us, Milhaud was dropped “right in the middle” of a Brazilian cultural moment which exposed him to the full gamut of experience for this specific song, “Pelo Telefone,” and its attendant complexities. This included the song’s popular adoption, per Milhaud, as the “Carnival song of 1917,” along with its redefinition of the Brazilian *maxixe* and *choro* into a new genre, the *samba*, which carried its own archaic and peculiarly Brazilian connotations. The *samba* and many of the other forms of Afro-Latin musical forms we are familiar with today – the *mambo*, *bossa nova*, *rumba*, *guaguancó*, *tango*, and others – are a mixture of Portuguese, African, and indigenous elements which interact in unexpected ways as a reflection of two counterbalancing forces: the “catechization,” or more accurately Europeanization, of indigenous and African communities, and the opposing force of multiculturalism, to which early ethnomusicological scholarship has uncharitably referred as “miscegenation.”¹⁵

Perhaps the best example of these diverse origins can be found in the rhythmic heartbeat of *son clave* – “clave music” or “key pattern” – in Afro-Latin music.¹⁶ There are several components to this basic rhythmic pattern, all performed on a deceptively simple set of hardwood sticks, the eponymous “claves.” First is the cross-beat, or polyrhythm, that is generated from the presence of multiple so-

¹³ Teresa Meade, *A Brief History of Brazil*, 2nd ed. (first published 2009; New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 123.

¹⁴ See Sean Stroud, *The Defence of Tradition in Brazilian Popular Music: Politics, Culture and the Creation of Música Popular Brasileira* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

¹⁵ Lila M. Wistrand, “Music and Song Texts of Amazonian Indians,” *Ethnomusicology* 13, no. 3 (1969): 469-488, here 473.

¹⁶ David Peñalosa, *The Clave Matrix: Afro-Cuban Rhythm: Its Principles and African Origins* (Redway, CA: Bembe Inc, 2012), 255.

called “beats” that are layered together.¹⁷ Rather than being a temporary metrical change, or a transitory device from one beat to another, these cross-beats, like the *tresillo* (“triplet” in Spanish, but this translation is misleading), are the fundamental basis of an entire piece. The clave instrument itself could never totally represent the rhythmic complexity of the beat, but when combined with the various other layers of rhythm – the *agogo* (multi-pitched bells struck with wood), *conga* drum, *guiro*, or *cabaça* – it creates a composite which, while seemingly contradictory or bipolar, is actually part of “the same *Gestalt* [fundamental character],” to borrow a phrase from ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu.¹⁸ These inseparable layers of polyrhythms, while expressed differently in different genres of Afro-Latin music, are foundational to their structure.

The clave beat was inherited most likely from Sub-Saharan Africa, but it is not the only element of the *samba* which came to mingle in Brazil. As a result, the question of cultural ownership in the practice is complicated, especially when it comes to dance styles oriented in a communal setting. “Pelo Telefone” in its original recording performance, for instance, did not have a rhythm section at all, yet the feeling of the *son clave* is still present.¹⁹

Authorship and ownership in these types of settings are not neatly categorized in ways to which the Western musical press is accustomed, and as such, identifying any component of ownership in the “song” (that is, the notional idea of the song which is transmitted from place to place, not the particular performance) becomes a challenge. It is a challenge today just as it was when “Pelo Telefone” was first circulating. A letter from the credited author/lyricist for the popular song, published in *A Noticia* (a Brazilian journal) in 1917, was produced in response to glowing reviews of the song by the critic “Arlequim,” the pen name of Paulo Cabrita, which demonstrates this conundrum in real time:

I should tell you, my dear Arlequim, as a way to honor the truth, that the verses of friendly [*simpático*] Donga’s *samba carnavalesco* “Pelo telefone,” are not original. Or, better yet, they

¹⁷ With regard to the terminology used here, “polyrhythm” is understood as distinct from “polymeter” which is, confoundingly, also a musical device that produces sonic complexity. With polyrhythm, the “meter” (think of it like the metronomic ticking of a clock) is consistent, but the emphasis in different layers is unique. In polymeter, to extend the metaphor, the clock itself is changing its ticking. To further complicate things, Milhaud and his later colleagues like Edgar Varèse (1883-1965) and Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) used one or both techniques, sometimes in the same piece. See Darius Milhaud, *La creation du monde*, Op. 81a (1923), Edgar Varèse, *Ionisation* (1931), Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941).

¹⁸ Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 92.

¹⁹ Lindsay Walsh, “Brazil is Samba: Rhythm, Percussion, and *Samba* in the Formation of Brazilian National Identity (1902-1958)” (Honors thesis, Wesleyan University, 2010).

are not mine. I took them from popular ballads and did what numerous playwrights running around today do: I put them in order, arranging them into music. Nothing more.²⁰

By 1917, Brazil was musically a thoroughly “modern” place, replete with domestic recording studios and broadcast industries, the proliferation of sheet music, and other technological facets which mirrored Europe at the time. Music which came from communities generally silenced or under-represented, however, with no clear “author,” offered an existential crisis of kinds for a modern Brazil because they sought for some way to categorize the music along the lines of author/composer/lyricist/artist, with similar crises faced by the United States and Europe when importing this music. The *samba* is above all a principle of dance and a community activity – a *roda do samba*, or a kind of circle for dancing – which has its roots in West African and Cape Verdean culture.²¹ Dance and community are so intertwined in *samba* that the *samba* band, often called the *bateria*,²² is also present for another activity not commonly seen as music at all, namely, the *capoeira*, which is a Brazilian martial art with very strong connections to rhythm. The paradigm of sole ownership for music is contrary to many musical traditions (*samba* being just one example) where music is an activity to be shared – especially before the widespread use of printing and music recording.²³ With the crisis of attribution in Brazil came a sort of blindness: on the part of not only European observers like Milhaud (who had observed that “on the fringes of the forest lived descendants of the Nordic races who had reverted to savagery and now inhabited miserable huts, surrounded by a horde of half-naked children”²⁴), but also from the music industry itself in Brazil, which with each adaptation of “Pelo Telefone” separated it further from its origins.

Milhaud was receptive to all the music he found in Rio de Janeiro, but he did carry his own preconceptions and prejudice about culture and the ever-fraught terms and conditions of “art.”²⁵ Upon his return to Paris, Milhaud expounded on what he perceived as the misplaced priorities of the Brazilian musical scene in the

²⁰ Joao Mauro de Almeida, “No reinado de Momo . . . uma carta do Mauro,” *A Notícia*, 24 January 1917, reproduced in Flávio Silva, “Pelo telefone e a história do samba,” *Revista Cultura* 8, no. 28 (1978): 64-74, here 70.

²¹ Hertzman, *Making Samba*, 94-97.

²² Loosely, “battery,” but more likely with the implication of “rhythm section.”

²³ See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998); and Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (first published 1977; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). Both works address the sociological construction of music and the roles of performers, listeners, and “authors” (as much as they exist) as participants in a system apart from the musical “object.”

²⁴ Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 72.

²⁵ For a discussion of the cultural framing of art, see, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (first published 1979; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); and Monroe C. Beardsley, “What is an Aesthetic Quality?” *Theoria* 9 (1973): 50-70.

journal *La revue musicale*. *La revue musicale* was a forward-thinking periodical founded by Henri Prunières, a prominent French musicologist, in 1920 to help “dispel the public’s ignorance and its absurd biases” around the state of modern music in France, a scene which had formerly been predominated by staunchly nationalist sentiment.²⁶ While Milhaud likely intended to beneficently turn Brazilian *élite* back toward Brazilian music like Nazareth’s *tangos* instead of foreign music like his own creations or the works of Igor Stravinsky performed by the *Ballets Russes*, it also reveals the obfuscation of essential parts of Brazilian musical culture by placing “the jewel of Brazilian Art” into the hands of significantly Western-oriented composers:

It would be desirable that Brazilian musicians realized the importance of the composers of *tangos*, *maxixes*, *sambas*, and *caterêtes*, like Tupinambá and a genius such as [Ernesto] Nazareth [...] The rhythmic richness, the ever renewed fantasy, the verve, the drive, the prodigious melodic invention which one finds in each work of those two masters, make them the glory and jewel of Brazilian Art.²⁷

These aspects which Milhaud identifies as the truly great aspects of Brazilian music – rhythmic richness, melody, and the “verve” of complex syncopation – are undoubtedly present in Nazareth’s music, but Nazareth was not the only source of “genius” in that respect and certainly not the most appropriate source for the roots which made Brazilian music so unique. For instance, Milhaud fails to mention any specific component of Brazilian rhythm which he could identify as unique (or at the very least he declined to do so) or any experiences where cultural practices like *samba* were elemental and unadulterated. On the other hand, however, Brazilian music was free to take what it would from the musical cultures of the Portuguese who had long been the hegemonic cultural power there, a fact which complicates the relationships of power in the musical discourse between the two. Brazilian music was the *samba* and the *maxixe*, but it was *also* Nazareth, Villa-Lobos, and even Milhaud – to the extent that his music was written in and around Brazilian culture and that some of it had even been performed in Brazil.

Milhaud’s most concrete work with Brazilian influences, *Le bœuf sur le toit*, has been thoroughly catalogued by Brazilian scholars like Aloysio Alencar Pinto and

²⁶ Frédéric Lefèvre and Henri Prunières, “Nouvelles Littéraires,” *La revue musicale* 10, no. 98 (1929): 91: “Le devoir du critique musical digne de ce nom me semble être de tenter les plus grands efforts pour dissiper l’ignorance du public et ses préventions absurdes, lui faire aimer à la fois l’art du passé qu’il ne soupçonne pas et l’art du présent qu’il abomine *a priori*. C’est dans cet esprit que j’ai fondé en 1920 *La revue musicale*.” See Michel Duchesneau, “*La revue musicale* (1920-1940) and the Founding of a Modern Music,” in *Music’s Intellectual History: Founders, Followers, and Fads*, ed. Zdravko Blažeković and Barbara Dobbs Mackenzie (New York: RILM, 2009), 743-750.

²⁷ Darius Milhaud, “Brésil,” *La revue musicale* 1 (1920): 60-61: “Il serait souhaitable que les musiciens brésiliens comprissent l’importance des compositeurs de tangos, maxixes, sambas et caterêtes comme Tupynamba et le genial Nazareth. [...] La richesse rythmique, la fantaisie indéfiniment renouvelée, la verve, l’entrain, l’invention melodique d’une imagination prodigieuse, qui se trouvent dans chaque oeuvre de ces deux maîtres, font de ces derniers la gloire et le joyau de l’Art brésilien.”

Manoel Aranha Corrêa do Lago, consistent with the composer's notes on the form, to reveal that his sources were mostly literary – meaning from published scores.²⁸ Milhaud's use of primarily written scores underlines how much his interpretation of Brazil, via his quotations in *Le bœuf*, was reliant on a version of Brazil that was already polished and editorialized for an audience who could read sheet music, rather than a more complete aural version of Brazil that could expand beyond the horizons of notated music. The sources include Nazareth and others who had published collections of Brazilian songs, and they were primarily from collections for the piano. Milhaud was therefore selectively filtering what qualified as "Brazilian" for the purposes of incorporating it into his *Saudades* from the outset and very inception of the music. This filter could be considered the second step of abstraction on Milhaud's part, which separated Brazilian music like "Pelo Telefone" by degrees even further from its origins. *Le bœuf* premiered in France, written by a French composer who had traveled to Brazil, had heard Brazilian music, and had picked up reams of sheet music to take home. To the degree that it reflects a variety of different interpretive decisions, it is an astounding feat of cultural transmission and transformation.

II. *Les Six*

To understand Milhaud's time in Brazil, the French perspective on its own interior artistic culture is just as important to explore as the Brazilian styles to which Milhaud was exposed: issues of novelty, masculinity, restraint, and expression dominated the conversation in the 1920s when Milhaud was associated with the musical group *Les Six*. Contrary to the more recent theoretical understanding of sociologists like Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (of *The Invention of Tradition* fame), Milhaud saw his French heritage and tradition as a concrete phenomenon:

One does not invent a tradition; one receives it and works at it. It depends not only on the musician's tastes and his inward motivation, on those influences which are the result of the circumstances and events of his life, nor on his particular musical preferences but, above all, on the race to which he belongs.²⁹

Milhaud's understanding of race, nationality, and the role of tradition is complex. It must be understood "in its place," which is to say 1920s France, a time when both race and nationality were key issues in the struggle with modernity.³⁰ As the opening line of his memoir puts it, Milhaud is a "Frenchman from Provence, and

²⁸ See Aloysio Alencar Pinto, "Darius Milhaud e 'Le Bœuf sur le Toit'," in *Concert Program Temporada Oficial de Ballet de 1980: Os Olhos de Degas/Sarau de Sinhá/O Boi no Telhado* (Rio de Janeiro: Teatro Municipal/Funarj, 1980); and Manoel Aranha Corrêa do Lago, "Brazilian Sources in Milhaud's 'Le Bœuf sur le Toit': A Discussion and a Musical Analysis," *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 23 no. 1 (2002): 1-59.

²⁹ Darius Milhaud, "The Evolution of Modern Music in Paris and in Vienna," *The North American Review* 217, no. 809 (1923): 544-554. See also Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (first published 1983; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³⁰ Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 29.

by religion a Jew.”³¹ He puts nationality first – as a Frenchman – but he inevitably had to deal with critics such as Louis Vuillemin who accused him of being an outsider (a Jew) responsible for undermining French culture from within.³² Contemporaneous with the inherently anti-Semitic attacks leveled at him, there was a more insidious struggle taking place during the 1920s which bears closer scrutiny: a battle between visions for the future of European music in general, succinctly invoked in the phrase “polytonality versus atonality.”

While it was not quite as dualistic as a simple fight between two rival camps, the debate between methods of atonality (seen most prominently in the works of Arnold Schoenberg) and polytonality, like those expressed by Milhaud and his associates, reflects deeper phenomena about the cultural imagination of France and Europe as a whole, something which was addressed by the philosopher Karl Mannheim as early as 1927.³³ Milhaud himself tackled this topic head-on in an essay in *La revue musicale*, appropriately titled “Polytonalité et atonalité.”³⁴ Polytonality in this case can best be understood as the super-imposition of music in different keys simultaneously – a technique employed by Charles Koechlin, Stravinsky, and Milhaud, as well as later composers of repute like Sergei Prokofiev.³⁵ Atonality, on the other hand, was seen as the culmination of a tradition of dissonance that had evolved over two centuries of music in Austria and Germany, from Mozart and Beethoven to Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner, all of whom had stretched the limits of the perception of tonality writ large.³⁶ At the center of this debate was the question of which music reflected the aesthetic ideals and artistic *dicta* of the new French nationalism – a discourse which had already been co-opted by Jean Cocteau in his periodical *Le Coq et L’arlequin*.³⁷ Henri Collet, the journalist credited for creating the term, saw the polytonality of *Les Six* as a

³¹ Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 3.

³² Louis Vuillemin, “Musique et Nationalisme,” *Le courrier musical et théâtral*, February 15, 1923, 65. See also Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 27.

³³ For a discussion of cultural imagination, see Paul Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination,” *Philosophic Exchange* 7, no. 1 (1976): 17-28. See also Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (first published 1929; London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936).

³⁴ Darius Milhaud, “Polytonalité et atonalité,” *La revue musicale* 4, no. 4 (1923): 29-44. See also François de Médicis, “Darius Milhaud and the Debate on Polytonality in the French Press of the 1920s,” *Music and Letters* 86, no. 4 (2005): 573-591.

³⁵ A good example of early polytonality can be found in Igor Stravinsky’s ballet *Le sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*) (1913), as well as more explicitly in his *Petroushka* (1911). In *Petroushka*, there are moments where two keys most distantly related to each other, C major and F# major, are played in succession or simultaneously – to great effect.

³⁶ Idiomatic examples of this aggressive re-definition of harmony can be found in works such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, String Quartet No. 19 in C major, “Dissonance,” K. 465 (1785); Ludwig van Beethoven, *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet, Op. 133 (1825); Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, WWV 90 (1865).

³⁷ See Jean Roy, *Le Groupe des Six* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 190-210.

road to paradoxical simplicity: “They take the complexities of polytonality as a point of departure eventually to arrive at simplicity.”³⁸ Milhaud himself defined the French musical ideals as containing “a certain clarity, sobriety, ease, moderation within romanticism, and care for the proportions of the design and construction of a composition, with the desire of achieving precise, straightforward and concise expression.”³⁹

Opposed to this, in principle, was the over-indulgence and excess of Wagnerian romanticism, which most of *Les Six* uniformly detested. While Claude Debussy, who garnered late acclaim for works like his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), was viewed as a staple of the French musical establishment and perhaps even the embodiment of French musical style, *Les Six* had musically moved on from his “enchancing vagueness.”⁴⁰ Last to the scene in France was Schoenberg, himself Austrian, who enjoyed a brief and controversial popularity in the new music scene of Paris in the 1920s, and who had struck upon his conception of atonality in response to his own great personal distress and the encouragement of the expressionist movement in Germany.⁴¹

The collection of Milhaud’s writings from the 1920s, *Études*, contains most of his thoughts on a variety of topics, including his fellow composers, his critics, and the debate between classicism and romanticism, and between atonality and polytonality, among others. Milhaud’s vision for French music is sometimes paradoxical, for it embraces the purity and simplicity of works by Satie and Stravinsky (particularly *Mavra*), but Milhaud still held that the direction of new music was “not incompatible with romanticism” – an embrace of Wagner and Debussy, albeit through a certain filter which Milhaud often referred to as “Mediterranean lyricism.”⁴²

The French musical establishment, through voices like Vincent d’Indy (founder of the *Schola Cantorum de Paris*), had been staunchly anti-Wagnerian long before the hostilities of World War I. D’Indy and critics like Vuillemin sought to define French nationalism in opposition to perceived German influences, particularly in works by Schoenberg. Oftentimes this led to the exclusion by the French establishment of composers like Louis Durey, Satie and Milhaud who rebelled

³⁸ Henri Collet, in Roy, *Groupe des Six*, 201: “Quelle est en somme l’esthétique musicale des Six? Ils partent de la complexité *polytonique* pour trouver la simplicité.”

³⁹ Darius Milhaud, “La Musique française depuis la guerre,” in *Études* (Paris: Éditions Claude Aveline, 1927), 7-26, here 11.

⁴⁰ Roy, *Groupe des Six*, 201. See also Claude Debussy, *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, L. 86 (1894). The piece was composed as a “musical illustration” after a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), a Symbolist poet for whom Debussy had great affection.

⁴¹ See Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black and Dika Newlin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975); Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21 (1912); Arnold Schoenberg, *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11 (1909); Alban Berg, *Piano Sonata*, Op. 1 (1907).

⁴² Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 40.

against the principles which had become enshrined in the music of Gabriel Fauré and Debussy.

In an unpublished article on Debussy (who was often the subject of criticism by writers in periodicals like *Le Coq*), Milhaud talks about the new primacy of linear melody and counterpoint in French music, both of which were features that would be accentuated by polytonality instead of obscured by the hard-to-sing leaps and intervals of atonal melodies: “We were in such need of an art that was robust, wholesome, and more contrapuntal in expression, where feelings of the greatest purity and tenderness could be conveyed with simplicity.”⁴³ Aside from the gentle swipe at Schoenberg, Milhaud was also making plain his complicated feelings concerning Debussy: genius, but inimitable and outdated, representative of an artistic style which was no longer relevant. Milhaud often made light of the connections between the aesthetic values of *Les Six* and the claim to French nationalism, and one important way in which he did this was by placing himself and his comrades in a distinct lineage of French composers who were already accepted as virtuous and patriotic. Milhaud, for instance, took as idols composers like Rameau, Hector Berlioz, Emmanuel Chabrier, and Albéric Magnard, who had all been accepted canonically.⁴⁴

The stressing of “horizontal” music over “vertical” music (linear melody over chords and theoretical harmony) in the works of *Les Six* offers a glimpse into the difference of analytical thought between composers who favored the neo-classical *simplicité* of Stravinsky’s *Apollon Musagète* and Milhaud over the harmonically rich Wagnerians and *Debussystes* — a group in which the French establishment included contemporary composers like Koechlin and Schoenberg.⁴⁵

III. *Quatre épices*

Milhaud’s various interactions with Brazil and other foreign cultures in his music demonstrate the various layers of culture and assimilation present in any work of art, and the different stages of an artist’s understanding of his own culture and the culture of others. Taking four different works by Milhaud: a song from the *mélodie* (French art song) cycle he wrote for Claudel’s *Connaissance de l’Est*, his ballet *L’homme et son désir*, which was conceptualized and written primarily in Brazil, his later ballet *Le bœuf sur le toit*, and his piano suite *Saudades do Brasil*, we can examine how this exchange of culture affected both the artist’s style and his conception of musical modernity.

In 1911, Milhaud was gifted a copy of Claudel’s book of poems, *La Connaissance de l’Est*, by his friend Céline Lagouarde, and when the composer met his future

⁴³ Darius Milhaud, “Claude Debussy,” unpublished article, reproduced partially in Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 10.

⁴⁴ See the figure in Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 35.

⁴⁵ Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 9-10.

collaborator in 1912, he had already set some of the latter's poems to music.⁴⁶ The fourth piece in the collection, "Ardeur," addresses the Claudel poem of the same name, and in its final moments reveals the intersection of Claudel's ardent Catholicism and Milhaud's ability to paint the text as a young composer:

Let others flee beneath the earth, let them carefully wall up the openings of their homes /
 But a sublime heart, racked by love's torment, embraces fire and torture. /
 Sun, redouble your flames! It is not enough to burn. Consume! /
 I would suffer not to suffer enough. /
 Let nothing impure escape the furnace; let no blind spot escape the punishment of the light!⁴⁷

The most apparent feature transcends the purpose of this analysis dealing with cultural exchange—Claudel's literally "burning" devotion to his faith.⁴⁸ Identifying the impetus for the poem draws first the careful accounting of when the poem was written: in the midst of an oppressively hot summer day. This is, however, not the end of the story; Claudel's fascination with the sun can be fruitfully analyzed in its relation to another poem in the collection, "The Deliverance of Amaterasu," which artfully conflates his own ardor with the legends of the Shinto goddess.⁴⁹ Claudel, at the time, was the French ambassador to Japan (in addition to being a poet and playwright, he was a well-respected international diplomat), and his drawing together of aspects from his own internal life with an outside reference to his surroundings and the mythos of Japanese culture reflects an integration that was more complex than mere appropriation.

Milhaud's setting of this poem has many aspects in common with other *mélodies* of the time, particularly with the late works of Henri Duparc and Chabrier, such as its declamatory style (using the vernacular pronunciation of French), the harmonic ambiguity, and the careful attention to vocal range and ease of singing despite the complexity of the piano accompaniment. This Milhaud of 1912 had not yet been to Brazil and had just begun on the path of multicultural adaptation that would characterize the rest of his career. He, like many of the other composers of his era, began his career by attaching himself to a contemporary poet and setting their words to music, a tradition in *mélodie* that had long roots: Saint-Saëns and Victor Hugo, Debussy and Stéphane Mallarmé, Duparc and Charles Baudelaire.

L'homme et son désir, on the other hand, was a head-first dive into the unknown for Milhaud. He describes his creative inspiration thus:

[...] we were in constant contact with the virgin forest and its mysteries. I shall never forget how, at the sunset, the nocturnal sounds of the forest burst forth suddenly, the simple life-noises of little animals of all kinds [...] vibrating together in a richness of undreamed-of

⁴⁶ Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 45.

⁴⁷ Paul Claudel, *Knowing the East* [Connaissance de l'Est], trans. James Lawler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 53.

⁴⁸ James Lawler, in Claudel, *Knowing the East*, 127.

⁴⁹ Claudel, *Knowing the East*, 105-109.

tonalities, dominated by the lianes and the orchids [...] If one could hear percussion played in a sustained *pianissimo* one might have somewhat the same impression.⁵⁰

As one of Milhaud's most important works (perhaps not in popularity, but as a turning point in his career), *L'homme* acts as a musical response to Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* ("The Rite of Spring"), which had washed over the Parisian music press like a storm in 1913. As with Stravinsky's ballet, the premise of *L'homme et son desir* was "savage and furtive movements [...] sudden, extremely rapidly and hurried," and featured heretofore unheard independence in the various instruments of the ensemble. In *Le sacre du printemps*, the unnamed and primal vernal ritual is based on Stravinsky's own culture, with Russian folktale and melody finding their way into the work on an explicit level.⁵¹ In *L'homme*, this primitivism had a different root: Brazil. Curiously absent from the written score, however, is any adaptation of actual Brazilian music, apart from the syncopation, where Milhaud conflated the Brazilian "catch of the breath" (the ineffable pause, much like the suspended notion of timing felt in Viennese waltzes) with the hypnotic patterns of the forest.⁵²

Upon his return to Paris after the war, Milhaud's joy was tinged "with a certain nostalgic regret," having fallen in love with Brazil.⁵³ The memory of his time there preoccupied him, and Milhaud composed *Le bœuf sur le toit* nearly on a whim, as a "fantasia [...] suitable for an accompaniment to one of Charlie Chaplin's films."⁵⁴ He endeavored to gather whatever he could of Brazilian music while in Paris—tangos, samba, maxixes, and some Portuguese *fado* music. Corrêa do Lago has described the work as a veritable "anthology of Rio and São Paulo popular music at the end of World War I."⁵⁵ *Le bœuf* was born as a somewhat lurid cabaret piece, and eventually became the name of a very popular avant-garde cabaret club in Paris, which (as Milhaud attests) was frequently mistaken as the source of inspiration for the piece when, in fact, the opposite was the case.

The nature of Milhaud's acquisition and use of "Brazilian" sources speak to the relationship between Brazil and Europe. Edward Said, in his seminal 1978 text *Orientalism*, describes this mutually constitutive process as one where the neatly categorized understanding (Brazilian folk melody being the proxy) of a foreign place becomes more than just a representation of that place; it becomes the place itself, as personal understandings shape the actual world. The experiences and

⁵⁰ Darius Milhaud, "The Influence of Latin-American Music on My Work," reproduced partially in Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 54.

⁵¹ For reference, see Igor Stravinsky, *The Firebird (L'oiseux de feu)* (1910), an amalgamation of various components of Slavic folklore—from the mythical Firebird to the stereotypical protagonist, Koschei the Immortal.

⁵² Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 75.

⁵³ Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 86.

⁵⁴ Milhaud, *Notes without Music*, 101-102.

⁵⁵ Corrêa do Lago, "Brazilian Sources," 6.

relationships which formed Milhaud's *Saudades* and his ballets were mutually constitutive in the same sense: Milhaud was participating in Brazilian culture as much as the culture was operating within him, even though he had largely remained on the periphery and only lived in the country comparatively briefly. Milhaud's ballet did not single-handedly begin this far away view of nonwestern foreign mystique, but taken on a field of similar works across art forms, ranging from Paul Gauguin's paintings in Tahiti to Debussy's piano prelude "Pagodes" in his collection *Estampes*, the mutual constitution that Said lays out is recognizable in the techniques used in those pieces. For Gauguin, the simplistic primitivism of lines and color are meant to invoke the backwards simplicity of the Tahitian islands, while with Debussy the musical construction (pentatonic scales, for instance, along with plenty of open intervals and "planing")⁵⁶ is very deliberately meant to represent the Orient, or the "Other." For Milhaud, the polytonality itself – the multitudes of voices, all independent and individually unintelligible – is what portrays the environment of Brazil.

Milhaud's final overture to Brazil is found in his suite for piano: *Saudades do Brasil* is the most complete synthesis of his time there and, much like *Le bœuf*, serves as a quasi-catalogue of the experiences Milhaud found vital. In it one can find as close to a true expression of the *son clave* rhythm as in any work by a non-Latin composer, but it is intertwined with Milhaud's own particular style and inventions: the polytonal melodies at odds with the rest of the piece ("the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing"), the layering of rhythm and syncopation, and a general air of restraint and understatement, all of which were fundamental parts of Milhaud's compositional repertoire.

Returning briefly to "Pelo Telefone," the Carnival *samba* which Milhaud had heard incessantly during the first months of his stay, the trajectory of the song's transmission from West African roots to subaltern indigenous communities, into popular Brazilian culture, and from there to Milhaud's avant-garde ballet is a journey of alteration, or perhaps even adulteration from point to point. Each stage of transmission in this process, to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of cultural hegemony, reflects the encroachment of epistemic violence in a rising scale of degree, obscuring the origin of the practice which is being transmitted.⁵⁷ Where the *samba* started as a community dance and music practice with diverse origins, it was transformed into a Brazilian ethno-national concept of *nossa música*; where it was a complex collection of timbre and uncategorizable influence, it became reduced to the notated score. On the other side, from Europe to Brazil, the effect could be described as one of increasing adoption of Western norms, like the incorporation of the Portuguese *fado* and *batuque* into syncretic cultural practices

⁵⁶ These compositional techniques are outside the domain of discussion for this article, but a fruitful resource relied upon by many music students is Miguel Roig-Francolí, *Understanding Post-Tonal Music* (first published 2007; Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008).

⁵⁷ See Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 271-313.

like the *samba*, as well as more direct concessions like the widespread demand for European classical music—for instance, the *Ballets Russes* and sheet music from contemporary composers.

Cultural transmission is by itself a relatively inert concept, but when the dynamics of power are applied to it, as they are in Foucauldian discourse, the act of cultural transmission becomes laden with meaning, each act pushing and pulling significance and control between parties. Power among those groups is always unequal—whether internal to Brazil, between the owners of the Brazilian *latifundios* and their clientele, or external, as between Portugal or France and their former colonies.

Conclusion

There have been several forays into cataloguing Darius Milhaud's immense compositional output, as well as explorations of his style, but the dynamic between French art near the end of the colonial period and its "subject" cultures, even exotic places not under its direct domain, has not been adequately explored. Milhaud's *œuvre* is relatively accessible by scholars, and it is well documented, but the intricacies of unraveling subconscious trends, whether in art or the written word, can be a challenge under the best of circumstances. Critical theorists and scholars of subaltern studies have likewise examined other under-represented communities, but Brazil presents a stature and multiethnic complexity that has yet to be properly addressed by the field.

The history of the 1917 *samba* "Pelo Telefone" is an indication that Milhaud was immersed in an undercurrent of cultural norms half a world away from the comforts of Paris. Milhaud's prejudice (owing to his participation in French contemporary music) shaped his experiences into a form which he could digest, and of which he could then make use for a general public back in Paris. Milhaud was participating in a very broad, multilateral culture—both when he was in Brazil and when he was at home in Paris, and the particular history of influences which led to works like *Le bœuf sur le toit* and *Saudades do Brasil* is exemplary of artists' ability to live on the periphery of a culture, add to that culture in a substantive way, and incorporate outside influences into their own art. The popular *samba's* reception, both in Brazil and by proxy in France through Milhaud's music, reveals the issues and intricacies that cultural transmission can often entail, but most importantly, it demonstrates that the artistic relationship—experience, influence, and product—works both ways.

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