

DIÁLOGOS DUO

Cantos do Nordeste: Songs of Northeast Brazil (2020) by Richard Boukas

• Composer Commentary •

Composed between March and August 2020, this seventh suite composed for Diálogos Duo is devoted to the richly diverse music and culture of Northeast Brazil. The region is comprised of nine states: Pernambuco, Bahia (the two most commonly known outside of Brazil), Alagoas, Ceará, Maranhão, Paraíba, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte and Sergipe.

The range of folkloric genres representing these states is vast. For that reason and the numerous legendary composers and cultural figures Boukas wished to honor, he pre-planned an ambitious goal of eighteen (18) movements. In performance the work is divided in half: movements 1-9, 10-18. It would be up to two hours in duration including breaks between pieces.

As with previous Diálogos suites, Boukas's pre-compositional process for *Cantos do Nordeste* consisted of extensive ethnomusicological research: creating musical transcriptions from authoritative recordings and videos, scholarly readings about each genre's cultural origin and a deep examination of each composer's works to glean their stylistic essence to be reflected in each tribute movement.

Cantos do Nordeste brings the Duo's complete original repertoire to sixty-seven (67) movements, the largest body of contemporary Brazilian repertoire composed for clarinet and guitar.

1. Amanhecer (Dawn) This Prelude movement (without tribute) is a brief and ethereal sound painting of dawn in the *sertão*- the dry plateau area which is home to some of the region's greatest musicians and cultural figures. It is not Brazilian-influenced in any obvious way.

2. Baião de Dois (Baião for Two) *Baião* (and its derivatives) is the most ubiquitous musical genre of northeast Brazil- comprised of Moorish, African, Indigenous and western European folkloric influences. A common expression for a simple plate of rice and beans, *Baião de Dois* is dedicated to Minas Gerais composer **Sérgio Santos** (1956-)- who has incorporated a number of northeast Brazilian genres into his vast repertoire. After a solo guitar introduction, the form is a varied AABCA. The harmonic vocabulary leans more towards the *Minas* direction, featuring diatonic stepwise movements. The guitar part uses *Dropped D* tuning, most common in *baião*.

3. De Sexta pra Dominginhos (from Sunday for Dominginhos) Dedicated to legendary accordionist-composer **Dominginhos** (José Domingos de Moraes, 1941-2013), the title of this *xote* is a pun on *Hermeto Pascoal's* masterpiece *De Sábado pra Dominginhos* written for Dominginhos on the 1987 landmark recording. *Xote* as a genre has clear Scottish and indigenous roots. Its melodic flow and underlying rhythmic base has a swinging triplet feeling not unlike *reggae*. Set in AABACA form, the initially simple harmonies gradually morph into *Pascoal's* highly modulatory language. The tonal scheme (C-Ami-F or I-VI-IV) mirrors that of many *choros*.

4. Véspera de São João (Eve of São João) São João is one of Brazil's most important feast holidays (held in early June). Dedicated to the king of *baião* **Luiz Gonzaga** (1912-1989), the genre is *arrasta-pé* (literally "drag the foot" in the dance steps). Modeled after Gonzaga's classic *Pagode Russo*, the piece unfolds in a varied form of ABABCA. The B section changes to *frevô*. The C section is a virtuosic solo guitar transition before the final A.

5. **Beira do Mar (Seashore)** This relaxed movement is a *ciranda*- a gentle and popular circle dance resembling the *marcha rancho*. Dedicated to the queen of ciranda, **Lia de Itamaracá** (who hails from the island of that name), each strophic verse is traditionally preceded by an instrumental *ritornello* played by saxophone, trumpet and trombone while a snare drum and *bombo* (small bass drum) holds down the basic groove. The modal change in this piece from major to minor tonality and back to major is not a traditional harmonic feature.

6. **Samba do Mar (Sea Samba)** This ABAAB samba is dedicated to the hugely popular singer-guitarist **Dorival Caymmi** (1914-2008). It is the only movement in a flat key (Bb). The B section is in Db major (bIII ma). Caymmi was a true renaissance man- musician, poet, painter, actor. He epitomized and captured the aesthetics of *Bahia*, composing songs praising the beauty and simplicity of living life by the sea. He was also father to three hugely successful musicians- Nana, Dori and Danilo.

7. **Rei de Cangaço (King of Cangaço)** Dedicated to **Lampião** (Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, (1898-1938), whose fierce group of bandits were the most notorious in the first half of the 20th century. The *cangaço* tradition goes back to the 1830's, when *cangaceiros* left the coastal areas to conquer the interior of the northeast. On horseback, brandishing rifles, leather hats and boots, the most common dance genre associated with *cangaço* is *xaxado*. Quite similar to *baiao*, *xaxado* is modal in character, featuring *sanfona* (accordion), the *zabumba drum* and *triangle*. The piece is set in the common *Lydian dominant mode*, unfolding in AABBA form with an open guitar solo before the final A. Guitar tuning is *Open G*: DGDGBD. Also featured is two-handed tapping on the guitar body to imitate the *zabumba*.

8. **Maestro Duda (Maestro Duda)** *Frevo* is the music and dance genre featured during *carnaval* in northeast Brazil. **Duda** (José Ursicino da Silva, 1935-) is the acknowledged master composer-arranger who set the reference for *frevo* in the port town of *Recife*, state of *Pernambuco*. *Frevo's* fast tempo and melodic character features virtuosic scale-based runs played by a big band of saxophones and brass. The piece in A minor is set in AABBCA form, the final A modulating up a whole step to B minor. The C section is a contrapuntal duo in A major.

9. **Maracatu de Reis (Maracatu of the Kings)** *Maracatu* is an Afro-Brazilian processional tradition represented by different *nações* (nations) whose direct roots from Africa were preserved as a result of the Portuguese slave trade. Much like *escola de samba* (samba school) in Rio de Janeiro, a maracatu nation in full procession and costume can be comprised of up to several hundred musicians, singers and dancers. Each nation has its king (*rei*) and queen (*rainha*). The highly polyrhythmic percussion texture is offset by diatonic syncopated melodies customarily performed in call-and-response fashion.

Maracatu de Reis is dedicated to prolific composer and ethnomusicologist **César Guerra-Peixe** (1914-1993). Apart from his impressive body of compositions, his 1950 treatise on *maracatu* remains the most authoritative. The main theme of the piece uses the common *Lydian dominant mode*, proceeding through an elaborate and diversified form or episodes. There is an improvised modal guitar solo accompanied by a clarinet bassline using "slap" percussion technique, followed by a written clarinet solo. Guitar tuning is *Dropped C-G* (CGDGBE), expanding the bass register and offering new harmonic possibilities. This movement closes the first half of the suite.

10. **Violão Nordestino** This extensive solo guitar piece (the only of the suite) begins the second half of the suite. Based on the *baião* and *musica armorial* (see next movement), it is dedicated to the late guitarist **Sebastião Tapajós** (1943-2021). Originally from Amazonian state *Pará*, his playing and compositions unite a strong classical training with extensive knowledge of folkloric genres and an impressive command of jazz harmony. The piece is framed by four main themes surrounded by slower *armorial* passages and athenmatic rhythmic textures.

11. **Toada Armorial** *Toada* is a ballad form originating in northeast Brazil but prevalent in other regions as well. Usually in 4/4 meter, *Toada Armorial* is set in a dirge-like 3/4. It is dedicated to **Ariano Suassuna** (1927-2014), the cultural founder of the *Armoial* movement in the 1960's. *Armoial* was reflected not only in music, but poetry, fine art and architecture. Its music melds medieval modal references with a classical chamber style. The basic form of the piece is AABCA, including a solo guitar introduction and other transition material. The final A utilizes extensive reharmonization of the modal melody, sweeping Brahmsian guitar accompaniment and an intensified clarinet statement of the main theme an octave higher.

12. **Coco Pouco Loco (A Bit Crazy Coco)** *Coco* is a close variant of *baião* in which clever lyrics are sung in sixteenth notes with relaxed agility. Cocos can also assume the form of the *desafio*, a musical duel in which two singers accompany themselves on *pandeiro* (Brazilian tambourine) trading humorous insults and gossip. *Coco* was hugely popularized by the great **Jackson do Pandeiro** (José Gomes Filho, 1919-1982). As in movement #7, guitar percussion with two-hand tapping predominates in the opening verse, imitating the *zabumba drum*. The piece has a typical *ritornello* preceding each verse, whose form is AABC.

13. **Xote Grego (Greek Xote)** This *xote* is the second dedication to **Luiz Gonzaga**. It blends *xote*'s traditional melodic and harmonic vocabulary with *bouzouki* lines more befitting of the Greek sailor dance known as *sirtaki*. Gonzaga's composition title *Pagode Russo* was the genesis of this merging of two unlikely styles. Being of Greek descent, Boukas decided to bring this idea into sonic realization. The form also uses a *ritornello* preceding each verse. The melody is shifted between clarinet and guitar, opening up the opportunity for contrapuntal writing in the clarinet.

14. **Spok Bach** This *frevo* is a double dedication to the dazzling **Spok Frevo Orchestra** (formed in 2001) and **J.S. Bach**. After an initial double statement of the *A theme*, a metric modulation derails into a contrapuntal reworking of Bach's *Prelude in D Major* from *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book One*. The *A* section returns, followed by a *C* section whose modulatory harmonies and asymmetrical phrase structure contrast with the more traditional *A theme*. This leads directly to a jazzy clarinet "*Shout chorus*" based on the original Bach prelude harmonic structure. The final *A* section closes this hybridized adventure.

15. **Marcha das Baianas (March of the Baianas)** This gentle *marcha rancho* evokes the elegant procession of *baianas* (young women singers). It is dedicated to **Antônio Nóbrega** (1952-), brilliant multi-instrumentalist and Northeast Brazilian cultural icon. After a strictly classical formation as orchestral violinist in Recife, *Nóbrega* envisioned and realized elaborate spectacular shows showcasing popular folkloric genres in both music and dance. *Marcha das Baianas* begins with a solo guitar introduction which leads into the *marcha* tempo. The main melody is quite diatonic, however the *B* and *C* sections in this ABACDA form are far more elusive harmonically. A solo guitar interlude precedes a final and partial statement of the *A theme*.

16. **Horizonte Infinito** (Infinite Horizon) This *choro* is dedicated to the singular prolific genius of Brazilian contemporary music, **Hermeto Pascoal** (1936-), who for decades has been one of Boukas's primary compositional influences and source of inspiration. Both the melodic and harmonic vocabularies are earmark *Hermeto*. The ABBACA form (with an *introduction* and companion *outroduction*) winds its way through several key centers and technically virtuosic clarinet writing. A rare *rubato* guitar interlude precedes a final reworking of the A theme.

17. **Tocata Sertaneja** Sertaneja refers to music from the *sertão*, or its distinctive cultural milieu. This piece is a *forró*, a fast *baião*. *Forró* is not considered to be a single genre *per se*, but a lively dance party featuring numerous Northeast Brazilian genres. This piece is dedicated to the great accordionist-guitarist-composer **Sivuca** (Severino Dias de Oliveira, 1930-2006), who championed his own particular fusion of *baiao* with a jazz harmonic vocabulary.

This uptempo *baiao* merges the technical challenges of a keyboard *tocata* with jazzy melodic cross-rhythms and a cycle of fifths harmonic structure. This movement is the actual *Finale* of the suite, leading directly to the Postlude. After a double statement of the main A theme in A major, a B section in Eb minor unwinds into a slow, pensive guitar solo. To prepare the final A, the guitar introduces *tocata* sixteenth-note figuration while accelerating back to the original tempo.

18. **Despedida ao Sertão** (Farewell to the Sertão) Without tribute, this brief Postlude is a *baiao* restatement of the final theme from movement 10's solo guitar piece, *Violão Nordestino*.

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