

Henrique Oswald: a Brazilian Foreigner in Brazil—Comments on a Gap in the History of Brazilian Classical Music

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Abstract: *This article addresses the historical gap concerning the Brazilian composer and pianist Henrique Oswald (1852 – 1931). Oswald spent many years in Europe and, back to Brazil, he and his music were accused of not being “Brazilian enough”. Notwithstanding, Oswald is one of the greatest Brazilian composers of all times. So far, however, he has not achieved the historical recognition he deserves.*

Keywords: *Henrique Oswald, Music, History, Discrimination, Brazil*

*The man who is swimming against the stream
knows the strength of it.*

Thomas Woodrow Wilson

I. “By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants”

History’s raw material are human facts and it is for historians to decide which of those are historical, what means to have collective importance among the uncountable other facts that have not; in other words, historical facts are the tip of an iceberg which is already an iceberg’s tip (since the great majority of them will remain inaccessible forever), and their historicity will always rest on human decision. Being a conversation of the present with the past, History lies, to a large extent, in the methods of fact gathering and in the person who gathers and interprets them. As the English historian Edward Hallett Carr (1892-1982) puts,

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use - these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.[1]

No wonder History is full of misinterpretations, gaps, and flaws of all kinds. In the following lines, we will address one of those cases, namely that of the Brazilian composer and pianist Henrique José Pedro Maria Carlos Luis Oswald (1852 – 1931), better known as just Henrique Oswald.

II. Nationalism as fashion

Discrimination seems to have been a genetic fate for Henrique Oswald. Indeed, “Oswald was born in Rio de Janeiro. His father was a Swiss-German immigrant and his mother from Italy. The family name was changed from ‘Oschwald’ due to concerns of discrimination”.[2] Born in Rio de Janeiro, by then capital of the Empire of

Brazil, Henrique Oswald travelled quite a lot; for the standards of that time, one can say that he became a citizen of the world. In 1854

the Oswald family moved to São Paulo. His mother taught music privately to aristocrats and by age 12 he had his first recital. In São Paulo, he also studied with Gabriel Guiraudon. His “farewell recital” occurred at age 16; after this he went to study in Europe. He studied in Europe then spent several years in Florence. In 1902 he won a piano composition competition sponsored by *Le Figaro* with the piece *Il neige!*... (‘It snows’). He then left his family in Europe (they moved to Brazil much later) and from 1903 to 1906 directed the *Instituto Nacional de Música* in Rio de Janeiro. He also served as Brazilian consul in both The Hague and Genoa. He died in 1931, just several days after his birthday festivities.[3]

A relevant fact is that the jury of that piano competition was composed by nothing more, nothing less than Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) and Louis-Joseph Diémer (1843-1919).[4] Although he was one of the leading figures of Brazilian Musical Romanticism, Oswald, so far, has not achieved the recognition he deserves in History. Brilliant as composer, instrumentalist and teacher, Oswald was accused of not being “Brazilian enough”, so to say, by nationalist authors such as Mário de Andrade (1893-1945) and Renato Almeida (1895-1981).[5] *Envy and inferiority complex* could have been the baseline in the background of the nationalistic discriminations suffered by “Henrique Oswald” – as Mário de Andrade, in his obsession with having a Brazilian identity at any price, went as far as calling him, just like in the case of Johann Sebastian Bach, laughably renamed by the author of *Pequena História da Música* (“*Little History of Music*”) as “*João Sebastião Bach*”.[6]

As a social resonance of what was happening in Europe at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, nationalism became fashionable in Brazil and in Latin America as a whole. One example out of many is that the first Odeon records recorded in Brazil, precisely in the period 1902-1907, had the colours of the Brazilian flag in the label and all of them contained popular Brazilian music.[7] Anyway, Henrique Oswald – praised abroad as a composer and instrumentalist, let alone his experience as consul of the then-young *República do Brasil* – made himself a career to be envied. His extensive repertoire includes symphonies, masses, as well as piano pieces, duos, trios, quartets and so on; yet, it was in chamber music that he felt more at home, so to say. More than one of his Brazilian peers must have felt dwarfed by him. Historically and geographically, Oswald clearly stands out due to the diversity of his creations, as well as to his high technical and artistic skills; Oswald’s music is one of the most refined one can find in Brazilian Romanticism. Described as the most prominent creative figure in all Brazilian History of Music, Heitor Villa-Lobos (1857-1959), although he himself was a nationalist, recognized Oswald’s worth and made his works more widespread, namely his *Missa de Requiem*, which was included in Villa-Lobos’s *Coleção Escolar*, published by the renowned publishing house Arthur Napoleão, which for decades promoted Brazilian classical music.[8]

III. It is about time to rehabilitate Henrique Oswald

Italian, French, German and Russian influences are significant in Oswald’s chamber music. They helped him to develop his own musical language, characterized by a solid technique of composition, along with the complete mastery of melody and harmony; Oswald was at ease in roaming through different keys, at times demanding virtuosity from the interpreters. Musical Impressionism was not unfamiliar to him, a fact that can be noticed in his *Ofélia*’s song cycle, composed in 1901. Refinement, elegance, singularity, clearness and simplicity were the trademark of Oswald’s work as a whole. Europe granted him recognition; great names like those of Saint-Saëns, Buonamici, Fauré, José Vianna da Mota, Vladimir Rebikov and Isidor Philipp admired Oswald’s music.

In Brazil, however, his qualities and achievements as composer, pianist and teacher (brilliant Brazilian artists, such as Luciano Gallet, João Octaviano, Frutuoso Vianna and Oscar Lorenzo Fernández were his pupils) are still undervalued – notwithstanding some exceptions, being the already mentioned Villa-Lobos one of them.[9] Discrimination and ostracism has been the price Henrique Oswald paid for being loyal to his own musical style. It must be considered that true works of music (and this applies to all other branches of art) go beyond national frontiers. No matter how much of Gabriel Fauré’s music Henrique Oswald assimilated (the French composer was his model *par excellence*), he will always be a romantic Brazilian composer; likewise, stylistic similarities between Salvador Dalí’s (1904-1989) painting and that of the Dutch Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450 – 1516) do not make him less Catalan or surrealistic than he was as a painter.[10]

Contemporary Brazilian researchers, namely Fausto Borém de Oliveira, José Eduardo Martins, Eduardo Monteiro and Marcelo Henrique Coutinho, have started to plant the seeds of rehabilitation of Henrique Oswald, “one of the greatest Brazilian composers of all times”. [11] Let us hope the sowing will pay off, so that History (one of the most imprecise of all sciences) will grant this “forgotten Brazilian master” [12] of music (the most abstract of all arts) the place he deserves.

References

- [1.] Edward Hallett Carr. *What is History?*, London, Penguin, 2008, p. 23.
- [2.] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrique_Oswald.
- [3.] Id. Oswald’s father died during the family’s stay in Italy and the young musician started to face financial problems. Fortunately, Dom Pedro II (1825-1891), the generous Brazilian Emperor, then passing through Italy, granted Henrique Oswald a pension from his own pocket (see Tomás Borba & Fernando Lopes Graça. *Dicionário de música ilustrado*, Lisbon, Cosmos, 1963, v. II, p. 329).
- [4.] In spite of all those connections with the French musical world, there is not the least mention of Henrique Oswald and his music in the more than 1.200 pages of Jean and Brigitte Massin’s *Histoire de la Musique Occidentale*, published by the first time in 1983 by Fayard.
- [5.] See Marcelo Henrique Coutinho. *O ciclo “Ofélia” no contexto da obra vocal de câmara de Henrique Oswald* (Master’s Thesis), Rio de Janeiro, UFRJ, 2009, pp. 1-3 et passim.
- [6.] See Mário de Andrade. *Pequena história da música*, Belo-Horizonte, Itatiaia, 1987, pp. 80 et passim.
- [7.] See Wilson Martins. *História da inteligência brasileira (1897-1914)*, São Paulo, Cultrix/Universidade de São Paulo, 1978, t. V, p. 182.
- [8.] “Arthur Napoleão dos Santos (6 March 1843– 12 May 1925) was a Portuguese composer, pianist, instrument dealer and music publisher. Brother of Aníbal Napoleão and Alfredo Napoleão. He was born in Porto, Portugal, and gave his first piano concert at the age of 7. When he was 8, supported by Ferdinand II of Portugal, Napoleão gave his first international concerts, visiting cities such as London (where he played at the Portuguese Embassy in the city) and Paris. Thereafter he toured all over Europe and America, sometimes playing duets with Henri Vieuxtemps or Henryk Wieniawski. At age of 15, he performed in New York and critic Richard Storrs Willis attended ‘out of curiosity to see the sort of child that tickles Europe’. Willis was impressed and noted him as ‘an extraordinary performer... His touch is exquisitely full of tenderness; his precision almost unerring; his power more than respectable, and his rounding of musical thought perfectly delightful’ (Vera Brodsky Lawrence). In 1866 he settled in Brazil, living in Rio de Janeiro. Here he set up a shop to sell instruments and publish sheet music. He taught piano lessons (one of his pupils was Chiquinha Gonzaga) and composed almost exclusively piano pieces. He died in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, aged 82. He is the Patron of Chair 18 of the Brazilian Academy of Music” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Napole%C3%A3o_dos_Santos).
- [9.] Oswald dedicated the last 20 years of his life to the teaching of music to Brazilian students; by this time, “he played a prominent role in Rio’s musical life” (Edward Booth et alii. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, London, Macmillan, 2001, v. X, p. 463; see also Henry George Farmer et alii. *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, Kassel/Basel, Im Bärenreiter-Verlag Kassel und Basel, 1949-1957, v. XVIII, p. 790; and Florêncio de Almeida Lima. *Elementos fundamentais da música*, Rio de Janeiro, Author’s edition, 1958, p. 328).
- [10.] See, for instance, Leosinha Magalhães de Almeida. *Henrique Oswald. 1952-1931*, Rio de Janeiro, Departamento de Imprensa Nacional, 1952, p. 64).
- [11.] Eduardo Monteiro. “Henrique Oswald e os românticos brasileiros: em busca do tempo perdido”, in *Textos do Brasil*, n. 12, Brasília, Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2005, p. 71.
- [12.] Fausto Borém de Oliveira. “Henrique Oswald: A Biography of a Forgotten Brazilian Master”, in *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1994), pp. 75-92.