



A caricature of the *pianeiro* Sinhô, by Nássara

Brazilian Piano Styles

By Jovino Santos Neto

This is a basic overview of the use of the piano in Brazilian music, from the 1820s, when pianos were first brought and made popular throughout the countryside, to the present. I will outline some of the basic stylistic idioms and present practical rhythmic, melodic and harmonic approaches that can be useful to all those interested in traditional and contemporary Brazilian music.

- **1808- 1860 – Lundus and Modinhas**

One of the main differences between Brazil and the other South American countries is the fact that, as the sole colony of Portugal in the continent, it became for several years the actual seat of the Portuguese Empire. In 1808, when John VI, fleeing from Napoleon, moved his court from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro, a new cultural era was ushered. Brazilian ports were open for trade with other countries, a National Press was founded (which led to a wide diffusion of printed sheet music in the coming decades), and European ideas and art were brought into a mix that already included millions of Africans, Native Brazilians and Portuguese immigrants. Soon, pianos built in England found their way into the homes of wealthy landowners, even those living hundreds of miles inland. It was common then for these plantation masters to have their African slaves learn music, and some farms even had full orchestras with resident black arrangers and performers of sacred and profane music. The Emperor, a declared music lover, invited several European composers to visit and live in Rio, among them **Sigismund von Neukomm**, a German disciple of Josef Haydn, who stayed from 1816 to 1821 and taught several Brazilian pupils. His piano piece *O Amor Brazilêro – Caprice pour le Pianoforte sur un Londú brésilien* (op.38) is the first documented instance of an African-derived song form entering the European concert tradition. The form was the *lundu*, a sensuous and syncopated dance brought from Africa by slaves and performed in the courtyards after a day's work. Its characteristics were the use of systematized syncopation, a flattened leading note, and switches between major and minor modes in the same key. It sounded strange, exotic and attractive to European ears, and it soon became a popular style, appealing to many Brazilian composers. Among them was the priest **José Maurício Garcia** (1762-1830), hailed by his peers as a notable

improviser on the organ and the clavichord, but who soon switched to the newly arrived instrument, the piano. He was nominated Inspector of the Royal Chapel, a music Academy that trained hundreds of musicians, both Brazilian and foreign. Several of his *lundus* and *modinhas* (romantic Portuguese songs, usually performed on guitar) have been preserved to this day. Even though pianos were widely popular among the leading elite of the country (in 1856 Rio was called “the city of pianos” by a foreign visitor), the close contact between masters and slaves, who were often employed as musicians, propitiated a diffusion of their sound and of their appreciation by the general population.

- **1860- 1930 – Polkas, Maxixes and Choros**

In the second half of the 19th century, as a strong middle class started to develop in the now independent kingdom of Brazil, the piano started its trajectory to become a truly popular instrument. European dance forms such as the waltz, the polka and the mazurka became very popular. One of the main players in this period was the composer **Ernesto Nazareth** (1863-1930), whose work, situated halfway between the classical and popular idioms, reflected the transition of the piano from the rich households to coffee houses, salons, brothels, restaurants and the homes of simple people. Slavery in Brazil was abolished in 1888, which led to a huge influx of workers from the rural farmlands to the burgeoning cities of Rio, São Paulo, Recife and Salvador. Another key figure of this period is **Chiquinha Gonzaga** (1847-1935), a bold lady whose compositions blended the classical European tradition with syncopations derived from the African *batuques* heard in the evenings in the courtyards. This was the beginning of a new type of musician, the *planeiros*, whose melodic, humorous, soft and syncopated approach to music contrasted with that of the *pianistas*, or purists of European classical forms. Other important names from this period, which had its apex from 1915 to 1931, were **Sinhô**, **Bequinho** and **Luís Masson**. The *planeiros* were part of a Pan-American wave responsible for the shift in feel that transformed the popular polka rhythm:



into the *habanera* half-syncopation:



The *habanera* pattern is found on a wide variety of styles, from the tango of Buenos Aires to the Cuban *danzón*, and is also present in early American jazz compositions, such as *St. Louis Blues*. Jelly Roll Morton was referring to this pattern when he said that the "Spanish Tinge" was an essential element of jazz. The parallels between American jazz and the music of Brazil still go deeper. Listeners often feel a strong connection between the early choros (then known as "Brazilian tangos") and ragtime music. Both forms were based on the traditional rondo form (AABACA) of European music, and were often notated in 2/4 time, which represented the feel of the beat. However, in ragtime the rhythmic displacement of the melody notes pointed to a basic unevenness, subtly combining a binary and a ternary pattern into what became known as *swing*, where in maxixe and in choro music the melody retained its even 16th note feel, developing syncopation by the use of rests and accents. Below are some examples:

Excerpt from *O Corta Jaca*, by Chiquinha Gonzaga:

Soon, the *habanera* accompaniment had moved towards a more syncopated pattern, composed mostly of the rhythmic figure known as *garfo* (fork), represented by a 16th, an 8th and another 16th:



This bouncy pattern, in which the central 8th note is played staccato, became the basis for melody and accompaniment of *choros* and *maxixes*. The main difference between these two styles is that in the *choros*, the melody is comprised of long sequences of 16th notes, more in accordance with the polka tradition from where it was derived at first, whereas in a *maxixe* the *garfo* pattern is present in the melody as well. The *maxixe* dance became extremely popular and polemic in Rio around the turn of the century, as it required sensuous moves from the dancers, shocking the more traditional segments of society, but nevertheless attracting thousands to join in the balls that were advertised year-round, as well as during Carnival. In 1914, the wife of then President Hermes da Fonseca was scolded by Senator Rui Barbosa for promoting a social gathering in the Presidential Palace where Chiquinha Gonzaga's *O Corta*

Jaca was performed on guitar. In Barbosa's words, "...this is the lowest, basest, and grossest of savage dances, the twin sister of the *batuque*, the *cateretê* and the samba. It cannot receive the same attentions as the music of Wagner, lest the national conscience revolts and our faces blush with shame." These strong words are a testimony to the power of syncopation to move people around in strange and unheard of ways.

There is another important name to be mentioned here: Alfredo da Rocha Viana, known by his nickname of **Pixinguinha** (1897-1973). Although not a pianist (he started out as a virtuoso flutist and later moved on to the tenor saxophone), his countless compositions and beautifully crafted arrangements left an indelible mark in the styling of the music of Brazil, and in the way that the African, European and other influences were to be blended. In 1916 we have the first recorded samba in history, *Pelo Telefone*, written by **Donga** (Ernesto dos Santos), and first notated for piano by his band mate Pixinguinha in 1917, where it was a hit for Carnival

We end this section with another example by Ernesto Nazareth, where the left hand is almost totally syncopated, as the right hand plays chordal *garfos* with rests instead of the first 16th note, creating the light and bouncy feel that remains until today the center of the beating heart of Brazilian music.

Excerpt from 1922, by Ernesto Nazareth

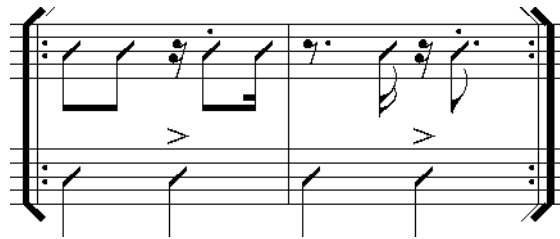
The musical score is for a piano piece in 2/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It is marked 'Piano' and 'f' (forte). The right hand plays a series of chords (garfos) with rests, while the left hand plays a syncopated melody. The first system consists of 8 measures, and the second system consists of 8 measures, ending with a final chord.

The year of 1922 also saw the beginning of a modernist movement in Brazil, and in music we see the appearance of **Heitor Villa-Lobos** (1887-1959), who successfully blended the bohemian *choro* tradition with European concert music.

- **1930-1958 – Samba-canção and Baião**

The 1930s saw the development of a new urban style of music, a reflection of the expansion of the main cities and the beginning of the change of Brazil from an agrarian into an industrial society. Samba was now a style of music played, sung and danced in the *morros*, or hills where the poor immigrants and the children of freed slaves were building precariously balanced huts over the city. Meanwhile, down in the city, a romantic wave of songs was being born, combining melodic elements of Italian arias with a languid, cool and subtle

rhythmic feel, that might have sounded like a ballad to American ears, but inside which a samba was softly pulsating. In both cases, the syncopated beats glided effortlessly over a strong low quarter note pulse. In the *favelas*, they were played by *tamborins* and handclaps over a fast pulse; in the city below, piano and guitar chords were outlining the same basic patterns at slower tempi:



The *samba-canção* was a distant cousin to the Cuban bolero, and the main vehicle of popular music expression in Brazil for decades. Here sophisticated harmonies were added, coloring emotionally charged lyrics and sinuous melodies of songs by **Noel Rosa**, **Ary Barroso**, **Pixinguinha**, **Herivelto Martins** and **Dorival Caymmi**. The proliferation of radio stations with live performances and the expansion of recorded music made sure that listeners and musicians alike throughout the vast countryside were becoming aware of the new style. Several important arrangers perfected their styles then, combining percussion from the *morros* with pianos and orchestras. Among them, there was a young pianist from the South of Brazil, **Radamés Gnattali** (1906-1988). Starting in 1931 as a conductor and arranger for the Rádio Nacional in Rio, he penned over 6000 charts, utilizing sophisticated harmonies that until then had been employed mostly by European composers like Debussy and Ravel, or by Americans like Gershwin and Berlin. However, the rhythmic basis gave the new music an unmistakable Brazilian flavor. Meanwhile, the successive waves of immigration from different regions also brought new elements into the mix. From the arid Northeastern states, composers like **Luiz Gonzaga** and **Jackson do Pandeiro**, often accompanied by accordion, triangle and *zabumba*, introduced a more rustic way to make music, featuring modal melodies born in the Middle East and brought to Portugal and Spain by the Arab invaders of the Iberian Peninsula, whose dominion of over 500 years left strong cultural marks. These, after being transplanted to Brazil by the colonizers, took root and blossomed into a style known generically as *baião*. Part dance music, part chronicle of a lives lived among poverty, drought and feudal landlords, the new musical arrival from the *Nordeste* was initially preferred only by the poor immigrants as a way to remember their home land, but eventually became one of the prime rhythmic and thematic propulsors of Brazilian popular music.

The post war years also saw a strong influence of American popular music on Brazilian musicians. Pianists/singers, such as **Johnny Alf** and **Dick Farney**, both Brazilians with anglicized names, were already blending harmonies borrowed from composers such as Gershwin and Berlin with a laid back vocal style reminiscent of Sinatra and Bing Crosby.

1958-1973 – Bossa Nova, MPB

In the late 50s, a new musical wave was being developed in Brazil, once again combining elements from quite different origins. On one hand, there was a group of young musicians in Rio who were listening to American jazz singers and players, absorbing harmonic influences and styles, especially from West Coast cool jazz musicians, such as Chet Baker and Barney Kessel. On the other hand, in the interior of Bahia State, a young guitarist, **João Gilberto**, created a sophisticated way to blend the syncopation of samba with altered chords, paving the way to the movement that eventually came to be known as *bossa nova*, or “new thing”. Gilberto’s creative partnership with pianist/composer **Antonio Carlos** (a.k.a. **Tom**) **Jobim** (1927-1994) and with lyricist **Vinícius de Moraes** sparked a way of music making that emphasized sophisticated harmonies with an understated vocal delivery and a delicate groove, often based on samba, but with other rhythms present as well. Many other pianists contributed to the development of the bossa nova language, among them **Luis Eça**, **Eumir Deodato**, **Sérgio Mendes**, **Hamilton Godoy**, **César Camargo Mariano** and **João Donato**.

As Brazil underwent a military coup in 1964, leading to the establishment of a dictatorship and to the curtailing of human rights, music became a powerful force in the reflection of the cultural, artistic and political aspirations of a whole generation. The **MPB** (for *Música Popular Brasileira*, or Brazilian Popular Music) trend that was bred in successive popular song festivals through the late 60s led to the appearance of composers like **Chico Buarque de Hollanda**, **Milton Nascimento**, **Edu Lobo**, **Caetano Veloso**, **Gilberto Gil** and **Ivan Lins**. Here a strong and politically engaged lyrical content was paired with a wider musical palette, featuring not only musical styles from all over the country (toada, frevo, baião, xote) but also importing elements from rock and pop music from the rest of the world.

- 1973 – 2000 – **Música Instrumental Brasileira** (Brazilian Jazz)

The early 70s mark the appearance on the scene of a new generation of musicians, who, while remaining aware of and being inspired by the traditional forms of Brazilian music, also opened up new means of musical expression that reflected the creative urge of musicians from all over the world. A key figure in this period is **Hermeto Pascoal**, a self-taught multi-instrumentalist, composer and arranger from Northeastern Brazil who, through his ensembles and his individual work, can be considered the father of modern instrumental music in Brazil. He developed his iconoclastic style in many scenes, from street fairs in his home state of Alagoas to jazz clubs in São Paulo to New York, where his music was recorded by Miles Davis in 1970. In Brazil, he mentored and inspired successive generations of musicians, and continues to be a driving force in the music of Brazil today. Other important names that relate to Brazilian piano in this period are **Egberto Gismonti**, **Wagner Tiso**, **Nelson Ayres** and **Gilson Peranzetta**.

One factor that defines modern Brazilian instrumental music is its ability to remain connected to the traditional styles of the past century, while it reaches out to inspire and be inspired by other musical traditions of the world. In fact, this “universal regionalism” has been a trademark of the peculiar mix of elements found in Brazil since the 1800s. Today, there is a new generation of players who have learned the classic choro, maxixe, baião, samba and bossa nova repertoire, while they incorporate modern harmonic techniques of improvisation and composition, expanding both the roots and the branches of the Brazilian Music tree.

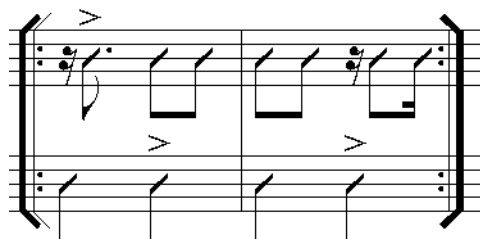
Appendix – Brazilian Groove Samples

In this appendix, I have selected some rhythmic patterns as samples of the major styles prevalent in the music of Brazil. They are represented below in 2 layers, shown on 2 staves. The grooves are shown as simple pairs of 2/4 measures, which may be combined into longer patterns and extended to generate different meters as well. For pianists, a suggested use would be to practice them both in a solo setting (when the 2 hands represent both layers) and in a rhythm section context (where the functions of the layers may be assigned to different instruments). For a selected discography or listening suggestions, I recommend an Internet search using the names mentioned in this text. There are many web sites in Portuguese and in English that document the biographies of the musicians, as well as online retailers that sell their recordings, such as www.caravanmusic.com, www.brazilianjazz.com, www.ventania.com.br and www.brazmus.com. I also recommend to anyone interested in becoming familiar with these styles to learn the melodies of songs, as they will become invaluable elements in the internalizing of the architecture of each style.

- Samba 1



- Samba 2



• Baião 1

Musical notation for Baião 1, consisting of two staves. The right staff features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes and chords, while the left staff has a simpler bass line with quarter notes and rests.

• Variation:

Musical notation for a variation of Baião 1, consisting of two staves. The right staff features a different rhythmic arrangement of sixteenth notes and chords compared to the original, while the left staff remains the same.

• Baião 2

Musical notation for Baião 2, consisting of two staves. The right staff features a rhythmic pattern with accents (>) on the notes, and the left staff has a bass line with accents (>) on the notes.

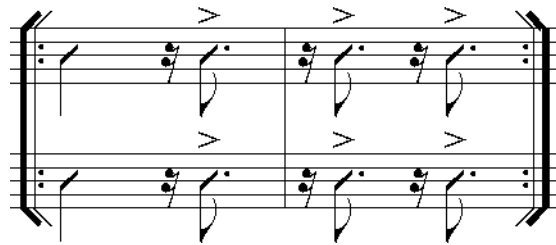
• Baião 3

Musical notation for Baião 3, consisting of two staves. The right staff features a rhythmic pattern with accents (>) on the notes, and the left staff has a bass line with accents (>) on the notes.

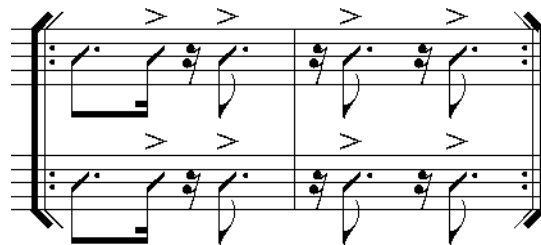
• Choro

Musical notation for Choro, consisting of two staves. The right staff features a rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes and chords, and the left staff has a bass line with quarter notes and rests.

- Maracatu



- Variation:



- Frevo



About the author

Jovino Santos Neto was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He worked as a pianist, flutist and producer with Hermeto Pascoal from 1977 to 1992, and moved to the United States in 1993 to pursue his own career as a musician, composer and educator. He recently won the IAJE/ASCAP Commission for an established composer and the Chamber Music America *New Works* jazz composition award. Jovino is an Associate Professor of Music at Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts, and has released several recordings, leading his own ensemble and also in collaboration with musicians such as Mike Marshall and Richard Boukas. For more information about Jovino's music, please visit his web site at www.jovisan.net