

“Musique Cannibale”: The Evolving Sound of Indigeneity in Heitor Villa-Lobos’s *Tres poemas indigenas*

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In December 1927 Paris’s Salle Gaveau hosted a performance of works by Heitor Villa-Lobos, to great acclaim. A front-page concert review in the newspaper *L’Intransigeant* noted especially a series of three songs, *Trois poèmes indiens*, in connection with a tale of Villa-Lobos’s capture by Amerindian Brazilian “cannibals,” rescue by heroic whites, and eventual return to urban life with the fruits of “jungle” music.

The story is surely apocryphal, but the works, later published with the Portuguese title *Tres poemas indigenas*, shed light on a real cultural-historical process. Villa-Lobos was no collector-champion: two songs were arrangements of melodies that had previously been published, and the third set a newly written poem by Villa-Lobos’s modernist colleague Mário de Andrade. Villa-Lobos’s songs define and make use of indigenous Brazilian identity in a particular way, inscribing indigeneity and modernism together into contemporary Brazilian nationalism.

Over the course of the three songs, Villa-Lobos uses increasing pitch resources and expanded interval contrast to create an evolving image of Amerindian music-making, beginning with a narrow pitch collection and ostinatos and ending with a more Lied-like approach to text-music relations. Villa-Lobos takes advantage of Brazilian urban Indianist fantasies, while also redefining indigeneity as something expansive, able to encompass even the most modern and urban of Brazilian materials, so long as they draw upon themes perceived to be related to indigeneity.

Using close readings, I take *Tres poemas indigenas* as a case study in composition’s exposure to intertwining pressures of exoticism, modernism, and nationalism. Villa-Lobos’s embrace of distant, primitive indigeneity made for good fortune on foreign shores. But it also served a domestic project which cast indigeneity as integral to national identity. From these songs, this paper also connects to broader discussions of the relationship between indigeneity and nationalism and of the foreign and domestic consumption of Amerindian caricatures.