

THE VALUE OF STUDYING CHORO FOR THE CONTEMPORARY JAZZ GUITARIST

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The Music of Argentina and Brazil, MCY 662  
April 22, 2016

## **The Value of Studying Choro for the Contemporary Jazz Guitarist**

Brazilian music had a profound impact on global musical styles in the twentieth century and continues to be influential. The scope of this imprint is evident in the fact that after swing, the second most common time feel in which American jazz standards are interpreted is bossa nova (or samba, at brighter tempos). It has become a requirement for jazz guitarists, and all rhythm section players, to be able to adapt the performance of common melodies and chord progressions to the template of Brazilian rhythms. Many otherwise excellent working guitarists are uncertain of what musical patterns to play with Brazilian time feels, and often the subtle asymmetries of the subdivision are overlooked. Fortunately, recent developments in technology are bringing about a culture of global listening in which more care is given to the credible representation of world music styles. The emerging generation of jazz musicians is not content to render repertoire in an ambiguously “latin” style. Higher standards of authenticity are being set for understanding South American and Caribbean music. The cultivated player of a style is one who investigates the origins of a tradition at its roots, studying not only the noteworthy contemporary players, but also discovering their influences and cultural backgrounds. In regards to bossa nova and samba, an acquaintance with the virtuosic tradition of choro is the inevitable result of such delving. The study of choro greatly enhances the working knowledge of Brazilian guitar styles required of the contemporary jazz guitarist.

Choro proceeds from a unique milieu in Brazilian history. The abolishment of slavery occurred comparatively late in Brazil, in the year 1888. A resulting mass movement of people

from rural areas to urban centers followed, creating a dynamic confluence of cultures.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the continued importation of slaves from West Africa, nineteenth century Brazil also experienced a steady stream of European immigration. German, Italian and Russian immigrants, among others, arrived with their instruments and musical traditions, contributing new sounds to the blend of Luso-Brazilian, Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian music that pre-existed in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> In Rio de Janeiro and the city of Salvador in Bahia, dances of European derivation, such as the waltz, quadrille, schottish and polka, evolved under the influence of the Afro-Brazilian lundu and began to take on a unique Brazilian character.<sup>3</sup> The nascent styles hybridized European instrumentation and harmonic tendencies with Afro-Brazilian rhythms and percussion instruments.<sup>4</sup> Tango brasileiro, polca-lundu and maxixe are a few examples of the profusion of dances, rhythms and musical forms that came into being in the half-century following emancipation.<sup>5</sup> It was this potent environment of intermingling and amalgamation that gave rise to the enigmatic choro.

At the turn of the century, the *terno*, a trio comprised of flute, cavaquinho and guitar, was a common ensemble. With the addition of the violão de sete cordas (seven-string guitar) and the pandeiro, with the occasional substitution of the ten-string bandolim for the flute, the terno was expanded to become the *conjunto regional*, the typical instrumentation of choro.<sup>6</sup> The specific

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<sup>1</sup> *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, s.v. "Brazil," by Gerard Béhague. Accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/03894#S03894.3.1>

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Magaldi, "Brazil," in *Musics of Latin America*, eds. Robin Moore and Walter A. Clark (New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 254-255.

<sup>3</sup> Tamara Livingston-Isenhour and Thomas Garcia, *Choro: A Social History of a Brazilian Popular Music* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), 180-186.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Béhague.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Rodhe, "Violão de Sete Cordas" in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Popular Music*, ed. George Torres, (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2013) Accessed April 22, 2016 [https://books.google.com/books?id=MX5BXxjwV9cC&pg=PA445&lpg=PA445&dq=who+are+the+most+influential+guitarists+of+choro?&source=bl&ots=jTyFJcdljo&sig=ONCurzVoad\\_4FDXs8sTFTMjWrNA&hl=en&sa=X&](https://books.google.com/books?id=MX5BXxjwV9cC&pg=PA445&lpg=PA445&dq=who+are+the+most+influential+guitarists+of+choro?&source=bl&ots=jTyFJcdljo&sig=ONCurzVoad_4FDXs8sTFTMjWrNA&hl=en&sa=X&)

origins of the seven-string guitar in Brazil are not known definitively, but speculation attributes its arrival to immigrants from Russia, where a seven-string folk guitar tradition is known to have been sustained by the Romani people.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the inclusion of the violão de sete cordas in the ensemble had profound consequences for the guitar traditions of Brazil. Due to the instrument's distinct contrapuntal musical role, it provides a valuable key to understanding harmony in popular Brazilian music.

The introduction of the violão de sete cordas into the conjunto regional, likely around 1920, is credited to two musicians, Otavio "China" Viana (1888-1927) and Artur "Tute" de Souza Nascimento (1886-1957).<sup>8</sup> Both worked in the group known as "Os Oito Batutas" with legendary flautist and saxophonist Alfredo "Pixinguinha" da Rocha Vianna (1897-1973).<sup>9</sup> During this period of time, the professionalization of Choro was being driven by the hire of ensembles in silent cinemas, radio stations and recording studios. Chorões (the musicians who specialized in choro) in the regionais were expected to be able to play a variety of styles and to accompany singers and guest soloists on recordings for broadcast. The role of the violão de sete cordas in the ensemble was to provide the bass line, or "baixaria." Tute and China were known for playing a steady quarter note pulse that held the ensemble together.<sup>10</sup> The full contrapuntal potential of this role was later realized by Horondino "Dino Sete Cordas" Jose da Silva (1918-2006).

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[ed=0ahUKewj1hs\\_et4LMAhWibT4KHUxWAfiQ6AEINTAD#v=onepage&q=who%20are%20the%20most%20influential%20guitarists%20of%20choro%3F&f=false](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354111111_The_Brazilian_seven-string_guitar_traditions_techniques_and_innovations)

<sup>7</sup> Adam J. May, "The Brazilian seven-string guitar: traditions, techniques and innovations" (Master's thesis, Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, VCA & MCM, The University of Melbourne, 2013), 17-19.

<sup>8</sup> Livingston-Isenhour and Garcia, *Choro*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> May, 21.

Dino Sete Cordas played the six-string guitar in Os Oito Batutas for many years. He only transitioned to playing a seven-string instrument when China and Tute retired.<sup>11</sup> Dino's contributions to the technique of the instrument, however, would be incomparably influential. The virtuosic counter-melodic lines Dino developed on the violão de sete cordas are believed to find their derivation in Pixinguinha's saxophone playing.<sup>12</sup> In the late 1940's, during a time of economic hardship, Pixinguinha allowed his friend and colleague Benedito Lacerdo (1903-1958), also a flautist, to purchase the rights to his music.<sup>13</sup> Having traveled to Europe as a performer, Pixinguinha had taken a liking to the saxophone, and transitioned to the modern reed instrument, allowing Lacerdo to occupy the flute chair. From that point onward, Pixinguinha embraced a counter-melodic role in the ensemble, playing obligatos and guide-tone lines against the melody. The style of Pixinguinha's accompanying is in turn attributed to the ophicleide playing of his mentor Irineu de Almeida (1863-1914) in the fire department band, *O Banda do Corpos de Bombeiros*.<sup>14</sup>

A striking parallel exists between the shift from tuba to string bass in North American jazz and the conversion from ophicleide and other low brass to the violão de sete cordas in Brazil. Both transitions occurred within the first two decades of the twentieth century, and both coincide with advancements in recording capabilities and increased radio dissemination of music. In the 1920's, powered microphones made the employment of string instruments practical in a greater variety of contexts. Through these causal trends, and due to the broad influence of Pixinguinha and Dino Sete Cordas, a continuity was established in which the role of the low

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup> Livingston-Isenhour and Garcia, *Choro*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> May, 22.

brass in wind bands at the turn of the century exerted a definitive impact on the development of guitar playing in Brazil in the twentieth century.

The relevance of the contrapuntal baixarias of the violão de sete cordas to understanding harmony in Brazilian popular music is underscored by the ubiquity of chord inversion in choro, samba and bossa nova progressions. Many commonalities exist between harmony in popular Brazilian music of the twentieth century and harmony in North American jazz. The majority of progressions are in major or minor keys and are often enhanced by secondary dominants, tritone substitution and occasional modal interchange chords. In Brazil, however, the tendency of the guitar to provide a complimentary melody in the lower register has yielded an approach to harmony in which inversions of chords have taken on characteristic identities of their own.

*The Real Book*,<sup>15</sup> which has been the most popular fake book containing jazz repertoire in the last couple decades, finds its closest parallel in Brazil in the collection of songbooks assembled by musician and scholar Almir Chediak.<sup>16</sup> Numerous volumes have been compiled by Chediak, focused either on genres (i.e., bossa nova or choro), or on the works of specific songwriters. *The Real Book* volumes and the Chediak books present pieces in lead sheet format, with the melody represented on the five-line staff and the chord changes provided above for the accompanying instrumentalists. Drawing comparisons between the compositions in the two sets of books, one will find chord symbols in inversion, or chords synonymous with an inverted chord, with much greater frequency in the Brazilian repertoire. The devices of line cliché and contrary motion are pervasive in samba and bossa nova, emphasizing the melodic direction of the bass line as a key defining feature of the harmony of the composition. The function of the violão de sete cordas in the conjunto regional has undoubtedly informed this proclivity.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Real Book* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Almir Chediak, ed., *Bossa Nova I* (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Lumiar Editora, 1994).

Therefore, learning to play idiomatically appropriate accompaniment to choro melodies represents a direct path to a lexicon of chord voicings for the authentic interpretation of samba and bossa nova.

Additionally, the works of chorão Anibal “Garoto” Augusto Sardinha (1915-1955) are considered to be invaluable for the development of both traditional and contemporary Brazilian guitars skills. When I traveled to Brazil for the study of music in 2010, I arranged lessons with two excellent modern players of the violão de sete cordas; João Paulo Bittencourt of Rio de Janeiro<sup>17</sup> and Alessandro Penezzi of São Paulo.<sup>18</sup> Both expert chorões independently suggested the study of the works of Garoto as a means of acquiring the techniques and vocabulary of Brazilian guitar. The piece “Desvairada,” an example of a waltz (or “valsa”) within the choro repertoire, is standard guitar pedagogy in Brazil in addition to being a delightful guitar performance showcase.

Garoto, or “the kid,” was a child prodigy and became an accomplished multi-instrumentalist by the time he was in his twenties. Demand for his skills was great in Rio de Janeiro in the 1930’s, and his notoriety led to the opportunity to tour the United States with Carmen Miranda.<sup>19</sup> During his travels, Garoto was proactive in seeking out contact with American jazz musicians and had the opportunity to interact with Duke Ellington and Art Tatum in New York City. Upon his return to Brazil, Garoto brought these influences to bear on choro through his innovative compositions. In an inspiring set of interviews with contemporary purveyors of choro, compiled by Julie Koidin in 2011, numerous modern luminaries of the genre testify to Garoto’s contribution to the modernization of the genre through the expansion of the

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<sup>17</sup> João Paulo Bittencourt, personal communication with author, February 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Alessandro Penezzi, personal communication with author, March 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Livingston-Isenhour and Garcia, *Choro*, 112-114.

harmonic palette.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Garoto is credited with setting the stage for the emergence of bossa nova, despite the fact that his frail health and untimely death did not allow him to witness the birth of the next phase of Brazilian popular music.<sup>21</sup>

**Example 1. Nelson Faria, Musical example, samba, mm. 1-4.<sup>22</sup>**



Musical styles often owe aspects of their derivation to techniques that develop due to their ease of execution on the instrument. One example of this is the prevalence in Brazilian guitar playing of voicings that employ open strings. Open strings have been used for pedal point and close-voiced chording on the guitar for centuries, but the addition of the seventh string exponentially expands the number of available possibilities.<sup>23</sup> Nelson Faria provides an apt example of this usage of the guitar in one of his exercises for accompanying in his excellent instructional manual *The Brazilian Guitar Book* (see example 1).<sup>24</sup> Considerable challenge to the left hand is avoided through the use of open strings to manifest these voicings, which are otherwise possible but involve uncomfortable stretches. Brazilian guitar playing is replete with

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<sup>20</sup> Julie Koidin, *Os Sorrisos do Choro: Uma jornada musical através de caminhos cruzados* (São Paulo, Brazil: Global Choro Music, 2011) 212-213, 239-240, 314-315.

<sup>21</sup> Livingston-Isenhour and Garcia, *Choro*, 115.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> May, 54-55.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson Faria, *The Brazilian Guitar Book*, ed. Chuck Sher (Petaluma, California: Sher Music, 1995), 28.



examples of this technique, to such an extent that it is a defining characteristic of the national sound.

The unique asymmetry of the sixteenth-note subdivision in choro and samba is another instance of a broad characteristic of a musical style having been effected by instrumental performance technique. The tamborim is a diminutive high-pitched membranophone, small enough to be held in one hand. It is typically held in the left hand and sounded with a plastic drum stick that is not rigid. A technique exists for playing the tamborim that involves turning the drum itself into the path of the moving stick.<sup>25</sup> Playing this way causes an accent that occurs ahead of the beat, causing a loping quality in the subdivision. The time feel created can be quite elusive to the non-native Brazilian musician, as it derives from a strong physical logic pertaining to a percussion instrument that is not common outside of Brazil. Similar and complimentary asymmetries materialize from the rhythms of the caixa (snare drum) and various shakers. It is therefore recommended that all instrumentalists, even string players, who aim to achieve an authentic time feel in choro, samba and bossa nova invest time in learning to play Brazilian percussion instruments.<sup>26</sup> The absorption of the nuanced placement of the sixteenth-notes is most easily accomplished through the kinesthetic experience of playing the instruments from which the time feel evolved.

Regarding time feel and rhythm, the guitarist will also find it instructive to observe the development from polka rhythms to choro rhythms to samba rhythms. This progression essentially involves an increase in syncopation. In polka rhythms, chording typically occurred on the third sixteenth-note of the beat (or the “and”), as per example 2. In choro it became common

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<sup>25</sup> Alberto Netto, *Brazilian Rhythms for Drum Set and Percussion* (Boston, Massachusetts: Berklee Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

to place the chord on the second and fourth sixteenth-notes of the beat, as illustrated in the excerpt from Choro No. 1 by Heitor Villa-Lobos (example 3). This rhythmic figure is often played by the cavaquinho, and was adapted to the guitar.<sup>27</sup> Tying the syncopated sixteenth-notes across the bar line in turn leads to variety of samba patterns (example 4). Some of these patterns predated the samba in the instrumentation of choro, and it was not uncommon for the violão de sete cordas to borrow these patterns from the cavaquinho or percussionists.<sup>28</sup> Hence in learning to use appropriate musical patterns in samba and bossa nova with a convincing feel, the guitarist is well-served by developing functional accompanying skills in choro.

**Example 2. Typical accompanying rhythm, polka.**



**Example 3. Heitor Villa-Lobos, Choros No. 1, mm. 26-29.<sup>29</sup>**



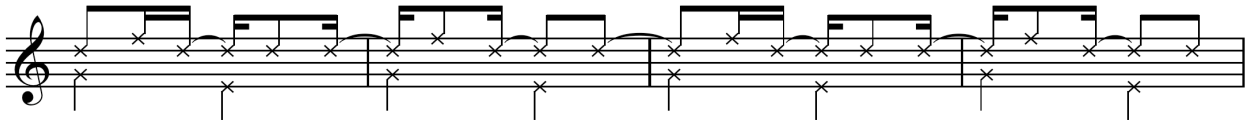
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<sup>27</sup> May, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>29</sup> Heitor Villa-Lobos, *Villa-Lobos: Collected Works For Solo Guitar* (Paris, France: Editions Max Eschig, 1990), 12.

**Example 4. Nelson Faria, Samba variation #2 (in the style of João Bosco), mm. 1-4.<sup>30</sup>**



Although both the six-string guitar and the violão de sete cordas generally played supporting roles in the conjunto regional, choro nonetheless offers ample opportunity to develop one's single-note melodic playing. In lessons with Alessandro Penezzi, the importance of knowing the melody of the piece was emphasized.<sup>31</sup> The expert violãoista should be capable of improvising a harmony to the melody during any passage which might benefit from such reinforcement.<sup>32</sup> This flexibility requires staunch command of both the melody and chord progression. The melodies of most choros are challenging in both their verticality and syncopation, and the guitarist only stands to gain in their command of the instrument by developing this repertoire. Moreover, the form of a choro is typically AABBACCA, but is flexible in interpretation due to the need to extend pieces in performance or jam sessions. Most all choros are composed with anacruses that allow for the players to know which section is coming up next.<sup>33</sup> The guitarist who knows the melody is empowered with the capability of steering the ensemble through the form, if necessary, by providing the anacrusis to the upcoming section.

Beyond the potential of the study of choro to inform the guitarist's interpretation of harmony, rhythm and melody in samba and bossa nova, the playing of this paradigmatic

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<sup>30</sup> Faria, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Alessandro Penezzi, personal communication with author, March 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> May, 39.

Brazilian national music is its own reward. In spite of the decline choro experienced in the 1950's and 1960's due to the ascendancy of bossa nova and other popular styles, the music remains vibrant.<sup>34</sup> This is due in large part to a renaissance of interest in the music that occurred in response to the emergence of the influential virtuoso Raphael Rabello (1962-1995).<sup>35</sup> A contemporary of Rabello, Luiz Otavio Braga, is given credit for transitioning the violão de sete cordas from steel to nylon strings, but it was Rabello who brought this development to popularity.<sup>36</sup> The innovations of Braga and Rabello divided the playing of the violão de sete cordas into two schools: the traditional school of choro accompaniment on steel strings using the dedeira (thumb pick), and the new school of soloistic playing on nylon strings. The violão de sete cordas had conventionally been strung with steel strings because the climate in Brazil is not favorable to the use of gut strings. After World War II, nylon became a viable alternative material for the crafting of strings and came into common usage on the six-string guitar. Out of a desire to better match the timbre of the six-string guitar, Braga commissioned the building of a violão de sete cordas with nylon strings.<sup>37</sup> Rabello, and subsequently many others, recognized the enhanced expressive potential of the instrument and its use became widespread.

Rabello died tragically young after being infected with HIV through a blood transfusion following a minor automobile accident.<sup>38</sup> His legacy, however, is felt in the presence of a generation of vibrant players of the violão de sete cordas who cite him as their inspiration. Rabello is revered as the consummate pillar of Brazilian guitar playing because he had a flawless command of the styles of his predecessors, was steeped in tradition to the greatest extent

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<sup>34</sup> Bryan McCann, *Hello, hello, Brazil: popular music in the making of modern Brazil* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 242-243.

<sup>35</sup> Koidin, *Os Sorrisos de Choro*, 209.

<sup>36</sup> May, 26-28.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Livingston-Isenhour and Garcia, *Choro*, 157.

possible, and was nonetheless progressive and cutting-edge.<sup>39</sup> The contemporary Brazilian players who follow him seek those same distinctions in attempting to uphold his standard. Jazz guitarists will benefit greatly from keeping up with ongoing developments in the Brazilian guitar scene. The immense talents of guitarists such as Yamandú Costa, Marco Pereira and Alessandro Penezzi, just to name a few, are too exhilarating to be overlooked.

In conclusion, the choro legacy offers a profound source of enrichment to the student of Brazilian guitar styles. The contemporary jazz guitarist is expected to play Brazilian music with a high degree of fluency. It is therefore important to invest in the skill set through research, listening and participation. Understanding the role of the violão de sete cordas in choro informs the guitarist's conception of rhythm, harmony and melody in samba and bossa nova. Familiarity with Brazilian percussion instruments, the techniques involved in playing them, and the resulting nuances in time feel is to be highly recommended. In addition to the cultivation of an improved interpretation of samba and bossa nova, participation in choro music is itself rewarding. A resurgence in the popularity of the style is taking place in Brazil and beyond, inspiring musicians everywhere. As with any heritage that boasts a large catalog of technically demanding material, choro offers musicians of any background the opportunity to broaden their musicianship through fun and exciting repertoire. Guitarists in particular will find depth in this vital and quintessentially Brazilian tradition.

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<sup>39</sup> May, 32.

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