

MARCO POLO

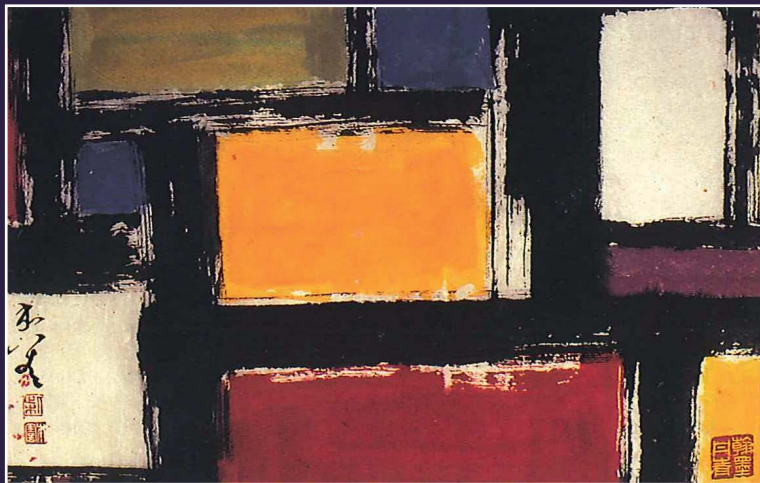
LATIN-AMERICAN CLASSICS

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Heitor
VILLA-LOBOS

String Quartets
Nos. 4, 6 and 14

Danubius Quartet



Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887 - 1959)

String Quartets Nos. 4, 6 and 14

“I love to write quartets. One could say that it is a mania.” Villa-Lobos made this confession, quoted by Pierre Vidal, in Paris in the spring of 1958. He had completed his seventeenth and final quartet the year before and had begun to sketch an eighteenth. It is usual to think of Villa-Lobos’s prodigious output in orchestral terms, and it may come as surprise that chamber music forms a substantial part of his work. Of that chamber music string quartets are by far the major constituent, and within the broader context of the twentieth-century string quartet, dominated by Bartók and Shostakovich, Villa-Lobos’s seventeen quartets must be considered a significant, though poorly acknowledged, contribution.

Villa-Lobos attributed his knowledge of the string quartet to the study of Haydn. Whether or not one accepts the veracity of his claim, any attempt to find traces of the Viennese master in the Brazilian’s work would be in vain. There are no stylistic connections, and sonata form itself is all but absent. The keys to Villa-Lobos’s quartet idiom lie elsewhere. A primary source of inspiration is the rich and diverse musical folklore of Brazil, which the composer discovered between the ages of 18 and 25, when he travelled extensively through the Northeast, the Amazon basin and the South with touring theatrical companies. Even earlier he had come to know the lundu, the choro, the maxixe and other forms of “urban folklore”, better described as the popular music of the times. To those Brazilian impressions may be added a taste for Renaissance polyphony, the *ricercare*, Bach’s fugues and Franck’s cyclical principle, the last acquired most likely through self-study of d’Indy’s *Cours de composition musicale*. In this highly personalised scheme of things the Viennese classical structures and especially the sonata held little attraction for Villa-Lobos. Instead the mostly self-taught composer found his own, non-academic solutions to the problems of form and unity. His frequent reliance on imitation - the successive entry of a theme in all four voices - affirms an innate feeling for fugal thought. Variation, which substitutes for development, creates a sense of continuity, often transforming one musical idea into another in a “stream of consciousness”. In his study of the quartets, published in 1978 by the Museu

Villa-Lobos, Arnaldo Estrella describes this as “a flowing brook, a constant becoming”. Conversely, variation also creates contrast, a stylistic device that Villa-Lobos achieved even more dramatically through abrupt juxtapositions. Finally it must not be forgotten that the composer began his professional life as a cellist in small ensembles, “orquestrinas”, that entertained in cafes, music halls and theatres. Many ideas in the quartets seem conceived in terms of the cello; even when introduced by another instrument, they attain fullest expressivity when heard in the cello part. Villa-Lobos’s experience as a string player may also account for the uncommon sonorous combinations and instrumental techniques that impart a further dimension of originality. That is often most evident in the scherzos, which give freest reign to his exuberant flights of fancy.

Amidst the baffling, sometimes uneven profusion of the Brazilian’s music, the seventeen string quartets maintain a consistently high quality and become in later years his chosen medium of expression. Chronologically they form four groups. The first four quartets were composed between 1915 and 1917, a period of much other chamber music, including the Second Sonata-fantasia for violin and piano, two cello sonatas and the Second Piano Trio. Thereafter a fourteen-year hiatus intervenes in the quartets. That period from 1917 to 1931 saw the creation of major orchestral works, among them Uirapuru, Amazonas and the six orchestral Chôros. Much of that time was spent in Paris, where Villa-Lobos came into contact with Ravel, Dukas, Falla, Schmitt, Honegger, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Casella and Varèse - contact that obviously bore fruit. His return to the string quartet in 1931 produced one isolated example, the Fifth. For the next seven years he energetically focused on the development of musical education in Brazil, composing a multitude of choral pieces. The Sixth Quartet, also isolated, appeared in 1938, and four more years were to pass before Villa-Lobos’s involvement with the quartet resumed and intensified. From 1942 onward he produced eleven quartets in fifteen years.

Musically the quartets belong to three periods. To the early period belong the first four quartets. Of these, the First has little in common with the others. It is in fact a six-part suite with a folkloric veneer; its three successors, with few traces of national flavour, move tentatively toward the originality that Villa-Lobos was seeking. The Fifth and Sixth form an overtly nationalistic pair, even indicated by the designations *Quarteto Popular*, No. 1 and *Quarteto Brasileiro*. In a practice unusual for Villa-Lobos the Fifth Quartet quotes

actual folk melodies, but the Sixth absorbs folkloric elements into a broader musical spectrum and, significantly, marks the maturation of his quartet idiom. The Seventh through Seventeenth Quartets belong to the third phase, wherein national elements become increasingly universalised and find ultimate expression in the rarefied atmosphere of the final masterpieces.

Quartet No. 4 dates from 1917 and is unique among Villa-Lobos' quartets in that its first performance took place some 30 years later, when the *Quarteto Borgerth* premièred it in Rio de Janeiro. Compared to its three predecessors, the Fourth Quartet displays greater simplicity and clarity, and the four voices move with greater independence. Serenity prevails in the opening movement, where the cello introduces the first theme in C minor. Before long, tonal ambiguity sets in, dominating the movement and producing beautiful, fleeting harmonic colours. The more animated central section displays a conflict between B major and C major; more significantly, it establishes a rhythmic pattern that becomes a feature of the later quartets. The movement follows Villa-Lobos' customary ternary design, but the reprise shows considerable variation of the original material and a heightening of tension. A simple rhythmic pattern, gently played by the violins and viola, begins the slow movement, providing an accompaniment to the cello's haunting melody, evocative of Afro-Brazilian spirituality. The contrasting middle part, with its rustic characters, looks ahead to the *Bachianas Brasileiras*. The Scherzo begins with a galloping figure and later becomes more melodic with accompanying scale passages in the cello. Polyphony dominates the central section. In contrast to the Scherzo, which presents many difficulties of execution, the Finale has few complications. Tonally straightforward, adhering in large part to C major, and rhythmically simple, it moves along with a clear sense of purpose. Its contrasting episode is a vivacious fugue, wherein the successive entries in alternating tonic and dominant maintain the tonal clarity and brightness of mood.

Commissioned by the Stanley Quartet and composed in Rio de Janeiro in 1953, Quartet No. 14 was premièred in the United States the following year. Known as "the Quartet of Fourths," it is dominated by that interval in terms of melodic and harmonic construction. The rhythms in the first movement create a sense of urgency. The slow movement begins with an expressive, chromatic theme in the second violin, which passes a fifth higher to the first violin, then an octave lower to the viola and then to the cello. The more diatonic middle section gains in harmonic richness through doubled tenths, fifths and fourths, and it is followed by a return of the initial section in condensed form. The imaginative Scherzo

features scales in contrary motion, and the contrasting central part offers a more serene lyricism with an underlying melancholy. Fourths play a generative and cohesive role in the strong finale, which builds to a satisfying conclusion.

Far from being a sequel to the folkloric Fifth Quartet, Quartet No. 6, entitled *Quarteto Brasileiro*, is the pivotal work in the series and one of its masterpieces. Composed in 1938 and première in 1943 by the Quarteto Haydn in Rio de Janeiro, it is the most Brazilian of Villa-Lobos' string quartets, having absorbed the melodic and rhythmic essence of Brazilian folk music. In joyful E major, the opening movement utilises the characteristic syncopated rhythms of the Sertao, Brazil's northeastern hinterland. In construction it grows from an initial generative idea, thus representing a huge advance over the previous quartets. In like fashion the second movement's harmonic base derives from that same initial germ, and the theme of the slow movement arises from the previous movement's main theme. Instead of a Scherzo, the Sixth Quartet has in second position a sunny Allegretto in A major. The main theme, first heard in the cello against a pizzicato accompaniment in triplets, returns in the reprise in the first violin's high register. Villa-Lobos characterised the slow movement as "slightly tragic", and it stands, searching and profound, in sharp contrast to the extrovert nature of the other movements. Its middle section is in the manner of a *ricercar*. The Finale in E minor skips along with lilting vitality until interrupted by not one but two central episodes. The first evokes a rustic harmonica, and the second turns contemplative. Finally, the lilting initial section returns, surging to an end in a brief, energetically rising coda.

Danubius Quartet

The Danubius Quartet has won considerable acclaim since its establishment in 1983. With the violinists Judit Tóth and Adél Miklós, violist Cecilia Bodolai and cellist Ilona Wibli, and the artistic direction of the distinguished violinist Vilmos Tátrai, the quartet won awards at Trapani, Evian and Graz in the earlier years of its foundation, and has recorded, among other works, the String Quartet No. 1 of Remenyi for Hungaroton, the complete String Quartets of Villa-Lobos for Marco Polo and for Naxos the Mozart and Brahms Clarinet Quintets. The Danubius Quartet has given recitals in Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia, Italy, France and Switzerland and appeared at a number of international festivals.

**Heitor
VILLA-LOBOS
(1887 - 1959)**

**String Quartets
Nos. 4, 6 and 14**

Danubius Quartet

	String Quartet No. 4 (1917)	
1	Allegro con moto	6:22
2	Andantino (tranquillo)	5:58
3	Scherzo - Allegro vivace	4:20
4	Allegro	5:11
	String Quartet No. 14 (1953)	
5	Allegro	5:19
6	Andante	5:00
7	Scherzo - Vivace	3:08
8	Molto allegro	3:20
	String Quartet No. 6 (1938)	
9	Poco animato	6:40
10	Allegretto	4:27
11	Andante, quasi adagio - Lento	6:39
12	Allegro vivace	6:29

Recorded at Hungroton Studio in Budapest from 18th to 19th April (Tracks 1-4),
22nd to 25th April (Tracks 5-8) and 20th to 23rd May, 1991 (Tracks 9-12).

Producer: Ibolya Tóth

Engineer: János Györi

Music Notes: David Nelson

Cover Picture by Benjamin Chai

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