

MARCO POLO

LATIN-AMERICAN CLASSICS

DDD

8.223393

Heitor
VILLA-LOBOS

String Quartets
Nos. 3, 10 and 15

Danubius Quartet



Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887 - 1959)

String Quartets Nos. 3, 15 and 10

"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 a 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 *chôro*, 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 personalized 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 cafés, 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 *II 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 universalized and find ultimate expression in the rarefied atmosphere of the final masterpieces.

Quartet No. 3, composed in 1916 and first played in 1919, stands out from the rest of Villa-Lobos's quartets in respect to form, content and style. The language is close to French impressionism, and one senses Debussy's presence in the melodic and harmonic material. Furthermore, the form is cyclical with much of the music related to the generative theme heard at the very outset, and in this regard d'Indy seems to have left his mark. Clear textures, refined sonorities and superb balancing of the instruments add to the perception that the third is the most French of all Villa-Lobos's quartets. The second violin, viola and cello announce the ten-note germ theme at the beginning of the first movement, which is serene, seamlessly flowing and moderately paced. The colours are subdued and often magical, owing to the use of harmonics, and the music follows a course of unbroken metamorphosis and development. The quartet owes its nickname, the "Popcorn" Quartet, to the scherzo, a movement predominantly in pizzicato that suggests the sound of popping corn. Right- and left-hand pizzicati, glissandi, throbbing polyrhythms and bowed passages all contribute to what must be one of the most original movements in the entire string quartet literature. Unusual timbres are heard also in the slow movement, where the strings are muted with the mute placed upside down to produce an imitation of bagpipes. Harmonic pizzicati add special colour to the initial statement of the theme, derived from the first movement's generative theme, and this quiet, meditative movement proceeds wrapped in an aura of subtle beauty. Insistent semiquavers herald the final movement and provide the first hints of Brazilian flavour, albeit with a Gallic slant.

Melodic ideas from the previous movements return, underscoring the quartet's cyclical nature until the end, an emphatic coda.

Written in New York in 1954 and premièred by the Juilliard String Quartet in 1958, the fifteenth is known as the "Harmonics" Quartet, owing to the timbral effects heard at the beginning and near the end of the slow movement. Tonal and rather bright in mood, the first movement follows Villa-Lobos's customary A-B-A form with a dance-like coda appended. After the enchanted, light-filled opening of the slow movement, the mood darkens with the appearance of the main theme. A central section, suggestive of a *modinha*, sustains the serious tone. In his study of Villa-Lobos's quartets Arnaldo Estrella likens the scherzo to one of Beethoven's, noting its rhythmic vitality and youthful spirit. The cello announces the main theme of the finale, which is atypically slow and serious.

Quartet No. 10, composed in 1946, was premièred in Paris in 1950 by the Quartet de São Paulo. Less severe than the ninth quartet, it vacillates between atonality and tonality. Arnaldo Estrella finds its first movement less remarkable for its material than for what Villa-Lobos makes of it. From two elements, the first an unpromising chromatic motif, the second a more interesting rhythmic figure, the movement grows by variation, amplification, conjunction, and fragmentation, creating a sense of development within Villa-Lobos's customary ternary form. Contrary to the majority of his slow movements, the *Adagio* possesses nothing of folkloric or nostalgic character, but it is no less emotionally intense. The atonal scherzo is built of two elements, one rhythmic and reminiscent of the first movement's rhythmic idea, the other melodic, though consisting of only two notes separated by a minor second. The trio, in the minor mode, has hints of tragedy. Tonality is restored in the finale, which begins with a simple, folklike melody and has episodes in C major, G-flat major and F major. After a faster, dissonant central section in 7/8 time, the quartet ends with a reaffirmation of C major.

David Nelson

Danubius Quartet

The Danubius Quartet has won considerable acclaim since its establishment in 1983. 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 Reményi 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. For Quartets Nos. 3 and 10, the quartet is led by Gyöngyvér Oláh, with the violinist Adél Miklós, violist Cecilia Bodolai and cellist Ilona Ribli. For Quartet No. 15, the quartet is led by Judit Tóth.

MARCO POLO VILLA-LOBOS: String Quartets Nos. 3, 10 & 15 8.223393



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STEREO

Playing Time: 65'41"

Heitor VILLA-LOBOS (1887 - 1959)

String Quartets (Complete) Nos. 3, 10 and 15

Danubius Quartet



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String Quartet No. 3 (1916)

- 1 Allegro non troppo (5:40)
2 Scherzo 'picópas': Molto vivo (4:21)
3 Molto adagio - Largo - Agitato lento (7:01)
4 Allegro con fuoco - Vivo (4:50)

String Quartet No. 15 (1954)

- 5 Allegro non troppo (6:31)
6 Moderato (7:16)
7 Scherzo: Vivo (2:00)
8 Allegro (5:27)

String Quartet No. 10 (1946)

- 9 Poco animato - Quasi allegro (6:10)
10 Adagio - Più mosso - Tempo I (7:03)
11 Scherzo: Allegro vivace - Vivo (4:35)
12 Molto allegro - Più mosso - Tempo I (4:02)

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György József (Tracks 5-8)

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