



Zealous Clerics, Mischievous Musicians, and Pragmatic Politicians: Music and Race Relations in Colonial Brazil

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Upon leaving his post as Governor of the Captaincy of Minas Gerais, José João Teixeira Coelho wrote a series of advices to his successor exposing his view on the main problems of that once immensely rich gold mining region. In one of these, dated September 16, 1790, he complained:¹

4. There is no white man or woman in the Captaincy of Minas Gerais who wants to serve, because they are persuaded that they would look bad if they had a work that, as they understand, would be fitting only to slaves. As a result, hundreds of male slaves and hundreds of female slaves occupy themselves with domestic services and are not working in plantations and gold mining.
5. The arrogance and idleness of the whites have been transferred to the mulatto men and black women, because once they are free, they do not want to work or serve, and, as necessity forces them to look after their subsistence by illicit means, men and women sink into those vices that correspond to their different sexes.

¹ José João Teixeira Coelho. Instrução para o Governo da Capitania de Minas Gerais. *Revista do Arquivo Público Mineiro* 8 (1903): 561-2.

4. Não há na Capitania de Minas hum homem branco, nem hua mulher branca, que queirão servir; porque se persuadem que lhes fica mal hum emprego que elles entendem, que só compete aos escravos. Deste modo centos de Escravos e centos de Escravas se ocupão nos serviços domesticos e deixão de se ocupar no trabalho das terras, e na extracção do ouro.
5. Esta presumpção e ociozidade dos brancos se tem transfirido aos Mulato,s e Negras, porque hua vez que são forros não querem trabalhar nem servir, e como a necessidade os obriga a procurarem as suas subsistencias por meios illicitos, -- se precipitão os homens e as mulheres, cada huns nos vícios, que correspondem aos seus differentos sexos.
6. Aquelles Mulatos que se não fazem absolutamente ociozos se empregão no exercício de Muzicos, os quaes são tantos na Capitania de Minas que certamente excedem o numero dos que ha em todo o Reyno. Mas em que interessa ao Estado esta aluvião de Muzicos?

6. Those mulattoes who are not completely idle, employ themselves as musicians, who are so numerous in the Captaincy of Minas that they certainly exceed all those who live in the entire Kingdom. But what benefit brings to the State this flood of musicians?

Contrasting with the optimistic and benign remarks by André Antonil earlier that century, Coelho's observations anticipate what many European travelers would think about Brazilians in the decades to come: that they were lazy, that hard working was an indicative of a lower social status, that slaves performed most of the work, and that when slaves were able to buy their freedom, they became as lazy and arrogant as their former masters.

The perception that blacks, mulattoes and whites in the Colony were all music lovers was almost cliché among observers, but that could be regarded either as a positive or a negative attribute. Speaking as a colonial administrator, Coelho downplayed the relevance of music in face of occupations such as agriculture or gold mining. In his pragmatic view, people should work on activities that could result or contribute to an increase in royal revenue. As for landowners and the urban middle-class, even though most of them enjoyed watching a *missa cantada* performed by chorus and orchestra at the Church, and no civic commemoration was complete without a *Te deum* set to music and a performance of a *comédia* or an *ópera*, they hardly considered music performing as an honorable full-time occupation. Even in Portugal professional activities such as acting and singing suffered from similar prejudices, carrying infamy as implied in a letter signed by Dom José I in 1771. Some white Brazilians eventually took music as a profession – mostly monks, priests, and military personnel – and Portuguese Chapel Masters were sporadically sent from Portugal to some major Brazilian towns, but the large majority of professional musicians working in Brazil during the colonial period was constituted by mulattoes and blacks, freemen and slaves.

As political and social forms of organization in colonial Brazil followed patterns and models brought from the colonizers' homeland, there were also clear attempts at implanting or simplifying Portuguese musical institutions. However, some fundamental differences rendered that difficult and new ways of organizing

musical activities had to be devised. Portugal was small and densely populated, the exact opposite of Brazil. The sparse population and huge distances between villages in the colony made certain practices unfeasible and others useless. In the inlands, isolation would favor self-entrepreneurism and some degree of amateurism.

After the 1750s, the gradual scarcity of gold in Minas Gerais prompted a migration of the work force from mining activities to other sectors of the economy. Religious and civic feasts actually increased in most urban centers founded during the gold rush, and with it more demand for music and more opportunities for singers, instrumentalists, and composers. As the century progressed, the old structure based on the strict control of Chapel Masters revealed itself insufficient and too expensive to deliver music to all feasts during the year, causing a phenomenon known as *estanco* (literally stanching, damming). New mechanisms had to be conceived and old laws changed or relaxed to allow existing composers, players, and singers to do their work, while offering training, regulation, and accreditation to new professionals.

Following Portuguese models, mulatto artists organized guilds (*corporações de ofícios*) to regulate the activities of artisans, craftsmen, painters, sculptors and musicians. In addition to that, some lay brotherhoods functioned as de facto guilds, such as the musicians' *Irmandade de Santa Cecília*, although the main purpose of such associations was to provide their members with spiritual, medical, and economic assistance, a Christian funeral, and even after that, a quicker and less painful stay in Purgatory. Some of these activities involved costly rituals and each brotherhood wanted to appear richer and more blessed than the other. This sort of competition, especially in Minas Gerais, ended up generating an important source of work for free-lance musicians.

A master musician, or *mestre da arte da música*, would have several apprentices working professionally as instrumentalists and singers in his ensemble, enabling him to provide music to civic and religious feasts. After years of training and several exams, those apprentices could become masters themselves, earning a certification in the liberal arts and a status slightly higher than that of a master-

craftsman. However, if laws were to be strictly followed, a mulatto would never be able to earn that type of certification. Administrators in Brazil realized that in order to carry out their job and deliver the goods that the king expected, they had to relax some laws, allow accommodation, and create exceptions, a process that would lead to situations that undermined the very premises once used to rationalize and legitimize slavery.

One of these assumptions was that black Africans were cursed in some way, lesser humans. Carrying the stigma of having a supposedly impure or infect blood, mulattoes – and for that reason also Jewish and Muslims, converted or not – were denied chances to function properly in Iberian-American societies, at least on a theoretical level. In a letter of January 27, 1726 Dom João V reasoned:²

... because of the lack of competent people, it was necessary, in the beginning, to tolerate the admission of mulattoes to perform those functions ...
... it is not easy to persuade [white men] to avoid having black or mulatto concubines, and for that reason, the families are becoming all tainted ...
... from now on, we will not permit any man who is a mulatto, in any of the four degrees in which *mulatism* is an impediment, to be elected as a representative or ordinary judge or to perform any function in the government of the villages of this Captaincy, and likewise no man who is not married to a white woman can be elected. ...

However, because mulattoes were so numerous, and white colonists so few in comparison, the colony would simply come to a stop if those laws were enforced. By opening one exception after another and allowing gifted mulattoes to earn professional degrees and own property, administrators and lawmakers paved the way for a phenomenon that would be referred in the following centuries as “whitening”. Although the word has been used sometimes in the context of racial miscegenation, it is also related to a certain perception in some racist societies that a mulatto or a light-skinned black who was able to accumulate some wealth and prestige has earned the right to be treated as a white.

² Arquivo Público Mineiro, codex SC-23, f. 24r.

One of the first documented examples of that mechanism is seen in a petition sent to dom José by the free mulattoes of Rio de Janeiro, who asked the king if they could wear rapiers (little swords) in their belts, an important symbol of status that marked the boundaries between the categories of honorable, or worthy men (*dignos*) and the infamous or disreputable men (*desclassificados*). The king answered that his decision would depend on what the Governor had to say about the issue.³ On 30 May 1753, the Governor of Rio de Janeiro, Gomes Freire de Andrade, Count of Bobadela, wrote:⁴

What the supplicants claim in the attached petition is entirely true, because in this Captaincy there are mulattoes [*pardos*] with assets, who own properties with slaves; there are master-craftsmen, painters, musicians, and there are many who live as contractors of other activities, which they perform honestly and with general approval, and for that they make themselves worthy [*pelo qual se fazem dignos*].

The importance of such testimony is enormous. When Gomes Freire claimed that a mulatto was an honorable person because he had assets, he anticipated a famous and cruel say that summarizes the way many perceive as the core issue of race relations in Brazil in the following centuries, “a poor white is black, a rich black is white,” an idea that resurfaces in Caetano Veloso’s verse from the song *Haiti*, which is not about the Caribbean country, but about the 1992 Carandiru massacre in São Paulo: “quase pretos de tão pobres” – almost black because they are so poor. But

³ Arquivo Público Mineiro, codex SC-100, f. 24r-24v.

Dom Jozeph por graça de Deos Rey de Portugal ... Faço saber a voz Governador e Capitam General da Capitania do Rio de Janeiro por partes doz homenz pardoz Livrez dessa Capitania, se me fez a pitição que em atenção ao que nella expunhaõ elles fizesse merce mandar passar ordem para que possaõ trazer espadas, ou espadim á sinta visto terem a seu favor a declaração do Capitulo 12 da nossa prematica. Me pareceu ordenar-vos informeiz Com vosso parecer.

⁴ Ibid.

O que os supp.tez alegam na pitição junta hé inteira verdade; pois nesta Capitania há homenz pardoz á fazendadoz com escravatura e fazenda : há mestres de officioz, Pintorez, muzicos, e muytos q vivem de requerentez, e dos mais officioz, que referem com estimação e bom procedim.to pelo qual se fazem diguinis; e como este requerimento he todo da Real grandeza de V. Magd.e mandara o q. for servido. [...] em Lixboa a trinta de Mayo de mil sete centos cincoenta e trez [...]

Gomes Freire goes further, implying that becoming a good artist and earning general approval for his work could be a way of earning dignity.

In a society in which opportunities for social mobility were scarce, such as Portugal during the *Ancient Régime*, music has provided means of escaping poverty, much like a religious career. As late as the early 19th century, Dom João VI was still receiving letters from poor Portuguese parents asking him to admit their sons at the *Seminário Real de Música*, so they could have a better life. However, for *Mineiro* musicians, being a musician was not simply about escaping poverty. More than a means of social climbing in economic terms, this was a path through which a mulatto could achieve recognition as a human being.⁵

At this point, a paradox needs to be clarified. Many Portuguese kings were composers, instrumentalists, singers, or aficionados and so was the case with the Portuguese aristocracy and the small nobility of the colony. In fact, even the Brazilian elite regarded amateur music performance as a desirable quality, a measure of civility. Early Portuguese and Brazilian bibliographers such as Loreto Couto, Mazza, and Barbosa Machado placed accomplished music composers on the same level as successful writers and preachers – probably because it generated publications. Genealogy books often emphasize the proficiency on the harp or the guitar, placing them side by side with the gift for poetry, or the instruction on the so-called liberal arts.

A common motto among these biographic sketches is the evaluation of the life and works of some artists after the way they were acknowledged by Portuguese audiences. Manuel de Almeida Botelho, born in 1749, was one of the first Brazilian mulatto musicians who managed to find his way into the elite circles of Lisbon.⁶

⁵ A process that seems to be based on a similar mechanism was the social rising of musician *escudeiros* (squires) in Portugal in the 15th and 16th centuries. Many of these commoner boys and young adults who were described as good musicians and particularly skilled in guitar playing were able to find a path to low nobility, reaching the status of *cavaleiro fidalgo*.

⁶ Dom Domingos Loreto Couto. *Desagravos do Brasil e Glórias de Pernambuco* (Recife: Prefeitura da Cidade do Recife, 1981), 376, manuscript at Lisbon's Biblioteca Nacional, MS F.G. 873.

As suas obras, e composicoens musicas tiverão singular aceitação entre os melhores professores de Portugal, sendo as principaes hua missa a quatro vozes, e dous violinos. O psalmo lauda

Recognized by the white elites as an accomplished artist and, mostly because of that, an honorable man, he would be followed decades later by Domingos Caldas Barbosa and Joaquim Manuel da Câmara. Through their art, they have been granted the right to be considered fully human by at least part of the white elite, even though that status was always subject to challenge. Laws were not always bended or relaxed and prejudice was still very real. The same law that a Governor would relax when he wanted a mulatto to perform some work could be the sole reason to deny him a long deserved promotion. Years of hard working or the recognition of having accomplished many things would not prevent him from being called petulant or *folgado* [wide] when his path crossed the interests of a white person.

Besides, one could speculate that if music was a path to dignity for a mulatto, a white man would consider it to be the other way around, a demeaning factor, exactly because of that. By mid-seventeenth century the Portuguese writer Francisco Manuel de Melo seems to have had that in mind. Exiled in Bahia from 1655 to 1658, he wrote about the guitar: “being an excellent instrument, it was enough now that blacks and scoundrels knew how to play it, that honorable men no longer wanted to put it in their arms.”⁷

On mulatismo musical

A key intellectual in Brazil during the first half of the twentieth century, Gilberto Freyre devised the concept of a “racial democracy” in his influential 1933 book *Casa grande e senzala*. In contrast with American patterns of race relations, the

Jerusalem a quatro vozes, dous violinos, oboe e trompas. Tres, Tantum ergo, a quatro com rabecas, e hum a dous choros. Varias sonatas, e tocatas tanto para viola, como para cravo. Cinco mottetes, e hum miserere a quatro vozes de composição modulada para a semana santa, que provando-se em caza do mestre da solfa Joaquim Borges usava d’elles nas suas funções. Alem das referidas obras compos em Lisboa outras muitas cantilenas, como duos, minuets, tonos, etc. acreditadas com a aprovação, e testemunho de Caetano Monsi, italiano de nação, e insigne cantor, e compositor da S. Igreja Patriarchal de Lisboa.

⁷ Francisco Manuel de Melo. *Carta de guia de casados* (Mem Martins: Publicações Europa-América, 1992): 67.

concept was based on miscegenation, of intermixing as a means of social upward mobility. Consciously or not, Freyre overlooked the level of violence ingrained in the process, for being a Portuguese landowner in the tropics meant having freedom to sexually exploit his slaves – both female and male – and in many cases assume the role of godfather to a large number of illegitimate sons. There is hardly one intellectual in Brazil today who would not classify that behavior as institutionalized rape. Even so, the social rising of generations of mulattoes was possible through that mechanism, as long as they rejected their mothers' religion and culture and adopted those of their Portuguese fathers – another facet of the concept of whitening.

There is no doubt that Francisco Curt Lange knew Freyre's work when he first came up with the concept of *mulatismo musical* in a series of articles published in the 1940s. The German-Uruguayan musicologist brought to the international awareness a corpus of sacred music composed by mulattoes since the 1780s, an immense repertory unknown even to most Brazilians, which was still played in some small towns hidden in the mountains of Minas Gerais.

Curt Lange has never elaborated what he meant by *mulatismo musical*. In most of his writings he seems to refer to a socio-historical context in which a large number of mulatto composers and performers developed a distinct musical style. But then, he compares that style to the works of the so-called Mannheim school or the early Haydn.⁸ Curt Lange did not perceive what is obvious for us today – the clear connection between the music of Minas Gerais and the Neapolitan school. Research on Davide Perez and Niccolò Jommelli, Neapolitan composers who worked for the Portuguese court, was practically non-existent when Curt Lange published most of his articles.

The *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa* defines *mulatismo* in its 2001 edition simply as (1) behavior, attitude characteristic of a mulatto, (2) formation, knowledge, dominion directly related to a mulatto. However, the word *mulatismo* carried a negative connotation in Colonial Brazil, as if to indicate a disease, a sort of

⁸ Francisco Curt Lange. *Arquivo de música religiosa de la Capitania Geral das Minas Gerais* (Mendoza: Universidade Nacional de Cuyo, 1951): [i-vii].

birth defect that prevented people of having the same opportunities as an Iberian of pure-lineage. Evidently, that was not what Curt Lange had in mind. Nevertheless, by *mulatismo musical* he always wanted to say more than just “the musical practices of a group of mulattoes”.

When Curt Lange pieced together music, mulatto, and Brazil, he created a myth. Embedded on that myth is the idea of a possible national character, the flexible personality of mulattoes who were racially unclassified, neither black nor white, but free spirits, not restrained by the chains of slavery or the rules of behavior that were expected from a *fidalgo*. And it is through that myth that Curt Lange explained some supposed irregularities in harmony and voice leading that he found in some of those compositions.

Later, some of those irregular traits revealed to be very regular on the understudied Neapolitan and Neapolitan-influenced repertoires, others could be attributed to decades of copying and updating. Similar traits surpass individual idiosyncrasies in the large corpus of works that Curt Lange started gathering in the late 1930s, which seems to indicate that the musical style of the composers of Minas Gerais had stabilized – in lack of a better word – by the early 1780s. In lack of musical sources, other type of documents seems to suggest that “irregularities” were more frequent some decades earlier. Upon visiting the region in the late 1720s, the Bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Frei Antonio de Guadalupe, wrote to the king saying that he found many “profanities” in the music that he heard in the churches of that region, “both in words and music, because almost all musicians were mulatto [*pardos*], ordinarily flawed [*viciosos*]”. He then asked the king to issue a directive that no work could be sung “without being reviewed, in Latin, music and words”. The letter was prompted by a personal argument between the Bishop and a mulatto composer in Vila Rica who was “very proud of himself, full of trickery, and who did not want to submit”, to his orders.⁹

⁹ Francisco Curt Lange. La música en Minas Gerais: un informe preliminar. *Boletín Latino Americano de Música* 6 (1946): 418.

The name of that composer is unknown, but twenty years later the same issue was brought to bear again, this time with a different closure. Acknowledged as a competent musician, the mulatto Francisco Mexia was opera director and Chapel Master in Vila Rica and Sabará in the 1740s and 50s. In 1752 Mexia had just finished delivering music to religious festivities, operas, and dances in commemoration to the coronation of Dom José when the Bishop, Frei Manuel da Cruz, sent a letter to the king complaining about certain “profanities” in Mexia’s music, blaming him of not allowing his music to be reviewed by the Chapel Master and seditiously inciting his fellow musicians in Vila Rica to do the same. After hearing all sides, in a letter dated May 25, 1752, the recently crowned king Dom José ordered the Bishop to stop bothering the musicians and let the composers do their work:¹⁰

I recommend that you lift these oppressive obligations and relieve the singers and contractors of these Feasts of the need to ask for a license and to have their music scores reviewed, because you have other easier means to prevent the abuse and irreverence that you fear.

Francisco Mexia had previously been appointed by the same Bishop to serve as Chapel Master of Vila Rica from 1748 to 1750, when Manoel da Costa Dantas, also a mulatto, replaced him.¹¹ Why his music suddenly started sounding too profane to the Bishop is something we do not know. The issue probably was more politics than aesthetics. In any case, the appointment of Mexia and Dantas as Chapel Masters could never have happened in Portugal, where there were plenty of musicians of pure Iberian lineage to do the job. As the distance between major churches were much greater in Brazil, musicians had to be appointed with different criteria to work as Chapel Masters in smaller churches scattered through an immense territory. So, by the 1750s, arguing that someone was a bad composer because he was a mulatto simply would not stand, at least not in Brazil. In any case, even though Mexia was

¹⁰ Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon, Codex 241, f. 370r-v.

¹¹ Paulo Castagna. Pesquisas iniciais sobre os mestres da capela diocesanos no Bispado de Mariana (1748-1832). *Anais do V Encontro de Musicologia Histórica* (Juiz de Fora: Centro Cultural Pró-Música, 2004), 60-3.

not appointed Chapel Master in the following years, he took advantage of the gray areas in the system, successfully placing the Bishop against the new Portuguese king and eliminating at least one level of bureaucracy for himself and his peers.

The path to dignity could be blocked by incomprehension, lack of familiarity, or refusal in admitting the exceptions and particularities that were inherent to the colonial administration. A newly-arrived prelate or official would evaluate an excellent mulatto musician less as a worthy man than someone who is twice as infamous. The 1770s controversy between Chapel Master and opera director Antonio Manso and the newly-arrived Bishop of São Paulo, Frei Manuel da Ressurreição, illustrates exactly that, as explained by the Governor of São Paulo in June 18, 1774:¹²

Since the Bishop brought with him a Chapel Master, he prevented any Church of admitting the aforesaid Manso with the pretext that he was *operário* and mulatto, and because his music was of violins, but neither is the aforesaid Manso a mulatto, nor does he look like one in his color, and even if he were, we should not consider that as a defect because of Our Majesty's brand new laws.

For the Governor of São Paulo, the traditional evaluation of purity of blood by genealogical records was replaced by a visual assessment, which would become the norm in the following centuries. Again the conservative views of the Church clashed with the pragmatism of administrators. It is not by coincidence that in various occasions during the eighteenth century the Bishops of Rio de Janeiro, Mariana, and São Paulo were at odds with mulatto musicians who seemed petulant to them, exactly because of the social prestige that they acquired through their music and the protection that they gained from secular authorities who needed them.

Concluding remarks

¹² Lisboa, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Brasil, São Paulo, caixa 23, documento 2666.

The concept of *mulatismo musical* lacks what Curt Lange always tried to find, that is, the evidence of a truly national Brazilian style, or a school – term that he used more than once – which would give more coherence to his life project, the *americanismo musical*. Ideologically charged, Lange’s writings are also dated, visibly influenced by Gilberto Freyre’s interpretations of race relations in Brazil, which regarded miscegenation as the key factor to the success of the Portuguese colonization and to the bright future of the Brazilian people, in a prophetic tone that predates the optimistic views of Darcy Ribeiro.

A reassessment of Curt Lange’s ideas would have to take into account race and ethnicity in a less utopic and more scientific way, maybe integrating views from anthropology, such as Roberto DaMatta’s concept of *mulatismo cultural* as a Brazilian way of dealing with tension and conflict while avoiding direct confrontation. DaMatta’s model offers a way to explaining how and why Brazilian society is marked by a history of continuous tension between discordant elements, resolved less by negotiation than by self-exhaustion, until they lose their energy and accommodate somehow.

However, we need to not know more about the music of provincial towns of Portugal, Madeira and the Azores, to understand the extent in which the music of Minas Gerais did or did not follow the same patterns and models of other peripheries, and if ethnicity was a factor in that difference. What we do know is that ethnicity played a role in how an artist would function in that society, that music was a key factor for a mulatto to negotiate a more favorable position, and that perceptions of whiteness, blackness, dignity, and success would be reshaped throughout the Colonial period partly because of the work of mulatto musicians. Finally, we know that poverty and subalternity were cause for discontent and resistance in the colony. But they also promoted creative solutions and a sense of improvisation that would anticipate and help defining what was to be a Brazilian.