

**CULTURAL COUNTERPOINTS:
Examining the Musical Interactions between the U.S. and Latin America**



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“Ragtime traces in the Brazilian choro *Segura ele!* [Hold him!] by Pixinguinha: composition and performance hybridization after the trip to Paris in 1922”

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of its abstract, which was peer-reviewed. This paper is presented as submitted by the author, who has authorized its dissemination through *IUScholarWorks*.

Ragtime traces in the Brazilian *choro Segura ele!* [Hold him!] by Pixinguinha: composition and performance hybridization after the trip to Paris in 1922

Abstract: Analytical study about *Segura ele!* (Hold him!) and *Um a zero* (One by Zero), two *choros* by Brazilian composer and performer Alfredo da Rocha Vianna, known as Pixinguinha (1897-1973), the leading figure of the genre in the twentieth century. It is well known that after the historical trip of his *choro* group *Oito Batutas* (*Eight Smarties*) to Paris in 1922, where he met American jazz musicians, Pixinguinha introduced some stylistic innovations in the performance practices of *choro*. It shows traits of ragtime in *Segura ele!* and features of traditional *choro*, (a Brazilian popular music genre), in *Um a zero*, departing from lead sheets (PIXINGUINHA, 1919, 1929), historical recordings (PIXINGUINHA, 1998) and iconographic information. A comparison among formal, harmonic, rhythmic, motivic, instrumentation and iconographic elements reveal that Pixinguinha's *choro* style was influenced by the US popular music genre in several levels, in the song *Segura ele!*. There is, still, a comparison between similar motives from *Segura ele!* and *The Entertainer*, composed by Scott Joplin, the most important composer of ragtime. Some considerations by Scott Joplin about how to play the ragtime are observed in the recording of *Segura ele!*. Finally, it is possible to visualize the difference between *Um a zero* that was composed in 1919, before the trip, and *Segura ele!*, composed in 1929, some years after the trip.

Keywords: Pixinguinha; *choro*; ragtime; Brazilian popular music; music hybridization; musical analysis.

1 – Introduction

Brazilian Alfredo da Rocha Vianna, known as Pixinguinha (1897-1973), wrote a large number of compositions, especially *choro* music. If it became a referential popular genre in Brazilian popular music with the first generation of *choro* composers Chiquinha Gonzaga, Antônio Callado and Ernesto Nazareth (VASCONCELOS, 1984) since the late nineteenth century, Pixinguinha, in the twentieth century, may be considered the best *choro* composer of all times (CABRAL, 1997). The versatility of Pixinguinha at *choro* - he acted as a composer, arranger, bandleader, flutist, saxophonist and conductor - coupled with his creativity and curiosity, enabled him to establish models for all the next generations of Brazilian *choro* players (CABRAL, 1997, p.13). A comparison between *Segura ele!* (Hold him!) with the more traditional *Um a zero* (1 x 0), both *choros* by Pixinguinha, shows that although these songs share common traits of the Brazilian genre, the former reveals traces of the American genre ragtime.

The systematic features of *choro* music proposed by ALMEIDA (1999) and SANTOS (2001) are important references to be recognized in both

composition and practices of performance of the genre. As many of *choro* traits are not notated, one has to look not just into the scores or lead sheets, but also in its recorded sound. In the case of Pixinguinha, the primary sources of his music are well preserved in Brazil in several collections of printed music, manuscripts and representative recordings of his performances, especially in Rio de Janeiro, such as *Museu da Imagem e do Som* and National Library.

After the consolidation of the ragtime and blues genres in the United States in the last decade of the nineteenth century, many groups of American musicians benefited from their wide acceptance in the European music scene, both popular and classical. Paris, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was considered the cultural epicenter of the world and attracted major artists from everywhere. Composers such as Debussy (*Goliwog's cakewalk* from the album *Children's Corner*, 1908) and Stravinsky (*Ragtime for eleven instruments*, 1918; *Ragtime* from *A Soldier's Tale*, 1918; *Piano-Rag Music*, 1919; KAMIEN, 1992, p.434; MACHLIS, FORNEY, 1990, p.476) quickly absorbed the characteristic features of ragtime in their music. American Jazz bands began to travel to Europe to play ragtime, by the year 1900 (SAGER, 2010) and thus became models for popular instrumental music in that continent. Already in the late 1920's, the first jazz bands formed by French musicians emerged in Europe in that style. In 1932, the Hot Club of France, with *Le Quintette Band*, was earning international recognition, especially with the brilliant performances of two of its members: Django Reinhardt on guitar and Stephane Grappelli on violin (COSTA e CASTRO, 2011, p. 82-88)

Pixinguinha's trip to Paris was one of the first cases in which Brazilian popular music was taken. But it was not a journey to only export national music. About that trip of Pixinguinha's group, called *Oito Batutas* to France, Sérgio Cabral tells about the impact that American musicians exerted in the musical life of the Brazilians:

"... the members of *Batutas* spoke of the contact with four jazz-bands musicians, with which they had a chance to play with." CABRAL (p. 80, 1997)

"Besides Pixinguinha on flute and alto sax, Palmieri playing mandolin and China on vocals and guitar, the new *Oito Batutas* provided a pianist (J.

Ribas), a trumpet player (Bonfiglio de Oliveira ...), a trombonist (Euclides Galdino), a drummer (Eugenio de Almeida Gomes, nicknamed Submarine), plus a saxophonist (Luis Americano)" CABRAL (1997, p.35).

Rafael José de Menezes Bastos also speaks of Pixinguinha's contact with American music in Paris in 1922, noting that:

"it was after this journey that Pixinguinha began creating musical links and matching his music with jazz which, at the time, was a real process of establishing a the new universal popular music" BASTOS (2005, p. 179).

In the present study we will explain, departing from a case study, how this historical event influenced the composition and performance of Pixinguinha's *choro*, observing stylistic traits in lead sheets and recordings. Two primary *choro* sources were chosen: the emblematic and traditional *Um a zero*, probably composed in 1919 (although it was first recorded only in 1946) and *Segura ele!* composed in 1929 (after the trip to France, occurred in 1922) and already reflecting the influence of ragtime. Both compositions have historical recordings included on the CD *Pixinguinha 100 years* (PIXINGUINHA, 1998). In that disc the composer is also the performer: in *Segura ele!* Pixinguinha plays the flute, and in *Um a zero*, he plays the saxophone (the flute solo existing in this recording is by Benedito Lacerda). In addition to this recording, lead sheets edited by Antônio CARRASQUEIRA (1997) were used.

In *Um a zero* we can clearly observe the presence of traditional elements of *choro* (ALMEIDA, 1999; SANTOS, 2001). In *Segura ele!* although some characteristics of *choro* remain, there is a strong influence of American ragtime, which traits are described by the major ragtime composer and performer Scott Joplin himself (CHASE, 1966) and, more recently, by Tania Mara CANÇADO (1999).

2 – Iconographic traces of the aesthetic change in the music of Pixinguinha and *Oito Batutas*

The iconographic documentation of Pixinguinha's music career reveals a keen observation of the evolving tastes of his audiences, especially towards "modernization". In 1919, four years before his trip to Paris, Pixinguinha put

together his band *Oito Batutas* (*Eight Smarties*) in Rio de Janeiro, which was formed by himself (flute), Donga (guitar), China (guitar and vocals), Nelson Alves (*cavaquinho*¹), Raul Palmieri (guitar), Jacob Palmieri (*bandola*², *pandeiro*, *reco-reco*³), José ("Zezé") Alves de Lima (mandolin and *ganzá*⁴) and Luis de Oliveira (bandola and *reco-reco*) (CABRAL, 1997, p.45; MARCONDES, ed., 1998, p.583), to play in the waiting room for the clients of the Palais Cinema, in Rio de Janeiro. *Oito Batutas* bears a formation very close to the so-called *choro regional* instrumentation that prevails today in groups of *choro*. At that time, they focused on a repertoire of genres typically Brazilian (*samba*, *choro*, *embolada*, *desafio*), as a program presented July 7, 1921 (CABRAL, 1997, p.68) reveals:

1° - *De bocca em bocca*. (Samba)

2° - *Remeleixo* (Choro) by A. Vianna

3° - *Bem te vi* (Poetry by Catullo Cearense), by O. Vianna.

4° - *Agueia Chiquinha* (Embolada), by João Pernambuco.

5° - *Preto Limão e Bernardo Nogueira* (Desafio), by O. Vianna e J. Pernambuco.

6° - *Graúna* (Grande Choro), by the great flutist Pixinguinha.

The growing popularity of the group allowed Pixinguinha and *Oito Batutas* tour to some states in Brazil – the neighboring São Paulo and Minas Gerais in 1919, the more distant Bahia and Pernambuco in 1921. Pixinguinha, himself a smarty, would get acquainted with the local music before traveling. From this program, we also infer that he included the genres *embolada*, when traveling to the northeastern area of Brazil. But they were preparing to higher flights - Paris in 1922 and Argentina in 1923.

The sojourn of *Oito Batutas* in Paris, sponsored by millionaire Arnaldo Guinle (MARCONDES, ed., 1998, p.583) lasted about six months and caused

¹ *Cavaquinho* is a Brazilian four-stringed samba and choro instrument played with a reed, similar to the ukulele.

² Bandola is a string instrument similar to a mandolin, but bigger and possessing a deeper sound.

³ *Pandeiro* and *reco-reco* are Brazilian percussion instruments much used in samba and choro, similar to tambourine and scraper, respectively.

⁴ *Ganzá* is a Brazilian percussion instrument much used in samba and choro, similar to a shaker.

profound changes in the aesthetics of the group. The influence of American musicians in the eclectic music scene of Paris was a strong one (BASTOS, 2005), and can be illustrated by the fact that Pixinguinha brought back to Brazil a saxophone (MARCONDES, ed., 1998, p.634). The aesthetic changes occurred not only in the instrumentation in the musical arrangements, but also with the inclusion of new genres. Not only saxophones, clarinets and trumpets began to be part of the arrangements, but also the jazz bands style and its typical repertoire, which "...now included fox-trots, shimmies, ragtimes and other foreign fashion rhythms." (MARCONDES, ed., 1998, p.584)

Indeed, there was a replacement of typically Brazilian instruments – such as the *cavaquinho* and *pandeiro* - by others, popular in the U.S. – such as banjo and drums. A program leaflet of 1923, one year after Paris, listing the songs from a concert held in the city of Santos, Brazil (CABRAL, 1997, p.68) already makes clear the changes in style:

- 1º March "My bird" (Jazz Band Os Batutas)
- 2º Fox trot "Positively Absolutely" (Delsol and Nata)
- 3º Fox-blue "224" Efeito de Pistão (Jazz Band Os Batutas)
- 4º American dance (Miss. Nata)
- 5º Electrico – Solo de saxophone (Euclides)
- 6º Tango Argentino "Roxo" (Trio dos Batutas)
- 7º Eccentric dance "Lucky Day" (Mr. Delsol)
- 8º Courdy Fox (Jazz Band Os Batutas)
- 9º One step (Delsol and Nata)
- 10º Samba "Não posso comer sem molho" (Jazz Band Os Batutas)
- 11º Fantasia do "Charleston" (James Black)

Here, we can see the inclusion of genres played by American ragtime bands, as the military march, fox trot, blues and charleston. Also, there is allusions to an "American dance" or to an "eccentric dancing" or to a "one step". A complete abandonment of the national verve is observed in this program. There is even a place for a "tango argentine". The internationalization of the *Oito Batutas* is also visible in other details such as the name of the group, now called *Jazz Band Os Batutas*. Amid the eleven pieces presented in that program, only one represents the typical Brazilian music: the samba *Não posso comer sem molho* (I can not eat without sauce) but even that, the program states, is played by a "Jazz Band".

3 – Elements of traditional *choro* in *Um a zero*

In *choro*, as it happens in many other popular musical genres, the best composers tend to be the best performers (FERRER, 1996). Pixinguinha came up with the first generation of *choro* players and is still nationally considered its greatest exponent.

Um a zero, considering both lead sheet and recording, can be taken as a stereotype of *choro* for several reasons. It confirms the traditional instrumentation of the *choro regional*: soloists (flute with the main melody and saxophone with contrapuntal lines) and accompanying instruments (guitar, *cavaquinho* and *pandeiro*). The melodic instruments occasionally trade functions or are replaced by other instruments such as clarinet and mandolin, among others. The Informality in the performance of *choro* (LARA FILHO, SILVA & FREIRE, 2011, p. 148-161) is reflected in the relaxed rhythmic realization, especially of syncopated rhythms.

In the recording of *Um a zero*, we can clearly hear the 7-stringed guitar (another typical *choro* instrument) playing the "harmonic bass line" described by ALMEIDA (1999) and SANTOS (2001), at the beginning of the repetition of Section A (Ex.1), with its stepwise motion, syncopated rhythm and chromaticism.



Ex.1 - Harmonic bass line played by the 7-stringed guitar in the recording of *Um a zero* (PIXINGUINHA, 1998)

The performance of Pixinguinha, playing improvised counterpoints on the saxophone, acts beyond mere melodic ornamental function, directing the harmony, preparing and responding to the flute solo played by Benedito Lacerda, as can be heard in m.1-4 (Ex.2). His contrapuntal lines commonly contain anticipations, what is typical to the rhythmic flexibility of *choro*.



Ex.2 - Pixinguinha's counterpoint and flexible rhythmic realization in the recording of *Um a zero* (PIXINGUINHA, 1998)

In the harmonic accompaniment, one can hear the penetrating timbre of *cavaquinho*, which plays a characteristic syncopated pattern (Ex.3).



Ex.3 - Syncopated harmonic accompaniment played by the *cavaquinho* in the recording of *Um a zero* (PIXINGUINHA, 1998)

Benedito Lacerda's interpretation, soloing on the flute, is characterized by rhythmical freedom, playing the melody without having to worry about vertical alignments with the accompaniment. Some notes are anticipated, illustrating what SANTOS (2001, p.5) describes as "...a relaxed way to play the rhythm over the pulse". Ex.4 shows m.5-6 of Section A of *Um a zero*, first as it appears in the lead sheet and then, as transcribed from the recording, with the relaxed rhythmic realization by Benedito Lacerda.



Ex.4 - Lead sheet and recording excerpts of *Um a zero* (m.5-6 from Section A) showing the relaxed rhythmic realization performed by Benedito Lacerda (PIXINGUINHA, 1998).

The Ex.5 shows (m.49-51) two more instances of rhythmical simplifications in Lacerda's performance, in Section C of *Um a zero*, both through the use of syncopation. First, the reduction of a 5-note pickup to just anticipated tied A. Second, the elimination of an ascending arpeggio by an anticipated tied F.



Ex.5 – Lead sheet and recording excerpts of *Um a zero* (m.49-51 from Section C) showing the rhythmic simplification and anticipation performed by Benedito Lacerda (PIXINGUINHA, 1998).

4 - Elements of ragtime in *Segura ele!*

Ragtime emerges in late nineteenth-century US as a fusion of plantation songs and cakewalks. The dissemination and refinement of this Afro-American artistic expression occurred mainly in the musical environment of minstrel shows, where black musicians singing with banjos were the main source white musicians resorted to before the Civil War (SABLOSKY, 1994, p.91).

In *America's Music: from the Pilgrims to the Present*, CHASE (1966, p.430) points out the similarity between these genres: "... a very thin gap that separates the more genuine minstrel songs of the mid-nineteenth century from the authentic ragtime style that emerged a few decades later". To a certain extent, the piano helped to musically fill this gap, becoming intrinsic to the style in its migration from the farms to the town's bars, parlors and music halls. The urban dissemination of ragtime promoted then the emergence of a increasing sophisticated generation of performers of the genre:

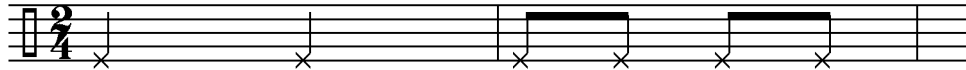
"... between the 1890s and the 1920s, there were ragtime bands, ragtime singers, ragtime banjo players, and, in addition to ragtime pianists Who played only written music, there were also ragtime pianists who improvised". (GRIDLEY, 1988, p.42)

Afro-American Scott Joplin (1868-1917) became the most popular American pianist and composer of ragtime, "...known in the late nineteenth century as the King of Ragtime" (GROVE, 1994, p.479). Maturing his style, Joplin fused his slave heritage with the more literate traditions of European concert music. The contact between ragtime and Brazilian music, however, did not occur in the American continent, but in Europe. BASTOS (2005) speaks of the cakewalk presence in the mixing pot of musical styles in the French scene:

"Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, France had already been "invaded" by *danses exotiques and danses nouvelles* (Apprill and Dorier-Apprill, 2001, p.31). The first included everything that was foreign; the second, especially the artistic expressions stemming from the Americas - the North American cakewalk, the Argentine *tango*, the Brazilian *maxixe*, the Spanish *paso doble*, the *rumba* in Cuba, among others." BASTOS (2005, p. 180).

In Pixinguinha's recording of *Segura ele!*, one can recognize many elements of traditional *choro*, as those observed in *Um a zero*, among them the structure based on the rondo form (ABACA). But, more interestingly, it brings, integrated into its texture, foreign elements to *choro*, pointing to a major stylistic change.

VALENTE (2011) studied the improvisation differences between *choro* and jazz and its relationship with the realization of left and right hands on the piano. Nailor "Proveta" Azevedo (VALENTE, 2011, p.167) speaks about the nature of the bass line in both genres: more melodic and rhythmically more adventurous in the Brazilian *choro*, more contrite and subservient to the soloists lines in the American jazz. In ragtime, this is also true considering the simple and predictable rhythmic accompaniment of military origin that CANÇADO (1999, p.172-174) describes as a "constant march rhythm in the bass line". This ragtime march can also be heard in the recording of *Segura ele!* in the CD *Pixinguinha 100 years* (Ex.6). Another ragtime feature perceptible in the recording and strange to *choro* by that time is the presence of the banjo in the instrumentation.



Ex.6 - Military march rhythm of ragtime observed in the bass line (unidentified instrument) of *Segura ele!* (PIXINGUINHA, 1998)

Another feature in the recording of *Segura ele!*, which may be linked to ragtime, is the presence of the Cuban rhythmic pattern called *cinquillo*. It is played by the banjo, five notes per measure, hence its Spanish name, with a syncopated sixteenth note over the second beat, as shown in Ex.7. According to CANÇADO (1999, p.152), this rhythmic pattern, common in ragtime, can be considered a variation of “eight sixteenth notes with a tie between the beats”.



Ex.7 - Cuban rhythmic pattern of the *cinquillo* performed by the banjo in *Segura ele!* (PIXINGUINHA, 1998)

Now, we turn to the words of the greatest composer of ragtime, Scott Joplin, to recognize another possible influence of this genre in the interpretation of *Segura ele!* by Pixinguinha. In a method of study in which he intended to teach how to play his music, Joplin (quoted by CHASE, 1966, p.433-444) says that in order to achieve the musical effects he wanted, it was necessary to give to "... each note its proper time and by scrupulously observing the ties..." and that the exercises "...are harmonized with the supposition that each note will be played as it is written, as it takes this and also the proper time divisions to complete the sense intended". Actually, in the recording of *Segura ele!* there is a great care to align vertically the melody with the bass line, avoiding the asynchrony that would result from the traditional rhythmical freedom of *choro* (especially in anticipated and delayed notes), as those observed in the recording of *Um a zero*.

Finally, we can also establish a thematic connection between *Segura ele!* and one of the most popular ragtimes of all times, *The Entertainer* by Scott Joplin, which occurs in a motive in the C Sections of both songs (Ex.8). This motive is formed by a under semitone appoggiatura followed by a syncopation. In *Segura ele!* this motive (with the same notes!) is used firstly in the downbeat, without the syncopation, and then dislocated as a pickup to the next measure. It causes a rhythmic disturbance that suggests a ternary meter, different from the common binary of *choro*.

The image displays three musical excerpts. The top left excerpt, labeled 'c.53', shows a melody in 2/4 time with a circled motif. The top right excerpt, labeled 'c.55', shows a similar motif in 2/4 time. The bottom excerpt, labeled 'c.33', shows the motif in 3/8 time, with two measures circled and bracketed as 3/8. Arrows connect the motifs from the top two excerpts to the bottom excerpt.

Ex.8 - Motivic similarity between *The Entertainer* by Scott Joplin (m.53 and m.55 of Section C) of *Segura ele!* by Pixinguinha (m.33-34 of Section C) and suggestion of a ternary meter.

5 - Conclusion

Pixinguinha's open mind leads him to be in contact with other musical cultures and allowed him to absorb stylistic elements that contributed to the formation of his mature and eclectic musical style. After his demands for a richer musical universe inside Brazil, he looked for an expansion of his horizons abroad. Pixinguinha's stay in Paris in 1922 with his group, *Oito Batutas*, represented a rich two-way street in which he took indigenous Brazilian music to Europe and brought back new musical and cultural experiences, which would reflect in his music with new instruments, new performance practices, new compositional processes and a new, not to say a "modern" way, via introduction of English terms, to relate to and influence his audiences.

In *Um a zero*, recorded before the trip to France, Pixinguinha and Benedito Lacerda followed an interpretation that emphasizes the traditional features of the *choro*. The instrumentation highlights the *cavaquinho*, the guitar, the flute and the *pandeiro*. From the point of view of rhythm realization, the use of syncopation (even in the accompanying lines) and the freedom of the soloist predominate.

On the other hand, *Segura ele!*, composed after the trip to France, Pixinguinha breaks apart from traditional *choro*, recreating the genre by resorting to the *ragtime* he heard in the jazz bands. As far as the instrumentation goes, he includes the exotic sound of the banjo and the novelty of the saxophone. Rhythmically speaking, Pixinguinha abandons the sophisticated syncopated bass line of *choro* to favor the simple and military origins of ragtime. Finally, he also incorporates the rhythm of the Cuban *cinquillo* in the harmonic accompaniment, pointing also to another possible connection with ragtime.

Both old and new interested Pixinguinha, who was crucial for the history of Brazilian *choro* in the twentieth century. An analysis of his music, both in text and sound show how he expanded the musical and cultural frontiers of *choro*, its aesthetics and idiomatic vocabulary.

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