

Fernando Lopes-Graça's choral music: Characteristics and interpretation

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Fernando Lopes-Graça's choral music was frequently performed with harshness. His connection to traditional music, his ideology and that of most choirs who performed it, and the influence of his politically-engaged songs gave rise to a style of interpretation that often had nothing to do with the music itself. On the basis of the analysis of some of his vocal compositions, this paper attempts to demonstrate that Lopes-Graça was, in most cases, a composer full of lyricism, a sensitive conveyor of natural, social, and poetic atmospheres, who has often been interpreted in an inaccurate and artificial way. This paper is based on the analysis of parts of the works *Quatro Redondilhas de Camões*, *Dos Romances Viejos*, *Três Esconjuros* and *Para as raparigas de Coimbra*, using musical examples from recent CD recordings by the Gulbenkian Choir. The way Lopes-Graça handles dissonance must, in most cases, be regarded as a sequence of colors, a subtle conveyance of emotional atmospheres, and only secondarily as an alternation of tensions. Indeed, the very concept of dissonance must be reconsidered in terms of his own music.

Keywords: Fernando Lopes-Graça; choral music; analysis of recordings; dissonance

Fernando Lopes-Graça's choral music is a whole consisting of harmonizations of folk songs (Portuguese songs for the most part) and original works.

Contrary to the "folkloristic" harmonizations promoted by the earlier regime, which have a simple harmony and were rhythmically and metrically regular, Lopes-Graça's folk songs are harmonically complex and have an irregular and asymmetrical rhythm and meter.

The Portuguese popular song maintains, as few ones do, the essence, the smell of the earth, the mark of its rural origin, the seal of its authenticity and popular inspiration. It is practically always a true native product, and not a transformation or adaptation...of the learned creation (Lopes-Graça 1974, p.32).

The original music, with its own language, maintains some characteristics of harmonizations of folk songs:

1. Communicability (i.e. harmonizations of folk songs were intended to be sung by amateur choirs, by the “singing common people”).
2. A syllabic style.
3. A clear, intelligible, and very natural articulation.
4. A high degree of freedom as regards rhythm and bar divisions, which is largely conditioned by spoken text and prosody, with asymmetries, hemioles, and unpredictable subdivisions (i.e. *Três Esconjuros*, No. 2).

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

Fernando Lopes-Graça was an educated man, a connoisseur and lover of the great Portuguese poetry. On the other hand, he was also an experienced choral conductor, acquainted with vocal technique and the expressive potentialities of the voice. Consequently, he always composed in a natural way and with an enormous sense of prosody. In his music, the phonetics of the poem is structural, standing ahead of the purely melodic construction of the singing.

The melody is sometimes related to modes and has ornamental melismatic motives typical of the Mediterranean folk music (i.e. *Dos Romances Viejos*, No. 2).

Lopes-Graça is sober in expressing emotions and feelings, using subtle and interior processes, never becoming superficial nor looking for easy effects. Nevertheless he always manages to translate clearly the atmosphere of his texts:

1. Through the melodic-harmonic structure itself (i.e. *Quatro Redondilhas de Camões*, No. 4, cc. 27-53: the static nature of the scene is given by the two lower voices, while the two higher voices, holding the poetic sequence of the text, are more agitated and discursive).
2. Through the melodic construction.

ambient of the text. To consider dissonances as tensions, without looking instead for the subtleness of colors, was one of the reasons that contributed to a rude interpretation style of Lopes-Graça music.

As in many other pieces, there is in *Falso cavaleiro ingrato (Redondilhas de Camões, No. 2)* an extraordinary connection between the harmonic atmosphere, with its unstable balance among functionality and color, light and shadow, open colors and subtle nuances, and the ambiguity of *Redondilhas de Camões*, in which hatred and love mix, merge, and co-exist.

Lopes-Graça's choral music has frequently been performed with some harshness by some of his interpreters, which has nothing to do with the music itself. This tendency should not be generalized however; among others, Borges Coelho with Coral de Letras da Universidade do Porto, Teresita Gutierrez Marques with Coro de Câmara de Lisboa, and Francisco d'Orey with several choirs have acknowledged and stressed the poetry and the lyricism in Lopes-Graça's choral songs.

For that rough performance style that damaged the image that Lopes-Graça's music left in certain environments and that contributed to leave it far from important auditoriums, we must find reasons:

1. The treatment of dissonances, of which we have already spoken.
2. As the composer was closely related to a left-wing party, his songs, regardless of the subject, were often used more as pamphlets than as autonomous and universal art works (most choirs that continuously performed Lopes-Graça's songs were ideologically close to the composer).
3. Politically-engaged songs, namely the *Canções Heróicas*, that represent a very small part of his vocal creation, acquired, specially in the period after the revolution, a great importance and popularity and they became in certain environments the flag of the composer, linking to Lopes-Graça's musical image and conditioning the interpretation of other types of songs, which also adopted a "heroic and rude style."
4. Lopes-Graça's own style in the performance of his works, vigorous, energetic, and not so prone to lyrical manifestations. In his own words, in 1974: "...thus, to a Wagner or a Mahler, 'hyper-expressive' musicians, I prefer a Debussy or a Stravinsky, not 'anti-expressive' musicians...but where the expression is restrained to the reasonable borders in which the music may be conceived as an 'expressive' art" (Lopes-Graça 1978, p. 128).

IMPLICATIONS

Then, what should a Lopes-Graça's choral music interpreter do?

1. He must focus on the work itself, without any type of preconceptions.

Every great musical work is an organism that includes in itself...its own beginning, middle, and end, an entity that contains in itself its own reason...Even if in his work there is a lot of the life of the artist, of his fights or his triumphs, of his rejoicing or his misery,...that work, however, if it has succeeded passing from the subjective to the objective, enlarged from the individual to the universal, ascended from "the particular to the general", that is, if it has moved from a personal contingency level to an aesthetic need level,...that work possesses immediately an entity of its own, that will be studied, interpreted, understood according to its internal structure, to its immediate reality (Lopes-Graça 1978, pp. 185-186).

2. He must be flexible, and search a natural and discursive phrasing, closely related to the spoken text.
3. He must only analyze, understand, find once more the sensibility, the lyricism, the cleverness, and the subtleness Lopes-Graça showed when he composed, and absolutely nothing else.

The sound work is a complicated organism, an organized body, in which all parts adjust according to an accurate logic. Previously to a performance, the artist *dissembles* the work, analyzes it, *listens* to it, in order to *understand its life*; afterwards, he takes the opposite direction: *he brings it together*, operates the summary of what he has observed – and the result is that there is no chord, there is no dynamics gradation, there is not a note that has not been *thought* of according to what it represents in the economy of the work (Lopes-Graça 1978, p. 173).

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