



Brazilian Report of Villa-Lobos's First Los Angeles Visit

IN CONTRAST WITH the euphoric coverage of Villa-Lobos's first visit to California in the *Los Angeles Times*, the report on it given by the Brazilian who was drafted to serve as his interpreter during his first Los Angeles stay struck a less exalted note. Villa-Lobos's interpreter was none other than Érico Veríssimo (*b* Cruz Alta, Rio Grande do Sul, December 17, 1905; *d* Pôrto Alegre, November 28, 1975). Remembered today chiefly as a novelist, Veríssimo continues being rated an author whose popularity in Brazil is second only to that of Jorge Amado—according to the *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984), iv, 551.

With the license accorded to such a novelist as Stendhal, Veríssimo colors his account with numerous anecdotes that do not spray perfume over Villa-Lobos. Veríssimo begins with a misdating. Villa-Lobos arrived at Los Angeles airport November 21, 1944, not November 22 (see *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, III/2:3-4, "Villa-Lobos Will Make Bow Today"). Occidental College conferred the honorary degree the night of November 21 (*Pacific Coast Musician*, xxxIII/23, December 2, 1944, p. 9), not November 22, and President Remsen Bird (*not* Byrd) bestowed it. Not Warner Jansen, but Werner Janssen provided the orchestra that played his works Sunday afternoon, November 26, at Philharmonic Auditorium. These, and numerous other errors, diminish the authority of Veríssimo's racy account published in *A Volta do Gato Prêto* (Rio de Janeiro/Pôrto Alegre/São Paulo: Editôra Globo, 1956), pages 330-343.

At the outset, Villa-Lobos offended Veríssimo by

calling him Luiz (Luís Fernando was Érico's son). Having been invited the year before by the United States Department of State to give a series of lectures on Brazilian literature at the institution of his choice, Veríssimo—who certainly had the right to consider himself no less renowned than Villa-Lobos—had chosen the University of California, Berkeley, where he began his lectures in September of 1943 (*prefácio* to *A Volta*). More to the point, Veríssimo counted already as an important cultural figure long before he first met Villa-Lobos in 1941. However, he then found him so "distracted, disconnected, and egocentric" (*um homem distraído, desligante e egocêntrico* [*A Volta*, p. 331]) that no amity could blossom.

Bearing in mind these background facts, no one should be surprised that throughout Veríssimo's account of Villa-Lobos's first Los Angeles visit, there should run an undercurrent of personal slight. When Villa-Lobos at the Occidental ceremony claimed that he had learned "the song of liberty from a bird in the Brazilian rain forest," Veríssimo translated his remark into English—but then added in English the less than gracious query, "Which bird?"—whereupon the audience broke into laughter that disconcerted Villa-Lobos. "Why are they laughing?" he whispered (in Portuguese) to Veríssimo, whose only response was the shaking of his shoulders. Villa-Lobos repeated, "Yes, it was in the Brazilian rain forest that I learned the song of liberty!" Veríssimo translated thus: "Mr. Villa-Lobos says that he learned the song of liberty in the Brazilian rain forest. . . . And I believe it, because today liberty in Brazil exists only in the rain forest."



As explanation of his having added to what Villa-Lobos had said this gratuitous hit at Getúlio Vargas's *Estado Novo*, Veríssimo tells us (in an aside) that only a few weeks previously he had revealed the "true political situation in Brazil" to an audience of eight hundred students gathered in the same hall at Occidental College where a doctor's degree was now being conferred on Villa-Lobos (who prospered during Vargas's régime).

Discussing the rehearsal for the concert at the Philharmonic, Veríssimo mislabels the *Ascensão* as Villa-Lobos's first symphony. According to him, "Villa-Lobos frenetically waved his baton at the conductor's stand, and screamed at me: 'Tell these animals that they must play this note together.'" The "animals" tried playing together until Villa-Lobos put down his baton, and "seating himself, staring at the ground, muttered: 'This is not an orchestra here or in Cascadura. These people are barbarians. I regret having come here.'" Nonetheless, the rehearsal recommenced.

After intermission, "during which Carl Dentzel—always very red and flustered—brought in sandwiches and bottles of Coca-Cola" that Villa-Lobos refused to consume, a new crisis developed. The square drums that had been ordered made at Universal Studios for use in *Chôros, No. 8* were not yet on hand. If Veríssimo reported rightly, Villa-Lobos then played the part of a madman until the drums did tardily arrive.

"This is not what I ordered," he cried out. "This will not do. I need a rumbly, vibrating sound. These are badly made. They didn't make what I asked for!" Carl Dentzel tenderly tried consoling him in a mixture of Spanish, French, and English. But Villa-Lobos wanted no consolation in any language whatsoever. Now again seated on the platform, he buried his head in his hands. Jansen [Werner Janssen] went on stage and began embracing him and saying friendly words: "Have patience. This will be corrected. Don't make anything of it. . . ."

After the rehearsal, Villa-Lobos walked across the street with others for luncheon at the Biltmore Hotel. According to Veríssimo, Villa-Lobos then at last became aware during the luncheon that Veríssimo's given name was not Luiz, but Érico. "He detests American food," asserts Veríssimo (this being the second full day of Villa-Lobos's first visit to the United States). By now, however, Veríssimo con-

fesses that he had begun to "like this outspoken man, who does and thinks as he pleases, and pays not the slightest attention to what may be thought or said of him." Was indeed Villa-Lobos the consummate boor?

So far as his report of the concert on November 26 goes, Veríssimo asserts that it was an "absolute success" (*um sucesso absoluto*). According to him, Igor Stravinsky came back stage "to compliment Villa-Lobos, whom he had already known several years previously in Paris, and with whom he had maintained correspondence" (*A Volta*, p. 338). But at a supper in Villa-Lobos's honor after the concert, Veríssimo reports that Villa-Lobos sat smoking his cigar, interjecting snide remarks about the bigwigs of industry assembled to do him honor.

On November 28 Villa-Lobos lunched at the Beverly Hills Hotel with a bevy of cinema composers that included Jerome Kern, Joe Green, and even aged Castelnuovo-Tedesco (who professed to Veríssimo that he detested Hollywood). Nat Finston ended the uncomfortable occasion with a tribute in the name of the Guild, "read rapidly and badly."

According to Veríssimo, Villa-Lobos's rudeness reached its apogee next day at a Bel Air mansion, where he and Arminda arrived hours late. Rejecting every compliment brusquely, he told Veríssimo to inform his hosts that he was disgusted with their company. "Tell the lady of the house that the piano is out of tune," he ordered Veríssimo—and then retreated early with Arminda, rather than waiting for refreshments. As for Villa-Lobos's tastes outside music, Veríssimo pictures him as adoring chiefly cowboy films and slapstick comedies.

Can this less than benign portrait of Villa-Lobos be accepted at face value? Veríssimo was a novelist. As a record of events during which he was forced to play the subservient role of a mere interpreter for a celebrity flourishing in the *Estado Novo*, must be read his novelistic account.

On Wednesday, November 29, the very day that Villa-Lobos reputedly spewed out insults directed at his Bel Air hosts, the *Los Angeles Times*, 1/5:3, reported an interview under the heading "Latin-American Musicians Lauded." At its close, Alexander Brailowsky—soloist of the week with the Philharmonic—spoke thus: "Villa-Lobos, the Brazilian now in Los Angeles, is, I think, tops."