

ON THE CHÔROS OF VILLA-LOBOS

LOU HARRISON

OF the great number of works by Villa-Lobos, the best known, not it is true to the large public but at least to the musically minded, are the series of *Chôros* and of *Bachianas Brasileiras*. Between these two groups one must choose for the most serious consideration the *Chôros*, because they represent his most characteristic expression and because the bow to neo-classicism which he makes in the *Bachianas* was never very heartfelt. Indeed these latter works might almost be called neo-academic, so far do they seem in texture from the typical French products in that style and so close do they sound to the sweet sentiments of Massenet, Gounod and Saint-Saens.

Villa-Lobos' *Chôros* derive in method and effect from the *Sacre* period of Stravinsky. Actually, if anything is ever to come of the musical stuff first made public in that work it will not come, I feel, through a redirected contact with the Stravinsky piece, but through the freer, more natural play on similar ideas found in either Villa-Lobos or Ives. The scores of these two composers represent, of course, the most successful embodiment of the contemporary musical *mélange*. As is well known, Ives arrived at his strong personal viewpoint early in the run and quite without the aid of Paris. His scores, as a result, are more original and for the most part are made of sterner stuff. Villa-Lobos on the contrary, learned a great deal in the Paris exchange. His brilliance of orchestral address and the particular taste which directs his choice of theme and tune are the immediate result of close and heated contact with the swirling esthetic winds that swept across Paris after the last war in the wake of retiring armies. From this formative period on, his compositions, already affected by the world-wide folksong cult, have shown an interesting combination of modern French technical observances and strongly nationalistic thematic casting.

The role played in the *Chôros* by the dichotomous melodic pattern of Brazilian tunes cannot be too strongly emphasized. A hasty glance at any of the sixteen works will reveal a vast majority of pages which are dominated by tunes that begin with normal American rhythmic action and then arrive in characteristic fashion at the final tone that in many cases extends

itself to a length outdistancing that of the active forepart of the line. The frequently ostinatic accompaniment more often than not goes right on keeping the pace, but the oversweeping theme is up there on top poised for the next descent into action. This is very like Latin life in general. Work a while, and then comes the siesta before you plunge in again. It is also why the *Chôros* sound, for all their Parisian international textural vocabulary, so very Brazilian and so very Villa-Lobos.

The *Chôros* are written for every sort of instrumental combination. Numbers 1 and 2 are respectively for solo guitar and piccolo with clarinet. The rest of the pieces up to Number 11 are for everything from chamber ensembles to full orchestra with chorus. Number 11 is in the form of a colossal piano concerto with accompaniment of grand orchestra (five flutes, eight horns and so on) and lasts way over an hour. Many exploit an enormous battery of primitive instruments as well.

In length and form there is a great diversity; some are short, some very long. Though Villa-Lobos has been insisting for years that the form of the *Chôros* is absolutely new, and an authentic addition to the line beginning with the suite and seeming to end with the symphonic poem, I am not personally convinced that a real form exists at all in the majority of them and am more likely to think of their having a rather extensive connection with the rhapsody, especially the Liszt Hungarian. They exhibit alternating sections of slow and fast material, they have a dance-like climax, and almost all avoid the expression of personal drama or internal lyricism. Themes are repeated and varied and they disappear with an air of surety which suggests that there are plenty more where they came from. Seldom is there a total repeat or an extended development of anything and this makes for jungle-like fecundity in the discourse. Sections of antiphonies, however, provide formal tree-trunks to keep the forest real.

The actual degree of texture, while generally rather complex and a bit dissonant, has an amazing variety of tension range, shifting from a couple of simple lines to a full panoply of shrill, close orchestral voices; never, however, jumping off the tonal platform which seems to underly the wide variety of harmonic cross-associations. Many popular as well as primitive rhythmic formulae are put to use both repetitively as accompaniment material and contrapuntally up to, and including, the fugue itself.

This brief introduction is only a short note on the general nature of the series. A word must be said though, about the name *Chôros* for which there seems to be no adequate English equivalent. The closest approximation is *Serenade*.