

A guitar duo's artistry, from Baroque to Brazil

By Sarah Tyrrell
April 16, 2014

Brasil Guitar Duo's long collaborative history is evident in the relationship that unfolds on stage. In fact, João Luiz and Douglas Lora have known each other since adolescence and have played together for over half of their lives. **They are remarkably responsive to one another,** needing hardly any eye contact, it seems. **Both boast a modest, disciplined demeanor, always gracious with the audience in what is more understatement than flash—more sophistication than sparkle.**

The Duo's exposure to and training in concert-hall composers and their repertoire parlays into appealing, surprising programming: Bach, Scarlatti, and Debussy are not off-limits for a single sitting, and that effortlessly combines with the folk and popular forms of Brazil and Argentina. One set alone might contain the urban ensemble choro music of Rio, some Northeastern dance rhythms, and a taste of samba, Brazil's national, iconic song and dance form. Friday's program demonstrated the Duo's comfort level across a variety of repertory, as they offered arrangements of eighteenth-century French harpsichord music alongside twentieth-century Argentine tango. In fact, their spectrum of musical interests informs each program, a lineup which remains fluid right up until stage time. Several changes were simply announced by Lora as the evening progressed, accompanied by some brief verbal program notes where necessary.

The first half opened with an Argentine tango by Piazzolla. "Zita" (not "Whisky" as the program stated) is a movement from the larger Suite Troileana and it is structured in three clear sections. This opener gave the audience a variety of moods, thanks to brisk polyphony giving way a slower, more melancholic vibe, then some racing, repetitive fingerwork. Of course, Piazzolla's color and drama are well suited to the guitar, Argentina's national instrument, and the appreciative near-capacity audience in Yardley Hall was hooked.

Luiz and Lora have ample experience with baroque-era music; their latest recording, a CD released on the Avie label, features all of J.S. Bach's sonatas for flute and harpsichord, astutely arranged by Luiz for flute and two guitars. On Friday, they played Rameau's Gavotte and

Variations, proving that this fascination with eighteenth-century chamber music is not a passing fancy. They show a real affinity for this aesthetic, paying careful attention to steady, motoric rhythms and sensitivity to the demands of complex polyphony. Both played crisply to maintain, through repetitive sequences, the transparent textures Rameau intended (Variation II was particularly impressive). The terraced dynamics were convincingly done. Les Cyclopes to follow required absolute attacks and releases, and the Duo's coordination was superb.

Composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco demonstrated his own affinity for J.S. Bach's music in composing for two guitars a set of twenty-four preludes and fugues, one in each of the major and minor keys. The Duo performed No. 7 in C-sharp minor of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's four-volume 1962 compilation, *Les Guitares bien tempérées*. The Prelude was less rhapsodic and free than the title suggests, grounded with a recurring refrain. The fugue's reserved subject and answer ricocheted nimbly between players in a conversational call and response. Luiz and Lora were focused here, but never intense, their easy partnership imparting a welcoming, riveting ambience.

Lora's own *Songs from the Inner Unfolding* is an active, richly textured piece. It was a treat to watch Lora's physical playing here, and in fact it was difficult to take the eyes off of the pair while they were underway. **They play with a remarkable fluidity and calm disposition, never approaching anything even close to flamboyance.** It was admirable how confident they were that the music would speak for itself.

The Duo then presented Luiz's arrangement of the Prelude to Villa-Lobos's *Bachianas brasileiras* No. 4. Even though I am partial to the full orchestral version, the two-guitar arrangement did much to honor the legendary piece. The plaintive theme was well suited to guitar, and through its almost obsessive repetition, the pair managed the necessary momentum to bring the piece to a convincing climax. As a finale to the first half, the Duo substituted a piece by Egberto Gismonti called *Sete Anéis*. The absolutely intoxicating outer movements surround a wild improvisatory middle section, where both players reveled in

the opportunity to celebrate Gismonti's call to explore special effects, contemporary harmonies, and avant-garde dissonances. In one segment, Luiz played a stark ostinato above which Lora coaxed some curiously modern sounds from his instrument.

Next to come was a set of compositions composed by Luiz. Zanzifuga honors Brazilian contemporary composer Edu Lobo by treating his theme "Zanzibar" to the baião rhythms that hail from Northeastern Brazil. Djavan's Portrait transformed what was originally a duple-meter samba into a showpiece of complex, irregular meters—complete with a fugue as a middle section. Luiz's harmonic language is at times very modern and his textures often austere. Throughout the substantial pieces, both players demonstrated their innate feel for his signature aesthetic.

The next Gismonti offering was A Fala da Paixão, which came across as a modern spin on the modinha, Brazil's urban song form. A melancholy, lyrical melody spun at a leisurely pace over the arpeggiated accompaniment, so a simple homophonic texture resulted, to be transferred soon into something much more sensuous and passionate. The showpiece Forrobodo (which the program notes translated as "big party" or "commotion") offered some blazing passages. The main theme was positively electric in diminution toward the final measures. The concert ended with Bate-coxa, Luiz's two-guitar version of virtuoso Marco Pereira's solo piece, a raucous ride that left a captivating melody fixed in the audience's ear.