

Flávio Chamis Takes Us on a Discovery Voyage Through Brazilian Musical Lands

Contributed by Robert White
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The mix of classical and popular occurs as a seemingly natural development in the career of Flávio Chamis. Until his nineteenth birthday, his musical life consisted of playing the guitar songs he heard in his native Brazil. Not satisfied with his engineering studies at the São Paulo University, he decided to start learning music seriously, following a natural talent that, till then, had been neglected.

That was the inception of a long process, which began in Brazil, continued at the Rubin Academy at the Tel Aviv University, and concluded in the Detmold Music Academy, Germany, where Chamis graduated in Orchestral Conducting.

From there, in order to observe a world-class orchestra at work, he decided to settle in the city of his favorite ensemble: not only did he get to know the Vienna Philharmonic, but also became conducting assistant to Leonard Bernstein.

Today, with a long list of performances within the classical music world, Chamis decided to incorporate the classical virtuosity into the Brazilian popular scene.

In 2003, he recorded *Especiaria*, which reflects his most inner convictions: "I always felt strongly about the interaction between classical and popular. As a classical musician, I have been permanently fascinated by (and confess being somehow jealous of the spontaneity of) the "cats" who play jazz and pop. I find their instinctive musicianship highly attractive".

Especiaria is a selection of the most representative music of Chamis in the popular realm. Or, better said, popular in its flavor, but classical in form and melodic complexity.

The choice to produce the CD fell on the excellent, Grammy awarded, Jay Ashby, experienced by having worked with so many international stars, such as Nancy Wilson, Paquito D'Rivera, The New York Voices, Slide Hampton, as well as the Brazilians Ivan Lins and Astrud Gilberto.

Because the repertoire of the CD is based on the interpolation of vocal and instrumental pieces, a singer was needed, preferably a great female voice. That is how Joyce, a very well known and refined singer from Brazil, came aboard as the vocalist in all six vocal tracks.

Recorded and mixed in the studios at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, in Pittsburgh, the vocal part of the CD starts with the prelude "Estrela" (Star), which includes the Cuban/American violinist Andres Cardenes. The track introduces the authorial character of the album: "I err without fear, as I err in my quest of being just what I am".

"Especiaria" (Spice), the title track, a prank on Brazil's discoverer, Cabral, is an exception in a repertoire of particularly dense lyrics. "O Intrínseco da Vida" (Intrinsic to Life), is a song charged with confessional and philosophical content, practically a modern Lied, with a sensitive piano accompaniment by Alon Yavnai.

"Two Note Samba" brings a revering reference to Antonio Carlos Jobim's One Note Samba. "Modinha Fora do Tempo" (Modinha Out of Time), in the asymmetric 5/4 time signature (therefore "out of time") and "Deuses do Céu" (Sky Gods) - with a delicate guitar solo by Marty Ashby - comprise the other vocal tracks.

Out of the instrumental works, "Samba Pra Quem Sabe" (Samba for Who Knows), bringing a sophisticated harmonic structure, features the clarinet of Anat Cohen. "E Daí?" (So What?), piece in which some compositional rules are deliberately ignored, works as metalanguage, addressing the "imperfection" of the form.

"Soroco's Song" and "Tristan Blues" are two referential compositions: the first alludes to a short story by the great Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa, while "Tristan Blues" (solo harmonica by Hendrik Meurkens) recurrently uses the first chord of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde in different harmonic settings.

"Qual o Que" (None of That), samba-bossa-pop, with brisk harmonies, "echoes the life of a Brazilian in America," according to Chamis, stressing the personal slant of Especiaria. Closing the CD, again the prelude "Estrela", this time as an instrumental postlude, and featuring an exquisite solo by Brazilian virtuoso trumpeter Claudio Roditi.

Especiaria is a record that deals with possibilities. The possibility of a classical musician, such as Chamis, directing a new look into popular music, resulting in a hybrid reading that preserves the meanderings and particularities of both universes.

Or still, the possibility of musing on a path that started with an informal contact with music. But now Chamis applies all his experience as a maestro and practically "conducts" the whole creative process of the CD.

Not only did he compose, arrange, and write the lyrics, but we also find his secure hand assisting in the editing, mixing, and even in the artwork, in which Brazilian spices (especiarias) are displayed as if thrown onto an old colonial map.

The cover sends us back to the beginning of the process, revealing the map from which Chamis ventures off on the search for his "musical spices."