

Bandolim's Wandering Bodhisattva Danilo Brito Arrives from Brazil

Contributed by Bruce Gilman
Wednesday, 02 January 2008

Musicians' technical skills have been on a rising curve for decades, and clearly a high point has been attained by the energetic and intensely serious Danilo Brito, a bandolim player who grabs hold of every piece he plays, leaving no doubt why he won Brazilian Popular Music's 7th Prêmio Visa, instrumental edition.

The Prêmio Visa de MPB, a competition for young musicians created and produced by Eldorado Radio and sponsored by Visa, took place for the first time in 1998. It is the most important and respected competition in Brazilian popular music, and as part of the prize, provides winners with the opportunity to record a CD.

Teeming with technically superb and musically distinctive melodic invention, Brito's CD, *Perambulando*, embodies the spirit of an age, radiates musical and cultural understanding, and presents an important aspect of Brazil's heritage (performance practice) to a younger generation.

In addition to four strongly-written Brito originals, the disc includes pieces by Severino Araújo, Pixinguinha, and Ernesto Nazaré - and it's high time someone took a fresh look at these works in light of changing attitudes toward performance practice.

In particular, the disc serves as a fine introduction to a coherent solo style, paced by ideas assembled in an imaginative manner. Brito's good taste steers him well clear of any prevalent trends, allowing the music's integrity to reveal itself from within. This CD embraces superbly crafted music of, at times, overwhelming intensity.

The craft and the intensity are inseparable: there's as little here of mere technical cleverness as there is of self-indulgent emotional display; the emotion both needs and is concentrated by tight control. Brito's craftsmanship and talent for writing are indisputable even by those whose tastes are for less elaborate fare.

This arresting CD finds Brito in the company of musicians with whom he is conversant; a general aura of good feelings, generated by the soloists and supporting musicians, permeates all tracks. The title-track, "Perambulando" (Wandering) opens the CD and properly sets the mood.

A self-declared bohemian, Brito wrote it as an homage to himself, albeit tongue-in-cheek, while moving between nighttime club and bar gigs in São Paulo. The tune's sinuous melody, benefiting from impeccable ensemble playing, has something to delight all but the most misanthropic listeners.

Serving up a potent mix of adrenaline-fueled vigor and jaw-dropping virtuosity, Brito displays his harmonic vocabulary

and rare gift for flowing lyric invention on "Sussuarana," a particularly effective example of his composing and instrumental capabilities. Featuring Toninho Ferragutti on accordion, this baião takes its title from a tiny village in the state of Paraíba where Brito's father, an amateur bandolim player, was born.

Forthright and driving, it is a comprehensive exposition of modern bandolim playing, with Brito's needle-sharp thought and attack providing notice that his extraordinary plectrum technique is intact.

One of the best known tunes in the choro repertoire, Severino Araújo's "Espinha de Bacalhau" (Spine of the Codfish) was composed for clarinet, Araújo's instrument. In this show of virtuosity, the interpreter must be careful or wind up "swallowing the cod's spine."

Here, with bandolim replacing the clarinet, but without altering the harmonic structure, Brito hews closely to the tune's original melodic and harmonic contours, his unflagging inventive flow and nonstop torrents of precisely structured tones giving the tune a fresh, "first-time-through" feel.

Brito, through both understating and overstating, stimulates peers to bring out the right message from Pixinguinha's music, thoroughly reinventing pieces in ways that the composer would have saluted. On the rarely played polka "Recordações" (Memories), Brito divides solos with Brazil's greatest living choro musician, flautist Altamiro Carrilho.

The epitome of finesse and poetic refinement, Carrilho phrases immaculately, caressing the dialog between flute and bandolim, his consistently beautiful tone and inspired ebullience enhancing the tune's rich expressive possibilities.

Late in his life, when Pixinguinha was in the hospital and neither friends nor relatives were visiting, he borrowed a pen and some paper to write the anguished "Desprezado" (Disdained), a tune concentrating on, as the name suggests, his illness and neglect.

Here, the dark reflectiveness of the themes, razor-sharp ensemble playing, Brito's tortured lyricism, and Proveta's tenacious clarinet virtuosity bring out the heart of the work, with Brito and Proveta beautifully interweaving solos with currents of urgency.

Achingly lovely, Ernesto Nazaré's waltz "Confidências" was transcribed for bandolim by Jacó do Bandolim. Brito's own arrangement includes, with minor adaptations, the fourth section omitted by Jacó. Acutely lyrical and tenderly expressive, Brito juxtaposes dramatic tension with warmth and dignified composure, unveiling just why Nazaré has had such an impact on generations of Brazilians - a deeply felt account.

With an energetic, forward-reaching feel, Milton Mori's "Choro pro Mario," has twin flames, Brito and the unfailingly incisive Proveta, sharing solos that are constantly stoked by an ensemble playing with splendid precision and vitality.

That Brito is a player who responds well to positive musical stimulation is similarly evident on "Evocação" (Evocation). This interpretation, transcribed for bandolim by Brito, is inspired perhaps by the presence of musicians who are completely in command of the material and supply the perfect support - a real gem.

The lyrically passionate waltz, "Julieta" was written by Pixinguinha's harmony professor, Mario Alvares, and is tinged with a certain nobility, a compelling elegance. Notable is Brito's feeling for naturally expressive contours, which allows the music to breath freely.

Both Zé Barbeiro and Marco Bertaglia (guitars), make strong contributions, accompanied by the sensuous lines of Luizinho Sete Cordas (7-string guitar); nonetheless, it is the strength and quality of Brito's playing which sets the seal of distinction on the performance.

With a controlled ferocity that keeps you on the edge of your seat, Brito is unfailingly idiomatic on "Um a Zero." He assaults the tune at a breakneck tempo that would leave many lesser players gasping, and the group's knife-edge unanimity of attack, tone, and dynamics are remarkable. They don't merely play this piece, they live it.

This version of Pixinguinha and Benedito Lacerda's choro classic, with Garoto's arrangement, must remain the touchstone for a very long time, reaffirming the thoroughbred character of a warhorse that often sounds overworked.

Evocative of the title ascribed, the melancholy "Choro da Saudade" by Paraguayan composer Agustin Barrios, adapted for unaccompanied bandolim, is haunting and eloquently phrased. Rarely has such a transmutation been accomplished with greater conviction. Brito's performance, conveying a suppleness of phrasing and dynamic shaping, is an amalgam of technical perfection, fluid musicality, and exemplary tone-production - a truly imaginative interpretation. This is playing of no mean distinction.

Loosely translated, Madrugada is the time after midnight and before daybreak. Brito, settling into a very sorrowful mood, performs his "Um Choro na Madrugada" on tenor guitar. The ensemble is immaculate and responsive; the timbre of the tenor guitar is subdued and shadowy, almost bitter, its dark-hued eloquence counterbalanced by a touching simplicity. Because these players listen intently to each other in the manner of chamber musicians, the interplay realized by soloist and ensemble takes on the character of a poignant dialogue and much is gained in vividness.

Brito heads an exhilaratingly purposeful account of "Aragão no Choro," drawing playing of infectious eagerness and disarming poise from the ensemble. Brito wrote the piece for a percussionist friend who appears on this CD. "He's a charismatic guy whose good humor is contagious," says Brito. With the group on its toes, the effect is undeniably exciting, a good example of what this group and Brito can do when everything clicks.

Perambulando is, in short, the ideal introduction to a young man at peace with his talent and his music, a musician who has proved himself one of the most formidably well-equipped bandolim players ever to riffle through the Visa MPB

process, and whose immediate stylistic antecedent and chief inspiration is the unadorned sound of Jacó do Bandolim.

Combining the intricacy and instrumental sound of Jacó with the progressive harmonic attack of Hamilton de Holanda, Brito commands a multi-shaded tonal palette and is possibly Jacó's truest and best successor, though in no sense his imitator.

Perpetually dazzling, Perambulando is never in danger of seeming like a demonstration of Brito's technical possibilities. His playing is agile, lean, and impetuous, with infinite flushes of warmth. In this excellent program, never does anything compromise the integrity, spontaneity, virtuosity, and sheer bravado of the performances.

Absolute rhythmic precision and the clarity of color that comes from meticulous balance are among its other pleasures. Each piece is a musical event, complete, integrated, and resourceful. With a special group feel to the whole, everything sounds exceptionally well-judged, interrelated, and texturally conscious, its sunshine and storm gauged with arresting flair.

Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of Brazzil magazine, an online international publication based in Los Angeles, for more than a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the Georgetown Journal.