

The Music of Samba Schools: A Challenge for Popular Music Studies

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The music of the samba schools of Rio de Janeiro, the *samba-enredo*, is a subject of much interest for popular music studies. One of its most striking features is the fact that most composers dedicated to this genre don't have any formal musical education, which provides fertile ground for studies on music learning processes and oral memory. At the same time, this music has a prominent position in the Brazilian phonographic market, besides being broadcasted by the country's major television station, which leads us back to Theodor Adorno's reflections on standardization in popular music. Added to this, the *samba-enredo* has its own performance circuit (the samba schools) and media coverage (blogs and websites specialized in Carnival), which contributes to the existence of a mode of production and reception that has no parallel anywhere else in Brazil and, I believe, abroad. Therefore, this article aims to discuss the challenges of analyzing this music genre, whose uniqueness lies precisely in being in the middle ground of a mass production and a musical craft still strongly marked by orality and self-learning.

Keywords: Samba; Samba school; Orality; Culture industry

Samba schools: a universe of contradictions

At each carnival, repeating and renewing a tradition begun in the late 1920's, samba schools in Rio de Janeiro move from their neighborhoods to downtown to participate in a competition in which each school parades in an avenue called *Sambódromo*.

The complexity of the aspects involving the parade of the samba schools can be verified by reading the judgment criteria of this competition: *bateria* (the rhythmic group of the samba schools); harmony (the relationship between the singing of the main interpreters and that of the school as a whole); evolution (excitement of the components of the school and fluency of the parade); *enredo* (conception and development of the theme proposed by the school); allegories and props; costumes; *comissão de frente* (a choreographed wing that opens the samba school parade); *Mestre-Sala* and *Porta Bandeira* (couple of dancers who lead and present the school flag) and *samba-enredo* (the song of the samba schools).

Since their foundation, the samba schools are marked by a series of contradictions present in many aspects of their constitution. Their own trajectory, from a form of sociability between marginalized individuals until its elevation to the status of a national symbol, was marked by constant negotiations between the *sambistas* and the government, the former with the intention of preserving their way of expression and the latter assuming the role of imposing "order over disorder" (Augras 1993) and, ultimately, promote a "domestication of the urban masses" (Queiroz 1985).

Another set of contradictions is related to the economic aspect. Some sectors of the samba schools are marked by a full-heart dedication of its members, as it is the case of the *passistas* (highly trained samba dancers) and the musicians of the *bateria*, who are not remunerated by their activities. At the same time, professionals such as the *Mestre-Sala* and *Porta-Bandeira*, the *bateria* director and, above all, the *carnavalesco* (the artist who conceives the *enredo* and all the costumes and allegorical floats of the parade) earn wages and are disputed by the samba schools. Another problem is related to the financing of the parade: samba schools are versatile enough to receive money from the government; from private companies that sponsor the making of plots related to their brands; and sometimes by mobsters related to the *Jogo do Bicho*, an illegal gambling game (Jupiara and Otávio 2015).

In many unprivileged neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro, samba schools still exercise a strong community role, since they are one of the few leisure and socializing spaces available to people of all ages, who are involved in the samba school activities not only during the Carnival period, but throughout the year. At the same time, since the parade is broadcasted by Rede Globo, the largest television network in Brazil, celebrities of all kinds, strangers to the community, see the samba schools as a way to show off their well sculpted bodies. It is necessary to emphasize that the samba

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schools themselves are interested in attracting these people, since they pay high sums of money to obtain costumes of prominence in the parade.

It is also possible to see a contradiction in their discourse itself: at the same time samba schools claim to be the guardians of the samba traditions, by preserving for instance, the *velha guarda* (the group of elderly members of each school), they stand in a race for innovation of the visual aspects of the parade through the use of pyrotechnic and technological elements, so that the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro does justice to the slogan "the greatest spectacle on Earth".

Samba-enredo

Samba-enredo, the music genre produced by the samba schools, is not immune to these contradictions. In the article titled "*The Disc is not the Avenue*": *Schismogenetic Mimesis in Samba Recording*, Frederick Moehn reports that, from the end of the 1990's, the tendency to try to reproduce in the studio the performance in the avenue was being left aside by the producers of the samba-enredo albums, who happened "to see these two spheres as oppositional, with certain of the performative practices of the avenue hindering the commercial market-ability of the recording" (Moehn 2004: 48). Subordinated to this dichotomy were the oppositions between the clean sound of the CD and the "dirty" sound of the avenue; the vocal performance of the singers, which require a more melodic style on the CD, as opposed to the shouting of the avenue; and the opposition between a much stronger presence of voice on the CD than on the avenue, where the percussions play a predominant role. Moehn points out, however, that "these differentiated values, aesthetics, and practices are not necessarily always in tension with each other" (Moehn 2004:49).

One of samba-enredo's most striking features is the fact that most of the composers who are dedicated to this genre don't have any formal musical education. It is possible to see from testimonials of older composers that the process of learning the repertoire was done in an autodidact way, from the observation of the most experienced samba musicians:

I was a child and then accompanied my brothers to samba. My brother Jorge had attended the Cacique de Ramos since he was a child, and he attended the [samba school] Imperatriz Leopoldinense when it still rehearsed in [club] Paranhos. My brother-in-law, Trajano Russo, who is considered one of the greatest *partideiro* [samba improviser] of Brazil and of Rio de Janeiro, went there too and I also used to accompany them. I was always lurking, always waiting for an opportunity, listening to one, listening to another. Another brother-in-law, Denir Lobo, went there and along with them I began to meet, when I was still a child, composers of the Imperatriz Leopoldinense, who frequented a corner, on which there was the bar called *El Fernando*, which on Sundays promoted a samba with the people of Imperatriz Leopoldinense and people related to samba. And as my brothers also went there, my brother-in-law etc, I would go there and listen to them. I loved listening to them (Tuninho Professor 2015, video).

In addition to the learning of the repertoire, it was common that the very learning of musical instruments took place on *rodas de samba* (samba meetings). According to the composer André Diniz, it is possible to see that even in the 1990's, when he began to compose sambas-enredo, the transmission of knowledge occurred in these informal situations:

I joined *Raça [ultra]*, from [the football team] Flamengo, and at the entrance door of Raça's head office there was a *pagode* [samba meeting]. So, I would see Bocão playing tantã [percussion instrument] and there was a boy named Marquinhos, who is Marquinhos do Banjo, a composer of União da Ilha, who played the banjo, and I kept looking at them. Then I started learning to play the cavaquinho (Diniz 2013, video).

However, samba-enredo has a singularity: since 1968, the songs of each samba school are recorded in discs released annually. Although the basic motivation of the recording is to obtain profits for the record companies and the samba schools, this practice gave rise — and here we have another contradiction — to a well-documented repository of sambas that makes possible to following generations of composers to have a vast and profound knowledge of the tradition that precedes them. The statement of the composer Diego Nicolau is revealing of this:

My learning was all by disks. I have LPs, I have all the CDs. I was always in love with samba-enredo. I was a kid who loved samba-enredo. When I took the taste for it, I went to search for older sambas (Nicolau 2015, interview).

The learning through discs is so important that Diego Nicolau reached the status of a respected composer in Rio de Janeiro even without playing an instrument:

I never studied music. It's a native musicality. A lot of people find it odd that I do not play any instruments. Usually those who do not play any instrument make only lyrics or make simple melodies. They find it odd that I make richer, more elaborate melodies without playing an instrument (Nicolau 2015, interview).

For a music genre in which the idea of tradition and belonging to a community is a fundamental part of its self-affirming discourse (Trotta & Castro 2015), to note that someone can somehow get the knowledge of the samba traditions by listening to discs is a fact of a remarkable contradiction. Therefore, evaluating the weight of the transmission of knowledge in person or through discs is a task of considerable interest to the popular music researcher.

Mainstream versus Alternative

The fact that samba-enredo is based on orality may explain the existence of certain structures that are recurrent in this music genre, as it is the case of what I call *paradigma de início* [start paradigm], a rhythmic-melodic structure used at the beginning of several sambas (Fig. 1):

"Treze Naus", Portela, 1969
(Ari do Cavaco / Rubens)

E B⁷ E B⁷ E C^{#7} F^{#m7}
paradigma de início

A - pe - sar De mui-tos sé - cu - los - pas - sa - dos

"E o samba sambou", São Clemente, 1990
(Helinho 107 / Mais Velho / Chocolate / Nino)

F C⁷ F C⁷ F D⁷ Gm⁷
paradigma de início

Ve - jam só O jeí - to que o sam - ba - fi - cou

"Peguei um Ita no Norte", Salgueiro, 1993
(Demá Chaga / Arizão / Bala / Guaracy / Celso Trindade)

F C⁷ F C⁷ F D⁷ Gm⁷
paradigma de início

Lá vou eu Me le - vo - pe - lo mar da se - du - ção

"As sombras da folia em alto astral", Unidos da Ponte, 1996
(Serginho do Porto / André Fullgaz)

C G⁷ C G⁷ C Am Dm⁷
paradigma de início

Lá vou eu E meu São Jo - ão de Me - ri - ti

"Deu pra ti! Tô em alto astral! Tô com Porto Alegre trilegal!", Caprichosos de Pilares, 2002
(J. Mazarim / Andre Fullgaz)

G D⁷ G D⁷ G E⁷ Am⁷
paradigma de início

Vem, a - mor Eu sou Por-to-A - le - gre na A - ve - ni - da

Fig. 1 – Paradigma de início

However, as Frederick Moehn asserts,

in the case of samba-enredo, contextual linkages to participatory and community-based music making are, in fact, manifest and highly meaningful, but they are continually challenged and redefined through interaction with commercial and market forces (Moehn 2004: 50-1).

It is therefore necessary to remember that samba-enredo is a music genre fully inserted in the culture industry. As far as the phonographic record is concerned, the sales of the samba-enredo discs reached their peak in 1986, when more than 1 million copies were sold (Cavalcanti 1995: 85). Although the samba-enredo's expressiveness as carnival music has diminished over the last twenty years², data from the Brazilian Association of Record Producers (ABPD) indicate that the album *Sambas de Enredo 2016* was the 7th best-selling album of 2015³, which represents attractive copyright for the composers. In this process, it is possible that many of the harmonic, melodic and formal repetitions of samba-enredo originated as a result of the search for ready-made formulae to achieve success, which leads us back to the process of standardization of popular music described by Theodor Adorno⁴ (1986).

Before reaching the *mainstream*, the sambas-enredo are presented in an alternative circuit, far from the eyes of the large public. Months before the carnival, each school makes internal disputes to choose which samba-enredo will be taken to the parade. Dozens of works are registered and after weeks of qualification the official samba is chosen. In this process, each partnership must bear the costs of musicians and singers who will play the samba on the *quadra* (the space where samba school rehearsals are performed), as well as the costs of paid crowds, flags, confetti and all kinds of resources to call attention of the judgement committee to the song that is being presented. It is a consensus that today it is necessary to spend some tens of thousands of dollars in order to win an internal dispute of a samba school.

² Among the reasons cited for this phenomena are the loss of the quality of the compositions and the esthetic stagnation of the genre, besides the national success of *axé* in the second half of the 1990's.

³ The data are available at <http://abpd.org.br/home/numeros-do-mercado/ano-2015/>

⁴ In a recent article, I discussed the most common melodic, harmonic, and formal patterns in samba-enredo produced since the 1980's (Prado 2015).

The growth of the expenses led to the emergence of the so-called *samba offices*, groups of composers who have the financial structure to compete in various samba schools. Although the samba offices are viewed negatively by many samba composers, there are others who see this phenomenon in a more pragmatic way:

You can say what you want about us, but we play the game with their rules. We do not play outside the norm. Do we have to bring a crowd? There will be a crowd. Do we have to bring people? So we'll bring people. Do we have to bring a good singer? I'll take the best. I'm in the game. Do we have to buy a table in the finals? I'm going to buy it. Do we have to buy a VIP area? I'm going to buy it. I will not let someone buy it before me (Diniz 2013, video).

If in the previous years the losing sambas of the internal disputes were relegated to the so-called *sambas cemetery* (Goldwasser 1975), being prevented from being played again in the *quadras*, nowadays the competing sambas are divulged in sites specialized in Carnival⁵. In addition to providing to the researcher a much greater panorama of the different aesthetics of samba-enredo than the audition of the official discs of samba schools could suppose, this new channel of communication has given these sambas the opportunity to transcend the not always honest decisions of the internal disputes of the samba schools and to make themselves known by new generations that will come.

Conclusion

If at the elaboration of my Undergraduate Research at the Department of Music of the University of São Paulo (Souza, 2010) I only proposed to make a musical analysis of the samba-enredo through the identification of its melodic, harmonic and formal patterns, the complexity of elements that surround the modes of production, reception and circulation of this music genre has forced me, now in my doctorate, to use concepts that came from linguistics (Souza 2014), musical cognition (Prado 2016), sociology (Prado 2015), oral memory, among other fields of study. Besides that, the interviews with composers of samba schools are a fundamental part of the research, since they provide valuable testimonials both on issues related to their creative processes and on concrete issues (financial, for example) of the samba school's universe.

It is this complexity that makes it necessary to create methods of analysis that account for a very characteristic feature of Brazilian music: the conciliation between traditional and mass production modes. Rather than importing ready-made models of Anglo-American musicology, I believe it is possible that Latin American musicology provides insights into similar problems faced by analysts of certain popular genres of popular music of the United States and the United Kingdom (the blues, for example).

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⁵SRZD Carnaval (<http://www.srzd.com/carnaval/>) and Carnavalesco (<http://www.carnavalesco.com.br/>), among others.

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