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POLYPHONY AND EVOLUTION IN *FADO* HISTORICAL
RECORDINGS FROM PORTUGAL

*Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world,
the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken,
the world is open and free, everything is still and will always be in the future.*
(Mikhail Bakhtin, 1984: 166)

Introduction: *Fado*, the UNESCO List, Polyphony and Evolution

What voices may we – ethnomusicologists listen to in *fado* in 2012? Now that almost a year has passed since *fado* was included into UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; that twenty years have passed since the Portuguese migrants showed how they play with their individual identity in the transnational situation through *fado* performance around New York (Côrte-Real, 1991); that twelve years have passed since I studied the relationship between cultural policy and music expression in the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Portugal, precisely motivated by the nationalist imprisonment of those Portuguese migrants (Côrte-Real, 2000); and finally that Internet opened doors wide to every kind of *fado* performance, thus made available at the simple touch of a keyboard key. We may hear many voices, contextualized in many perspectives, imbedded in ideological, acoustic and commercial motivations and trends; and it is not easy to separate and talk clearly about them.

Mikhail Bakhtin's early ideas on the interpretation of the openness of the world are most helpful for the analysis of *fado* as a music category. His writings on the *Answerability of Art* were seminal for his choice of the concept of polyphony to develop his thoughts (Bakhtin, 1919). Through the analysis of Dostoevsky's work in which Bakhtin stresses that the main characters are presented by the others, through their respective perspectives instead of the narrator's one, he laid foundations for a reasoning still underdeveloped in many sectors of the Portuguese society till today (Bakhtin, 1929). His writings as well as those by Mikhail Foucault on the openness of the language in which he mentions it as never finished and enriched by the chain made by those who participate in it (Foucault, 1966). And finally the writings of Clifford Geertz on the interpretation of cultures as webs of meaning helped me to understand the value of the openness of *fado* and also helped me to separate, for discussion, some different voices that have shaped it through time (Geertz, 1973). For this task I use a number of historical records in written, drawn/painted, phonographic and cinematographic sources. The paths of evolution are open to interpretation by each one of us as soon as the information unfolds... certainly unfinished, hopefully gaining freedom.

Nationalism and the Recording Industry

Like a rose-thorn in a flower bouquet, the recently found recording of the *Fado da Revolução*

(Revolution Fado) from 1910, reminds us how the individual action worked towards the established canon. History has shown that by the turn of the 19th to the 20th century centralized nationalist feelings were supported by the state-protected cultural industries. The emerging foreign recording industry in Portugal however, supported some individual initiatives, challenging the status quo of the moment. Not mentioning backstage details of this amazing scenario, I point to some then-published books on what became the “official” history of *fado*. In particular the romance *A Severa* by Júlio Dantas (1900), the very successful theater play with the same name (Dantas, 1901), in which the legend is set: the aristocratic male said to be in love with the poor female singer cries stating that: “It is the destiny of Portugal to die embracing the fate!” [É destino de Portugal morrer abraçado ao fado!] (Scene x, second act). Two other books *História do Fado (History of Fado)* by João Pinto de Carvalho (1903), and *A Triste Canção do Sul (The Sad Song of the South: Subsidies for the History of Fado)* by Alberto Pimentel (1904), contrasting with his *Happy Songs of the North* (1905), provided documentation and classification of *fados*’ literary texts. These books and the theater play, complementing the information published on the first comprehensive collection of musical transcriptions of popular songs (*Neves e Campos* 1893, 1896, 1899) harmoniously arranged the romantic image of *fado*, of nationalist resonance. The written references about *fado* worked as if to clean it, even mentioning that it is not an obscene song any more (ibid, 1893: 31). The idea of *fado* as the national song was born then. *Fado Nacional* is presented in a transcription for piano (Neves and Campos 1899: 43) in which the editor notes that the music is used with different popular verses. Pimentel also mentions *Fado Nacional*, he states that it was composed by the famous guitar player João Maria dos Anjos (Pimentel, 1904: 271). Pinto de Carvalho, referring to the death of the Marquis of Castello-Melhor, mentions tauromachy, guitar and *fado* as the song so characteristically national, that seems to be composed with the oceanic pulsations... (Carvalho, 1903: 268). The return to the *Severa* legend as presented by Dantas, then in 1901 and later in 1931, among other dates of smaller theater productions, the absence of scientific studies on *fado* and the re-edition of the books by Pinto de Carvalho and Alberto Pimentel in 1984 and 1989 respectively, revived old nationalist constructions of the *fado* meaning in the last decades of the 20th century.

The first Portuguese phonographic-film, by Leitão de Barros (1931) was an enormous success. The plot chosen was precisely that of *Severa*, adapted from the romance of Dantas. The excerpt shows the confrontation between social classes through love affairs. *Severa* sings *fado* in a sumptuous aristocratic party and the fiancé of the count notices their connections¹. It worked as if the Portuguese, for nationalist purposes, would live in such a drama plot, *fado* being the language.

The recently found *Fado da Revolução*, in a 12-inch recording from 1910, shows a very different voice or perspective for the polyphonic history of *fado*. Documenting Portuguese history, it proposes a new popular position.

O Dr. Afonso Costa
Ele tudo quer seguir
Andou armado na guerra,
Não para de discutir

Dr. Alfonso Costa
 He wants to follow everything
 He was armed in war,
 Do not stop to discuss

No dia 5 de Outubro
Rebentou a Revolução

On 5 October
 Revolution broke out

<i>O trono caiu por terra</i>	The throne fell to the ground
<i>Cantou vitória a nação</i>	The nation sang victory
<i>O rei e a sua gente</i>	The king and his people
<i>Fugiram de Portugal</i>	Fled from Portugal
<i>Foram embarcá-lo à Ericeira</i>	They were shipped to Ericeira
<i>P'ra ninguém lhe fazer mal</i>	So that nobody hurt them
<i>E tu que estás no poder</i>	And you who are in power
<i>Governando com liberdade</i>	Ruling with freedom
<i>Vivam os seus defensores</i>	Long live their supporters
<i>Por toda a eternidade.</i>	For all eternity.

This song represents the individualist vision, through a *fadista*² who dared to critically advert the new man in power after the fall of monarchy. New nationalism was expressed from an individual perspective supported by foreign recording industry emerging in Portugal. Meaningful critical songs similar to this one, classified as *fados*, were recorded and are only now being available for research. Opposing the centralized governmental forces, these songs – there are other meaningful sound recordings such as *Fado do Zé Povo* in which the singer calls attention for the management of the state budget – gave voice to what then thus gained some visibility: action songs as they were later classified by the communist composer Lopes Graça, in the 1940s, and intervention songs as they were called in the 1970s.

Singing Style and Ornamentation

Another kind of meaningful “polyphonic” situation happened in the history of *fado* from about the early 1940s on. This one has to do with sound and vocal style itself as it was experienced by the great singer Amália Rodrigues, and was mentioned to me as an outflow by Amália herself in a most interesting interview, at her home, in the summer 1990.

From 1940 on, Amália Rodrigues was discovered and used by the dictatorial cultural services as the main musical voice of the nation. Loving to sing, and doing it in a rather personal and emotional way, Amália soon included very different kinds of songs in her repertoire. Due to her natural vocal skills she also included ornaments in “dry, long and tedious *fados*” as she put it. *Povo que Lavas no Rio* became an ex-libris of her contribution. With verses extracted from a poem by the folklorist Pedro Homem de Mello, and music of the *Fado Victoria*, a traditional *fado* melody composed by the *fadista* Joaquim Campos, this song was used by Amália to explain me what *fado* is. So, in Amália’s voice, and as she stressed we may see through *Povo que lavas no rio*, *fado* is a way of singing, characterized by the vocal style in which the ornamentation of some particular syllables in different parts of the text is of paramount importance³. She sang me the same initial verse of the song with different accents and ornaments to show how the same song could be sung and heard as a *fado* or as a *flamenco cante*. Then she took only some seconds to conclude that *fado* is everything she sings regardless of the song origin. And it is not her but her audience who says so, she explained. It is a matter of style polyphonically recognized by the voices of her listeners. And this happened – Amália stressed – since very early in her career as a singer. The opened character of the definition of *fado* was expressed there as an em-

pirical conclusion, relying on its polyphonic nature. Regarding musical polyphony strictly speaking, meaning multipart music of vocal and instrumental origin, Amália's example is far richer than that of Manuel Joaquim Carvalho in his *Fado da Revolução*. Although it is obviously a question of personal style in musical interpretation, it surpasses it. If even today *fado* singers and players do restrain their ornamentation practice in recording sessions for the fear of making mistakes, one may imagine how this fear limited their recording performances when financial conditions were much more expensive and opportunities much rarer as happened in 1910⁴.

Fusion and Freedom

Last, but not least, the increasing trends for music fusion and free interpretation do add meaning to the polyphonic variety of *fado* influences and meanings nowadays. As historical recordings show when Carlos do Carmo produced the LP vinyl record *Um Homem na Cidade (A Man in the City)* in 1973 with a new sound and instrumental functioning for *fado*⁵. Or when Dulce Pontes revived Amália's *Fado Solidão (Loneliness Fado)*⁶ as *Canção do Mar (Sea Song)*⁷ later turned into even greater hit "Desert Fantasy" by Sarah Brightman⁸. Or when Rabih Abou-Khalil and Ricardo Ribeiro play a Lebanese/Portuguese influenced version of *Se o meu amor me pedisse (If you ask me my love)*⁹. None of this music plasticity is new. In fact already in the early 1950s *fado* was the subject of great musical fusion for political propaganda reasons for the European recovery after the Second World War. Once more Amália was involved, as well as some great North and South European and American singers and musicians. And I finish my presentation with a precious phonogram of the *Fado Coimbra* sang to jazz sound as *April in Portugal* in New York by Louis Armstrong in 1953¹⁰. Heading to the nationalist liberation of the world citizens these polyphonic voices found in a handful of historic recordings of *fado* and related songs thus unveil the path for an ethnomusicological discussion about music and transnationalism.

Notes

¹ Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br_1XFJK400 accessed on 05.06.12.

² Manuel Joaquim Carvalho.

³ Available at <http://letras.terra.com.br/amalia-rodrigues/230947/> accessed on 05.06.12.

⁴ Information given by Arménio Melo, Professor of Portuguese Guitar at the Escola de Música do Conservatório Nacional, and PhD student of Ethnomusicology at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa to his academic advisor João Soeiro de Carvalho, whom I thank the authorization to mention.

⁵ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukEDg9Ll22o&feature=related> accessed on 05.06.12.

⁶ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-JXKvIGc9U&feature=related> accessed on 05.06.12.

⁷ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCahD0M9cv4> accessed on 05.06.12.

⁸ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4egvCyHhWo> accessed on 05.06.12.

⁹ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AICT0p0X6e4> accessed on 05.06.12.

¹⁰ Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgekMkn6YKQ> accessed on 05.06.12.

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