

**MÚSICA E HISTÓRIA:
ESTUDOS EM HOMENAGEM
A MANUEL CARLOS DE BRITO**



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Opera Houses in Eighteenth Century Portuguese America

Rosana Marreco Brescia

The second half of the eighteenth century can be characterized by a significant change in theatrical activity and its role in society. In Portugal, dramatic activity went through a great change after the acclamation of King Joseph I. Even though the Royal Opera Houses as well as the other public theatres of Lisbon were completely destroyed by the great earthquake of 1755, most of them were slowly rebuilt thanks to the initiative of singular men who rented the buildings to impresarios who took care of the productions and all the running of the business itself. That way, the owners of the theatres passed to the impresarios the complicated task of managing a theatre and all the difficulties inherent in the production machine.¹

This system of theatrical administration was also employed all over Portuguese America. In Portugal as in America, public theatres developed their activities without any interference from the State, except for the payment of taxes.² In the case of Portuguese American theatres, they did not even give part of their profits to philanthropic institutions. However, they served as important instruments representing the power of colonial governors who, in many cases, were the great supporters of

¹ Maria João ALMEIDA, *O teatro de Goldoni no Portugal de setecentos*, Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 2007, pp. 19, 38.

² *Idem*, p. 27.

the construction of public theatres and the first to be interested in maintaining their permanent activity.

According to the civilizing values proposed by the enlightenment, theatre performed a fundamental role in society since it was capable of giving audience members some very useful values.³ A similar idea that theatre was a school of morality and good habits, written in an important document intended to regulate the activity of the public theatres of Lisbon in 1771, had great repercussions in the Luso-American colony. In 1791, the president of the Municipal Council of São Paulo writes that a house for public performances where comedy and tragedy are performed is the most powerful way of combatting the dissolution of manners, as well as teaching the audience the morality considered ideal by the colonial administration. He asks equally if anyone knew anything more efficient than poetry to show the truth in all its glory, as well as the terrible vices and the cruel catastrophes inherent in them, since only this divine art, employed for its true goal, could subjugate the most rebellious hearts.⁴

In Minas Gerais, Tomás António Gonzaga writes in his *Dedication to the Greats of Portugal*, which introduces the *Cartas Chilenas*, that there were two ways of becoming cultivated: the first by glorious actions which inspire us to follow the same path, the second by outrageous actions which disturb us. Both were equally effective and therefore theatres should be built to instruct citizens.⁵

Thanks to the new ideas favourable to the performance of dramas and comedies and to the construction of public theatres, several public opera houses were built all over the American colony, from Porto Alegre in the south of the Portuguese territory to Belém do Pará, capital of the State of Grão Pará.

Therefore, thanks to certain governors of the captainship, the opera houses of São Paulo, Belém do Pará, the first Opera House of Porto Alegre and Salvador da Bahia were built. Also the construction of the second theatre of Porto Alegre and Vila Rica was possible thanks to the

³ Laureano CARREIRA, *O teatro e a censura em Portugal na segunda metade do século XVIII*, Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1980.

⁴ António Soares AMORA, *Classicismo e romantismo no Brasil*, São Paulo: Conselho Estadual de Cultura, 1966, p. 78.

⁵ Tomás Antônio GONZAGA, "Cartas chilenas", in D. PROENÇA FILHO (ed.), *A poesia dos infidentes: Poesia completa*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Aguilar, 2002, p. 795.

support of the governors of Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais. Some theatres had a private character and functioned exclusively for the amusement of their owners, however the great majority were public theatres exploited commercially by dramatic impresarios and open to the general public who could afford to buy tickets.

The city of Salvador da Bahia owes its first theatre to Vasco Fernandes César de Meneses, first Count of Sabugosa and Vice-king of the state of Brazil between 1720 and 1735. In fact it was not really a proper building dedicated to public performances but more a stage set in the most important room of the City Hall. The theatre functioned permanently for almost four years and its first performance took place on 22 October 1729, the birthday of King John V.⁶ According to documents preserved at the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, the theatre had great support from public and councillors, as well as other members of the colonial administration.

Dom Luís António de Souza Botelho Mourão, 4th Morgado de Mateus and governor of São Paulo between 1766 and 1776, was an important figure regarding permanent theatrical activity in Portuguese America. He was born in 1722 close to the city of Amarante in Portugal and belonged to a family who had served the kingdom of Portugal both culturally and in the army. Possessing a strong personality, D. Luís António is recognized as one of the most active captains of Portuguese America during the Marquis of Pombal's government.⁷

During his stay in America, D. Luís António wrote a journal which proves he already had a great interest in theatre from his first day on Brazilian territory. One entry reads that on the 23 June 1765, when he was in Rio de Janeiro, after a full schedule, he was invited to see a performance of *Dido Abandonada* at the opera house of that city, which was composed of "excellent music and dances".⁸

There are several entries of this type throughout his journal, where important events and normal days are concluded with detailed descriptions of the performances attended by D. Luís. During his stay in Rio de Janeiro, more precisely on the 24, 28 and 30 June 1765, he attended the

⁶ Affonso RUY, *História do teatro na Bahia, séculos XVI - XX*, Salvador: Universidade Federal da Bahia, 1959, p. 26.

⁷ *Idem*, pp. 5-17.

⁸ Secção de manuscritos, Arquivo de Mateus – 21, 4, 14, n° 001, Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro.

opera house owned by Boaventura Dias Lopes, and administered by Luís Marques Fernandes.⁹

According to Heloisa Bellotto, the characteristic enthusiasm of D. Luís António and his natural exaggeration for things which interested him are constant and frequent in the letters he wrote to the court of Lisbon during his stay in São Paulo, as well as his impressions on the colony and the possibilities of growth that he believed possible. However, even though he had abundant new ideas concerning the administration of São Paulo, the task of restoring the captainship and make it somehow productive was not an easy one. D. Luís was completely aware of the challenge he was facing and wrote that he found the captainship dead and that the duty of resurrecting it was more difficult than creating a new one, because creation was amongst the responsibilities of all men but resurrection was a miracle reserved to Christ himself. To create the world, he wrote, “God did not take long, however to restore it after it was lost he had to make his omnipresence human, dedicate thirty years and give his own life”.¹⁰

The opera house of São Paulo was established in the ancient Jesuit College, located exactly in front of the ancient seminary, which had been converted into the governor’s palace. According to D. Luís’ journal, the works on the theatre building were still not completed in 1769.¹¹ During the first years of activity of the Opera House, the performances which were presented in honour of the governor, included the presence of the most important personalities of the city, as well as the general public. Descriptions such as the following are quite frequent: “the boxes were occupied by the main families and the general public was placed in the orchestra stalls where they sit on benches”. However we know that from the beginning D. Luís encouraged the largest number of inhabitants of the city to attend the performances and later on, following the lack of public, he demanded that the economic elite of São Paulo went to the theatre.¹²

⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁰ Heloisa Liberali BELLOTTO, “O Morgado de Mateus, Governador de São Paulo”, *Boletim da Biblioteca da Universidade de Coimbra* 34/2ª parte (1979), pp. 33-37.

¹¹ Secção de manuscritos, Arquivo de Mateus (see n. 8).

¹² Rui Vieira NERY, “E lhe chamam uma nova corte: A música no projecto de administração iluminista do Morgado de Mateus em São Paulo (1765-1784)”, in *idem* – E. LUCAS (eds.), *As músicas Luso-Brasileiras no final do Antigo Regime: Repertórios, práticas e representações*, Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda – Fundação Gulbenkian, 2013.

The Opera House of São Paulo had twenty boxes besides the benches in the orchestra stalls mentioned previously. However it seems that the number of audience members was not enough to cover all the expenses of the company, especially because some of them regularly did not pay for their seats in the theatre. The journal tells us that on the 2 September 1772, that after having performed the 30 operas that the singers were engaged for, it was not possible to maintain the activities of the theatre, since some of the box owners did not pay the amounts due on time and others did not want to pay for the next season's performances. Confronting this problem, the governor ordered the judge of the captainship to write a document inspired by what they had done in Rio de Janeiro, where actors had to perform 30 operas over a year of which eight had to be new productions. The performances took place every Sunday at 8pm even if the governor had not yet taken his seat in his box. The document was to include the names of all the box owners and the corresponding prices so that the governor could invite the main families of São Paulo to choose which box they wanted. They also had to commit to pay the annual fee, split into three payments. He also ordered that the most successful traders should buy the orchestra seats for the price of 15 *patacas*. In this way, when they saw the decisions taken by his Excellency and the pleasure that the maintenance of the opera house gave him, "some for pleasure, some for convenience, and others yet for fear, ended up buying the tickets as well as the boxes". After that, the actors could keep their jobs in much more stable circumstances than before.¹³

Another important governor as regards the construction and support given to opera houses in Portuguese America was João Pereira Caldas, governor of the State of Grão Pará between 1772 and 1780. According to Monteiro Baena, after attending a performance in Macapá—probably in a temporary theatre—Caldas hired the Bolognese architect Antonio Giuseppe Landi to build him an opera house close to his palace.¹⁴ To conclude the works of the theatre, Pereira Caldas counted on the support of other important men of Belém do Pará. The theatre opened in 1774 and its construction was possible through the system of signatures

¹³ Secção de manuscritos, Arquivo de Mateus – 21, 4, 16 (2.9.1772), Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁴ António Ladislau MONTEIRO BAENA, *Compêndio das eras da província do Pará*, Belém: Universidade Federal do Pará, 1969, p. 192.

which, as with other opera houses in Portuguese America, suffered from delayed payments.¹⁵

Unlike other theatres in the colony, the opera house of Belém functioned exclusively for the pleasure of the governor and his guests, since it was not exploited commercially by an impresario and did not benefit from professional actors, at least during its first years of existence. According to a report written by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira and dated 1783, the theatre opened only occasionally since it did not have a dramatic company engaged by the theatre owner. Therefore, performances were given by the curious and amateurs who acted only to please the governor.¹⁶

Besides the governors, it is interesting to observe that some religious men performed quite an important role in the construction and maintenance of opera houses in Portuguese America. Such was the case of Boaventura Dias Lopes in Rio de Janeiro and Amaro de Sousa Machado in Porto Alegre.

Regarding Rio de Janeiro, we know that in 1748 there was a new theatrical company working in the city, the “Opera of the Living”, so named because living actors had replaced the puppets which used to perform before in the same theatre. The owner of the establishment was the priest, Boaventura Dias Lopes.¹⁷

He was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1710 to a family with four other brothers and sisters. In 1749 he took the habit of a secular priest of the order of Saint Peter, giving one of his properties as a warrant.¹⁸ That means that Boaventura was not yet a priest at the time the Opera of the Living started its activities.¹⁹

This opera house, located in Rua da Alfândega, cost its impresarios 300,000 réis per year. They had to pay 100,000 réis every four months and for this they had the right to use all the musical scores, costumes

¹⁵ *Registo de várias cartas/portarias, e Ordens expedidas pelo/III.mo e Ex.mo S.or Martinho de Souza e Albuquerque, Gov.or e Cap.m/General do Estado do/Pará./Tomo 4º*. Manuscritos Reservados, Cod. 4521, fols. 120, 120v e 121, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal.

¹⁶ Alexandre Rodrigues FERREIRA, *Diário da viagem filosofica pela capitania do Rio Negro*, Documento 134, fol.13, Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁷ Fundo so6.sso8, UD:50, Endereço 38.65.01, Cx.153, Acervo Cleofe Person de Mattos do Rio de Janeiro.

¹⁸ Gilson NAZARETH, “Da identificação histórica através da biografia individual e coletiva”, *Revista do Colégio Brasileiro de Genealogia* 4 (1990), pp.7-10.

¹⁹ Fundo so6.sso8, UD:50, Endereço 38.65.01, Cx.153, Acervo Cleofe Person de Mattos do Rio de Janeiro.

and sets, as well as all the other materials necessary to produce opera performances. At the end of the contract, the tenant had to return to the owner of the theatre all the costumes and music scores he had bought during the time of his contract. There was also a fine of 50,000 réis if the priest Boaventura found out that the tenants facilitated the copying for others of scores of the music performed in his opera house. The priest had a private box at every single performance, more precisely the first one close to the staircase.²⁰ The contract is very similar to others signed in Portuguese America, and it says that after paying the annual rent to the owner of the theatre, the fees of the actors, musicians, prompter, hairdresser, etc., the impresario could have all the profits from the box office.

The Opera of the Living was apparently destroyed by a fire during a performance of *Encantos de Medeia*, by António José da Silva. Once again thanks to the support of the captainship's governor, the Marquis of Lavradio, the theatre was rebuilt but in a different location, now closer to his palace and the main square of the city.²¹

It was in 1758 that the new opera house of Rio de Janeiro opened its doors. The new theatre, much more dignified than the previous one, was also owned by the priest Boaventura Dias Lopes, as we can see in other contracts he signed with theatrical impresarios who ran the theatre.²² It was during the contract of the impresario Luís Marques Fernandes that Louis Antoine de Bougainville attended a performance. Concerning this performance, he wrote:

Cependant les attentions du vice-roi pour nous continuèrent plusieurs jours; il nous annonça même de petits soupers qu'il se proposait de nous donner au bord de l'eau, sous des berceaux de jasmins et d'orangers, et nous fit préparer une loge à l'Opéra. Nous pûmes, dans une salle assez belle, y voir les chefs-d'oeuvre de Métastase représentés par une troupe de mulâtres, et entendre cês morceaux divins des grands maitres d'Italie exécutés par un mauvais orchestre, que dirigeait alors un prêtre bossu, en habit ecclésiastique.²³

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Fundo Decretos do Executivo, cx.19, pc.34, doc.7, Arquivo Nacional do Brasil.

²² Nireu CAVALCANTI, *O Rio de Janeiro setecentista: A vida e a construção da cidade da invasão francesa até a chegada da corte*, Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editora, 2004, p.174.

²³ Louis Antoine de BOUGAINVILLE, *Voyage autour du monde par la frégate "La Boudeuse" et la flûte "L'Etoile"*, Paris: L. Rombaldi, 1970, p. 77.

Another religious man closely related to theatrical activity in Portuguese America was the priest Amaro de Sousa Machado, responsible for the construction of the Opera House of Porto Alegre. Once more, the governor of the captainship of Rio Grande do Sul offered his full support to the priest's initiative.

This opera house was also rented to impresarios who took care of the business under the supervision of its owner. In this case, the impresario Pedro Pereira Bragança hired a company led by the actress Maria Benedita de Queiroz Montenegro. From the contract it is evident that Amaro de Sousa Machado was actually a native of Portugal.²⁴

According to Machado's testament, the theatre opened in 1805 under the auspices of the governor, the baron of Bagé, who offered a large plot of land so that the theatre could be built. He also writes that the activity of the theatre was interrupted while he joined the army during the administration of Diogo de Sousa (1809-1814), but that it was resumed during the government of José Maria Vasconcelos e Sousa (1818-1821). Another interesting point is that the priest Amaro seemed to be better intentioned as far as his activity as priest and theatre owner was concerned, especially if one compares him with the priest Boaventura Dias Lopes of Rio de Janeiro. In his testament, Machado specifies that he wished his theatre could be rented to other impresarios so that they could give at least two *contos de réis* per year to the orphans so he could "reduce some restitution, which is destined for the salvation of my soul".²⁵

One theatre in particular deserves attention since it was built by an ordinary man. It is the Opera House of Vila Rica, capital of the captainship of Minas Gerais. The theatre was constructed in 1769 by João de Sousa Lisboa, a Portuguese man who had worked in several different activities since his arrival in Brazil in the decade of 1740,²⁶ achieving significant success in most of them. Although he never belonged to the administration, Sousa Lisboa is one of the most important personalities of eighteenth-century society in Minas Gerais.

Regarding the Opera House, all the expenses for the construction of the building and the engagement of actors, besides the purchase of

²⁴ Athos DAMASCENO, *Palco salão e picadeiro em Porto Alegre no século XIX*, Rio de Janeiro – Porto Alegre – São Paulo: Editora Globo, 1956, pp. 7-8.

²⁵ Lothar HESSEL, *O teatro no Rio Grande do Sul*, Porto Alegre: Editora da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 1999.

²⁶ AHU_ACL_CU_003, Cx.11, d.966. Rolo 10, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino de Lisboa.

scores, sets and costumes, were in the charge of Sousa Lisboa, who although he was very proud of “his” theatre, wanted to recover the amount he invested in the business.²⁷

The theatre was opened on 6 June 1770, the birthday of King Joseph I. During the second year of its existence, the opera house was rented to Marcelino José de Mesquita, an impresario who was previously hired to paint some of the decorations of the opera house.²⁸

Although Sousa Lisboa did not have to take care of the production details of his theatre while it was rented to an impresario, the businessman always made sure nothing was lacking for the proper functioning of his opera house, attending all the performances in his private box, number 14 on the first floor.²⁹ He imported scores from Portugal, ordered others to be copied, hired actors and singers from Vila Rica and other cities of Minas Gerais, and Brazil, and never forgot to announce his accomplishments to his friends living in other parts of the colony.³⁰ As far as the functioning of theatres in Portuguese America is concerned, it is quite rare to find a theatre in Brazil built through the initiative of a native from the colony. The only exception during the entire eighteenth century is the priest Boaventura Dias Lopes. All the other opera houses were built and supported by Portuguese men, both religious and secular, governors and businessmen, who in a certain way transmitted the ideas so much in vogue in Portugal throughout the century, where theatres were believed to be “the school where people should learn the most healthy principles of politics, morals, love of the nation, values, zeal and fidelity, with which they should serve their sovereigns, civilizing, and turning themselves from the insensitive remains of barbarism which they have inherited from the sad centuries of ignorance”.³¹

²⁷ *Carta enviada por João de Sousa Lisboa a João Baptista de Carvalho a 31 de Julho de 1770*, CC – 1206, fols. 2, 2v e 3, Arquivo Público Mineiro.

²⁸ *Carta enviada por João de Sousa Lisboa ao Tenente Joaquim José Marreiros a 8 de Março de 1770 sobre a contratação de Marcelino José de Mesquita para as decorações da Casa da Opera*, CC – 1205, fols. 11v e 12, Arquivo Público Mineiro.

²⁹ *Escritura de arrendamento da Casa da Opera de Vila Rica assinada entre o Coronel João de Sousa Lisboa e Marcelino José de Mesquita*. Primeiro Ofício de Notas, vol. 151, fol. 107v, Arquivo Histórico do Museu da Inconfidência de Ouro Preto.

³⁰ *Carta enviada por João de Sousa Lisboa ao Reverendo Doutor João Caetano Pinto a 13 de Julho de 1770 sobre a contratação de um gracioso para integrar o elenco da Casa da Opera de Vila Rica*, APM, CC – 1205, fols. 27v e 28, Arquivo Público Mineiro.

³¹ *Instituição da Sociedade estabelecida para a subsistência dos theatros publicos da Corte*, Lisboa: Regia Typografia Silvana, 1771.