

Cláudia Neiva de Matos, Fernanda Teixeira de Medeiros
y Leonardo Davino de Oliveira (Eds.) (2014)

Palavra cantada: estudos transdisciplinares

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Reviewed by Victoria Saramago Padua
University of Chicago

The series of events and publications to which “Sung Word: Transdisciplinary Studies”¹ belongs represents a major collective effort to reflect upon the numerous musical modalities to be found in Brazil. Held in Rio de Janeiro in 2000, 2006, and 2011, the “Meetings on Sung Word Studies”² brought together experts from a number of areas and themes around — but not limited to — the history and theory of sung music in Brazil.

The proceedings of each congress were published as books in the following years. However, contrary to the congresses, which kept a clear relation of continuity, the books are not numbered and remain bibliographically independent from each other. They share, however, highly similar cover designs and variations on the same title: “Towards the Sung Word: Poetry, Music, and Voice”³ (2000), “Sung Word: Essays on Poetry, Music, and Voice”⁴ (2008),

and finally “Sung Word: Transdisciplinary Studies”⁵ (2014). They also have the same editors: Cláudia Neiva de Matos, Fernanda Teixeira de Medeiros, and Elizabeth Travassos, who was replaced by Leonardo Davino de Oliveira for the preparation of the last publication. With the advantages and drawbacks it entails, the present work must be thus understood within this particular book series that is not formed by volumes, whose authors may or may not be present across different books, and whose somewhat organic expansion is counterbalanced by an almost systematic diversity that makes it resemble a guide or companion.

As the editors state in their introduction, they sought — and successfully achieved — to bring together some of the most well known names in Brazilian music scholarship, foreign influential names, and younger promising scholars. Anthony Seeger opens the collection by provocatively proposing a comparative and transdisciplinary study of the Amerindian song across the Americas.

1 “Palavra cantada: estudos transdisciplinares”

2 “Encontros de Estudos da Palavra Cantada”

3 “Ao encontro da palavra cantada: poesia, música e voz”

4 “Palavra cantada: ensaios sobre poesia, música e voz”

5 “Palavra cantada: estudos transdisciplinares”

Other articles by ethnomusicologists are present throughout the volume, albeit with more specific objectives. Elizabeth Travassos, for example, compares two genres of slave origin that had different developments in two geographical areas of Brazil's eastern regions: on the one hand, the excessive character of rhyme and word play in the *coco de embolada*; on the other, the magical powers of deep metaphorical chains in the *jongo*. Two similar yet independent Northeastern genres are also compared by João Miguel Manzóllilo Sautchuk: the *cordel's* previously composed verses, and the *repente's* improvisations.

Side by side with works on different parts of Brazil are the ones more focused on the so-called Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo axis. These usually approach the Brazilian genres most widely known internationally: Samba, Bossa Nova, and MPB (Brazilian Popular Music). They include close readings, such as the detailed account by Carlos Sandroni of the variants a *lundu* interpreted by Eduardo das Neves has had. Many are based on a historical perspective: while some entangle episodes related to music into a broader social history, others focus on historical accounts of musical reception and aesthetic or compositional patterns. Among the former is Liv Sovik's analysis of how the samba school *Salgueiro* shed new lights onto the 18th-century historic figure of Chica da Silva. Another example is José Miguel Wisnik's exposition of how Caetano Veloso's reading of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa reveals deeper intellectual exchanges between

Portugal and Brazil during their turbulent dictatorships. The second trend includes, among others, David Treece examining problems in English translation of classic bossa nova songs, or Luiz Tatit's analysis of patterns in the composition of lyrics and melody in 20th-century Brazil.

The volume also includes articles on an array of periods, such as Walter Garcia's intriguing yet not fully compared juxtaposition of João Gilberto and the rappers of *Racionais MC's*; or a study of the colonial composer Lobo de Mesquita by Julio Cesar Moretzsohn Rocha, based on his careful doctoral research; or more theoretical approaches, such as Leonardo Davino de Oliveira's passionate conceptualization of the role performed by the "neo-mermaids"⁶; or even an overview of the French *chanson*, by Stéphane Hirschi --not to mention many other articles that would certainly deserve to integrate this brief survey.

Unsurprisingly, the broad thematic and disciplinary scope of *Palavra cantada* poses both advantages and challenges to the editors Matos, Medeiros, and Oliveira. The several periods, contexts, and perspectives covered by the book trace a powerful panorama of sung music in Brazil and constitute an evidence of the flourishing scholarship on the relations between word and song in the country. In this sense, the editors skillfully manage to almost completely avoid overlaps between the approaches. It is a noticeable effort, considering that even genres as

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paradigmatically present as samba or *bossa nova* are analyzed through different points of view and theoretical backgrounds.

On the other hand, clear challenges faced by the editors emerge from the problems of setting a delimiting criteria and a unified conceptual framework for the volume. In spite of being heavily focused on Brazil or on comparative studies with a strong Brazilian component, the present anthology is not defined by its editors as a collection on Brazilian music, which is proven by the inclusion of Hirschi's article. The anthology would become more consistent by either limiting its scope to Brazilian studies, or presenting it as a collection on world music and, consequently, incorporating articles on other languages and geographical areas.

The need of establishing a more complete definition of the collection's foundation concept — i.e. "sung word"⁷ — remains another problematic aspect. The authors define it as "any communicative or artistic fact in which poetry meets music and vocal performance" (11, my translation), and develop this idea in two paragraphs. Especially because the range of topics is so wide and the methodological premises are so diverse, a longer introduction that accurately explained what is meant by "sung word" would be an extremely valuable tool to navigate the many theoretical modulations and potential dialogues to be found from article to article. While some of the articles in the first books of the series tackle this problem,

such as the ones by Angela Lühning, Ruth Finnegan and Cláudia Neiva de Matos (in the second volume), a definition by the editors that could work as a parameter for the whole book and set the foundations of the project would be helpful or even needed.

Nevertheless, *Palavra cantada: estudos transdisciplinares* brings a powerful contribution to the study of sung word in Brazil. Scholars working on related fields will certainly benefit from this interdisciplinary effort, while students and the general public will have in their hands a comprehensive introduction to the social, aesthetic, and historical aspects of the many genres comprised by the broader category of the Brazilian song.

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