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# BRAZILIAN SAMBA IN THE GUITAR MUSIC OF RADAMÉS GNATTALI

**TETIANA FILATOVA**[1]

**SUMMARY.** The guitar music of Radamés Gnattali is investigated in the aspect of realization of genre traditions of popular Brazilian music of choro, samba, bossa nova. The melodic and rhythmic features of samba inherited from Afro-Brazilian ritual dances and ritual practice of candomblé and capoeira are noted. On the basis of modern publications of Brazilian, American, Canadian, European scientists, ethnologists and choreographers the historical and stylistic varieties of samba are systematized, metric characteristics, rhythmic patterns, links with African dances Batuque and Lundu are summarized. The specificity of the choreographic vocabulary of the samba dance school is outlined, illustrations and video materials of Rio de Janeiro carnival parades are given. The polymetric gestural-plastic atmosphere of the movement is described. The nature of the combination of musical timbres is outlined; the correlations of articulated body movements with percussion rhythm are derived. An analysis of three concert guitar etudes is presented from the perspective of a hybrid dialog of musical languages and genres of Brazilian and European music, as well as elements of North American jazz. The guitar sound-imaging techniques of playing, which create imitation of the sound of string, wind and percussion instrument sounds, are generalized.

**Keywords:** genres of Brazilian music, Concert Studies for Guitar of Radamés Gnattali, choro, samba, bossa nova, sound-imaging performance techniques.

## 1. Introduction

The name of Radamés Gnattali (1906, Rio Grande do Sul - 1988, Rio de Janeiro), Brazilian composer, pianist, violinist, conductor and arranger, was much less frequently mentioned in his lifetime than that of his world-famous

[1] *Ph.D., Professor at the Department of Theory of Music, the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. E-mail: filatova.tanya@gmail.com*

compatriot Heitor Villa-Lobos. Meanwhile, it has been familiar to local audiences since the early 1930s, when the musicians' compositions were adjacent to each other on the concert stage. The concert music of Radamés Gnattali (as the composer himself named it) easily traveled through the familiar soundscapes of popular urban music in Brazil – intonations of choro, samba, bossa nova, generously seasoned with timbres and rhythms of local folklore with a dash of elements of North American jazz culture.

Modern musicology in the process of studying this area of creativity includes a number of publications by Brazilian, American, Canadian, Belgian musicians, ethnographers, choreographers, experts on Latin American dances. One block of materials is devoted to the analysis of the composer's (Marcio Correa[2], Rui Pedroso[3], Valdemar Silva[4]), the other one – to the issues of the samba genre's existence, the specificity of its musical language and dance choreography (Barbara Browning[5], Elizabeth Drake-Boyt[6], Luciano Lima[7], Luiz Naveda[8]).

The aim of this article is to discover in R. Gnattali's guitar music the traditions of Brazilian samba and its links with authentic models, using the cycle "3 Concert Studies for Guitar" as an example. The research direction continues the topic of the author's previous publications on Brazilian guitar music[9].

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[2] Correa, Marcio Guedes. *Radamés Gnattali e a guitarra elétrica: Concerto Carioca Nº 1 (Radamés Gnattali and the electric guitar: Carioca Concert No. 1). Revista da Tulha,* vol. 7, Issue No. 1, 2021, pp. 79–104.

[3] Pedroso, Rui F. *Três estudos de concerto para violão de Radamés Gnattali: uma análise interpretativa através das diretrizes de Jan Larue (Three concert studies for guitar by Radamés Gnattali: an interpretative analysis through the guidelines of Jan Larue).* Santa Maria, RS, 2019.

[4] *Silva, Valdemar A. Três estudos de concerto para violão de Radamés Gnattali: peculiaridades estilísticas e suas implicações com processos de circularidade cultural: PhD thesis ((Three concert studies for guitar by Radamés Gnattali: stylistic peculiarities and their implications for processes of cultural circularity).)*. Escola de Música e Artes cênicas, Goiânia, 2014.

[5] Browning, Barbara. *Samba: resistance in motion.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995.

[6] Drake-Boyt, Elizabeth. *Latin Dance*. Greenwood, Santa Barbara, 2011.

[7] Lima, Luciano. *Radamés Gnattali e o Violão de Concerto: Uma revisão da obra para violão solo com base nos manuscritos (Radamés Gnattali and the Concert Guitar: A review of the work for solo guitar based on the manuscripts).* UNESPAR, Curitiba, 2017.

[8] Naveda, Luiz; Leman, Marc. *A Cross-modal Heuristic for Periodic Pattern Analysis of Samba Music and Dance. Journal of New Music Research, Ghent University, 2009,* vol. 38, pp. 255–283.

[9] *Filatova, Tetiana. Guitar preludes by Heitor Villa-Lobos: genre traditions of Brazilian music.* Studia UBB Musica, LXIX, Special Issue 3, 2024. pp. 127–148.

## 2. Brazilian genres in the guitar music of Radamés Gnattali

The oeuvre of Radamés Gnattali was initiated by a deep interest in the language and everyday traditions of Brazilian folk genres, which became the basis for all areas of the musician's professional activity: professor at the National Music Institute of Music in Rio de Janeiro, conductor, concert academic pianist, who mastered the basics of classical guitar and cavaquinho playing techniques. As the author of arrangements of popular Brazilian samba melodies for radio and compositions for the concert stage, Radamés Gnattali was interested in unusual for academic ensembles instrumental compositions with guitars, cavaquinho, mandolin, accordion and harmonica. The composer's creative output includes thousands of arrangements of Brazilian songs, five symphonies, four concertos for guitar and orchestra, 274 concert compositions, the manuscripts of which are partially preserved in family archives.

Most of the works were written "based on Brazilian music" for various timbres, and many are notable for their authentic references to traditional folkloric origins. Examples include thirteen "Brasilianas", three "Carioca" concertos, six "Brazilian Fantasies", a "Brazilian Suite", and concert virtuoso cycles featuring folk instruments such as harmonica, cavaquinho, surdo, reco-reco, tambourines, rattles, accordion, and mandolin. Experiments are based on the knowledge of regional instrumental performance traditions, household environment and specific timbre colorations.

The guitar heritage of R. Gnattali is no less indicative in this respect. Along with H. Villa-Lobos, the composer created the cycle "Ten studies" for solo guitar (1967), with personal dedications to each of the first performers, famous Brazilian guitarists: Turibio Santos, Sergio and Eduardo Abreu, Antonio Carlos Barbosa Lima. In contrast to his large cyclical plan, between 1950 and 1981, the musician wrote three more virtuoso etudes with the program titles "Danza Brasileira" (1968), "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 1" (1950), and "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 2" (1981). The connection between the language of music and local folklore in the titles of the compositions is often articulated by the author himself: "Suíte popular brasileira" for guitar and piano (1952), "Suíte brasileira" for piano, electric guitar, double bass and percussion (1954), "Brasiliana No. 7" for tenor saxophone, quintet with electric guitar and accordion (1956); "Concerto Carioca No. 3" for flute, alto saxophone, guitar, double bass and percussion (1964), "Concerto à Brasileira" (1967), the guitar piece "Alma Brasileira" based on choro motifs, and the third part "Choro" from the cycle "Brasiliana No. 13" (1983), the manuscript of which is signed by the author's hand: "I am samba bossa nova".

### 3. Brazilian samba: the language of sounds and the plasticity of dance

There are discrepancies in the definition of the origin of the term “samba”: the etymology comes from the word “semba”, which in the Kimbundu language (a family of Bantu languages spoken in Angola) means an African circular dance. However, Brazilian researchers, in particular Bernando Alves, believe that the word *samba* is known since the XVII century in the grammar of the language of the Karirí, inhabitants of the agglomeration of the Brazilian state of Ceará. It was the name of an indigenous Brazilian dance, which later came into contact with African traditions in northeastern Brazil and arrived in Rio as a result of internal migrations. With all the etymological interpretations of the name, the samba genre implies a lively, excited dance of militant or, on the contrary, erotic character. The states of growing joyful excitement, strengthening of powerful energy of the spirit are inherited from magical rituals, dances of African tribes and peoples of Bantu, Yoruba, from ceremonies of worship of the pantheon of gods and sacrifices. Authentic religious and cult ceremonies were accompanied by sensual movements of dancing bodies, articulating with each gesture the most complex figures of furious African rhythm. To this day, one can still feel this ancient power of candomblé rituals in the samba poetics of Bahia. It was there that the most archaic Brazilian form of samba (Samba de Roda), the circular cult dance (roda) and its magical scenography, was born.

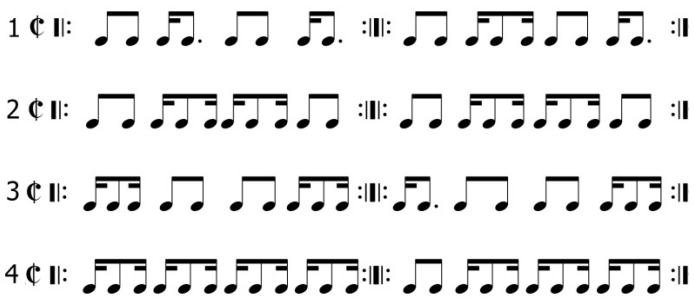
Samba in Rio de Janeiro became a reference point for the Afro-Brazilian groups of residents of the outskirts of the musical capital, who gathered in homes in families, communities or took to the streets for candomblé rituals to the sound of hundreds of percussion instruments. The dances had a mass character; they were included in carnival processions and festive ceremonies. Currently, samba is considered the “musical pearl” of Brazil, officially recognized as a national cultural symbol.

Unlike the candomblé ritual, samba was not religious in nature. At parties where batucada and capoeira were played, since the introduction of choral singing of improvised couplets to the accompaniment of applause and percussion at the carnival there appeared something that was considered the first samba – the song “Pelo Telephone” (1917). According to this genre-communicative situation, it was recorded on the first records as “Carnival Samba”. Its rhythm differed significantly from the subsequent samba samples of the 1930s, but it was from this first moment that the genre name was

fixed, although in the future it changed its semantic content more than once. In the 1930s it was the rhythm known as “Samba do Estácio” that became the defining genre “marker”. The secular version of samba is close to the *maxixe* (Brazilian tango, not similar to the Argentine tango). From the atmosphere of a secular party samba went to the squares, integrated into urban and rural carnivals, in their crowded processions and was created for walking along the streets of carnival groups dancing and singing. The “estácio”-style samba is performed with the singing of verses and refrains with different texts to the same melody, accompanied by a number of regional instruments – guitar, flute, cavaquinho, pandeiro, sometimes together with woodwind instruments, banjo and extended range of percussion. Thus, two models of samba of different genre branches were formed: estácio – urban samba based on baiao-carioca (a regional variety created by natives of Rio de Janeiro); maxixe-samba based on paired “Brazilian tango” with a characteristic manner of swaying hips, with accents on erotic elements of movements familiar to the dance floors of evening clubs. The fiery, burning passion of this dance was enhanced by the choreography of figures similar to the flexible movements of the “wriggling snake” (passo cobra), picked up by the energy of active rhythm accompanied by the party of African drums with marching characteristics, rhythmic accelerations suitable for carnival parades. In the 1950s, a slow rhythmic samba influenced by the bolero (samba do fossa) emerged and began the bossa-nova movement. Along the way, Radamés Gnattali and Laurindo Almeida turned to the samba genre field as fast samba flowed into slow bossa nova. Next came the names of Tom Jobim, João Gilberto – middle-class men well acquainted with Debussy’s music and North American jazz. From the fusion of style phenomena of such different natures and in different proportions arose the wave of bossa nova.

*The basic binary meters, syncopated rhythms* of samba and bossa nova are based on alternating equal beats and syncopated rhythmic figures with the addition of forward and backward punctuations. The syncopation figures changed their “location”, appearing respectively on the second and fourth beats (variant 1), as inverse punctuations on the second and third beats (variant 2), or on the first and fourth beats (variant 3), which also suggests the possibility of total syncopation of all four beats of a bar (variant 4):

**Scheme 1**



**The basic binary meters, syncopated rhythms of samba and bossa nova**

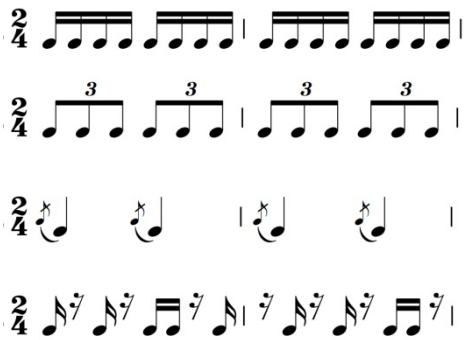
Brazilian samba sounds lively, Caribbean samba sounds very fast, Brazilian bossa nova or the "white" version of samba sounds slow. Rural and urban authentic national samba traditions, symbolic of Brazilian culture as a whole, spread in the XXth century to all regions, not only to the south or northeast. They became sonic emblems of the song and dance culture of local carnivals – joyful, pleasant, familiar music, perfectly harmonized with the environment. Popular forms of life correlate with academic and jazz "readings" of genres. The updating of popular melodies and rhythms with dissonant harmonies and jazz swings merged with the intimate character of vocal intoning. Rhythmic disruptions between the voice and the accompaniment embellished the poetics of soft sound, without affective emotions, forcing – quietly, easily, with a flexible timbre palette of musically intoned words. This evoked distant artistic resonances with the European modernist quests of European art, generating a metaphorical frame between French refined sound painting and jazz, which was reflected in the "mirror" of new incarnations of popular Brazilian traditions.

Barbara Browning comments extensively on the apparent close association of samba with Candomblé ceremonies: "It is an ancient, complex, powerful belief system in which spirituality is expressed through complex rhythmic structures and divinity manifests itself in the bodies of the dancers"[10]. The ceremonies of the cult are conducted under the sounds of percussion rhythms – the ringing of agogo bells, the rattle of the atabaque drum, the lingering sounds of berimbau strings are repeated like magical incantations.

[10] Browning, Barbara. *Samba: resistance in motion.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, p. 23.

The plastic body language, its rhythmic and gestural vocabulary, inherits figures of African ethnogenesis. For the dancer, the samba is a polymeter superimposed on the structure $^{2}/_{4}$ , in which the strong beat is suspended and the weak beat is accented, serving as the dominant mode of Pan-African music. It should be considered that "Western musical notation is not suitable for recording polymetres, since samba contains rhythms that are curved so weakly that their variations in imprecise writing are read synchronously, in the interaction of all the patterns, models, and breaks in pauses"[11]. The binary steady pulse of sixteenth notes is usually carried by the high-pitched percussion of the reco-reco; triplets are articulated by the mid-range sound of the tambourin, grace notes are played by the deep low-frequency African surdo bass drum, while dotted rhythms, broken by pauses, are featured in the pandeiro part. The dancer responds to each layer of rhythmic structure with different muscle movements. Next scheme is based on the sample from Barbara Browning's explanation of the features of samba choreography[12]:

**Scheme 2**



**Vertical grid of samba rhythms**

The dense, springy rhythms of samba interweave in the performance of the entire samba percussion section, which consists of nine instruments: the surdo bass drum, the ganza shaker, the tamborim mid-range drum, the agogo bells, the pandeiro tambourine, the reco-reco wooden idiophone, the caixa aluminum membranophone, the cuica small high-pitched cylindrical drum, and the rebolo drum with a double-layer membrane for accent articulation.

[11] Ibid, p. 11.
[12] Ibid.

The choreographic pattern of samba disrupts the body's alignment with lightning-fast, sharp gestures during short steps. Syncopation generates swaying, shifts in body weight from one leg to the other, side-to-side steps, turns, jerks, twists, curves, and articulated movements, including hip rotations synchronized with knee bends and lifting the foot onto the toe, wave-like undulations of the torso, smooth arm openings, rapid micro-tremors of the abdominal and hip muscles, head and shoulder turns, and sudden leaps. The dance movements evoke a sense of "playing apart," captivating the audience with their ancient "African exoticism".

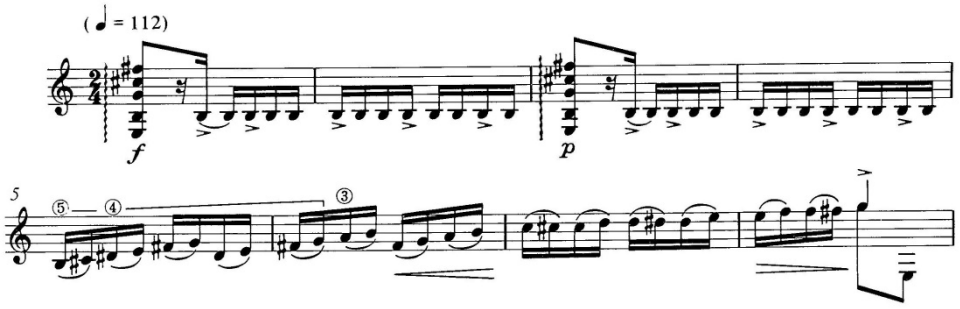
## 4. Three Concert Studies (etudes) for guitar by Radamés Gnattali: dialogues in the rhythm of samba

The idea to combine three separate etudes into a cycle arose post factum and therefore, the order of their arrangement does not correspond to the chronology of creation – "Dansa Brasileira" (1958), "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 1" (1950), "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 2" (1981), which is reflected in the first London edition (1989). Each etude may sound separately, but all are united by the color of Brazilian samba: the best soloists of Brazilian dance schools move in a single powerful gust of joyful excitement in a stream of carnival parade, in exotic outfits of tropical juicy colors. Fast tempo, rumbling of hundreds of drums, pulse of syncopations in a complex grid of rhythms, general singing of popular samba melodies, flickering of gestures and bodies with almost acrobatic silhouettes of movements – such an imaginary picture is conveyed by the composer thanks to the resources of the guitar solo. Like Heitor Villa-Lobos, Radamés Gnattali played guitar in the carnival quarters of Rio. He strove to create a new repertoire inspired by urban folklore on the one hand, concertizing as a pianist with the music of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel on the other, and recording improvisations with jazz musicians on the radio on the third. This hybrid reality is therefore characteristic of many of the composer's works: in the cultural fabric of the language of Brazilian music, one can clearly see stylistic traces of romanticism, impressionism, modernism, and echoes of jazz.

*"Dansa Brasileira"* is dedicated to the famous guitarist Laurindo Almeida, the first performer of this etude. The author encouraged improvisation of the performer on the basis of the manuscript text, variation of rhythmic and melodic patterns, as is customary in folk tradition. He believed that musicians know better the peculiarities of their instruments.

The initial bars open with a guitar solo – a presentation of the rhythm of choro and samba (bars 1-4). This usually sounds like a signaling "invitation" to dance in the percussion part, with sharp punctuation and articulation of the weak beats, syncopation and variation of the accent side of the rhythmic pulse. The strength of the initial beat of the e-moll chord, with the addition of the Doric harmonic coloration of the characteristic cis tone common to baiao and choro melodies, reinforces the genre references to the northeastern genetic roots of the dances. The connection with the choro music is most clearly signaled by the melody of the ascending passage (bars 5-8) – usually entrusted to the flute, violin, guitar, or piano (in concert settings). It demonstrates virtuoso intense movement of appoggiaturas grouped into two sounds:

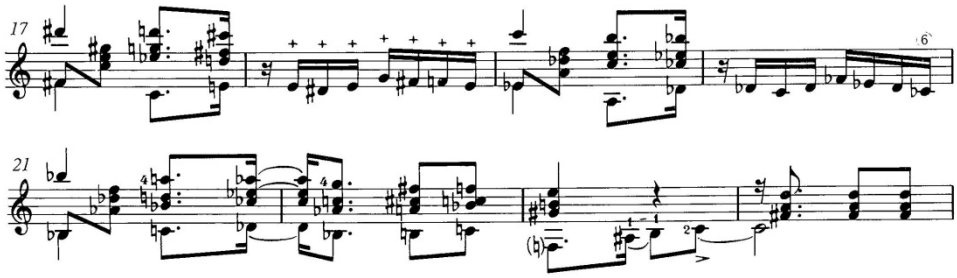
**E.g. 1**




**R. Gnattali. "Dansa Brasileira" (bars 1–8)**

The phase of material development includes sequences with the transposition of segments down by minor thirds, encompassing a dissonant chromatic space. This approach is uncharacteristic of traditional Brazilian popular music vocabulary but is typical of jazz multi-voiced chord blocks (bars 17–23), while maintaining the choro rhythm:

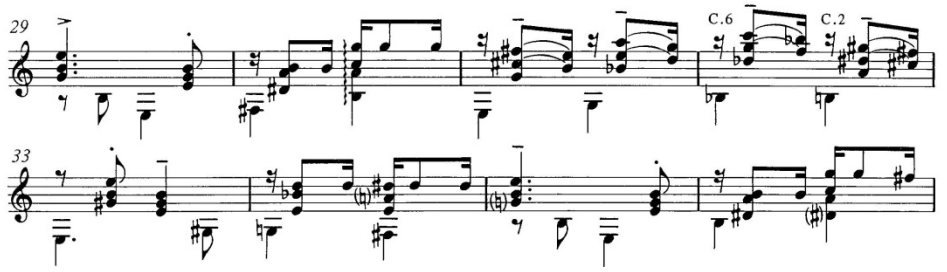
**E.g. 2**




**R. Gnattali. "Dansa Brasileira" (bars 17–24)**

The samba rhythm is emphasized at a fast tempo (bars 27–46) by sharp figure patterns in the primary key of E-minor and sequential movement of similar chord structures (built on a tritone and a fourth) ascending in minor thirds, followed by whole-tone descents of melodic phrases in bar 32. Here, the samba rhythm, which has ancestral connections to the African dances lundu and batuque, is generalized:

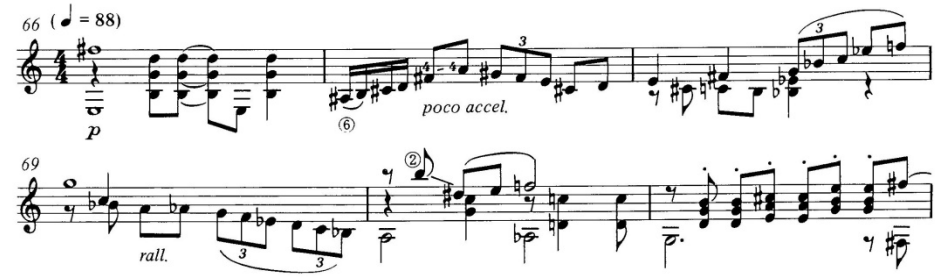
**E.g. 3**




**R. Gnattali. "Dansa Brasileira" (bars 29–36)**

In the middle section, a sharp deceleration to an *Andante* tempo marks the transition from the fast, fiery samba to a more lyrical, sentimental version – the bossa nova, characterized by smooth, slow swaying, suspended triplets, and the soft sonorities of ninth chords, with fluid single-third harmonies and major-minor colorations (bars 66–69). From there, all the themes move in a circular pattern:

**E.g. 4**

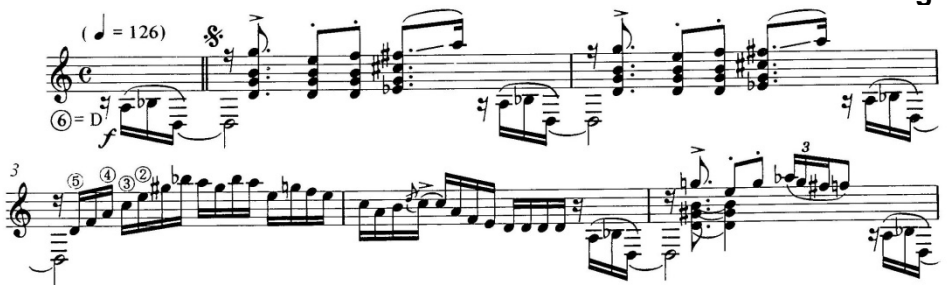



**R. Gnattali. "Dansa Brasileira" (bars 66–71)**

*"Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 1"*, dedicated to Raphael Rabello, incorporates a dialogue between genre elements: the virtuoso European toccata, Brazilian choro, the fiery brilliance of a fast samba, and, in contrast, the quiet, slowly suspended in time, tender, sensual, and contemplative bossa

nova. The proportions of the song's three-part form (ABA, bars 32 + 12 + 32), traditional for Brazilian popular music, with a literal reprise and codetta (Menos), follow a tonal process strategy (D→G |D|D→G|*codetta* D). The author's manuscript contains no key signatures, yet modulation shifts are clearly perceptible through deep bass pedals pulsating in the samba rhythm. Each time, they begin with a powerful "push" from a tied weak beat and sustain for a long duration, pulsing in the same rhythm over one or two measures. This establishes the impulse of the primary key, D, revealed over a sustained organ point in a major-minor environment. The entire first section maintains an intense dissonant background: over a stable bass framework, subdominant and altered dominant seventh chords are layered, followed by $D_{11}$, $D_{13}$ – typically jazz harmonies transposed downward in minor thirds while preserving their original structure (tritone, fourth, fourth). These shifts of multi-third verticals (or "block chords") are characteristic of jazz music as well as modernist academic composition. The syncopated rhythm is drawn from choro, further accentuated in the samba, and occasionally interrupted by smooth passages – imitations of choro musicians playing the flute or violin. At times, everything comes to a halt, frozen in a quiet harmonic overtone or during a meter change, yet the dance, in its fiery and jubilant essence, continues pulsating until the end of the section. The strong, rhythmic "strokes" of the sustained bass resemble the percussion of carnival processions (bars 12–14; 17–18), where the tambourine gives the signal ("bell") for all performers and marks the primary rhythmic pattern:

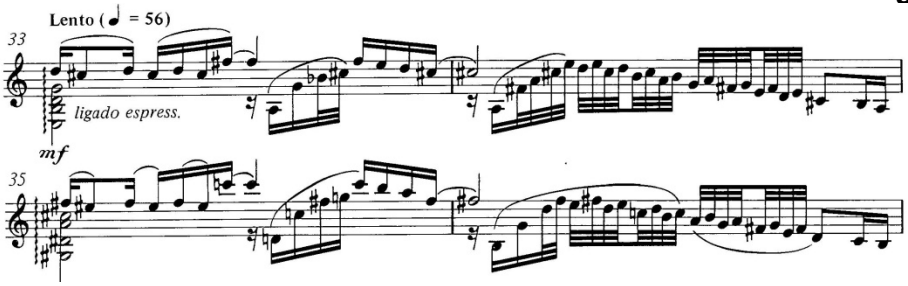
**E.g. 5**




**R. Gnattali. "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 1" (bars 1–8)**

The mid-part completely "throws off" the energy of the rapid motoric movement that relates Brazilian samba to the European toccata. It is precisely this "fast running in the Brazilian soundscape" that is metaphorically implied in the title of the piece. In the middle, the plasticity of fluid movements reigns. It appears as in "slow motion animation" – 12 bars of "floating" in the atmosphere of a beautiful, quiet, gentle bossa nova:

**E.g. 6**

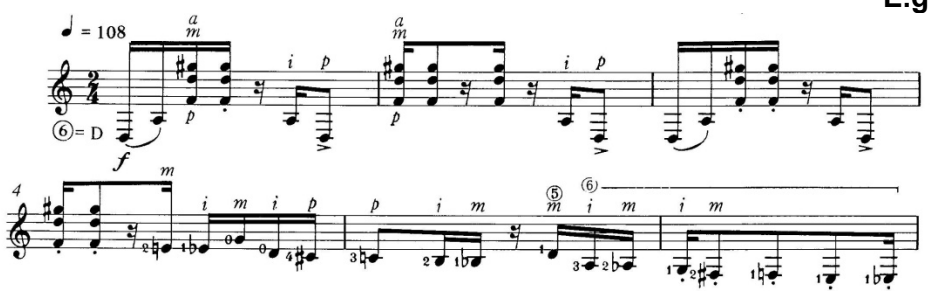



**R. Gnattali. "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 1" (bars 33–36)**

A sequence of non-accords shades the expressive melodic phrases that follow sequential deviations. The sonic fabric either gathers into an arpeggiated vertical or scatters into melismatic embellishments, but here the samba rhythm loses its springy activity. It acquires the calmness of a *lento* movement and is organically integrated into a state of sensual contemplation.

*"Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 2"*, dedicated to Waltel Blanco, the piece is characterized by the use of open strings, the instrument's coloristic resources, and percussive playing techniques to simulate a full ensemble (bars 43–46). The etude was written 23 years apart, and this can be felt in its musical vocabulary – more modern yet still grounded in familiar rhythms. The addition of a second, and especially a tritone or a split third, to the supporting chords enhances the music's sharpness and poignancy. Dissonant clusters unfold within the texture, where the upper layer creates intense dissonance against the acoustic bass foundation. Their repetition is accompanied by a varied interplay of sonic constructs:

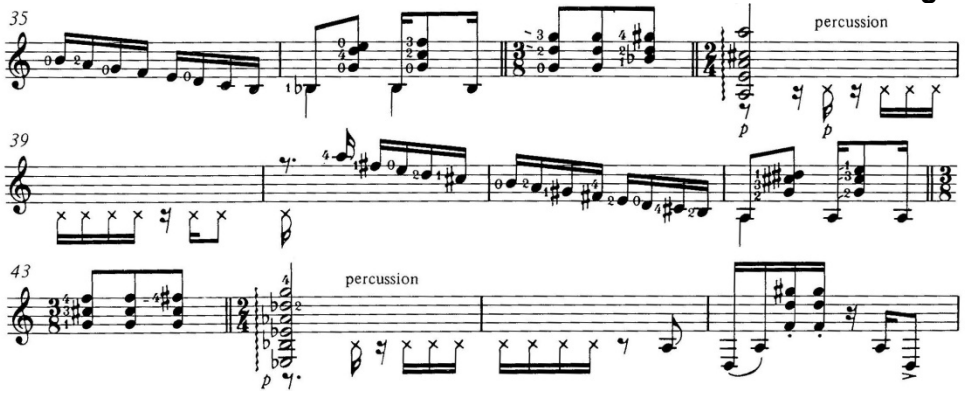
**E.g. 7**




**R. Gnattali. "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 2" (bars 1–6)**

The imitation of Afro-Brazilian membranophone percussion is indicated by the author's marking *percussion*. The absence of a specific pitch allows the performer to choose the striking point – on the strings and fingerboard, on the guitar body, or along the rim. In the first case, the sound resembles palm strikes on the leather membrane of the atabaque – a ritual instrument of African shamans – producing deep, resonant low tones. This sound is well known by capoeira. In the second case, tapping on the guitar body or rim creates the effect of a high-pitched wooden cajón-like box or a medium-range pandeiro tambourine:

**E.g. 8**




**R. Gnattali. "Toccata em ritmo de samba No. 2" (bars 35–46)**

## 5. Conclusions

The study of Brazilian samba in the guitar works of Radamés Gnattali has revealed the significance of popular folk genres in the composer's oeuvre. These genres manifest in the blending of rhythmic formulas and the "carnival" contrasts of dance movements. The guitar's imitation of percussion, string, and wind instruments – sonic attributes of Rio de Janeiro's urban parades – recreates the folk-regional spirit of the music. Its sound is revitalized through the influence of modernist compositional techniques and jazz aesthetics. The fusion of diverse, stylistically and generically contrasting materials into a heterogeneous mix has become a defining feature of Brazilian musical thought and way of life. Here, we have chosen to focus on samba, setting aside – though not diminishing – the equally compelling aesthetic phenomenon of bossa nova. While directly connected to samba,

bossa nova requires a separate study of its musical-linguistic and gestural-plastic morphology. This aspect, particularly in its projection onto Brazilian guitar compositions, presents a promising avenue for further research.

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