As I begin this introductory survey of Brazil’s chamber music, I cannot resist remarking that (to most of the world, anyway) the country’s composers seem to fall into two categories—Heitor Villa-Lobos, and everyone else. Villa’s name is widely known and his music readily available, both in recordings (a search on amazon.com, for example, yields over a thousand hits, including several chamber music CDs) and in published format (his entire catalog is available from Eschig). While Villa is virtually the sole representative of his country’s chamber music in the international repertoire, very few of his chamber music pieces—beyond the two cello Bachianas and the Jet Whistle—are performed outside of Brazil with any regularity. Music by the other group of composers of these generations is rarely, if ever, heard. Latin American music does not often appear on concert programs outside of the region, mainly because information about it is scarce. The composers are not studied in standard music history classes; and recordings, especially of chamber music, are hard to find. Scores are not easily obtainable because many of the pieces have either never been published or have been out of print for decades. The music of Brazil is also affected by these problems but, in recent years, libraries there have begun to make their holdings searchable through the Internet, and some provide ways to obtain copies of the material.

In an effort to make this survey as useful and as immediately applicable as possible for the readers, I have limited the overview to 19th- and early 20th-century works that can be obtained from a publisher or library at this time. This means that I have omitted the chamber works of some excellent composers, as well as some fine pieces by others. In some cases, the music is inaccessible for the reasons discussed above; in others, I have not been able to locate a reliable source for the scores, even if I have found references to them. But keep your ears open. Since the publishing world is in constant flux and libraries’ digitization projects and database updates are ongoing, at the end of the article you will find a list of recommended composers to watch for.

HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

Brazil’s best-known composer of concert music (or música erudita, as it is called there) was born in 1887 in Rio de Janeiro, then the nation’s capital. His father was a librarian and amateur musician who organized regular musical soirées at the family’s home. It was at these gatherings that the young Villa had his earliest and most important musical education, since a brief stint at the Instituto Nacional de Música (INM) in 1907 left him utterly unimpressed with the state of the musical instruction in his country (later in his life, he would devote a lot of time and effort to changing this situation). When his father died suddenly, the young Villa took his first musical job—playing the cello in cafés and theaters to support the family. He became interested in Brazil’s very rich folk music (both urban and rural) and traveled around the country from 1905 to 1912. During these trips, which took him not only to big cities but also to some small villages and remote ranches, Villa became very well acquainted with the folk music of most of the regions of Brazil. He settled back in Rio in 1912, married the very gifted pianist Lucília Guimarães and quickly became a true enfant terrible, hell-bent on breaking all musical traditions and creating his very own, Brazilian style of music. In February 1922, a festival of modern art took place in São Paulo. The Semana de 22, as it was called, became the turning point for modern art in Brazil and precipitously placed Villa, who presented many of his works during the week’s events, at the forefront of the country’s musical avant-garde. In July of that year, Arthur Rubinstejn, one of the composer’s early illustrious supporters, gave the first performance of the piano suite A Prole do
The pianist’s recommendation, Villa left in 1923 for Paris. Becoming art of the city’s effervescent artistic milieu—meeting some of the leading artists working there at the time, including Picasso, Varèse and Copland—he lived in the French capital on and off for the next seven years. While visiting Brazil in 1930 to conduct some concerts, Villa had his plans permanently altered by the bloodless coup d’état staged by Getúlio Vargas. One of the consequences of this revolution was that severe restrictions were placed on the international transfer of funds. Without the stipend that allowed him to pay his bills in France, Villa-Lobos was forced to remain in Brazil. During this period, he became very involved in the improvement of the musical education system through the Superintendência de Educação Musical e Artística and designed a system of musical instruction based on Brazilian culture. He died in Rio in 1959.

Villa’s catalog includes about 450 pieces, 67 of which are for ensembles of many configurations. These include two monumental (and monumentally varied) collections: the Choros (14 were written between 1921 and 1929; but the last two have been lost) and the nine Bachianas brasileiras (1930–1945). He also wrote 17 string quartets, 3 piano trios for woodwinds and several pieces for unusual instrumental combinations.

**The Choros**

Named for the popular genre of carioca-style instrumental music created in Rio toward the end of the 19th century, Villa’s Choros include pieces for various instrumental combinations, including small ensembles (the musical evenings that young Villa attended at his home were typical roda de choro, or “chores”). In this trio, the constant interplay and tension between popular and more abstract materials—a polarity that Villa manages with masterly imagination—is a hallmark of the music that listeners recognize immediately. Of the composer’s 12 extant Choros, those that may be of greatest interest to today’s chamber musicians are numbers 3, 4, and 7.

In Choro no. 3 (“Pica-pau,” 1925), the popular material is not the urban-derived choro, but an Americanized melody collected in Mato Grosso by Roqueiro Pinto, the legendary anthropologist and pioneer of Brazilian folk music. The piece is written for the very unusual combination of clarinet, alto saxophone, bassoon, three horns, trombone—and male choir. The syllables pica-pau (woodpecker) are onomatopoeically delivered by the choir with a rhythmic regularity that shapes the whole piece. In Choro no. 4 (1926), horns and trombone highlight the dichotomy between popular and abstract elements. Roughly three-fourths of the way into this piece, after a series of loosely related episodes, pure choro emerges and lasts until the end. Choro no. 7 (“Setentinha,” 1924) is written for flute, oboe, clarinet, alto sax, bassoon, violin and cello (and offertage, string orchestra, brass, and, rather than a sepiotrope). It starts off with a high pedal-point in octaves on the violin, leading into melodic material similar to that of Choros no. 3. The piece then continues in the series’ typical episodic pattern—and even includes a brief “Rite of Spring” moment. Halfway through, an ostinato in the low winds ushers in series of short, interrupt ed episodes. The surprising appearance of the ostinato tam-tam introduces the final section, a lively samba, complete with a repeating figure in guitar known as the caixa-pau and improvisatory-type runs in the saxophone and flute. A brief coda closes the work in a strong union.

**The Bachianas**

Villa saw an affinity between the music of J. S. Bach and the melodic, harmonic and imitative devices employed in the popular instrumental music of Brazil. The collection Bachianas brasileiras was the compositional result of that insight, and Villa brought to Bach’s music a down-to-earth quality with universal appeal. Almost all movements in the series have a more traditional, Suite-like name, as well as a Brazilian folk music title. Bachianas # 1 is subtitled “Suite brasileira.” The movement “Suite americana” displays a wide variety of devices, including counterpoint, syncopated melodies and a quote from a children’s radio program. The music is rarely in the form of direct quotations. The final movement (Allegro non troppo) displays Villa’s instrumental imagination with alternation of open strings and harmonics, unison passages and contrapuntal moments, including a furious coda. The second movement (Moderato), played con sordino, uses harmonics (howned and pizzicato) to great effect and has marvelous pacing. A minute-long coda recapitulates the movement’s opening sonority. The Scherzo (third movement) is short and vigorous, built on a triple-motto perpetuo figure; the final Allegro, also forceful, uses imitation and strong union passages.

**For Woodwinds**

Villa’s woodwind music (in addition to the Bachianas brasileiras no. 6 and Choros no. 2 includes the Quinteto em forma de choros, 1921, one Quartet (1928) and the Quinteto in forma de choro (1928). The last two are for woodwinds and piano in the English or French horn, and bassoon. It is built in a succession of episodes of varying texture, including imitation, various rhythmic ostinati and solos, with some popular-sounding material, most notably in a passage about two-thirds of the way into the piece. After this, the theme becomes a subject for imitation and the quintet builds a crescendo that culminates on the final chord.

SIGMUND RUTTER VON NEUKOMM

Very little chamber music was written in Brazil before the late 19th century. A good example of the Portugeuse arrived in the early 1500s and independence was declared in 1822) produced a wealth of beautiful religious music for voices and instruments. It was not until Napoleon’s army entered Lisbon in November 1807, forcing the
Portuguese king, D. João VI, to move his court to Rio de Janeiro, that a chamber music tradition began to develop in Brazil.

The earliest music in the genre was written by the Austrian Sigismund Ritter von Neukomm. Born in Salzburg in 1778, he was a student of Michael Haydn, became organist at the university church in his native city around 1792 and moved to Vienna in 1797, where he was Joseph Haydn's student for seven years. Kapellmeister at the German Theatre in St. Petersburg from 1804 to 1808, Neukomm transferred to Paris in 1809 to become pianist to Prince Talleyrand, the legendary figure in French politics. On Talleyrand's recommendation, the composer traveled to Rio de Janeiro in 1816, accompanying William I of Luxembourg. William was charged with re-establishing diplomatic relations between France and Portugal after the Congress of Vienna brought about the European Restoration (Talleyrand was the chief French negotiator at the Congress; Neukomm accompanied him there and composed and presented several works during the proceedings.) The composer stayed in Brazil for five years, during which time he taught the royal family and other local and foreign dignitaries; befriended José Maurício Nunes Garcia, Brazilian musicologist and harpsichordist who has earned him acerbic press attacks, most notably from Oscar Guanabarino, an influential arts critic for the Jornal do Comércio. In response to these, Nepomuceno coined a phrase that would become a cri de guerre among his fellow nationalist composers: "A people that doesn't sing in its own language has no homeland."

In 1819, Neukomm returned to Paris and recorded Neukomm's Brazil-written pieces—among his fellow composers; befriended José de Alencar. Nepomuceno was also one of the first composers to include Brazilian, particularly Afro-Brazilian folk elements and instruments in his symphonic and chamber music. The inclusion of a reco-reco for his orchestral Série brasileira, premiered in 1897, stirred yet another controversy. (Related to the gong, the reco-reco is a metal tube two or three springs stretched over it. The sound is for his European studies in the 1880s due to his anti-Imperial views, or decades later in academia, when he had to relinquish the directorship of INM, over his unsuccessful attempt to get the school to adopt Schoenberg's Treatise on Harmony. In 1888, he left for Rome, where he studied for two years at the Liceo Musicale Santa Cecilia. He moved on to Berlin in 1890, and to the Schola Cantorum in Paris in 1894, shortly before returning to his homeland, where he became the country's most influential musical figure in the first decades of the 20th century.

Edvard Grieg, whom Nepomuceno befriended in Europe (Nepomuceno married one of Grieg's students, pianist Walborg Rendfjel Bung), was a strong influence in the younger composer's growing desire to tap into the rich musical heritage of his own country. Upon his return to Brazil to teach organ at the INM, Nepomuceno started setting texts in Portuguese by leading Brazilian poets. In 1894, shortly before returning to his homeland, where he became the country's most influential musical figure in the first decades of the 20th century.

ALBERTO NEPOMUCENO

Often considered the father of Brazilian musical nationalism, Alberto Nepomuceno was born in Fortaleza, in Brazil's northeast, in 1864. He was involved with the most progressive political and artistic causes of his time, including the formation of the Republic and the abolition of slavery (which happened in 1888 and 1889, respectively). Nepomuceno's ideals put him in constant conflict with established authorities, be they in politics, where he was denied government support for his European studies in the 1880s due to his anti-Imperial views, or decades later in academia, when he had to relinquish the directorship of INM, over his unsuccessful attempt to get the school to adopt Schoenberg's Treatise on Harmony. In 1888, he left for Rome, where he studied for two years at the Liceo Musicale Santa Cecilia. He moved on to Berlin in 1890, and to the Schola Cantorum in Paris in 1894, shortly before returning to his homeland, where he became the country's most influential musical figure in the first decades of the 20th century.

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produced by scraping the springs with a metal stick.) The 1916 fracas over Schoenberg’s *Treatise*, which he had translated, was the last clash with the INM’s faculty and precipitated the end of the directorship he had held, with one interruption, since 1902. Nepomuceno was another early supporter of Heitor Villa-Lobos (demanding that music by the young composer be printed with his own published pieces). He died in Rio in 1920 and left a corpus of works that includes songs, operas, symphonies, and a handful of chamber compositions, including three string quartets, a piano trio, duos and a quintet.


The Piano Trio in F-sharp minor, premiered in Rio in 1916, is a magnificently crafted piece. The harmonic and textural atmosphere shows French influence (including the use of the whole-tone scale and a very fluid counterpoint, with occasional imitation). The most striking feature of the work is its pacing and the contour of the phrases, which usually have unaccented endings and are separated by expressive pauses. Every movement has remarkable features, from the outer Allegros to the spirited, whole-tone Scherzo and its lyrical trio, and the slow, wonderfully phrased second movement. The piece ends with a powerful Mixolydian-flavored coda in unison leading to a plagal cadence on F-sharp major (the first movement had also ended with a plagal cadence, on F-sharp with no third).

Nepomuceno’s three string quartets, written shortly after he started his studies in Berlin, are solidly constructed according to current models and already show the young composer’s ear for harmonic and textural subtlety, his characteristic mastery of phrasing and the rhythmic freedom that will be apparent in the Piano Trio, written some fifteen years later. Remember to keep an eye out for these other composers active during the late 19th and early 20th century: Francisco Braga, Oscar Lorenzo Fernandez, Luciano Gallet, Carlos Gomes, Alexandre Levy, Luis Levy, Henrique Oswald and Glaucio Velasquez. Libraries, both in Brazil and the U.S., are a good place to look for music by these authors. The Biblioteca Nacional has pieces by all of them and offers a duplication service. The Biblioteca Alberto Nepomuceno, at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro offers similar services and search capabilities. In the U.S., the Latin American Music Center at Indiana University in Bloomington is the most established center dedicated to the repertoire and holds an important collection. And the University of Akron’s Bierce Library maintains the Burle Marx Brazilian Music Collection. Your local public or university library might also have scores and recordings, or might be able to obtain items through interlibrary loans, so search away!

*Musica erudita* plays an important role in the extraordinarily vital and varied universe of Brazilian music. I hope that this overview will help ensembles open the door to these largely untapped treasures.

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