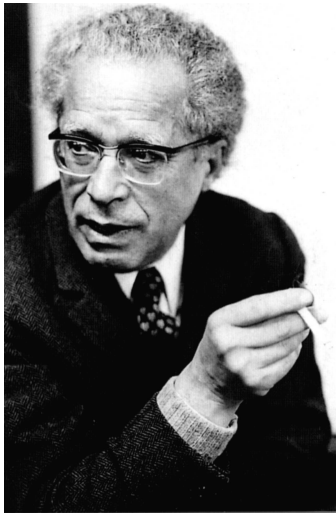


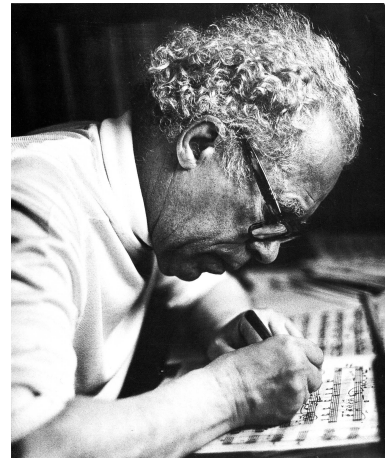
## Fernando LOPES-GRAÇA: Music under High-Level Surveillance

By Bruno Belthoise



**H**e is the musical voice of modern Portugal. He drew upon his profound knowledge of the works of Debussy and Stravinsky, yet his true inspiration came from the folk songs of the Portuguese countryside. His musical output was one of the largest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet he struggled to earn a living as a musician. He collected prizes and awards for his compositions, yet his professional musicianship was never recognized by Salazar's Estado Novo dictatorship. He could very well have forged a brilliant career for himself in exile in France or the United States, like Prokofieff, yet for close to half a century chose instead to join the struggle with his pen and staves, his articles and his music, side by side with anti-fascist groups. He was totally committed politically and socially, yet did not subscribe to doctrines. Ferociously independent and jailed several times by Salazar's political police (PIDE), he remained the most free spirit of the artistic world of his time. Fernando Lopes-Graça would have been 100 years old on December 17, 2006.

1906 is both the birth year of the giant of Russian composers, Shostakovich, and the year that Béla Bartók published the first edition of his first twenty folksongs. The volume of Shostakovich's work is immense; Lopes-Graça's work expresses itself in practically every musical domain. Bartók's musical nationalism would later serve as a model to Lopes-Graça for developing his own creative Portuguese voice. It was almost like a double symbolic prelude to Lopes-Graça's arrival into the world in the small city of Tomar, whose light, for him, was "as the element which transfigures and glorifies the almost consubstantial union of Nature and Art".



Lopes-Graça began as a pianist in his home town's motion picture theatre. By 1923, he was admitted to the college-level course at the Lisbon Conservatory to study under his elder masters, Tomás Borba and Luís de Freitas Branco. In 1927, it was the virtuoso piano course under the esteemed Viana da Mota. In 1928, emerging as a composer of some renown, he performed his first composition, *Variações Sobre um Tema Popular Português* (*Variations on a Portuguese Folk Theme*) and entered the political arena by founding the newspaper *A Acção*, in Tomar. Lopes-Graça would pay dearly for his membership in Tomar's communist organization. Although he received highest honours from the Conservatory, he was prevented from taking a teaching position there. On October 27, 1931, the composer Luís

de Freitas Branco wrote in his diary: “What happened today at the Conservatory is both tragic and symptomatic: two police officers wanted to arrest the candidate for the teaching position in the piano department, for having allegedly instigated and participated in some political graffiti in Tomar, thereby signifying his distaste for the dictatorship. The jury protested, but the police had their way. After the candidate passed his audition, receiving the highest score from the jury (18 points out of a possible 20), he was arrested”. In the end, Fernando Lopes-Graça went to jail at Aljube and was subsequently placed under house arrest at Alpiarça where he wrote: “Revolution and Freedom are one and the same. They are immutable laws engraved in the Cosmos, similarly eternal and divine”. Nevertheless, his resistance to the regime had a musical as well as literary characteristic. In opposition to the status quo of the time, Lopes-Graça was a genuine supporter of modern aesthetics. In 1929, with Pedro de Prado, he founded *De Música* magazine, on which other composers, such as Armando José Fernandes (also born in 1906) and Jorge Croner de Vasconcelos, would collaborate. He performed premieres of Hindemith and Schoenberg in Portugal, took literature classes at the University and wrote for the magazine *Presença* alongside avant-garde Portuguese poets. In spite of his extraordinary abilities as a composer, essayist, and pianist, the regime prohibited Lopes-Graça from taking advantage of a scholarship awarded him in 1934 to study musicology in Paris. Unperturbed, and after being held again in prison in 1936, he set off for France at his own expense to study composing and orchestration with Charles Koechlin. In Paris, he took part in Popular Front cultural activities and wrote a series of Parisian musical chronicles for *Portugal* magazine. When World War II broke out, Lopes-Graça joined the volunteer corps of the “Friends of the French Republic” and worked with a number of Spanish Civil War exiles, but he refused to accept an offer of French citizenship and instead returned to Lisbon to escape Nazi tyranny.



Back in Portugal, Fernando Lopes-Graça continued to speak his mind, notably as a music critic for the *O Diabo* and the *Seara Nova*. His opinions earned him the “privilege”, in 1941, of being forbidden to teach in officially-sanctioned schools: he concentrated his efforts entirely on the educational, musical and political struggle at the Academia dos Amadores da Música (Amateur Musicians’ Academy). In the *Século Ilustrado* he wrote: “The Academy is my musical home (...) as an artist, but especially as a teacher; here I have been able to do things I have been prevented from doing elsewhere”. He established the Amateur Musicians’ Choir, composed his *Canções Heróicas* (*Heroic Songs*), declaring his compassion for humanity and faithfulness to his artistic ideals. These *Songs*, which he described as “utilitarian” music, directly supported the political fight for the democratic and anti-fascist cause. The censorship bureau prohibited their publication in *Seara Nova*, and prevented them from being heard or sung in public. However, in addition to these political compositions, his outstanding work as a contemporary and visionary artist was rewarded no less than four times by the Composer’s Prize of the Círculo de Cultura Musical (Musical-Cultural Circle). Most notable among these prizes was the one for his *História Trágico-Marítima* (*A Tragic Sea Story* - 1944), a large oratory for tenor and orchestra on a poem by Miguel Torga which exemplifies his choice of Portuguese historical themes. To promote 20<sup>th</sup> Century music, he founded the

Sociedade de Concertos Sonata (The Sonata Concert Society), whose concerts were often watched closely by the PIDE, with orders to identify, as for example in a 1951 recital, anyone who may have broken out in supposedly excessive applause.

Alternating between political struggle and time served in jail, Lopes-Graça nevertheless gained recognition abroad. He participated in intellectual meetings in Poland and Czechoslovakia but kept his distance from the aesthetic and ideological positions taken by the Second Congress of Progressive Composers in Prague and from the Communist regimes in general. In 1947, assisted by the



Frenchman Michel Giacometti, he undertook a project that would be a founding step towards establishing a Portuguese musical identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the compilation of songs and folk music, ending in the late 1950's with a classified and analysed collection of recordings, covering the whole of mainland Portugal and its islands. Lopes-Graça had studied this music, which remained very much alive in rural communities, since 1938 when he began harmonizing folksongs, and it became the basis of his musical language. In spite the fact that this astonishing achievement, like Bartók's in Hungary, was of inestimable value to Portuguese music, he was refused a travel visa for the Béla Bartók International Competition, where he was invited to be member of the jury in 1949. This was part of the furtherance of a deliberate strategy by the regime to isolate the composer and limit his international relationships. His correspondence, for example, in 1965 with Mstislav Rostropovitch, who had commissioned his *Concerto da Camera col Violoncello Obbligato*, was systematically disrupted by the PIDE. Forced by the Portuguese minister of education to give up his private teaching credentials, he was obliged to leave the Amateur Musicians' Academy, to do translations (of Rousseau and Romain Rolland and others), and to make ends meet as well as he could. In his unrelenting struggle for the individuality of Portuguese music, he continued to harmonize and compose, never giving up his faith in freedom. From his desk came in turn *Viagens na Minha Terra (Travels in my Homeland)* in 1953, *Melodias Rústicas Portuguesas (Rustic Portuguese Melodies)* in 1959, the fifth series of *Canções Populares Portuguesas (Portuguese Folksongs)* in 1959, as well as the 24 notebooks of *Canções Regionais Portuguesas* spread out between 1943 and 1988. Symbolically, in 1960, for the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Portuguese republic, he had no qualms about editing the second volume of his *Heroic Songs*, sold illegally, under the table! He stated: "Now we can tell them how much I consider art to be a religion, my only religion (...) and how much I see it as the only religion of the future, the only religion of free, just and wise human beings."

It was only after April 25, 1974, that Lopes-Graça was able to live fully as a composer, to relish 20 years of that so-much-hoped-for freedom. As a Communist Party member until his death, he wanted to "bring the voice of the people to classical music" and make it reach those who would not normally have access to it. The creator of an "imaginary folklore", as

the French describe Bartók, Lopes-Graça was also the author of several fundamental books in the area of musicological and aesthetic thought, where he contrasted the vitality of Portuguese poetry with the lack of individuality in Portuguese music. He defended the tradition of composing songs to Portuguese poetry from all periods: Eugénio de Andrade, Gil Vicente, Bocage, Camões, Mário Cesariny, Fernando Pessoa, João José Cochofel, Antero de Quental. The extent of his writing for voice is vast and contains no less than 228 *a capella* songs from 1940 to 1980 alone! According to his close friend, French composer Louis Saguer, the music of Fernando Lopes-Graça combines a number of techniques and styles that “range from the most classical tonal writing to the most incisive atonalism, drawing on the rich polyphony of Portuguese folk music, as well as masterpieces from the world over. His research leaves no stone unturned, and gives him the assurance of always being able to find the necessary synthesis for expressing himself as a musician and a citizen.” At his death on November 27, 1994, he left behind him a monumental opus of more than 260 works.



Before Lopes-Graça Portuguese music lacked historical continuity, and no composer would have been able to say that his own music was part of an evolutionary process in Portuguese musical thought. This legendary, multi-faceted musician, who carried within himself the idiosyncrasies, the suffering and hopes of the Portuguese people, brilliantly led the way for succeeding generations of composers.

As Sérgio Azevedo, one of today's outstanding Portuguese composers tells us, Lopes-Graça's house in Parede (near Lisbon) was always open to enthusiastic young musicians. He inspired these students always to demand more of themselves as he himself had been inspired to do by his admiration of Beethoven and Bartók. Covered with honors in the aftermath of the revolution, he was re-admitted to his position as director of the Amateur Musicians' Academy, and designated president of the commission for educational reform in music. The awards he received were innumerable as well as inevitable. His *Requiem for the Victims of Fascism in Portugal*, commissioned by the Portuguese government, was premiered on July 27, 1981. Among the soloists that evening was life-long friend Dulce Cabrita, alto, and a superb interpreter of his music. During his life many others were faithful to his art and stood by him in the struggle: author João José Cochofel, guitarist Piñeiro Nagy, baritone Fernando Serafim, and pianists Filipe de Sousa, Olga Prats, Nella Maissa, Maria da Graça Amado da Cunha (who premiered many of his works and whose playing embodied both feeling and intelligence), to name but a few. They chose to perform Fernando Lopes-Graça, they took risks in doing so, and they fought for freedom and to serve the music of a composer who is indispensable to the history of 20<sup>th</sup> Century music.

Translation: Jed Barahal