An interview with the composer Sérgio Roberto de Oliveira

Tom Moore (Duke University)

Sérgio Roberto de Oliveira is now in the second decade of a very active career as composer. The last year has included a semester as visiting Mellon Artist-in-Residence at Duke University (Spring 2009), where he composed works for faculty member Susan Fancher, saxophone, and the Ciompi Quartet, both premiered at Duke on April 25, 2009, as well as a new work for Carioca flutist Maria Carolina Cavalcanti. My previous interviews with Oliveira have appeared in the periodical *21st Century Music*, as well as at the website MusicaBrasileira.org.

The present interview took place at *A Casa Estudio*, Rio de Janeiro, August 1, 2008.

MOORE, Tom; OLIVEIRA, Sérgio Roberto de. An interview with the composer Sérgio Roberto de Oliveira. *Opus*, Goiânia, v. 15, n. 1, p. 8-22, jun. 2009.

Tom Moore: In the United States the eighties and nineties saw a turning-away from the avant-garde, and from high-modernism. How do you see this dynamic playing out in the Brazil of the same period?

Sérgio Roberto de Oliveira: As you know, I was born in 1970, and I feel much more comfortable talking about what I personally experienced than about what I studied, but I can give you my point of view from the moment when I started to follow contemporary music more closely. First, there is the problem of vanguards in general. I think that after the seventies in Brazil people had exhausted what they had to say that was new. I have a problem with this idea of "avant-garde" today. I am very suspicious of someone who says that he is going to make a complete break, to do something completely new, because we have already experimented with almost everything. I hear concerts of electroacoustic music, which theoretically would be avant-garde, and I heard old music. I hear music that sounds like it is at least twenty or thirty years old.

From the end of the eighties on you have a mixture of everything. If, before, someone was considered better because he was part of the avant-garde, with all other styles thought to be inferior, now we see all these styles happening at the same time. Brazilian music privileges communication and avant-gardes don't communicate. On the contrary, they shock to communicate via alienation. My generation, and the generation before mine, has a relationship to the idea of contemporary music that is a little different. Even at the university, there are professors talking a great deal about theory of communication, which points you in a certain direction. Not in the sense of making the music easier, but to have tools that are more efficient in accomplishing what you want with the public. As a student, before I became a composer, I was already interested in dialectics, mathematics, philosophy, trying to understand how music as an artistic expression relating to the public could take place.

I think that the path that we are on today, where I am working each day, and that is the path of Brazilian culture, with sponsors, the Lei Rouanet ... it is important to say this, because without money, you can't eat, make music, make culture - is that of providing access. If you are going to provide access for the public, you have to communicate. I think that the trend has been to make music that communicates more.

In my own work I have used techniques that in another time might have been avant-garde, and which still may not be very palatable to the public, but using elements which communicate. For example, my piece premiered last year in England, which is a dodecaphonic *frevo*. The recorderist himself, John Turner, a great musician, and very experienced, told me after the premiere, "I didn't know that it was twelve-tone". And it was. The question of communication comes before the flags of the various esthetic schools. This is the big difference today.

When you see people doing things that might be considered "avant-garde", and which are in fact rather "passé", they are usually trying to use humor as a means of communication. A few years ago at the Bienal [of contemporary music in Rio de Janeiro] there was a piece which was a game on the stage, like a sort of tennis match, by Leo Fuchs, and which was simply a big joke. He was communicating through irony and humor. I see Tim Rescala doing this as well.

The word of the moment is communication, because we are increasingly realizing that access, getting through to the public, is important.

TM: It used to be that you could imagine classical music as an island without connections to other musical universes. Someone could be trained in classical music, without ever getting into any sort of popular music, rock.... anything that wasn't classical. For your generation there is no such thing as a classical music uncontaminated by other possibilities.

SRO: True. What sometimes escapes people when they are thinking about nationalism in music is that the European model is one without contamination, because in Europe there is a tradition of classical music which is very strong and very old, much stronger than the model for popular music. In making a national music, more than trying to reproduce folkloric music, something which had its moment in Brazil, we are thinking about how people behave culturally. You can take musicians who specialize in Baroque music, like our friend Laura Rónai, and who nevertheless knows the songs of Chico Buarque, because she hears them on the radio, she relates to them, knows how to sing them... and so our culture is a culture of mixture, a complete mixture. Especially in Rio de Janeiro, and in the great capitals, you have a mixture of the popular, the erudite, and the intellectual in your day-to-day life. What happens in music is only a reflection of what is going on in the street daily. It's true that this generation has heard ever more popular music, but this is also the case with imported music. Around the world there is this trend to incorporate jazz and rock into classical music.

Fundamentally, though, in Brazil we are trying to express in our music what we have in our culture. You won't be able to find a classical composer who is not in continuous and direct contact with popular music, with popular culture. When I talk about culture, I am talking about everything, from what people eat, to how they talk - it all affects us. I think there will always be an oscillation, but for the moment all of our different esthetic and compositional trends are taking place at the same time. We don't have one group that is putting down another group.

TM: Whereas it used to be the case that if you were a serialist, you couldn't admit that there was anything of value in a more romantic school, and vice versa.

SRO: I recall that a professor of mine at the university mentioned that he received an application form for the Bienal or something like that, where he had to talk about his music, and they asked what esthetic school he belonged to, and he said he didn't know what to put down. I was studying with him in the early nineties, and this took place in the late eighties, so people were still thinking with those attitudes of the seventies.

For me, mixing samba with classical music is no different from mixing different schools, esthetics in the same piece. It's possible.

TM: The question of mixture of styles has been around in Brazil at least since the time of Jackson do Pandeiro.

SRO: In fact it goes back, as far as I know to the modernist movement towards the beginning of the last century, with Oswald Andrade, which was just a bringing to awareness of what we have always done. Brazil is a culture of immigrants. Comparing it with the culture in the United States, a country that I have visited numerous times, I see that in the United States people are much more concerned to keep their roots intact, as is this case for Jewish culture as well. In Brazil these roots don't last more than one or two generations, because people really do mix. Someone's great-grandfather may have come from Africa, but he is Brazilian. If you listen to black Brazilian music, samba, or any other manifestation, and compare it with African music, you will see that yes, there are points of contact, but it's something different.

I think that music which is a mix, like jazz, is much more interesting than pure music. I think that African music is much more boring that samba or jazz. I think it has to do with the possibilities of mixture.

TM: This is where you have the great similarity between the United States of America and the United States of Brazil, the great nations which have this mixture, in different ways, of course.

SRO: And this is why these two have the most interesting popular music in the world, in my opinion. And the fact that they are young nations means that they have traditions of classical music which are imported. As long as I am importing music, I will always be behind. They took the lead long ago. If I try to imitate their music I will never come close to what they are doing. But if I discover my own identity, which is not theirs, but is theirs mixed with the identities of other peoples...

TM: After eating them, digesting them....

SRO: After digesting them I can present a different culture. I am enchanted with these concepts of anthropophagism. After all this time they still explain what is going on with Brazilian culture. And music is no different.

TM: Let's talk about some recent pieces. You have told me on various occasions that for you the most important point, the most creative point, is when the light goes on, the kernel of the piece appears... Pauxy Gentil-Nunes did some research in talking with people about this. Where does the light come from?

SRO: A while ago, I used to have contempt for inspiration - I thought "inspiration doesn't exist". It's foolish to talk about whether it exists or not, but the question is where the ideas come from. When I am facing a piece, it always has to do with communication. I am always thinking about "who am I composing for?" what is my channel of communication, and these things are a big help in defining the piece that I am composing. The idea comes from trying to resolve this objective problem, that has to do with the performer, or the ensemble, and the public for whom the piece will be played.

Where does it come from? I don't know. I think it comes from the same place as the other ideas. It's not a flash - rarely is it a flash - more often it is something that matures, to think of various things, and change my mind until finally... this is why I tell you that it is crucial moment. It is very unlikely that I will **apagar** [to erase] when I am composing. This is the moment when I **apago**. This the moment when I think of various possibilities, and change various possibilities. It takes me much more time to begin a piece than to finish a piece. In the moment when I settle on the idea, which will structure the entire piece, when I come to writing down the notes, I am already very much headed in the right direction. I am already certain about what I want. Of course, sometimes I can change my mind about some notes, but since it is very much connected to the structure....

I composed a piece last year, which is still unpublished, for trombone and piano, *Humana*, for which I established a structure, and when I came to compose, I was little by little subverting the structure, until I realized it was a different piece. And I threw out the structure, and made a different one. But this is an exception for me. The idea generates the structure. Everything serves to communicate the idea. It's the idea that has to be intact, that has to be played.

Once I have the idea, I only have to think about how this idea can be best communicated, how to translate it into sounds.

TM: Let's talk about 7. It's hard to imagine what sort of piece composition students would produce if

you asked them to write a piece about the concept of "seven". And what do you suppose audience members imagine if you tell them, before the piece begins, that it's about "seven"? It seems rather dry... but perhaps one might imagine that it has to do with the great Brazilian mastery of rhythms?

SRO: There are two things. The first has to do with the public, since Prelúdio XXI always has each composer speak to the public before the pieces are performed. The aspect of "seven" is something completely technical, so that's why in introducing the piece I am always joking about all the manifestations of seven in our culture, and the public even begins to participate.

I think this piece is extremely technical, and from the first moment of irony, when I have the two instruments playing in unison, and gradually drifting apart, I am already subverting the idea of precision in the first measures of the piece. If someone was expecting something mathematical, well, yes, it's mathematical, but the mathematics is subverted in the service of art.

TM: The reaction of the public is "oh no... he's messing up!!! already!!"

SRO: ...until it gets to a point where they realize that it can't be a mistake.

TM: "OK, now I get it...."

SRO: At the same time that seven is the basis of the structure, there are two extremely clear, singable tunes... the guy who putting away the instruments yesterday [after the piece was performed] was whistling one of them. I am sure that it's the only tune in seven that he has whistled in his life. I also took advantage of the fact that there are two percussionists. That stereotype of the Brazilian who is good with rhythm is why I never use typically Brazilian rhythms in this piece. There's a moment with the clave, a quieter passage in the music, where I was playing with material from salsa... there are moments which remind me of solos by a rock drummer... I was trying not only to explore the possibilities of the percussion, but the possibilities of contrast, working with irony to produce something that the listener is not expecting, from the opening moments.

TM: The communication in this piece also comes, I think, from the ostinato in this piece, which is not present as an ostinato per se, but the fact that the listener is always counting up to seven in his head. The most popular pieces in the history of music are those in which the layman can easily participate - the Bolero of Ravel, the Canon of Pachelbel... the listener can participate physically with what is taking place, and the more cerebral layers they may or may not perceive.

SRO: It wouldn't make any sense to write a piece called "Seven" for percussion, in 7/4, if it weren't very clear. So the structure was what made communication possible.

TM: You have a piece in seven, one of the Bagatelles for solo flute, "Arpeggios", but there you are always obfuscating the rhythm...

SRO: There I was communicating "I am playing arpeggios", not "I am playing in seven". If I am not mistaken, the last movement of *Mot Pour Laura* is also in seven, but there, yes, there is an ostinato.

TM: Let's talk about Atonas, which is perhaps your most abstract piece.

SRO: I think it's worthwhile for someone who listens to *Atonas* to hear Studies on Alban Berg as well. I was commissioned to write a piece for piano solo to be played after the Sonata by Alban Berg. I spent quite some time studying the sonata, not just from the obvious point of view of trying to understand the material he was using, which is very rasteiro, but what he does with it, how it gets to the audience. And in doing this analysis, I ended up with a lot of material, some of which also went to create the Studies on Alban Berg, which has many more of these elements than does *Atonas*. *Atonas* is already heading in a different direction, in the direction of communication. The Berg sonata ends placidly, at a low dynamic, a low density, and this is where *Atonas* begins. I tried to imagine a sonata that went from back to front. Our friend Caio Senna said to me "there's no such thing as a sonata that goes from back to front - something that does so isn't a sonata", and I said, "No, if I think that a certain theme sounds like an A theme, and the other like a B, then it will sound like that". But it is certainly an abstract piece, with no metaphorical idea, as is also the case with the Studies.

TM: I recall attending a performance of the Berg sonata at Brandeis, a piece which is around a century old, and the friend who was with me asked afterwards "Was I supposed to enjoy that?" So it is a piece that continues to be too modern for many listeners.

SRO: That's interesting to hear, because to my ears it's very beautiful - I fell in love with it. In *Atonas* I give other things which the listener can enjoy, including the rhythm. People have told me it sounds like a tango. It isn't a tango, but there are rhythmic hooks which connect the listener with the music.

Communication has to do with giving the listener some kind of reference. I like to be able to speak before a performance in order to provide a reference, even if a layperson's ears will not be able to perceive it. But he will try. If I talk about "Seven", a layperson will not know what 7/4 is, what a septuplet is - none of it makes any sense to him. But he will be trying to hear sevens as he listens to the music. These references, whether they are

conscious or unconscious, are what makes it possible to communicate. In the case of Atonas and the Studies, rhythm is the primary channel of communication.

TM: We have been talking about music up till now, but do you think that in the area of communication there are influences from other arts in your music?

SRO: Not in a conscious way, but this certainly takes place, because these other arts are part of my cultural universe. In the case of literature, talking about my Brazilian side, there is certainly influence.

Last year [2007] I had a crisis, and thought that I would be unable to compose anything more. I thought that I had already said everything that I had to say, and in fact I couldn't manage to compose. It's a good thing that this didn't last for very long. I made a piece that turned out well, with considerable success, called *Dores* [Sorrows]. It's the piece of mine that has had the most performances up until now, with 73 or 74 performances, but it's a transitional piece. After this work, the thing that helped me find my path was a book by Ariano Suassuna, the Pedra do Reino [*Romance d'a Pedra do Reino e o Príncipe do sangue do vai-e-volta: romance armorial-popular brasileiro*]. Literary references are strong for me. It's probably the other art that I consume the most. Cinema is something that I consume like any other airhead that watches commercial films. I am not a lover of the cinema.

TM: A gourmand, rather than gourmet.

SRO: Exactly. The arts which really touch me are theater, music, and literature, including poetry.

TM: Let's talk about Dores, and then Suassuna. Dores is a work that is very dark, obscure, completely different, for example from Seven, which has brilliance, light, something tropical. There is nothing of this in Dores.

SRO: Certainly not. *Dores* has to do with my crisis, what it is to be human, with the age that I am - I hope to live for a long time, but I am entering that phase we call middle age, at least that is how I feel psychologically. It was a moment in my life when I looked back and thought "I have accomplished a lot of things, but what do I want to do in the next thirty-seven years?" This generated a psychological process for me; I began to do therapy, which was very important, an attempt to really look at myself, because as you know I am a guy who works a lot. Often we spend more time working and less time thinking about what we are doing. I think my crisis as a composer had to do with this. I had been composing in a rhythm that produced eighteen pieces in two years, which is considerable. This pause to look within was necessary. Getting out of it was difficult. It's easier to push a car that is already moving than one that is stopped. Since I felt exhausted esthetically, I

was looking for another way. Something that I think you must never lose is expression and communication. *Dores* was a commission to be played on a tour throughout Brazil, principally in the interior, where people are not so cultured and have little information available to them.

TM: Where they have no access to culture.

SRO: I wanted to make something that would speak directly to people. I think sorrow does. I didn't want easy applause - it wasn't a moment for easy applause. It's not a piece which has brilliance with this in mind.

Anyone who does therapy or any form of self-analysis begins to deconstruct himself...

TM: Discovering that is inside and repressed.

SRO: And it's a painful process. This painful process generated a piece called *Dores*. It was a piece that was commissioned a very short time before it was to be premiered. This also served as a metaphor for me. I thought "I will make a piece in which each instrument plays only one theme throughout the whole piece". What will change is how the theme relates to the other themes - a sort of kaleidoscope. I have a tendency to think vertically, something that has to do with my activities in popular music, but in this piece I was much more preoccupied with the line, but not in terms of counterpoint, because these themes do not change. I am thinking horizontally the entire time, but the horizontal is delimited by the size of each theme.

TM: You can imagine this piece as four people, each one with their own individual problem...

SRO: Exactly...

TM: ... and nothing changes.

SRO: I made a metaphorical connection of a particular sorrow with each performer. Each person has a different sorrow. The sorrows don't change, and they remain the same.

TM: And that's why we do therapy.

SRO: Exactly.

TM: Because the definition of crazy is doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome.

SRO: In *Dores* things change, at least for the listener, but not for those inside.

TM: To move on to Suassuna, he is a great figure, but little-known outside Brazil.

SRO: Ariano Suassuna is a writer and thinker from Paraiba who is based in Recife, Pernambuco. His art, his literature is very strongly based in Northeastern Brazilian tradition, and this has a tremendous amount of influence from Iberia. He developed the movimento armorial, which also has a musical expression.

What he is trying to do is give sophistication to the Brazilian element. If we see a film of knights in armor, this is completely distant from the actual reality of the Middle Ages - they weren't great knights in shining armor, with well-fed horses....

TM: They were filthy....

SRO: ... and probably sick, weak, with bad teeth. He tries to do the same thing with Northeastern culture. In Pedra do Reino, he describes the cangaceiros as if they were knights, with leather armor - romanticizing Brazilian reality, and not seeking romanticism in a foreign reality.

I realized, reading Suassuna, that this has a lot to do with the music that I make, and the way that I think. When I take twelve-tone materials, and make a frevo, or take Brazilian elements, and make a complex structure, this is exactly what I am doing. I am presenting that Brazilian element in a sophisticated, erudite way, but when I relate to it, I think "ah, that little baião that I did", in the same way that Tom Jobim said that he never composed bossa nova - what he was doing was samba. The way I present it to the world is a romanticization of something that I took from popular music, not as a researcher from outside, but as an active participant in popular music.

What I need to do is to do this in a more conscious way - this is the direction that my music needs to go.

TM: A "música de cordel"...

SRO: I had a nanny from the Northeast, who still works at my house, and she had an enormous influence in my upbringing. It was through her that I had contact with literatura de cordel, with Luiz Gonzaga, with all this. I have a sentimental connection to the Northeast. I feel like someone from the Northeast, although I have only been there as a tourist. I have a Northeastern heart.

TM: Although Rio may be the Brazilian face that foreigners see, the soul of Brazil is in the Northeast.

SRO: Our nannies are from the Northeast, the doormen in our buildings... my generation, which grew up in apartment buildings, and played in the streets, always had this presence of doormen who were almost uncles looking after us, from Paraíba or from Ceará, so of course the Northeast is part of our culture.

TM: But also because the Northeast was the place where the earliest colonization took place, and because there there was not the internationalizing influence of the national capital, traditions remained untouched.

SRO: Of course we are talking about the perspective from Rio de Janeiro. The view from somewhere like Mato Grosso would be different. But because of the rural exodus, the Northeast is part of the "mainstream" in Brazil. We lament that this five-hundred-year old tradition is gradually being lost to globalization. We have to take care with our traditions now. In Parati there was a ciranda that has now been replaced by a baile funk - in another 30 years the children of our generation will no longer now what a ciranda is.

I am always talking about mixing, but in this case I am talking about really not mixing. In order to mix we need to have the pure stuff so that we can drink from that spring. Somebody has to this - Suassuna is very concerned with this.

Mar do Norte is the first piece that I composed with this point of view. It is a maracatu - period. It's a piece for winds and contrabass, with a percussion soloist, and will be premiered Oct. 22, 2008. The whole time I am talking about music from Pernambuco. I also refer to caboclinho, another musical style from Pernambuco.

I wanted to discover how I could make this maracatu sophisticated, not that the popular maracatu is not sophisticated, but sophisticated within this world of the intellectual, the classical, using this technique of classical music.

I have technique, I studied composition, I have an education in this. This is not the most important thing for me, but simply a tool. I know that there are composers who place technique at the center of their music - their technique is sophisticated, and they are so in love with it that that is what they want to talk about the whole time. For me technique is a tool that allows me to communicate the ideas that I want to get across

I had the idea for *Mar do Norte* when I went to hear *Dores* in Recife. I had already been reading Suassuna, and took my computer and sat on the veranda looking at the sea. Everyone thinks I am talking about the North Sea in Europe, which they think is "the" North Sea, but this name is already something very Brazilian, because nordestinos do not say that they are from the Northeast - they say that they are from the North. They are

correct, because for them Brazil is this vertical coastline, north to south, so Mar do Norte is a Brazilian way of saying "sea of the Northeast".

TM: I recall you went to the Northeast, met a rabequeiro... was this before or after your crisis?

SRO: Before... or during... because this sort of thing is a process - it's hard to say exactly when it begins or ends.

TM: To simplify enormously... with this crisis hovering you went to find your soul in the Northeast.

SRO: Yes... to simplify things enormously. Something else that I think is important is that last year when I was in the USA and Europe, in the midst of this crisis, I traveled with my copy of Suassuna's book - I was reading it at that moment. When you are a foreigner you are desperate to look for your roots. I never cry when I hear our National Anthem - only when I am outside Brazil. Perhaps the fact that I was resolving this esthetic crisis while I was outside Brazil caused it to become even more acute.

Now that I recall, my visit to the rabequeiro was in Dec. 2006, and the crisis was clearly in 2007. I stopped to look at myself in May of 2007.

TM: Please talk about another piece for mixed ensemble, which you wrote for Mélomanie.

SRO: *Colors*.

TM: In Portuguese, Cores and Dores.

SRO: Except for the rhyme, they don't have too much to do with each other. *Cores* was written soon after *Dores*. This thing of each performer speaking only of himself is repeated in *Cores*. I decided to assign a different color to each instrument in the group. I created a physical relationship of frequencies with the music, taking the colors and transposing their frequencies down by octaves until I got down to the audible frequencies of notes. I defined the fundamental of each color and created themes that had to do the psychological view of the colors by cultures. So red is something vibrant, sometimes military, something to do with victory... If I am not mistaken, red was given to the cello. The piece is divided into two large sections, named for Newton and Goethe, two great theorists of color, with an intermediary section named Dalton, for the man who discovered Daltonism (color-blindness), a section which is obscure, and where the colors do not correspond to what they ought to.

TM: By the way, readers, the composer is color-blind...

SRO: And the interviewer as well... This is why I felt it necessary to talk about Dalton, particularly because my approach to the piece is ironic. My relation to colors, because I am color-blind, is something very individual. I know that the way that I see colors is different from the way the world sees colors, so I made a piece reflecting my vision of colors. Of course the media made a point of this when the publicity for the premiere was being done...

TM: Another recent piece is the duo for flute and piano titled A Véspera do Fim, commissioned by the Duo Barrenechea. My perception is that this piece has more to do with your earlier esthetic.

SRO: It's a piece that closes that esthetic. *Mar do Norte* is the first piece from the new point of view. *A Véspera do Fim* has a title that is quite indicative if I am talking about the end of a phase. It belongs to the earlier esthetic for practical reasons, given that I had to compose the piece very quickly - the premiere was already scheduled, I was busy writing other music, and I had to take a break from *Mar do Norte* to write it. And of course I can write much more rapidly if I am working the same way that I always have, with mental work that is more automatic. I should make it clear that I am not rejecting this earlier esthetic - it's fine, I like all the pieces that I wrote, but I began to feel unable to say new things using that esthetic. Perhaps after another three pieces I will discover that I was wrong, that I have lots more to say in that style. I am just in a moment of searching, something that has to do with someone that is 37 doing therapy, looking for things that have to do with self-knowledge. *A Véspera do Fim* has two movements, Love and Fidelity. These two have to do with the Beginning of the End. The beginning of the end of love often is connected with the beginning of the end of fidelity. Sometimes it is the lack of fidelity that causes love to end, or the contrary - love ended, and you can no longer manage to be faithful.

But it also has to do with a joke - when Fidel Castro, who is no doubt one of the great figures of the history of the twentieth century, stepped down, he didn't die - but it was as if he had - there were specials on television...

TM: Here in Brazil that is, not in the USA...

SRO: This sort of thing only happens when a great figure dies. I felt like they had buried Fidel Castro alive, and I felt like that moment was the beginning of the end of Fidel Castro. Thus the pun with the word Fidelidade (fidelity), a movement in honor of Fidel Castro, and in which I use Cuban rhythm to express this.

TM: The flute has such an important place in your work, and you manage to say so many things with this instrument, without ever repeating yourself. Many composers have various works for flute and piano, and you have such a large body of pieces, and only two for this traditional combination.

SRO: What happened in my career as a composer is that beginning from the moment when I decided that I would not write pieces that were not commissioned, would not write pieces without knowing that they would be performed, and had many people asking me for pieces, all of the instrumental combinations in my work are determined by the practical context. There was no duo for flute and piano asking me for pieces, because if there had been there would be more works for that combination. I wrote *Micareta* for a concert in the United States, and this most recent work for a concert here in April. *Mar do Norte* appeared because of a discussion like this. Ana Letícia Barros, the percussionist, was being interviewed about the relation of the composer to percussion, and at the end someone asked why Rio composers write so little for percussion. I said that I could not speak for other composers, but that in my case it was because the percussionists didn't ask me. If they ask me, I'll write. And that is when she asked me for the work, as simple as that.

TM: And the great future? are there things that you've been wanting to do but haven't been able to? a grand opera?

SRO: I am not an opera fan as a listener, much less... [as a composer...]. I prefer the operas of Mozart, which are less grandiose than those of the Romantics. There are two things that I would like to work on more, which are choral music and orchestral music. For two years now I have been trying to compose a Christmas mass, and I can't find the time. It's a work that is very important to me, a promise that I made to God, so I have to compose it, want to compose it, fell in love with the idea of composing it. The problem is that God hasn't arranged a concert and a date for the premiere... so it always gets pushed back...

TM: ...hasn't arranged it yet....

SRO: Not yet. I have composed almost half of a *Te Deum*, which I began writing for a competition. I saw that I wasn't going to be able to meet the deadline, but I think that nobody else did either. I never heard anything more about the competition. I am beginning to get more interested in orchestral music. I am beginning to romance the idea that in the not-so-distant future, perhaps in five years, I will write my first symphony. I think that I have the maturity for it. I am in a moment of discovering things, and I need to discover time for works that are mine, because my works have been dedicated to their performers. If I only am writing commissions, there is no time for the music that I want. Perhaps I need a moment in my year for one or two works that I want. I am getting over the trauma of the beginning of my career, when I had many works that were not performed. I have a piano concerto that has never been performed that I adore. As I have had the luck, the result of work, rather, to have many commissions - I am always owing things to great performers - I have resolved the problem of having unperformed works. The commissions are only useful if there is a date by which I have to deliver the piece - or

the money has to be good. With the structure we have these days, it is very unlikely for an orchestra to commission a work from a young composer... or even from an old composer. It's very rare. And since I don't want to be writing my first symphony when I am eighty, I will have to save a space in my year to compose one. I want to take advantage of the concert in December with Calliope [a chorus] in collaboration with Prelúdio XXI to compose part of the mass and premiere it at the concert, which would serve an impetus to compose the entire mass.

This year and last I composed much less than I wanted to. This will only change if all the ideas that are bubbling in my head have time to happen. Not just time to sit in front of the blank score, but because for me the moment of creation, of structuring the piece, is crucial, I need to have a mental space, not sitting in front of the computer, but walking in the street, without having to worry about the next concert, about other things, but walking in the street, thinking about the music that I am composing.

TM: Letting the soul do its work.

SRO: In the shower is my best moment for composing, a moment when you are doing something automatic and your head is free. 15 minutes a day, plus time driving, walking - almost an hour per day, composing. Unfortunately at the moment I am spending this time thinking about other things.

TM: As we say in Brazil, your head has been rented. You have to un-rent it to leave space for other things to come in.

SRO: Even if it's just those moments in the shower.

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