

## **Jorge Peixinho (1940 – 1995) and the performative body**

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### **Abstract**

Jorge Peixinho (1940 – 1995) was a composer, a conductor, a pianist, a teacher and a promoter of avant-garde music in Portugal. His influence marked undoubtedly all people that, for one or other reason, met him, even only as a member of his public. He was the face of the Portuguese musical avant-garde.

This paper aims to bring light Jorge Peixinho as a performative body, using films, interviews, statements and bibliographic analysis, and comparing it with the way he composed and played. And, therefore, to give another contribution for the study of his work as a composer and a performer.

Keywords: Jorge Peixinho, Contemporary music, performing body.

### **Introduction**

Jorge Peixinho (J.P.) was a composer, a conductor, a pianist, a teacher and a promoter of avant-garde music in Portugal. His influence marked undoubtedly all people that, for one or other reason, met him, even only as a member of his concert's public. He was the face of the Portuguese musical avant-garde.

One of the most interesting characteristic of J.P. was his individuality, assuming his strong will to affirm his beliefs and ideas . And this strong individuality was evident as a body: a performative body playing piano and conducting his group G.M.C.L.(Grupo de Música Contemporânea de Lisboa) a body interacting in everyday life, a body that encompasses sound imagination and creative mind.

But his body was also a container that absorbed and was modeled by education, by culture, by experiences of different sorts: emotions, excesses, the

way he behaved and was present, the way he talked with friends and to the public, the way he absorbed new music and new art. His body – also strongly present and creative in happenings (ex. *Divulgação*, 1965) and in pieces with scenic component – stays vivid in many people's memories (Melo e Castro: 1977).

Therefore, four major personae can be studied separately: J.P. the pianist, J.P. the conductor, J.P. composer, J.P. talking and interacting with others. These personae can be understood through the analysis of films, photographs, interviews, interviews with friends and music scores.

#### The pianist

The piano was the main instrument of J.P. through his entire life. He began very early to learn playing piano, having his aunt Judite Rosado as a teacher in his birthplace Montijo (Ferreira: 1989). And he never stopped playing until his death in 1995: in fact, when he died there was a solo piano recital already booked for some weeks later, in the TAGV theatre in Coimbra. His interpretations of Debussy, Schönberg, Webern, even of the late Liszt, were appreciated by colleagues and by the public, as well as the more avant-garde repertoire.

Watching J.P. playing piano, it is interesting to notice that his movements are very straight, moving his arms in an inflexible way, in order to a neat resolution of any performance problem. The hips, trunk and head don't move when he plays piano, or move only the minimum so that his arms and hands can reach the target, even when the target is a piano string. It is also possible to notice that the shoulders and trunk have some unusual tension when he moves his arms. This tension is also apparent when we see J.P. talking to the camera in interviews: it seems that trunk, head and arms are tight moving together with much tension (Ferreira: 1989).

A brief overview of J.P.'s piano scores and parts, on the contrary, shows very demanding sections with sudden rhythmic changes (ex. *Sucessões Simétricas*, Peixinho: 2000), different rhythms simultaneously (ex. *Red Sweet Tango*, Peixinho: s.d.1, *Study V*, Peixinho: s.d.2), constant dynamic and attack changes (ex. *Estudo II*, Peixinho: 2000), sudden body displacements between notes played with the piano strings and played on the keyboard (ex. *Serenata per A.*, Peixinho: s.d.3), arpeggi and melodic sections in extreme parts played with both hands (ex. *Estudo I*, Peixinho: 2000), use of percussion instruments and mallets

(ex. Lov II, Peixinho: s.d. 4). And we know that J. P. played the piano part of almost all of his works, solo or in an ensemble.

### **The conductor**

Conducting was, for J.P., not a specific or separate career but an extension of his activity as a performer, a pianist. Conducting was a necessity when working with the musicians that formed the G.M.C.L. (Contemporary Music Group of Lisbon): 1- accumulating, as usual in small groups, the performance of the piano part with the direction of the ensemble; 2- assuming the leading perspective of a composer conducting his own works; 3- assuming the leadership on the interpretation of his colleagues' works and works of the past, as a specialist in contemporary music; 4- assuming the direction of the group in terms of its aesthetic consistency.

J.P. was the leader and the motor of the G.M.C.L., but he always respected the views of his fellow musicians. Very important were António Oliveira e Silva (viola), Carlos Franco (flute) and Clotilde Rosa (harp), not only colleagues but very close friends. The performing experience of these and other musicians was always very important, helping to understand the needs, the possibilities and difficulties of playing a specific instrument. The G.M.C.L. was, in fact, a collective experience of friends, much like a family, with complicities much more significant than in other music ensembles.

The way he conducted was, according to statements of the musicians, a consequence of the work during the rehearsals. The reading of a specific musical notation, the freedom of the scores, the understanding of the compositional structures and the expressiveness of the music were much more important than any metric or performative signal. Many times the group rehearsed and/or improvised for hours, sometimes in a very dramatic way (discussions were common), unaware of time, until Clotilde Rosa – the oldest and closest to J.P. – said “enough”, finishing the rehearsal <sup>1</sup>.

But this very close work was necessary in order to understand – a mutual experience of education in contemporary music – some scores of J.P. and of his colleagues: some of these scores are so evasive in terms of meter, tempo and relationships between the instruments, that only a hard and profound

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<sup>1</sup> In private talks with members of the G.M.C.L.

mutual knowledge could enable an expressive interpretation, close to the intentions of the composer. In fact, now there is the need for new, more “musician friendly” scores, enabling “normal” musicians (outside the G.M.C.L. circle) to understand all of the performative intentions.

J.P., therefore, didn't use a common – academic – conducting technique: he responded to the expressive needs of the score with an intentional gesture, inducing the musicians to an expressive interpretation of the parts. The complicity of all musicians was of utmost importance, J.P. being the conductor – many times also the pianist – just another member of the group. Gesture was a consequence of the enthusiasm of J.P. and of the needs of that particular group of persons.

### **The composer**

The activity of a composer is, primary, an intellectual one, with less incidence on the body or in movement. Composers imagine sounds, musical objects, structures, and then elaborate musical pieces using the chosen material.

But gesture is a central reference when speaking about music: it seems that there is a certain affinity between 1- written musical gestures and their performance (Goodman:1976); 2- musical gesture (the way people understand the metaphor of musical movement) and body movement (Langer: 1957, Hermerén: 1993); 3- music materials and musical gestures as specific sound identities created by the succession of different sound pitches in time (Haga: 2008).

J.P.'s music is full of musical gestures of different sort:

- 1- Gestures as melodic movement – long ascending, descending or oscillating melodies;
- 2- Technical and stylistic gestures: punctilistic passages, successive repetition of short motives, shocking and disruptive sounds, harmonic (tonal) like passages, popular (traditional music) gestures (Monteiro: 2002);
- 3- Quotations: of Wagner (Tristan chord), of Vivaldi, of Machaud, of himself (Monteiro: 2003).

The gestures – compositional gestures – correspond to specific intentions in terms of composition. But they also correspond to movements (ways of playing the specific passages with the instruments), and to particular ways of dealing

with the instruments and with music (Brelet: 1951). Perhaps his hard and severe music education (the education in Montijo and the Superior Courses of Piano and Composition in Lisbon's Conservatory, before traveling to Rome) marked J.P. for life, appearing in different ways in a clearly avant-garde, post-serial (para-serial in J.P.'s words) production (Ferreira: 1989). It is important to notice that J.P., in a statement for an interview (Ferreira: 1989), said that only after going to Rome and meeting the new moods of composition he chose to be a composer: he was a composer by choice and not by any kind of constraint.

The body is, according to this view, a container of multidimensional perspectives on music, and reflects J.P. not only in an intellectual dimension but always in a performative – embodied – extension, showing all incorporated experiences.

And musicians know that different kinds of music correspond to different ways of dealing with the body-instrument partnership.

The interactive person

J.P. was, in fact, a very interesting person to talk with, always very helpful, active, especially when dealing with music (Machado: 2002). Music, art, politics and social-political problems were themes that arose many times open discussions: J.P. always persisted on the assertion of his values, points of view and corresponding interactions, having in mind his broad knowledge of Marxist (anti-Stalinist) philosophy. A story has been told which is revealing: once he made a concert conference on contemporary music in a small Portuguese city, where he criticized the backward looking techniques and music of Shostakovich; neoclassical music was one of avant-garde's and J.P.'s enemies. After the concert a member of the organization told J.P. that he shouldn't criticize comrade Shostakovich, a leading composer of the USSR: J.P. promptly rejected this narrow view of art and of socialism, reaffirming his view<sup>2</sup>.

J.P. always used to listen to others, trying to convince them of his ideas or changing his own way of understanding the world. Some values were always present: the need for a democratic free society and the struggle against conservative art – an art that, instead of trying to change society and aesthetics towards the future, tried to please a condescending public. Nevertheless, one of

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<sup>2</sup> In talks with Clotilde Rosa.

his closest – and dearest – students was Eurico Carrapatoso, a known Portuguese composer that uses mainly modal and tonal infra-structures, clearly post-modern, backward looking.

J.P. persisted on an enfant-terrible image throughout the sixties and the seventies, taking part in the first Portuguese happenings, playing pieces where music and action (with text and mimic) were melted, visibly shocking the conservative – bourgeois – public. But his compositions, also full of shocking moments, have, sometimes, an almost romantic perspective. Striking examples are Study I – Mémoire pour une Présence Absente (Peixinho: 2000), composed when he left a girl in Rome with whom he was in love; Lov (both I and II, apparently a title written in Flemish) clearly evokes Wagner's Tristan chord, ending with a long quotation of Isolda's death (Monteiro: 2002).

J.P. was a very intense, even excessive person, with his mind always intensively working, thinking on projects, music, ways of interacting in society, or on specific problems or persons. He gave the impression that his body was pushed by his thoughts and will, sometimes in an uncontrolled way: many times, even in concerts, things (objects, small instruments, music stands) felt down the floor, machines didn't work properly in J.P.'s hands, the papers of the score were in a wrong order. Sometimes the musicians in the G.M.C.L. had to rehearse only part of the score, being the last bars of J.P.'s new parts only distributed in the day of the concert. Many times things went wrong because J.P. – acting also as a producer – didn't care about small organizational problems<sup>3</sup>. His premature death in 1995, on his way to the Town Hall Assembly of Montijo, was, perhaps, a consequence of his lack of care towards his health, continuing with an excessive behavior even after strong medical advisement against it.

## **Conclusion**

J.P. the boy with a conservative musical education, J.P. the transformed person after going to Rome (1959/60<sup>4</sup>), J.P. the enfant-terrible, J.P. the Marxist avant-gardist, J.P. the constantly passionate person, J.P. the avant-garde composer

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<sup>3</sup> In talks with G.M.C.L. and witnessed by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Witnessed by members of the public, in a Symposium in Lisbon, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> October, CESEM, Culturgeste, Lisbon. Proceedings to be published in 2011.

that used to teach also Machaud, Bach and others, J.P. the serialist or “para-serialist”, J.P. the pianist and conductor, J.P. the improviser, J.P. the performer, J.P. the producer, J.P. the contemporary art thinker... It seems that such a rich and diverse activity, although complementary, could hardly match one lifetime, or one unique body (Delgado Teixeira: 2006). And perhaps there are different bodies associated to the same person, which came out with different personae:

1- The pianist and conductor, marked by a very conservative education, but revealing the intensity of the new avant-garde composer by will; this body perhaps had to struggle against the prejudice of the others and to the constraints of his strong conservative education; therefore the erroneous movements, the mistakes with objects, the tension on conducting and playing, perhaps even the hazardous behavior.

2- The very expressive and intense composer and avant-garde performer, free from any constraints, capable of imagining and writing sound structures of multiple sort, with intentions that couldn't cope with a body mainly used to conservative expression.

3- The passionate and intense person, who taught, loved, helped and attracted many people by his deep and intentional way of interacting, full of commitment. These three personae bodies are, in fact, inseparable, but their acceptance can help the understanding of J.P. and of his work.

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