

From “Overcoated Singing” to Brazilian song: rethinking *Bel Canto* in the Portuguese language

Do “Canto Encasacado” ao canto brasileiro:
repensando o *Bel Canto* em língua portuguesa

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the relationship between *Bel Canto* and Brazilian art song, highlighting the tensions and convergences between European tradition and national identity. Drawing on Mário de Andrade’s critique of the “Canto Encasacado,” it analyzes how the Italian technique dialogues with key aspects of the Portuguese language, such as prosody and nasality. Based on an interdisciplinary approach combining musicology, vocal pedagogy, and cultural theory—and drawing on authors such as Andrade, Santos, Miller, Bloem-Hubatka, and Carvalho—the study demonstrates that *Bel Canto*, when reinterpreted, can serve as a technical and expressive resource in Brazilian repertoire. It concludes that the integration of European heritage and national identity strengthens operatic singing in Portuguese as a distinctive practice, while also expanding its interpretative possibilities and reaffirming its role as a vehicle of cultural affirmation.

KEYWORDS: Bel Canto; Brazilian art song; Operatic singing; National identity; Decolonial.

RESUMO: Este artigo discute a relação entre o *Bel Canto* e a canção brasileira, destacando tensões e aproximações entre tradição europeia e identidade nacional. Partindo das críticas de Mário de Andrade ao “Canto Encasacado”, analisa-se como a técnica italiana dialoga com aspectos centrais da língua portuguesa, como prosódia e nasalidade. A partir de uma abordagem interdisciplinar que articula musicologia, pedagogia vocal e teoria cultural, com base em autores como Andrade, Santos, Miller, Bloem-Hubatka e Carvalho, o estudo demonstra que o *Bel Canto*, reinterpretado, pode ser ferramenta de apoio técnico e expressivo no repertório brasileiro. Conclui-se que a integração entre herança europeia e identidade nacional fortalece o canto lírico em português como prática singular, ao mesmo tempo em que amplia suas possibilidades interpretativas e reafirma seu papel como instrumento de afirmação cultural.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bel Canto; Canção brasileira; Canto lírico; Identidade nacional; Decolonial.



1. Introduction

Operatic singing in Brazil has always been marked by tensions between European tradition and the search for a distinct national identity. Since the nineteenth century, when Italian influence became consolidated through *Bel Canto*, critics and musicologists have reflected on the implications of applying a foreign vocal technique to a language with very different sonorities, such as Portuguese. In this context, Mário de Andrade emerges as one of the most incisive voices, denouncing what he called the “Canto Encasacado” (“Overcoated Singing”), the result of a mechanical application of the European model that disregarded essential aspects of the Portuguese language, such as prosody, nasality, and textual intelligibility.

The debate is not limited to a simplistic opposition between European tradition and *brasilidade*. Rather, it involves understanding how technical knowledge from a consolidated school such as Bel Canto can be appropriated, reinterpreted, and integrated into Brazilian vocal practice. In this process, phonetic, rhythmic, and stylistic issues become central, revealing that the search for a national vocal aesthetic is inseparable from reflection on language, identity, and culture. Brazilian music—with its diversity ranging from *modinha* and *lundu* to operatic, choral, and chamber repertoire—offers fertile ground for this dialogue, while also bringing to the surface decolonial dilemmas and the need to overcome paradigms inherited from a colonialist perspective, which for a long time considered Portuguese an unsuitable language for classical singing (Kiefer 1977).

From a methodological standpoint, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach that brings together musicology, voice studies, and cultural theory. It draws upon historical and theoretical texts—such as the reflections of Mário de Andrade (1972), Santos (2011), Miller (1996), and Bloem-Hubatka (2012)—as well as more recent studies that problematize the notions of tradition and identity, such as Carvalho (2025). The analysis privileges a comparative perspective, seeking to highlight both the points of tension and the possibilities of reconciliation between Italian vocal technique and the demands of Brazilian song.

The aim is to demonstrate that Bel Canto, far from being an obstacle to the affirmation of Brazilian vocal identity, can serve as a bridge between technique and culture, provided it is reinterpreted and adapted to the specificities of the Portuguese language and national musicality. By exploring the tensions between tradition and identity, this study seeks to contribute to the debate on the construction of a genuinely Brazilian vocal aesthetic, one that dialogues with European heritage without losing sight of the uniqueness of Brazilian culture.

2. Between tradition and identity: Bel Canto as a bridge for Brazilian song

The Brazilian songbook comprises a vast and diverse repertoire, filled with challenges and interpretative possibilities. Santos (2011) argues that Brazilian songs can be employed as a resource for technical and vocal development, emphasizing the importance of their recognition and appreciation.

The writer and musicologist from São Paulo, Mário de Andrade (1991), asserts that one of the obstacles to the support of the national repertoire was the influence of Bel Canto. According to him, the use of this technique made the songs sound as if they had not been written in Portuguese, hindering the audience’s understanding of the sung text. This concern with Brazilian vocal identity—the need to move away from the so-called “Canto Encasacado” (“Overcoated Singing”), which undermined the expression of *brasilidade*, and

to approach a manner closer to spoken language—was a widely discussed issue within the Brazilian musical milieu of the twentieth century (Santos 2011).

From the perspective adopted in this article, the central question is: was *Bel Canto*¹—namely, the technique of the Italian school—truly the problem to be addressed? The main criticisms raised by musicologists concerned the audience’s comprehension of the sung text and the fidelity of performance to the Portuguese language and to national identity. *Bel canto* was identified as the problematic element by Andrade (1991) and Santos (2011), as it was a technique of European origin. Its aesthetic standards, inherited from European companies, reflected their language and culture rather than our own.

The debate was not directed against *Bel Canto* itself—after all, Andrade acknowledged the Italian tradition as a consolidated foundation of vocal pedagogy—but rather against certain technical aspects when applied indiscriminately to Portuguese. Timbral homogenization, the absence of nasalization, and the loss of textual clarity were regarded as factors that distanced Brazilian song from its communicative function and from its connection with orality. In this sense, Andrade did not reject the Italian technique, but emphasized the need for adaptations that would respect the phonetic, rhythmic, and expressive specificities of the Portuguese language.

It is by no means a matter of repudiating the European *Bel Canto*, which—as we have already said—can perfectly serve as a technical development of the voice, to Brazilian singing, which, technically, is assimilable to the European.² (Andrade 1991, 110)

His vision of how Brazilian operatic singing should sound was therefore oriented toward the construction of its own vocal school, one that would reconcile European technical mastery with the valorization of Brazilian speech. He advocated for a form of singing that would preserve the intelligibility of the text, approximate the timbre and intonation of everyday speech, and reflect the cultural richness of the country—marked by the interweaving of Indigenous, African, and Iberian influences. The proposal was for a “nationalized” operatic singing, which would not renounce technical excellence, but which, at the same time, would not sacrifice the identity of the Portuguese language or Brazilian musicality in the name of foreign standards.

When we consider *Bel Canto* as a vocal school, it is difficult to associate the problems indicated by Andrade as originating from *Bel Canto* itself. This tradition has been employed not only for singing in Italian, but also in languages such as Spanish, German, French, and English, while preserving the intelligibility of the text and the diction proper to each of these languages. Such a practice does not seem to correspond to the so-called “*Canto Encasacado*” (“Overcoated Singing”) identified by Andrade.

Richard Miller (1996) demonstrates that there are singers who are able to sing well in any language, since a free voice does not present problems of diction. Intelligibility in singing is linked to the balance among vowels

¹ In this article, the concept of *Bel Canto* is understood as the Italian school of singing, primarily characterized by its bright timbre, the clarity and definition of vowels, and other related features. Morais and Barros (2025) discusses the use of the term in two ways: in a broad sense, as a designation of a vocal school; and in a more restricted sense, as some authors confine it to the Baroque period and to florid singing— i.e. with ornaments and with *coloraturas*—associated with composers such as Bellini, Rossini, among others.

² “*Não se trata absolutamente de repudiar o Bel Canto europeu que, já o dissemos, pode perfeitamente servir como desenvolvimento técnico da voz, ao canto brasileiro, que tecnicamente, é assimilável ao europeu.*” (Andrade 1991, 110)

and to articulatory clarity. This reinforces the idea that Bel Canto, when properly applied, can serve as a tool for preserving textual clarity rather than as an obstacle.

It is important to note that this “Canto Encasacado” (“Overcoated Singing”), described by Andrade (1991) and Santos (2011), displays the same characteristics identified in the modern twentieth-century voice by Bloem-Hubatka (2012), in which vocal production approaches an artificial ideal, moving away from the natural register of speech:

Present - day singers seem to possess a more corporate sound; we hear more of the method they use than of themselves. Historical singers seem to sing after a method that is not an obstacle to communication but an aid. (...) Present-day professional singers sing after the same method that is now taught in conservatories all over the world, (...) The present-day method also eradicates special-sounding voice types (...) Tenors sound the same the world over. (Bloem-Hubatka 2012, 06-09)

The Bel Canto school, therefore, has nothing to do with a practice that undermines textual intelligibility or distances itself from the natural characteristics of the sung language. This also applies to nasal sounds, which are so important for the intelligibility and correct pronunciation of Brazilian Portuguese in singing, as we shall briefly discuss.

2.1. Bel Canto and nasality in Brazilian Portuguese

Among the most challenging elements is the nasality of the Portuguese language. Unlike Italian—the reference language for Bel Canto—Brazilian Portuguese features a large number of nasal vowels ([ẽ], [ē], [ĩ], [õ], [ũ]) and nasal diphthongs, which create challenges both for vocal homogeneity and for maintaining the *legato* line. Italian singing, grounded in the purity of oral vowels, tends to seek clear and uniform timbres, whereas Portuguese requires a delicate balance between nasality and intelligibility.

Nasality must be controlled so as not to compromise vocal projection, but it should never be eliminated, as it constitutes an essential part of the phonetic identity of the language. This discussion directly recalls Andrade’s modernist concerns: singing in Portuguese meant respecting the particular sonority of the language, without erasing it in the name of a foreign aesthetic.

The Italian school makes use of nasal sounds in Bel Canto, employing them extensively for placement adjustments in the mask. The sensation of a bright timbre arises precisely from these adjustments. As Miller (1996) notes:

For In describing the pedagogical uses of the nasal continuants, it was mentioned that the entire oral cavity serves as a resonator in the execution of [m] (while remaining in a lateral position). It has also been shown that in [n] the oral cavity is altered so the portion lying behind the conjunction of tongue and alveolar ridge acts as a resonator without contribution from the forward area between the teeth and the lips, and that in [q] the mouth cavity (with the exception of the faucial area) is probably excluded as a resonator.(...) The ultimate location of high "head sensation" is often experienced with the phoneme [ji], pinpointing a feeling of “resonance” squarely in the center of the masque, or behind the nose, the eyes, or in some related area of the face, depending on subjective

responses of the singer. It will be seen at once that these syllables are based on the Italian word *ogni*, and that the exercise stems from the Italian School. The syllables, at the repetition on the vocalise, are reversed, the initial sound then being the lingua-palatal-nasal one. (Miller 1996, 86-87)

As we can see, nasality plays an important role in the production of the bright timbre, since the resonance adjustments derived from it are fundamental for the sensation of “voice in the mask.” Within Bel Canto, nasality is even employed as a pedagogical resource.

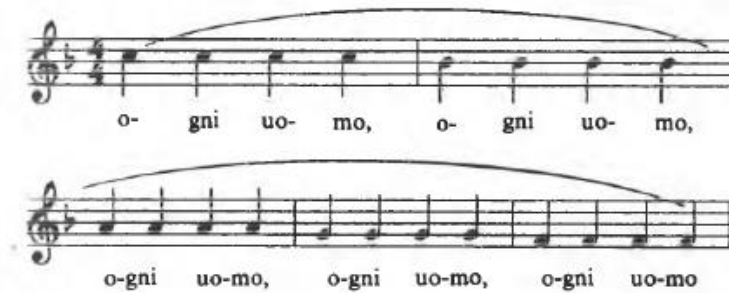


Figure 1 – Exercise attributed to the Italian school: alternation between nasal consonants and front and back vowels.

Reference: Miller 1996, 87

French also features nasal vowels ([ã], [ɛ̃], [œ̃], [ɔ̃]), for which vocal pedagogy has developed specific strategies. Modern teaching does not recommend eliminating nasality, but rather controlling it through the predominance of oral resonance. In other words:

The singer should conceive of the French nasal vowel as an oral vowel enhanced with nasal resonance, rather than as an exclusively nasal sound. The vocal emission must remain focused on the oral tract, ensuring projection; nasality is added as a “shade,” avoiding the excess that produces muffling. The result is an intelligible pronunciation, without compromising lyrical projection.

The same reasoning can be applied to Brazilian Portuguese: rather than attempting to “correct” the language to conform to Italian Bel Canto, the challenge lies in balancing nasality and orality, preserving linguistic identity without sacrificing clarity and projection. In short, it concerns oral vowels enhanced with nasal resonance, rather than exclusively nasal sounds.

It is important to emphasize that French was one of the reference languages for the development of pronunciation norms for Brazilian Portuguese in classical singing. These norms were established through the joint effort of several researchers (Kayama *et al.* 2007), with the aim of providing Brazilians—and any singer interested in performing in Brazilian Portuguese—with a document that systematizes a neutral pronunciation of the language. The material does not include the specificities of regional accents, since Brazil, with its continental dimensions, presents great phonetic diversity. Nevertheless, it represents an important step toward the internationalization of Brazilian art music.

2.2. The stridency of the folk singers

The oral music of Northeastern Brazil—with its legends, ballads, *aboiões*, and *repentes*, as well as street singing and other manifestations of popular expression—can be described by the characteristics of a rustic

and strident singing style. This notion of stridency should not be understood as a lack of technique or vocal control, but rather as a conscious aesthetic choice: the valorization of timbres regarded as rustic.

Carvalho (2025) refers to the sounds of the *viola caipira*, the *rabeca*, and the ballad singing tradition. As Suassuna states: “harsh, archaic sounds, sharpened like the edges of a knife-point³” (Suassuna *apud* Carvalho 2025, 244). Thus, the question arises: how can these aspects be associated with a technique whose guiding principle is a voice free of stridency?

Stridency itself is a debatable aspect. In Bel Canto, the bright timbre is valued; it is not, therefore, a matter of removing the “brilliance” characteristic of a strident voice, but of covering it so that this brilliance is distributed within a fuller timbre. In a certain sense, the control of this covering can be consciously managed by the operatic singer in order to achieve sounds that are more or less “harsh,” depending on the interpretive demands.

This resource can be observed in verismo operas, such as *I Pagliacci* by Leoncavallo. In the tenor aria *Vesti la giubba*, the expressive indication is to sing *a piena voce, straziante* (“full voice, heart-rending”). In this context, the tenor is expected to produce a timbre that is less beautiful and more “desperate,” rustic, and surrendered to the character’s pain. In this aria, a singer with solid technical command is able to move between these timbres and achieve the desired expressive outcome.



Figure 2 –Excerpt from the aria *Vesti la giubba*, from the opera *I Pagliacci* by Leoncavallo.
Reference: International Music Library Project - IMSLP

In the same way, the control and gradation of timbres can be applied to the national repertoire. Although Bel Canto has as one of its aesthetic ideals the pursuit of a homogeneous, flexible voice free of stridency, this characteristic does not prevent its assimilation into Brazilian repertoire. In fact, Bel Canto technique privileges clarity of emission, precision of prosody, and clear articulation of vowels. Bel canto preserves a bright, projected timbre capable of enhancing both text and expressivity. This proximity allows the Italian technique to engage in dialogue with the national aesthetic, offering performers tools to explore nuances between the smoothness of classical singing and the rusticity required by certain Brazilian repertoires.

³ “toques ásperos, arcaicos, acerados como gumes de faca-de-ponta” (Suassuna *apud* Carvalho, 2025, 244).

3. Brazilian national identity

In defense of Brazilian art song, the article by Castro, Borghoff, and Pádua (2003) raises an important point regarding the valorization of the national repertoire within vocal training in Brazil. The authors argue that the study of the national song should stand on the same level of importance as the European repertoire, not only for its artistic value but also because it constitutes an essential means of building Brazilian musical identity. This leads us to ask: why does Brazilian song not achieve the prominence it so greatly deserves? What are the obstacles encountered in the popularization of the national songbook?

One possible answer to this question lies in the difficulty of accessing quality editions of scores and recordings. Added to this is a historical factor: for much of its history, Brazil maintained a colonial mindset that did not value national singing or our identity as a people (Pignatari 2009). Today, however, we can observe the efforts of several researchers to highlight what has come to be known as decolonialism, an intellectual movement that seeks to deconstruct the social, political, cultural, and epistemic structures inherited from colonization, while promoting the recovery and appreciation of the experiences of historically dominated peoples.

The Portuguese language, until the end of the nineteenth century in Brazil, was considered unrefined and unsuitable for operatic singing—reason why it was almost banned from the musical taste of the economically dominant society, which sought to preserve its identification with European culture and resisted incorporating Brazilian popular values and elements into its art.⁴ (Kiefer 1977, 47)

Nevertheless, singing in Portuguese developed, and within the Brazilian territory it consolidated with pronunciation characteristics and regional styles that are neither, nor should they be, easily standardized into a single identity. Brazilian music, in its many forms, emerged from a broad mixture of peoples and cultures, resulting in an immense variety of styles. Today, Brazil may perhaps be most widely recognized worldwide for *bossa nova*, with its complex harmonies and Tom Jobim’s iconic song *The Girl from Ipanema*; however, its musical production is by no means limited to this genre, extending both to the development of popular music and to classical music. In the latter field, composers such as Carlos Gomes, Waldemar Henrique, Lorenzo Fernandes, Oswaldo de Souza, Alberto Nepomuceno, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Cláudio Santoro, Camargo Guarnieri, Francisco Mignone, Lygia de Biase Bidart, Lina Pires de Campos, Dinorá de Carvalho, Hilda Pires dos Reis, Esther Scliar and Jocy de Oliveira, among others, stand out for having explored and expanded the country’s musical diversity.

⁴ “O idioma português, até fins do século XIX no Brasil, era considerado língua inculta e imprópria para o canto lírico, motivo pelo qual era quase banido do gosto musical da sociedade economicamente dominante, que procurava preservar sua identificação com a cultura europeia e resistia em incorporar os valores e elementos populares brasileiros à sua arte.” (Kiefer 1977, 47)

The Iberian melody, together with African rhythmic richness, Indigenous ritual songs and dances, the music of religious cults, and military events, translated into a strong musical identity for Brazil.⁵ (Tinhorão 1991, 42)

The historical narrative highlights how the *modinha* and the *lundu* represented the first spaces of cultural resistance and of the affirmation of *brasilidade* in the face of the colonial legacy and European prestige.

Another aspect to consider is the invention of traditions. The maintenance and repetition of cultural ideas and practices create what is perceived as “traditional,” which may be associated with a so-called ideal past—a past that may or may not have existed, but which, even in its possible nonexistence, affects and provides a sense of identity to a people, even if that identity is invented.

The invention of traditions is a historiographical perspective that questions the authenticity—and even the antiquity—of certain practices, rituals, symbols, and discourses perpetuated in societies under the guise of a supposed ‘traditional’ character. By investigating the origins and processes of dissemination of these elements, pointing to them as productions—that is, as human ‘inventions’ often more recent than one might imagine—this line of studies highlights the functions performed by traditions, such as creating social bonds, strengthening collective identities, legitimizing authorities, or establishing continuities with an idealized past, thereby serving as tools of cohesion and social control.⁶ (Carvalho 2025, 64)

In this respect, one might ask to what extent Brazilian identity can be described as “traditional.” More profoundly, it is worth questioning to what extent the very set of ideas that constitutes European identity and aesthetics can be considered “traditional.”

Mário de Andrade was incisive in defending Brazilian culture in its various manifestations and understood that the European traditional ideal—or the knowledge originating from Europe—did not diminish the merit or originality of the music created in Brazil. He recognized a tendency not to acknowledge Brazilian identity or character in certain aspects, which contributed to what he called the “falsification of the Brazilian entity.”

But an important element coincides with this falsification of the Brazilian entity: the opinion of the European. The dilettantism that demands music exclusively our own is reinforced by what is genuinely ours and manages to obtain foreign applause. Yet, however respectful we may be of European criticism, it must be recognized once and for all that

⁵ “A melodia ibérica em conjunto com a riqueza rítmica africana, os cantos e danças rituais indígenas, a música de cultos religiosos e eventos militares se traduziram em uma forte identidade musical para o Brasil.” (Tinhorão, 1991, 42)

⁶ A invenção das tradições é a uma perspectiva historiográfica que questiona a autenticidade, e até mesmo a antiguidade, de certas práticas, rituais, símbolos e discursos perpetuados nas sociedades sob respaldo de um suposto caráter ‘tradicional’. Ao investigar as origens e os processos de disseminação desses elementos, apontando-os como produções, i.e., como ‘invenções’ humanas muitas vezes mais recentes do que se podia imaginar, essa corrente de estudos põe em evidência funções desempenhadas pelas tradições, tais como a de criar laços sociais, fortalecer identidades coletivas, legitimar autoridades ou estabelecer continuidades com um passado idealizado, atuando como ferramentas de coesão e controle social. (Carvalho, 2025, 64)

success in Europe has no importance whatsoever for Brazilian Music. In fact, it only reflects the expansion of the internationalized.

In music, even the Europeans who visit us persist in this search for the spiced exotic. If they hear a vigorous *batuque*, fine, they are enjoying themselves; but if it is a *modinha* without syncopation or certain lyrical effusions of Marcelo Tupinambá's little tangos, then that is 'Italian music'! They speak with a disdainful face. And those who think themselves knowledgeable start criticizing and advising, which is a vast danger. In a *toada*, a lullaby, or an *abôio*, they uncover at every step French, Russian, or Scandinavian phrases. Sometimes they even specify: that it is Rossini, that it is Boris. Well, what does Brazilian Music have to do with that! If *Milk* resembles *Milch*, do the words cease to be one English and the other German? At most, one can observe that both came from the same root. No one ever thinks of attacking the Italianness of Rossini because one of his phrases coincides with another from French comic opera.⁷ (Andrade 1972, 1)

The identity of national music results from an intense blending of cultures, which fused and generated an intricate web of possibilities branching into different manifestations from north to south across Brazil's vast territory. We do not need the opinion of other countries to recognize the greatness of our repertoire, for everything stems from the communion of cultures and ideas. Mário de Andrade (1972) continues:

One of the European pieces of advice I have often heard is that if we want to create national music, we must search for elements among the Indigenous peoples, since only they would be legitimately Brazilian. This is a puerility that reveals ignorance of sociological, ethnic, psychological, and aesthetic problems. A national art is not created through the discretionary and dilettantish selection of elements: a national art is already formed in the unconscious of the people. (...)

If only what is Amerindian were to be considered national, then Italians could not employ the organ, which is Egyptian; the violin, which is Arab; plainchant, which is Greco-Hebraic; polyphony, which is Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, Flemish, and who knows what else. The French could not use opera, which is Italian, and much less the sonata form, which is German. And

⁷ *Mas um elemento importante coincide com essa falsificação da entidade brasileira: opinião de europeu. O dilettantismo que pede música só nossa está fortificado pelo que é bem nosso e consegue o aplauso estrangeiro. Ora por mais respeitoso que a gente seja da crítica européia carece verificar duma vez por todas que o sucesso na Europa não tem importância nenhuma prá Musica Brasileira. Aliás a expansão do internacionalizado.*

Na música, mesmo os europeus que visitam a gente perseveram nessa procura do esquisito apimentado. Se escutam um batuque brabo muito que bem, estão gozando, porém se é modinha sem síncopa ou certas efusões líricas dos tanguinhos de Marcelo Tupinambá, isso é musica italiana! Falam de cara enjoada. E os que são sabidos se metem criticando e aconselhando, o que é perigo vasto. Numa toada, num acalanto, num abôio desentocam a cada passo frases francesas, russas, escandinavas. Às vezes especificam que é Rossini, que é Boris. Ora, o quê que tem a Musica Brasileira com isso! Se Milk parece com Milch, as palavras deixam de ser uma inglesa outra alemã? O que a gente pode mais é contrastar que ambas vieram dum tronco só. Ninguém não lembra de atacar a italianidade de Rossini porque tal frase dele coincide com outra da ópera-cômica francesa.” (Andrade 1972, 1)

since all the peoples of Europe are the product of prehistoric migrations, the conclusion is that European art does not exist.⁸ (Andrade 1972, 3)

In this sense, Bel Canto can also be Brazilian. Since the standardization of sung Portuguese diction, possible paths of reconciliation between technique and identity have emerged. The valorization of nasality as an aesthetic element, the pursuit of greater textual clarity, and the incorporation of rhythms and inflections unique to Brazil have expanded the interpretative possibilities of operatic singing in Portuguese.

The Brazilian modernist movement was the setting for the Anthropophagic Manifesto, written in 1928 by Oswald de Andrade and considered the most radical cultural and political manifesto of the twentieth century in Brazil. The text proposed the metaphor of “cultural anthropophagy” as a strategy for dealing with the colonial legacy: rather than rejecting European tradition, it was a matter of “devouring” it, critically digesting it, and transforming it into something of one’s own (Xavier, 2019). As the manifesto states, “only anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically⁹” (Andrade 1928, 1).

Oswald’s proposal does not deny that European culture lies at the foundation of Brazilian culture. From this perspective, by appropriating the culture of the Other, by devouring it, the *Anthropophagic Manifesto* seeks to operate the same principle of violence as the colonizer. Unlike physical violence, for Oswald the act of devouring is cultural, and his language takes on a metaphorical character. The exaggerated ritual of the anthropophagic act has a nature of desacralization: a pagan ritual of devouring the Other in order to assimilate it.¹⁰ (Xavier 2019, 6–7)

To devour the Other means to swallow and assimilate, not in a subordinate way, but by returning something authentically Brazilian. This idea, proposed by Oswald, aimed to re-signify social and cultural relations, transforming appropriation into creation. It is a way of incorporating the universal cultural legacy without submission—on the contrary, as an act of transvaluation. In this sense, the modernist movement subverted the relationship between former colony and metropolis, shifting the centers of symbolic power and affirming the autonomy of national culture (Xavier 2019).

⁸ “Um dos conselhos europeus que tenho escutado bem é que a gente se quiser fazer música nacional tem que campear elementos entre os aborígenes pois que só mesmo estes é que são legitimamente brasileiros. Isso é uma puerilidade que inclui ignorância dos problemas sociológicos, étnicos psicológicos e estéticos. Uma arte nacional não se faz com escolha discricionária e dileitante de elementos: uma arte nacional já esta feita na inconsciência do povo. (...) Se fosse nacional só o que é ameríndio, também os italianos não podiam empregar o órgão que é egípcio, o violino que é árabe, o cantochão que é grecoebraico, a polifonia que é nórdica, anglo-saxônica flamenga e o diabo. Os franceses não podiam usar a ópera que é italiana e muito menos a forma-de-sonata que é alemã. E como todos os povos da Europa são produto de migrações pré-históricas se conclui que não existe arte européia.” (Andrade 1972, 3)

⁹ “só a antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente” (Andrade 1928, 1).

¹⁰ “A proposta de Oswald não nega que a cultura europeia está na base da formação da cultura brasileira. Nessa perspectiva, ao se apropriar da cultura do Outro, ao devorá-lo, o Manifesto Antropófago procura operar o mesmo princípio de violência do colonizador. Ao contrário da violência física, a deglutição, para Oswald, é cultural, e sua linguagem assume um caráter metafórico. O ritual exagerado do ato antropofágico possui uma natureza de dessacralização: um ritual pagão de devorar o Outro a fim de assimilá-lo.” (Xavier 2019, 6-7)

Within the Brazilian modernist movement, “*O grupo dos cinco*” (the Group of Five) stands out, perhaps the most renowned for its pursuit of a national cultural identity that has inspired — and continues to inspire — artists in Brazil and around the world. The group was composed of Anita Malfatti, Tarsila do Amaral, Menotti Del Picchia, Oswald de Andrade, and Mário de Andrade, the latter two being directly connected to the reflections discussed in this study (Silva 2017).

Tarsila do Amaral is now recognized as one of the foremost representative artists of Brazil. Her painting *Abaporu* (1928) has become one of the greatest symbols of Brazilian culture and established a direct parallel with the idea of anthropophagy.

The title is a word from the Tupi-Guarani language. *Abaporu* is composed of different elements: *aba* means man; *poru* means to eat. This formation directly refers to the term anthropophagy, which comes from the Greek: *anthropos* (man) and *phagein* (to eat).¹¹ (Neckel 2007, 150)

Abaporu symbolizes a movement of affirmation of Brazilian national identity, marking artistic protagonism while pointing toward innovation and inspiration in the country’s cultural imagination. Tarsila do Amaral’s work not only inaugurates a unique aesthetic but also echoes the principle of modernist anthropophagy, which advocated the critical assimilation of the foreign in order to create something authentically Brazilian. In this sense, the painting goes beyond the visual arts, finding resonance in various artistic and cultural expressions of the Brazilian people.



Figure 3 –*Abaporu*, oil painting on canvas by Tarsila do Amaral
Reference: Neckel 2007, 150

It is also worth noting that Tarsila do Amaral had musical training and even composed a song — until recently the only known musical work attributed to her. The manuscript was discovered in 2021 and received its world premiere recording on January 25, 2022, at the Onofre Lopes Auditorium of the School of Music at UFRN. The performance featured singers Elke Riedel and Kaio Moraes, together with pianist Durval Cesetti, with the present author himself taking part as one of the interpreters. The recording is available on YouTube, was featured in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, and the score edition can be found on the official publishing site of the UFRN School of Music. The information regarding this discovery is documented in

¹¹ “O título é uma palavra da língua tupi-guarani. *Abaporu* é composto de diferentes elementos: *aba* significa homem; *poru* significa comer. Essa formação remete diretamente ao termo antropofagia, que vem do grego: *antropos* (homem) e *fagia* (comer).” (Neckel 2007, 150)

Morais, Barros and Cesetti (2024). The contributions of Tarsila do Amaral, even within an anthropophagic framework, are undeniably Brazilian and attest to the breadth of her artistic expression.

Another noteworthy movement in the path toward the valorization of the Brazilian national identity is the Armorial Movement. The Northeast of Brazil, a region of immense cultural richness, produces a unique art that represents another facet of Brazilian identity. Carvalho (2025) examines in greater depth the notion of the “invention of the Northeast” and the so-called Northeastern aesthetic, beginning with the figure of Luiz Gonzaga, one of the most prominent representatives of the region’s popular culture. His discussion highlights the historical panorama in which this cultural ideal was constructed, as well as the distinctive use of modalism in various forms to illustrate Northeastern identity. Within concert music, the Armorial Movement, led by Ariano Suassuna, stands out as one of the most remarkable initiatives in this process of cultural affirmation.

The Armorial Movement was conceived by the writer and poet from Paraíba, Ariano Suassuna (1927–2014). Officially launched in 1970, its proposal was to merge Northeastern popular traditions with European erudite forms, creating an artistic aesthetic that was genuinely Brazilian. Music, in this context, was not an isolated manifestation but a constitutive part of a broad project that also encompassed literature, popular theater, dance, and visual arts.

Suassuna understood literature, music, and the visual arts as inseparable dimensions of a single ideal. In music, this conception translated into performances that sought to preserve the spontaneity of popular orality without erasing the formal sophistication of written erudition. Northeastern *cantoria*, *aboios*, and *toadas*, with their narrative and often improvised character, were incorporated into concert structures. In this sense, the Armorial did not propose abandoning erudite tradition, but rather rooting it in the practices and sonorities of Brazil’s cultural depth.

The movement included composers who, under the leadership of Ariano Suassuna, gave musical form to the ideal of fusing popular and erudite traditions. Among them, César Guerra-Peixe stands out, with works such as *Mourão* and other pieces that translate Northeastern rhythmic elements into symphonic writing; and Cussy de Almeida, violinist and conductor, founder of the Armorial Chamber Orchestra, responsible for disseminating works such as *Aboio* and *Nordestinados*. Also noteworthy are Capiba, with the vigorous and austere piece *Sem Lei nem Rei*; and José Tavares de Amorim, who incorporated the universe of *pifanos* and *ciranda* in works such as *Pifanos em Dobrado*. (Nóbrega 2007; Carvalho 2025)

Another key figure is Clóvis Pereira, author of the celebrated *Missa Nordestina*, which integrates modalities of liturgical chant with popular melodies. Antônio José Madureira, then a young composer, created works such as *Repente*, which directly relate to the tradition of *cantoria*. Finally, Elomar Figueira Melo deserves special mention. Although autonomous in relation to the core of the movement, his production is often associated with the Armorial for its aesthetic proximity. Elomar developed an original language that fused the *sertanejo* songbook and the medieval troubadour tradition with erudite writing, resulting in a style deeply connected to the orality and religiosity of the Brazilian *sertão*. (Nóbrega 2007; Carvalho 2025)

These composers, each in their own way, projected Northeastern Brazilian music into the concert hall without erasing the traits that characterized it. In other artistic fields, one can highlight the painting of Francisco Brennand; the theater of Ariano Suassuna; the novels of Maximiano Campos; the poetry of Janice Japiassu, Ângelo Monteiro, and Marcus Accioly; the engravings of Gilvan Samico; the drawings of Fernando

José Torres Barbosa; the cinema of George Jonas; the sculpture of Fernando Lopes; and the architecture of Arthur Lima Cavalcanti—all under the direct influence of Ariano Suassuna as mentor (Nóbrega 2007, 02).

The Armorial Movement thus represented a true aesthetic transformation: music from the *sertão*, previously restricted to the popular domain, began to occupy concert halls and academic spaces while still preserving the vitality of its orality. This proposal also expanded to other artistic languages—painting, sculpture, literature, theater, and cinema—constituting an integrative and multifaceted aesthetic that reaffirmed the cultural diversity of the Northeast of Brazil as an essential part of Brazilian identity.

The relevance and contemporary significance of the Armorial Movement were reaffirmed in 2022, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, with the exhibition *Movimento Armorial 50 anos*, held at the Museu do Estado de Pernambuco (MEPE) in Recife. The event underscored the enduring legacy of Suassuna’s proposal as a landmark of Brazilian culture, celebrating the influence of the Armorial on multiple generations of artists and highlighting its vitality as an aesthetic project still present in the twenty-first century (Cultura-PE 2023).

The trajectory analyzed in this chapter shows that the search for a Brazilian vocal and musical identity takes place on different fronts, yet all share a common principle: the creative dialogue between foreign tradition and national culture. Bel canto, far from being an obstacle, proved capable of being “devoured” in the modernist sense, adapted to the prosody and sound of Portuguese, and transformed into a tool of cultural affirmation. The Modernist Movement, with the radicality of the Anthropophagic Manifesto, followed this same logic of critical appropriation, devouring the European legacy and returning it in an authentically Brazilian form. The Armorial Movement, led by Ariano Suassuna, expanded this perspective by fusing Northeastern popular traditions with erudite forms, projecting them into concert halls without erasing their oral vitality. Thus, whether in vocal pedagogy, visual arts, literature, or concert music, we observe the construction of a plural Brazilian aesthetic, rooted in orality yet open to dialogue with the universal.

3. Interpreting a song by Waldemar Henrique¹²: preparatory stages

The adopted interpretative approach aimed at applying the technical principles of Bel Canto—such as continuous legato, timbral gradation, and prosodic clarity—to the specific demands of Brazilian song, reconciling technical tradition and national identity.

Preparation began with a meticulous analysis of the score, focusing simultaneously on technical and expressive aspects. To this end, exercises involving reciting the text aloud were employed, followed by the practice of reciting the text on a single note. This method made it possible to dissociate the articulation of consonants from the continuous emission of vowels, favoring the homogeneity of the vocal line.

The sections that required greater technical attention were identified, such as passages in transitional regions between registers. At these points, a timbral treatment was adopted based on the balance between *chiaro* and *scuro*, applying the *scuro* timbre systematically in the high registers, in accordance with the historical guidelines of Bel Canto.

¹² Waldemar Henrique da Costa Pereira was a Brazilian pianist, conductor writer and composer (Belém do Pará, 1905-1995)

Prosody constituted the central axis of interpretative preparation, being decisive in locating the textual accents and adjusting the emission according to the style of the song. In a work of a regional character, as it is the case, the aim was to preserve a local accent compatible with the repertoire, respecting the sonority of Brazilian Portuguese and avoiding the vocal uniformity criticized by Mário de Andrade (1991). This procedure reinforces the naturalness and authenticity of the interpretation, valuing the marks of the language as an expressive element. Focus was on the accent and natural cadence of Northeastern Portuguese, bringing the performance closer to everyday speech, without sacrificing technical rigor.

The phonographic recording by the first author of this article, with piano accompaniment by Prof. Dr. Durval Cesetti, can be found at the link below:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-apiO9A0TC6Op0HzFtC7QNPjXivrKwBb/view?usp=sharing>

The study of the piece followed these stages:

- Stage 1** – Separation and translation of the text
- Stage 2** – Analysis of the context, subtext, diction, and declamation
- Stage 3** – Relationship between text and musical elements¹³

Matinta Perêra (Music by Waldemar Henrique; lyrics by Antonio Tavernard)

Matinta Perêra chegou na clareira e logo silvou...
No fundo do quarto Manduca Torquato de medo gelou.
Matinta quer fumo quer fumo migado, meloso, melado que dê muito sumo.
Torquato não pita, não masca nem cheira Matinta Perêra vai tê-la bonita.

Matinta Perêra de tardinha vem buscar
O tabaco que ontem à noite eu prometi.
Queira Deus ela não venha me agoirar...
Queira Deus ela não venha me agoirar... Ah!
Matinta Preta velha, mãe maluca, pé de pato
Quera Deus ela não venha me agoirar...

Matinta Perêra chegou na clareira e logo silvou...
No fundo do quarto Manduca Torquato de medo gelou.
Que noite infernal, soaram gemidos,
Resmungos, bulidos do gênio do mal
E até de manhã, bem perto da choça,
A fúnebre troça dum vesgo acaúan!
Acaúan! Acaúan!

The piece is part of the "Amazonian Legends" series, in which Henrique transforms regional myths into musical narratives, emphasizing orality, the magical nature of popular imagination, and the appreciation of

¹³ Regarding stage 3, it is important to note that the identification of musical elements occurred not only through the performance of the work, but also through analytical-musical procedures applied to it.

Amazonian culture. The figure of Matinta, a witch or sorceress who demands tobacco in exchange for silence, takes on dramatic and sonorous contours that evoke fear and respect. The legendary character is intensified by modal writing and vocal resources that require the performer to balance lyrical singing and declamation, something that Isabela Santos (2009) underlines as part of the interpretative difficulty of the repertoire.

Application of technical concepts:

The prosody of Matinta Perêra explores the narrative character of the Amazonian legend, incorporating elements of almost spoken declamation into the song. The frequent use of syncopation and ternary subdivisions creates a sense of irregularity that evokes the sudden and mysterious appearance of the character. The emphasis falls on keywords such as "medo" (fear), "fumo" (smoke), "tabaco" (tobacco), and "goirar" (to jinx), which concentrate the semantic weight of the legend and demand careful timbre from the performer, reinforcing the dramatic effect.

"Matinta Perêra chegou na clareira e logo silvou..." (Matinta Perêra arrived at the clearing and immediately hissed...) The line presents a narrative, almost declamatory rhythm. The natural accent of speech falls on "Matínta" (on the second syllable) and on "clareira" (on the second syllable), which should guide the vocal emission. The onomatopoeia "silvou" requires an expressive prolongation of the closed vowel [o], reinforcing the imitative character of the witch's hiss.

The following verse — "No fundo do quarto Manduca Torquato de medo gelou" (In the back of the room, Manduca Torquato froze with fear) — focuses its strength on the melodic cadence of the words "Torquato" and "froze," which mark the climax of the narrative tension.

The piece demands sudden contrasts in dynamics (marked as abrupt *f* and *agitato*) and a clear differentiation between the narrative and evocative passages. The singer needs to maintain firmness in the middle register and resonant low notes, since the vocal line constantly explores the mid-low region of the tessitura. Open vowels reinforce the rustic and threatening character, while nasals can be carefully articulated so as not to compromise intelligibility.

The use of *rubato* and *rallentando*, indicated in the score (e.g., measures 16 and 22), suggests expressive flexibility that can be adjusted according to the dramatic intensity of the text. The insistent repetitions of "Matinta Perêra" in the chorus function as a hypnotic and ritualistic element, favoring the use of portamenti and changes in vocal tone to intensify the supernatural aspect.

"Matinta quer fumo quer fumo migado, meloso, melado que dê muito sumo" (Matinta wants tobacco, wants crumbled tobacco, sweet, syrupy, that gives lots of juice). The emphatic repetition of "fumo" (tobacco) creates a ritualistic character, and the use of alliteration in *m* and *l* (migado, meloso, melado) reinforces the internal musicality of the text. The performer can highlight these repetitions with dynamic gradations and contrasting timbres.

The phrase "Torquato não pita, não masca nem cheira..." (Torquato doesn't smoke, chew, or sniff...) has a marked binary rhythm, with syntactic parallelisms reminiscent of popular oral formulas. Clarity of diction here is essential to maintain the narrative effect.

In the lines "Matinta Perêra de tardinha vem buscar / O tabaco que ontem à noite eu prometi" (Matinta Perêra in the late afternoon comes to fetch / The tobacco that I promised last night), the prosodic emphasis

falls on “tardinha” (late afternoon), “buscar” (to fetch), and “promet” (promised), calling for melodic expansion and the use of a dark timbre to highlight the seriousness of the threat.

The repeated plea “Queira Deus ela não venha me agoirar...” (May God grant that she does not come to bring me bad luck) can be interpreted with rubato, reinforcing the pleading tone.

“Que noite infernal, soaram gemidos, / Resmungos, bulidos do gênio do mal...” (What an infernal night, groans, grumbles, / and the rumblings of the evil genius resounded). The rhythm here is fragmented, imitating the noises described. Words like “gemidos” and “resmungos” call for clear attacks and consonantal energy.

Finally, the insistent repetition of “Acaúan!” (an ominous bird from Amazonian mythology) functions as a prosodic ostinato, ending the piece on a threatening note. It is advisable to articulate the diphthong [ã] clearly, allowing the nasality to resonate.

In short, the prosody of Matinta Perêra perfectly articulates the oral universe of Amazonian legends, combining ritualistic repetitions, expressive use of alliteration, and a strong presence of open and nasal vowels. The performer can work with the contrast between *chiaroscuro* and *scuro* timbres, exploring the phonetic richness of Brazilian Portuguese to highlight the supernatural and popular character of the song.

4. Final Considerations

The analysis undertaken throughout this article demonstrates that the relationship between Bel Canto and Brazilian song should not be understood as a clash between opposing poles—European tradition versus national identity—but as a fertile field of mediation, adaptation, and reinvention. As shown, Mário de Andrade did not condemn Italian technique itself, but rather its mechanical application, inattentive to the phonetic, rhythmic, and expressive specificities of the Portuguese language. The so-called “Canto Encasacado” thus appears as a warning against the loss of intelligibility and naturalness of the language, and not as a rejection of Bel Canto as a pedagogical and aesthetic tradition.

Recognizing that Bel Canto can, when reinterpreted, serve as a foundation for singing in Portuguese opens the way toward a hybrid vocal aesthetic: a practice that benefits from the Italian technical heritage—with its rigorous breath support, clarity of emission, and expressive richness—while at the same time valuing Brazilian identity markers such as nasality, rhythm, and orality. This synthesis not only preserves technical excellence but also strengthens the voice as an instrument of cultural affirmation.

Prosody played an absolutely central role in the preparation of the piece by Waldemar Henrique, reaffirming that clear textual structures are one of the indispensable pillars of authentic Bel Canto. By applying these principles, it became evident that the long, open vowels characteristic of Portuguese can—and should—be worked in full continuity with the *legato* vocal flow, while the consonants, function primarily as rhythmic elements providing structural support to the musical discourse.

The implications of this debate go beyond the historical or theoretical sphere. In the pedagogical field, they point to the need for vocal training programs that systematically include Brazilian repertoire, placing it on equal footing with the European canon. In performance, they highlight the importance of interpreters capable of moving between different styles and aesthetics, balancing smoothness and rusticity, tradition and

innovation. In research, they open new perspectives for interdisciplinary studies that link operatic singing, linguistics, cultural anthropology, and decolonial studies.

For those interested in the pedagogical use of Brazilian art song in vocal development, the work of Santos (2011) is particularly noteworthy. Aimed at democratizing access and facilitating the use of this repertoire as a teaching tool, the author selected forty songs by various Brazilian composers, organizing them in order of progressive difficulty. In addition, he included pedagogical suggestions for each piece, provided English translations of the texts, and produced an edition of the scores that presents, directly below each word, a transcription in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) — an essential resource for singers unfamiliar with Brazilian Portuguese pronunciation.

Thus, far from being an obstacle, Bel Canto can become a bridge: a resource that, while preserving the heritage of the Italian school, creates space for the construction of a genuinely Brazilian vocal aesthetic. Ultimately, this means understanding singing not merely as technique but as a space of cultural dialogue and identity affirmation—a space where tradition and *brasilidade* meet in dynamic and constant interplay.

5. Data Availability Statement

The entire dataset generated or analyzed during this study is included in the published article.

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