



## An Analysis of the Pianistic Writing in the Song *Ou Isto ou Aquilo* by Ernst Mahle

MODALIDADE: COMUNICAÇÃO

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**Abstract:** The main objective of this paper is to present partial results of an ongoing doctoral research through an analysis of the pianistic writing in the song *Ou isto ou aquilo* by Brazilian composer Ernst Mahle (1929) with poem by Cecília Meireles (1901-1964). The analysis process is based on Stein and Spillman (1996), Straus (1990), and Kostka (2006), and focuses on the interaction of text, music, and interpretative aspects. Final results show ways of interaction between music and text and also offer subsidies for a performance of the song. Supported by FAPESP.

**Keywords:** Brazilian music. Brazilian chamber song. Analysis and performance. Literature and music. Ernst Mahle.

### **Uma análise da escrita pianística na canção *Ou isto ou aquilo* de Ernst Mahle**

**Resumo:** O principal objetivo desta comunicação é apresentar resultados parciais de uma pesquisa de doutorado em andamento através de uma análise da escrita pianística na canção *Ou isto ou aquilo* do compositor brasileiro Ernst Mahle (1929) com poema de Cecília Meireles (1901-1964). A análise é baseada em Stein e Spillman (1996), Straus (1990), e Kostka (2006), e tem como foco a interação texto, música e aspectos interpretativos. Resultados finais mostram maneiras de interação entre música e texto e também oferecem subsídios para uma performance da canção. Financiamento FAPESP.

**Palavras-chave:** Música brasileira. Canção de câmara brasileira. Análise e performance. Literatura e música. Ernst Mahle.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper is part of an ongoing doctoral research, whose main objective is to investigate the pianistic writing in the songs for voice and piano with profane text by Brazilian composer Ernst Mahle. Mahle was born in Stuttgart, Alemanha, in 1929, and has been in Brazil since 1951, a Brazilian citizen since 1962. His vast work covers more than two thousand compositions, including original pieces and arrangements, especially on themes and folk melodies from different countries, most of them with pedagogical intention. There are twenty-six songs for voice and piano with Portuguese-language texts by various writers, including Portuguese Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) and other important Brazilian writers, such as Cecília Meireles (1901-1964), Mário Quintana (1906-1994), Carlos Drummond de



Andrade (1902-1987), Manuel Bandeira (1886-1968), Vinicius de Moraes (1913-1980), Ribeiro Couto (1898-1963), and Guilherme de Almeida (1890-1969). Mahle has been writing songs since 1962, with the most recent song dated 2012. Then, the analysis of the songs can reveal significant musical aspects in his unique musical language.

## 2. Objective and method of analysis

The main objective of this communication is to present partial results of an ongoing doctoral research through an analysis of the song *Ou isto ou aquilo* (“Or This or That”). Portuguese words in this paper were translated to English in a free way by these authors.

The process of analysis is based on Stein and Spillman (1996), whose model proposed for the analysis of *Lieder* focuses on the interaction of text, music, and interpretative aspects. The musical analysis is based on Straus (1990) and also includes terms and concepts by Kostka (2006). Due to the nature of this work, this analysis focuses only on aspects more relevant and significant in the musical structure, especially in the piano part. The main objective is to understand how the music responds to the poem, not only in a superficial way, but also in a deeper one, which can reveal the study of symbols and images used by the poet, also searching references in folklore, mythology, and other sources that offer subsidies for a more profound analysis and, consequently, a richer and more creative performance of the song. The final objective of the doctoral research is to recombine the data resulting from the analyses in order to substantiate a final performance of the songs, which will be registered in an audio CD, attached to the final thesis.

## 3. The song

The song *Ou isto ou aquilo* sets a homonymous poem by Brazilian poet Cecília Meireles (1901-1964). The first version of the song was written for quartet (soprano, flute, oboe, piano), as part of the collection *Três peças*, dated 1970. The version selected for this analysis was written for high voice and piano, dated 1982. The original poem is presented below, followed by an English translation.

### *Ou isto ou aquilo*

*Ou se tem chuva e não se tem sol,  
ou se tem sol e não se tem chuva!*

*Ou se calça a luva e não se põe o anel,*

### **Or this or that**

Or there is rain and there is no sun,  
or there is sun and there is no rain!

Or one puts the gloves and does not put the ring,



<i>ou se põe o anel e não se calça luva!</i>	or one puts the ring and does not put the gloves!
<i>Quem sobre nos ares não fica no chão, quem fica no chão não sobe nos ares.</i>	Who goes up in the air does not stay on the ground, who stays on the ground does not go up in the air.
<i>É uma grande pena que não se possa estar ao mesmo tempo nos dois lugares!</i>	It is a pity that one cannot be in the same place at the same time!
<i>Ou guardo o dinheiro e não compro o doce, ou compro o doce e gasto o dinheiro.</i>	Or I keep the money or I buy the candy, or I buy the candy and I spend the money.
<i>Ou isto ou aquilo: ou isto ou aquilo... e vivo escolhendo o dia inteiro!</i>	Or this or that: or this or that... and I am always choosing all day!
<i>Não sei se brinco, não sei se estudo, se saio correndo ou fico tranqüilo.</i>	I do not know if I play, I do not know if I study, if I run or I keep quiet.
<i>Mas não consegui entender ainda qual é melhor: se é isto ou aquilo.</i>	But I have not yet understood what is better: if this or that.

In the poem, Cecília describes dualities of things and speaks about her indecision to choice things. In the four initial stanzas, the poet describes things, speaking in the third person. From the fifth stanza on, the poet speaks in the first person, in a more introspective way, expressing inner conflicts that can represent her yearning for something unrevealed and even unapproachable. The last stanza suggests that the poet's inner conflicts remain even after the song closure.

In his setting of the poem, Mahle also emphasizes the dualities of things suggests the *persona's* feelings of indecision and hesitation. Lack of clear referential centers and constant changes of dynamics, meter, register, and pitch collections contribute to create a context of imprecision and vagueness.

The song can be divided into three main sections: section I (measures 1-23), including a long piano introduction from measure 1 to measure 12; section II (measures 24-39); and section III (measures 40-68). The formal structure emphasizes the poetic progression: in section I the *persona* describes things in the third person; in section II the *persona* is still in the third person, but begins to speak in a more symbolic way (“ares” / “air” and “chão” / “ground”); in section III, the *persona* begins to speak in the first person, emphasizing inner conflicts. Phrase structure is clear, despite the absence of traditional cadential approaches: phrase endings are mainly produced by reduced rhythmic activity in both the vocal line and piano part.

The music is centric, but centricity is not established by traditional ways. In general, referential centers are suggested by pedal points, reiteration, formal placement, arpeggiation, register, and durations. This procedure is called by Kostka (2006, p. 102) as

“tonic by assertion”. Example 1 shows the last measures of the piano introduction, measures 8-12, where it is possible to see the suggestion of a center on G by reiteration, formal placement, pedal points, register, and arpeggiation. There is also a brief emphasis on D in measure 10, recalling the dominant of G. In measure 10, the 5th-leap from D to G strengthens the center on G.

Example 1: Mahler, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, measures 8-12, center on G.

The piano introduction also presents the most predominant pitch collection of the song. Example 2 shows part of the piano introduction, measures 1-3, which is built on the pentatonic collection, the pentachord 02479. The interval-class vector of the pentatonic collection is 032140 and its subsets are (024), (025), (027), (037), (0247), (0358), and (0257). According to Kostka (2006, p. 23), due to the absence of semitones and tritones, any member of the pentatonic collection can be felt as a referential center and the result is an impression of fluctuation and vagueness, which can be directly related to the *persona's* inner feelings of indecision and hesitation.

Example 2: Mahler, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, measures 1-3, the initial pentatonic collection.

Example 3 shows measures 31-34, where it is possible to see instances of the tetrachord (0247) in measures 31 and 32. The impression of vagueness is also emphasized by a soft dynamic.

Example 3: Mahler, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, measures 31-34, subset (0247).

Other two recurring motives are the tetrachord (0347), in the vocal line, and the trichord (014), in the piano part, as shown in Example 4. Both of them produce awkward moments to depict the dualities of things: the figure of the vocal line recalls a minor-major triad emphasizing G, while the figure in the piano part recalls a fragment of a minor scale emphasizing D. This chromaticism also foreshadows the *persona's* inner conflicts.

Example 4: Mahler, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, measures 13-16, other motives.

The meter is varied. The song begins on 6/8, but 2/4, 3/4, and 9/8 also appear creating musical and dramatic instability. The first rhythm figure presented in the piano part (dotted-eighth-note+sixteenth-note+eighth-note) is a recurring rhythmic cell in the ternary subdivisions: it helps push the singer ahead within the pentatonic context. Example 5 shows measures 55-57: in the left-hand of measures 55-56, the rhythmic cell helps create motion to the pentatonic collection; in the left-hand of measure 57, it helps create motion to the octatonic collection.



55  
brin - co não sei se es - tu - do se sa - io cor - ren - do ou fi - co tran -

Example 5: Mahle, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, measures 55-57, main rhythmic cell.

A gentle melody is presented by the vocal line. The contour is predominantly disjunct, but the intervals are small (the largest interval is a perfect fifth). There are many repeated notes, but they are balanced within a rising and falling motion. The higher pitch of the vocal line emphasizes the word “[o dia] inteiro” (“the whole [day]”), measure 52, which is accompanied by an expansion of register in the piano part. There is also another dramatic moment in the vocal line, in measures 58-59, when an upward tritone emphasizes the word



58  
qui - lo *rit.* *dim.* *P* Mas não con - se -

Example 6: Mahle, *Ou isto ou aquilo*, measures 58-61, higher register in the piano part. “[fico] tranquilo” (“[be] calm”), which is shown in the next Example 6.

The piano part is mainly characterized by chords, figurations, and discrete doublings of the vocal line. The piano part is higher than the vocal line in measures 35-37 (“nos ares” / “in the air”), measures 52-53 (“[o dia] inteiro” / “the whole [day]”), and measures 58-59 (“[fico] tranquilo” / “[be] calm”), which can be seen in the previous Example 6. The persona's moments of yearning is emphasized by a higher register in the piano part.



There are many indications of dynamics throughout the song, going from *pp* to *f*. Indications of *pp* emphasize the most introspective moment, when the *persona* sings repetitions of “nos ares” (“in the air”) e “no chão” (“on the ground”), measures 31 and 35. At this point, there is a feeling that the *persona* goes somewhere far away. Indications of *f* produce contrasting moments in the vocal line, emphasizing the dualities of things described by the *persona* in measures 13, 18, 24, and 45, which can represent the idea of two things or two thoughts. It is also suggested in the piano introduction, where indications of *f* appear creating contrasts. In Example 2, shown previously, it is possible to see the contrast of dynamics at the beginning of the piano introduction.

### Conclusion

This analysis shows different possibilities of interaction between text and music and offers subsidies for a performance of the song as well. Poetic dualities and implied feelings of yearning and vagueness are suggested in music by pentatonic and octatonic collections, which are also emphasized by expansions of durations, register, pitch ranges, and dynamics. Changes of meter and imprecise referential centers produce moments of instability that can be related to the poetic requisites of indecision, imprecision, and vagueness. It also contributes to the listener's disorientation, feeling that can directly related to the *persona's* inner conflicts suggested in the poem. The piano part has an important role in this musical setting. It not only helps push the singer ahead within the pentatonic context, but also contributes to suggest the *persona's* different states of mind throughout the song. Moments of reality in the external world are suggested by middle register and dynamics. Moments of introspection and yearning are suggested by expansions of register and changes of dynamics. The quasi tonal sonority produced by the predominance of a triadic texture can represent the *persona's* moments of reality. However, a more dissonant sonority (including an octatonic collection and many semitones and tritones) can represent the *persona's* moment of inner conflicts and yearning for something unrevealed and even inaccessible.

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