

Daniel Afonso Interview 10/15/14

**G:** Hi Daniel, please tell me a bit about your background as a musician?

**D:** I started my musical life basically as a church musician. I grew up in Brazil. My family was Christian and went to a Baptist church, even though back in that day and even until today a majority of Brazilians would call themselves Catholic, but there are many Protestants as well.

I fell in love with piano, flute, and then I started singing more. I played piano at church and when I was 14-15 years old, my friends wanted to have a youth band, it was basically a choral group and mostly vocal ensemble. Since I played the piano, I formed the group and this was the beginning of my life as a conductor. We didn't have a lot of repertoire at first, and they were more interested in small ensemble music. As the leader of the group I started writing arrangements specifically for the group to sing at church. This is how I started composing, although I didn't really think of myself as a composer at the time, just the one who could write the stuff down. It was a very prolific experience because the group sang a lot and I was arranging music for them every other week. I was still in high school at the time so my theory knowledge was limited. I always loved singing, conducting, and composing but I never considered music as a career until college.

When I first went to college I actually didn't want to go for music. I loved languages and wanted to major in French to work as a translator or interpreter. Half way in to my second year I decided to double major in French and Music Education. And this was the beginning of the end for the French major. I fell in love with Music Education and immersed myself in my studies. You know how people feel like an odd duck until you find other ducks? I felt like that until I found like-minded people at the university's music school.

At this time I started to conduct community and church choirs in Rio, but it was still my own group that earned me notoriety and made people notice what I was doing. I basically had a writing lab that I could go and experiment with at rehearsal every week. If something didn't work I could change it right there. By the second or third year we were singing some traditional choral music repertoire, Brazilian folk music arranged for choir, some simple Renaissance music, etc. It was at this time that I fell in love with conducting and choirs.

One thing that is common in Brazil, as is in some other countries like Japan and Germany, is when certain organizations start a choir for their employees as a program for leisure and to relieve stress from work. I conducted several of these *coros de empresa* ("enterprise choirs") around Rio through foundations and other organizations.

During college in Rio I went to study choral conducting at a private conservatory. I ended up finishing college and my choral conducting diploma at the same time. My focus at this time was not as much as a composer but as a conductor. However, in graduate school I wrote a couple of pieces while working on conducting degrees. During my time at the University of Iowa, while working on my doctorate, I didn't write much. But after I finished and got this job here in California and had my own choirs again, I had a new motivation and started to write for them. So for the last 15 years I've been writing mostly for my university ensembles, plus getting commissions from time to time.

My current position is director of choral and vocal studies at CSU Stanislaus. This is my 16<sup>th</sup> year, I started in 1999. I also, conduct the Modesto Symphony Orchestra Chorus. I'm currently preparing the MSO Chorus for 2 holiday programs, and a holiday program with the University choirs. My work at the university is always very rewarding and inspiring, as I get to see the students grow musically, learn to deal with nerves, and "develop" as young musicians. It's exciting to see them evolve and grow, become stronger over the time spent at the university.

**G:** So how did you get involved with the Choral Artists specifically?

During my first year in California I got an email from Choral Artists asking for my date of birth to put in the program (they were performing one of my pieces, *Na Bahia Tem*). I wrote back with the info and asked the person to thank the conductor for programming my piece. Then Magen or someone from the choir called out of the blue and asked if I wanted to attend a performance (and offered me some comp tickets), so I went to one in Berkeley. This is where I met Magen for the first time.

When I met Magen, she was so kind and enthusiastic, and we have kept in touch over the years since. Magen was one of the first to really welcome me to California, and as Composer in Residence for SFCA it feels like things have come full circle now more than 15 years later.

**G:** What can you tell me about the piece you are currently writing for SFCA to premiere at the upcoming Holiday concerts *Postcards From Abroad*.

**D:** The piece I'm writing is basically inspired by a folk tradition of the north east part of the country where my family is from. I was born in the northeastern part of Brazil but when I was 2 my family came to Rio. The North East region of Brazil is very dear to me, and I really like folk music from there. The music can be very modal and is often full of very interesting rhythms, probably due to the African influence. A majority of the African slaves who came to Brazil would enter the country through that region, so the African tradition there is rich and everywhere (music, dance, food, religion, etc). That area was also populated by a variety of ethnic groups (native Indians, Portuguese, French, Dutch...), so the music and the arts in general in the area are rich and diverse.

*A Nossa Lapinha* is based on a traditional song performed in a folk celebration that happens in Brazil in early January, at midnight on Epiphany—which in Brazil is called “Dia dos Reis” (or “Day of the Kings”). This folk celebration is known as “Queima da Lapinha” (“Burning of the Lapinha”).

Although the word “lapa” (lapinha is a “small lapa”) translates literally as “cave, grotto, cavern,” it’s used here to represent the nativity scene. So, during this festivity, people disassemble the nativity scenes that have been placed at homes, churches, and other public places for the Christmas season and remove all figures that represent the characters. Then they take everything that was used to decorate the manger (flowers, leaves, straw, etc) to be burned. “Queima” means “burning;” thus “the burning of the nativity scene”.

Some people believe that the things used to decorate the manger are holy and should not be used for anything else after that—some even believe that if they don’t burn these things, the owner of the nativity set will have bad luck during the New Year. So, to avoid “bad luck,” they burn everything.

The emotional character of the song is a mix of sadness (because it represents the end of the Christmas season and all its celebrations) and hope (that by respecting the holiness of the scene, the faithful will have a good/blessed new year).

I first heard this melody when I was in middle school (hmmm... let’s say “a few years ago”). I went to a holiday celebration and heard a children’s choir perform it. For some strange reason, it stayed in my head all these years and I always wanted to write my own arrangement of the song. I wrote a very simple and introspective piece as an invitation to listen, meditate, and think about the new things that you want for the coming year.