

Jobim, Chopin, and the Qualities of Bossa Nova

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project is twofold. First, in this project, I endeavor to determine specific elements of Frederic Chopin's widely recognized musical influence on Antonio Jobim by constructing and comparing analyses of two of their respective works, "Prelude in E Minor" and "Insensatez." Second, using these analyses as a groundwork, I intend to directly synthesize my own bossa nova composition from Chopin's prelude to demonstrate the similarity of Chopin's prelude and Jobim's bossa nova song and the influence of Chopin on Jobim.

Introduction:

In all cultures, music changes over time. In Western culture, the music created today, classical or popular, sounds vastly different from the music of composers from past centuries, such as Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin. However, the works of many composers throughout history, even those from contrasting times and places, have definite similarities, and some composers have been greatly influenced by those who preceded them. One such instance of this is the influence of the Polish Romantic composer Frederic Chopin, who lived from 1810 to 1849, on the Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, who lived from 1927 until the year 1994. Jobim himself admitted that he was greatly influenced by Chopin,¹ despite the facts that Jobim was born nearly eighty years after the death of Chopin and that he lived on an entirely different continent than Chopin. When one listens to certain compositions by the two composers, one may not recognize the influence immediately, but the influence can be clearly seen in the comparison of Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor," opus 28, number 4, with Jobim's bossa nova song

¹ Suzel Reily. "Tom Jobim and the Bossa Nova Era." In *Non-Western Popular Music*, edited by Tom Langlois, 473-487. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011.

“Insensatez.” According to Irna Priore and Chris Stover², among many others, Jobim loosely based “Insensatez” on this particular prelude by Chopin. Nevertheless, the two works are markedly different in style and evoke a different rhythmic, harmonic, and, ultimately, emotional response. What is the main source of similarity between Jobim’s “Insensatez” and Chopin’s prelude, and what is the main source of difference? Moreover, what musical qualities must be changed to directly synthesize a bossa nova song, like “Insensatez,” from Chopin’s prelude?

Background/Related Work:

The influence of Chopin on Jobim has been widely recognized for many years. I first heard of this influence when I was a child, in a conversation with my father (who was born in Brazil). Later, when I wished to investigate this influence further, my mentor, Dr. Paul Humphreys, spoke of the significant similarity between Chopin’s “Prelude in E minor” and one of Jobim’s works (“Insensatez”). This influence of Chopin on Jobim is confirmed by several scholars.

For example, in her essay “Tom Jobim and the Bossa Nova Era,” Dr. Suzel Reily states, “It was through Kollreuter [Jobim’s piano teacher] that Tom Jobim first encountered Chopin and the Impressionists, whom he considered major influences upon his music. Indeed, he claimed that ‘The One Note Samba’ was inspired by Chopin’s ‘Prelude in D-flat,’ but the affinity

² Irna Priore and Chris Stover. “The Subversive Song of Bossa Nova: Tom Jobim in the Era of Censorship.”

In *Analytical Approaches to World Music Journal*, 3, no. 2 (2014).

http://www.aawmjournals.com/articles/2014b/Priore_Stover_AAWM_Vol_3_2.pdf.

between another of Chopin's Preludes - the 'Prelude in E Minor' - and one of his well-known songs - 'Insensatez' (How Insensitive) - is far more evident."³

According to Dr. Reily, among others, Jobim himself recognized the influence of Chopin on his music in general, and he based at least two of his works on works of Chopin.

Chopin's "Prelude in E minor" is harmonically atypical for its time, it features transitional tones which facilitate the smooth harmonic flow from one chord to another in a non-traditional progression. Several harmonic (chordal) analyses of this prelude exist. One such analysis which is particularly useful to my project in its detail and insight is an online analysis by José Rodríguez Alvira.⁴ In his description of Chopin's prelude, Alvira describes the function of the chords in the overarching key of the piece, and points out certain harmonic idioms which are also found in some of Jobim's works. David Damschroder also gives a useful analysis of Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor" in his book *Harmony in Chopin*.⁵

Because it is from the non-classical, jazz-like genre of bossa nova, Jobim's "Insensatez" has not been analyzed in the same manner or to the same degree as Chopin's "Prelude in E minor." However, there are several sources which contain useful observations about "Insensatez" and provide grounds on which one can construct an analysis. Several such observations regarding the overall structure and harmonic qualities of the song "Insensatez" are found in the

³ Suzel Ana Reily "Tom Jobim and the Bossa Nova Era." In *Non-Western Popular Music*, edited by Tom Langlois, 473-487. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011, 481.

⁴ José Rodríguez Alvira, "Harmonic Analysis of Chopin's Prelude #4," teoria.com.

⁵ David Damschroder, *Harmony in Chopin*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

online article “The Subversive Song of Bossa Nova: Tom Jobim in the Era of Censorship”⁶ by Irna Priore and Chris Stover.

Additionally, a non-traditional, graphical variety of musical analysis, which will be useful in my consideration and comparison of “Insensatez” and “Prelude in E minor,” is Dr. Roy Travis’ analysis of Chopin’s “Prelude in E Minor.”⁷ This analysis, which was given to me by my mentor, highlights the most important and fundamental components of the prelude, showing the melodic lines and resolutions of the different tones and voices in the piece.

Methods:

My research project will consist of two main parts: an analytic investigation of the relationship between Chopin’s “Prelude in E Minor” and Jobim’s “Insensatez”, and a creative synthesis of a bossa nova composition directly from Chopin’s “Prelude in E Minor.”

For my analysis, I will combine the existent analyses of Alvira, Travis, and Damschroder to form a composite harmonic description of Chopin’s “Prelude in E Minor.” I will then compare this combined analysis to an analysis of Jobim’s “Insensatez,” which I will construct from the basic score of “Insensatez” (found in *The Real Book, 6th Edition*⁸), basing my analysis on the procedures found in *Tonal Harmony: with an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music*⁹ and the

⁶ Irna Priore and Chris Stover, “The Subversive Song of Bossa Nova: Tom Jobim in the Era of Censorship,” in *Analytical Approaches to World Music Journal*, 3, no. 2 (2014).

⁷ Dr. Roy Travis, Graphical analysis of Chopin’s Prelude in E Minor. Unpublished, 1985.

⁸ *The Real Book, 6th Edition*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp., 2004.

⁹ Stefan Kostka, Dorothy Payne, and Byron Almén. *Tonal Harmony: with an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013.

aforementioned information in “The Subversive Song of Bossa Nova: Tom Jobim in the Era of Censorship”¹⁰ and “Tom Jobim and the Bossa Nova Era.”¹¹ After this initial analysis, I will work to develop a more complete and cohesive understanding of the melodic and harmonic processes in “Insensatez” by tracing a linear-structural graph of the piece (like Dr. Travis’ analysis of Chopin’s prelude).

From the analyses of Chopin’s prelude and Jobim’s song and their subsequent comparison, I will determine specific elements of the influence of Chopin on Jobim. I will then exhibit this influence of Chopin on Jobim and the shared qualities between Chopin’s prelude and Jobim’s song, by composing my own synthetic bossa nova song directly from Chopin’s “Prelude in E Minor.” Using the overall harmony and structure of Chopin’s prelude, I will alter as few elements of the prelude as possible, transforming the prelude into a bossa nova composition.

Expected Results:

Through my analysis, I will demonstrate that Jobim was significantly influenced by Chopin on a harmonic level, perhaps even more than most people realize. I will display this influence by showing, through my own synthetic composition, that one can change a Chopin prelude into a bossa nova song by simply altering a few qualities of the prelude. I will show that Chopin’s prelude and Jobim’s “Insensatez” are extremely similar harmonically, and that the main difference between the two works is not found in the chords of each work, but in the presentation of the chords and the rhythm of the compositions.

¹⁰ Irna Priore and Chris Stover, “The Subversive Song of Bossa Nova: Tom Jobim in the Era of Censorship.”

¹¹ Suzel Ana Reily “Tom Jobim and the Bossa Nova Era.”

I plan to present my findings and my synthetic composition at the 2019 or 2020 undergraduate Research Symposium and Arts Showcase, and, finally, present this research as my capstone project and thesis for the Honors Program.

Conclusion:

Music has changed greatly over time, but there are definite similarities between many works, even works from different genres, and numerous composers have been greatly influenced by those who preceded them. To demonstrate a particular example of this, the recognized influence of Chopin on Jobim, I will show that the compositions of Jobim and Chopin are more related than people realize by constructing a comparative analysis of Jobim's "Insensatez" and Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor." Finally, basing my work on my completed comparative analysis, I will synthesize a bossa nova composition directly from Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor."

References:

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Budget:

For my project, which I plan to engage largely during a month of the summer of 2018 or 2019, I will need the following funds:

- \$1600 for housing in Los Angeles for one month, during my research
- \$600 for food during that month
- \$150 for the purchase of any necessary materials (such as paper for the analyses) and for any unforeseen costs.

The total cost for this project is \$1350.