Rafael Carvalho on keeping your own culture alive

June 16, 2017 - Rafael Carvalho is a musician born and raised on the island of São Miguel in the Azores. He is considered the living standard bearer of the viola da terra, a small stringed instrument that is native to the Azores islands. He has recorded several albums of traditional and original music for the viola da terra and is one of the first people to develop a teachable curriculum for the instrument.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2014 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Process, Inspiration, Independence.

It's very rare to be known as being the living standard bearer for a specific instrument, to be considered the best in the world. How did your relationship with your particular instrument, the viola da terra, begin?

It started when I was a kid. I am from Ribeira Quente, a small village here in São Miguel. Lots of fishermen and farmers. I always liked music and my father played the classical guitar when I was small. He only knew how to play four or five chords, so that's what I learned when I was a kid. In 1993 some people in my little village formed a folk group and they needed someone to play with them, so I went to classes to learn. There is a tradition in the villages at Christmas where a group of musicians bring the baby Jesus from house to house and play songs. I think that was the first time I saw the viola da terra. My professor was Carlos Quental and I learned from him for about five or six months. Then he got sick so I had to try and learn little bits on my own. That's how I started to learn about the instrument. My teacher had a great passion. He would always like to explain better the context of the instrument more than just how you play it. He explained the viola's social function in the islands. It was the instrument that brought people together.

When we think about a century ago, people who worked the land had difficult lives in the Azores. Sometimes with very bad weather the harvests would go away and the sea and the wind would catch you in the waves. The people would stay together and normally we'd sing, we'd play, and we'd dance, but if there was no viola there would not be anything, no celebration. It was a very important instrument for socialization. So, if you have a party, you have to have the viola. Also, dances were the only time that boys and girls were allowed to really be together. I've been told that the musicians played an important part in the villages, everyone would wait for them to show up and play. That was the context as my teacher explained it to me.

So I started playing the viola da terra when I was 13. I immediately had a passion for the instrument. After that I started to play in a group and with my friends. I had to start teaching and giving other people music lessons when I was 15 or 16. Not because I knew so much, I just knew more than the others. I've been playing and teaching the viola da terra for the past twenty years.

Where are these instruments made?

Mine was made in São Jorge Island in the Azores. All the islands used to have at least one or two people that could make the instruments, but it's a skill that kind of became lost over time. As people immigrated to other places, there was no one left to make the instruments or teach people how to play them. Young people weren't interested. Most of the violas were coming from the mainland. There were factories that could make them faster. Getting a true viola da terra that was handmade by an artist would be more expensive.

Nowadays we have more builders on the islands and they are trying to build not only with different tools to get better sound, but they also have access to better kinds of wood. The instruments are better. The one I have with

me now was built in São Jorge Island. When I travel to other places I am like an ambassador for the viola da terra. I want people to see a good instrument, the best of its kind.

Where do the two hearts on the viola come from?

So the original name for the instrument is simply viola, that how we referred to them all over the country. Even different kind of violas, from different regions, were all just called viola. Eventually people start to specialize them, so you would know immediately what kind of viola it was, and from what region, based on how it looked. So this one is called the viola da terra. “Da Terra” is the land—viola from the land. That’s the common name. The other name is Viola dos Dois Corações, the two hearts. That’s because it famously has two hearts on the front. Viola dos Dois Corações—two hearts viola.

Because so many people left here and immigrated to other places, you have the two hearts—the heart that stays and the heart that went away. Nowadays if people decide to move away you still see them online, you see their pictures on Facebook, you can Skype with them or do a livestream. Most people don’t understand that a hundred years ago, if someone got on a boat to go to America or Canada, they almost certainly never saw their families again. Even if they could write letters, sometimes it would take a year to get here. So, you have the heart that stayed and the heart that went away, so our families are always connected to something.

You write and perform original music for the viola da terra, but you also play and record a lot of traditional Azorean music as well. Do you feel a responsibility to keep this music alive?

What I try to do—I’m not saying that I always achieve it—is to make a bridge between the past and the present. When I recorded my first CD in 2012, I recorded five traditional pieces of music, but also five original bits of music of my own. We have to show a little bit of what the instrument was, but also what it still is, what it still can be. So yes, it’s kind of a mission. It’s important to feel creatively connected to where you are from, to your history. It is a gift to share that with other people.

You are also working to create a teachable curriculum the viola da terra, which will enable people to learn it and play it throughout the world.

Yes, I teach both private lessons and at a music conservatory here in São Miguel. We are developing a curriculum that can be adopted and taught in other places. It doesn’t happen every day, but at least once a month I’ll get a message from someone in the world, something like: “I am a professional musician in France, can you send me some of your books of music so I can play these pieces?” We want to make sure people can understand the music, that there is sheet music that they know how to read. It feels good to put that out in the world, otherwise the music could easily have been lost. I also have my students, ages ranging from little kids up to my oldest, who is 83. It’s a pleasure to teach and explore an instrument that is connected to my life story and the story of the islands.

How do you approach writing new music for the viola da terra?

What I first wanted was just to learn and try to be like the others. And then when I started to have maturity in my performance style people told me, “No, you will never be able to play like our old records.” People like Miguel Pimentel, who is in his 70s now. I wanted to play like my teacher, Carlos Quental, and people would say, “You’ll never be like Carlos Quental because he has his own identity, you have to look for your own thing, your own songs.” That was like opening my eyes. So the first thing I did was just play traditional music and then try to do my own variations, like adding a different melody. After I was 25 or 26, I started to try and explore a little more of the instrument. In São Miguel and Santa Maria Islands we typically only play with the thumb. People have always tried to tell me, “Why don’t you play it like the classical guitar… Why don’t you try exploring?” So that’s what I do. It’s important to preserve the old music, but if you do not also create new music then the instrument is no longer alive. You want it to live, to keep living.

You’ve performed all over the world, do you enjoy playing in front of people?

Oh yes, very much. I always feel some tension, of course, some anxiety. The first concerts that I played were with the folkloric group I played with, back when I was 13. The first time I was really nervous, I almost fainted because I had to play the solos and I had only been learning viola for a few weeks. You get used to it. Now I play in front of audiences alone with my viola, or with one or two other musicians, and you never know, it maybe be 30 people it may be 500 people. In the beginning it caused me a lot of stress, but nowadays if I have a month where I don't have some sort of concert I really miss the stage. When I was younger I didn't need that, but now I do. I miss the stage, and I miss the adrenaline.

I really like to go in front of people and play the instrument. I talk to the audience like we are talking here. I play two or three songs and I explain a little bit about what they mean, where they come from. I feel like I need to do this—to present these songs to an audience—or else I feel like I'm frozen in time. And then sometimes things are not flowing or even you start to get tired, depressed with the stress of life, and when I go on stage and that all disappears. I can be giving classes all day and then if I have a concert at night I still complete the entire rehearsal and go home. Getting to be on stage gives me the motivation. I enjoy the normal work of teaching, but it's also really hard to teach every day, to work with a six year-old student and have them repeat, repeat, repeat. You start to get a little tired. I need the live concerts, it keeps me living.

"Five videos that can give people people knowledge of the viola da terra" by Rafael Carvalho:

Rafael Carvalho - Origens. (origins) This is one of my own compositions: The technique is playing only with the thumb, which is a common technique is common of São Miguel and Santa Maria.

Manuel Canarinho (Violin) and José Canarinho (Viola da Terra): Pico island. This is the technique of Pico and Faial Island. The Viola does the rhythm and not the melody. This is spectacular!!!

Group of musicians from São Jorge Island. They are recreating a traditional dance. The viola is at the middle of the dance. This is a recreation but it something still common on those islands. Also the technique is a mix of melody played with the index finger. Other musicians are doing the chords.

José João Mendonça. Graciosa island. This is a very difficult technique, combining the melody with the index finger and doing the "bass" with the thumb. This technique is common in Terceira, Graciosa, São Jorge Island.

At my hometown. Ribeira Quente. Playing a "desgarrada" with Idalina Leite. This is an example of a tradition where people just sing what goes on in their souls. She has them memorized, but sometimes she changes the subject, and uses some memorized phrases and creates some of her own. This is a tradition that still exists, a lot of people just sing for hours improvising each phrase.

Name
Rafael Carvalho

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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