

13. OLGA PRAGUER COELHO, BRAZILIAN FOLKSONG  
AMBASSADRESS, 1928-1943

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**Abstract:** At the end of the 1920s, a novelty from the *carioca* guitar scene echoed in the main Brazilian cities: young ladies from society dedicated themselves to the guitar, performing in public a folksong repertoire. Among all the artists who dedicated themselves to the interpretation of songs, Olga Pragner Coelho stood out for the mastery with which she blended her voice with the guitar. In the 30s she embarked on an international career, which first began in Argentina where she had much success. Olga then toured extensively in the Americas, Europe, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. Her art was known for its fastidious repertoire selection and, also, for the expertise with which she mastered voice and guitar in instrumental arrangements of great virtuosity.

**Keywords:** Olga Pragner Coelho, folksong, Brazilian guitar, Getúlio Vargas, Brazilian history.

OLGA PRAGUER COELHO, EMBAJADORA BRASILEÑA DE LA  
CANCIÓN POPULAR, 1928-1943

**Resumen:** *A finales de la década de 1920, una novedad del panorama guitarrístico carioca resonó en las principales ciudades brasileñas: jóvenes de la alta sociedad se dedicaban a tocar la guitarra, interpretando en público un repertorio de canciones populares. Entre todas las artistas que se consagraron a la interpretación de canciones, Olga Pragner Coelho se destacó por la maestría con la que*

*fusionó su voz con el instrumento. En los años treinta emprendió una carrera internacional que comenzó en Argentina, donde tuvo mucho éxito. Luego, Olga realizó numerosas giras por América, Europa, Nueva Zelanda, Australia y Sudáfrica. Su arte se caracterizó por una cuidada selección de repertorio y por la maestría con la que dominaba la voz y la guitarra en arreglos instrumentales de gran virtuosismo.*

**Palabras clave:** Olga Pragner Coelho, canción popular, guitarra brasileña, Getúlio Vargas, historia de Brasil.

The Brazilian government established precedent when declaring Olga Coelho a duly authorized exponent as its best in folk music. She has made two trans-Atlantic flights on her concert tours and is now winning North American hearts as she interprets South America's soul ("Olga Coelho to sing for aid to France", *Winter Park Topics*, February 1, 1946, no. 5: 6).

## INTRODUCTION

For fun and with no intention of being artistic, thus began one of the most coherent careers in Brazilian music, according to Olga Pragner Coelho, a trajectory that, analyzed over time, was no accident. Olga was born in 1909 and lived her youth in Amazonas and later in Salvador, moving to Rio de Janeiro in the early 1920s. It was in that city that she had her first contact with the guitar: "I started playing the guitar because I saw Gilda Rabello studying with Patrício Teixeira, who taught girls from all society; it suddenly became fashionable. Daddy said: no way! But he learned and nobody knew" (personal statement).<sup>1</sup> Her musical training, however, was not limited to

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Coelho passed away in 2008. I had the chance to visit her a few times and register her testimony. On May 20, 2002, I acted as interviewer, together with researchers Hermínio Belo de Carvalho, Luiz Otávio Braga, Jodacil Damaceno and Helena Soledade, at the testimony granted by Olga to the Museu da Imagem e do Som (Sound and Image Museum) in Rio de Janeiro.

the guitar: Olga studied piano for about eight years. In an interview to the São Paulo newspaper *Diário da Noite* she spoke about the beginning of her studies.<sup>2</sup> In this same period, she enrolled at the Music Conservatory, where she obtained a degree in theory and solfeggio and took classes with the composer Lorenzo Fernandez. Afterwards she became a student at the Instituto Nacional de Música, graduating in singing.

The early 1920s were marked by the emergence of the radio, which provided rapid and widespread diffusion of Brazilian popular music. In advertisements published almost daily in Rio de Janeiro newspapers, Rádio Clube (Radio Club) listed not only the program's details, but also kept in touch with the public, informing them, for example, that concerts and operas performed in the Municipal Theater would be broadcast through the loudspeakers installed at its headquarters (3<sup>rd</sup> floor of O Globo) and at Cinema Rialto. The transmissions became more varied with the regular participation of musicians from the Instituto Nacional de Música, which broadcast the recitals held there with a program focused on Brazilian concert repertoire, featuring works by composers such as Carlos Gomes, Francisco Braga and Henrique Oswald. Thus began the artistic trajectory of Olga Pragner Coelho, who was taken to Rádio Clube by her guitar teacher, Patrício Teixeira. In an interview with the Bahia newspaper *O Imparcial*, she declared: "I started participating, with some friends, in the Rádio Clube's amateur programs [*sic*], which was almost the only station at that time. I became fond of the microphone. The microphone —like Bahia— casts a spell".<sup>3</sup>

It was like this that she began her calling and to form the foundation of her training with the radio's daily practice, while participating actively

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<sup>2</sup> "I learned the guitar, at first, with Patrício Teixeira, and his lessons and encouragement will always be remembered with vivid affection in my memory. Patrício Teixeira is the best and most spontaneous troubadour I know in all of Brazil [...]. I also studied with Eustáquio Alves, a former student of the great Josefina Robledo, who kindly conveyed to me much of her vast knowledge about the guitar and the modern Tárrega school, today adopted throughout Spain, as it is the way of playing that offers better sound performance". "Como me tornei artista", in *Diário da Noite*, February 6, 1936, no. 2538: 5. Translations from the Portuguese are the author's own.

<sup>3</sup> "Canções de todos os povos", in *O Imparcial*, December 11, 1935, no. 1539: 3.

in charity parties, reaching forty presentations in a single month. For this reason, she was nicknamed by journalist Bastos Tigre as the “fever of Rio’s society”. This habit, besides being a fundamental part of her artistic development, reveals the social influence that marked the progress of her career. Olga Prager always performed in elite environments, whether economic, political, or intellectual. The description of those present at one of these receptions confirms this:

The most noble Lady Otávio Mangabeira is reinstating the prestige of the old salon to our worldly habits as a formula for supreme expression of elegance. Until recently, the salon had been in vertiginous decline to the absurd point of being called mere “dancing” of regrettable cosmopolitanism. With the holding of its weekly receptions, the salon’s elegant symbolism has been revived. In fact, these meetings are models of elegance, of aristocracy. Last Wednesday afternoon, Mrs. Otávio Mangabeira organized a reception. And the meeting was attended by an entire group of well-known personalities from our set. These were: Mrs. Washington Luis, Mrs. Vianna do Castelo, Mrs. Antonio Prado, ambassador of Argentina, ambassador of England, minister of Greece and wife, minister of Spain and wife, minister of China, Mrs. Julia Prudente de Moraes, Miss Olga Prager. During the beautiful party music was performed, Mr. Roberto Wilmar and Miss Maria Luiz Guimarães sang and Miss Olga Prager played the piano.<sup>4</sup>

Otávio Mangabeira was from Bahia and at the time Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position he held until 1930, thus justifying the presence of representatives from other countries. In this note, the writer’s distaste for the frank decline of French influences on social habits and the resulting conformity to the cosmopolitan American habits that would mark the period is emphasized. Nevertheless, and although he criticizes dancing, he is unable to avoid the use of an Americanism, already quite common in the vocabulary of those days when relating to the celebrated personalities of our set. The years of 1927 and 1928 were dedicated to radio programs and social events. These activities functioned as preparation for her baptism of fire in Rio society, which took place on December 16, 1928, the

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<sup>4</sup> “Mundanidades”, in *Gazeta de Notícias*, July 23, 1927, no. 174: 5.

date of her “first recital”, performed at the Instituto Nacional de Música (figure 13.1).<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 13.1:** Olga Coelho’s debut at Instituto Nacional de Música on December 16, 1928. *O Violão*, no. 2 (January 1929).

On this opening night, the foundations of her career were established, which, put into perspective today, demonstrates that these were maintained throughout her artistic practice. Among them, the repertoire choice, mostly unusual and not very well known, consisting of pieces from oral and popular tradition from different countries such as Argentinian, Uruguayan, Spanish,

<sup>5</sup> “INM’s grand hall overflowed yesterday with a select public avid to attend Miss Olga Pragner’s recital of songs on the guitar, who for the first time had contact with our audience. There were representatives of the President of the Republic, Mr. Ambassador, in addition to many members of our high society. [...] Her voice is very supple and pure and sonorous, with a clear and expressive diction. Absolute lady of the instrument, the guitar in her hands is wonderful”. “Música”, in *Gazeta de Notícias*, December 16, 1928, no. 300: 3.

French, English, Mexican and Peruvian songs, all performed in the original language, revealing her ability for research as well as for arrangements. Her performances, attended by people from the political and social elite, were reviewed in a great number of newspapers, both in Brazil and abroad, and were always favorable, in general. Below is the program of her first performance (table 13.1).

**Table 13.1:** Program of Olga Coelho's debut at Instituto Nacional de Música on December 16, 1928.

PART I

*Sob um pessegueiro* (Under a Peach Tree), *modinha* from the state of São Paulo

*Que entalção* (What a muddle), country song, first hearing

*Bem-te-vi* (Kiskadee), poem by Mello Moraes Filho

*No nosso tempo de colégio* (During Our School Years), poem by Luiz Peixoto, music by Hekel Tavares

*E nada mais...* (And Nothing Else), verses by Ademar Tavares, music by Hekel Tavares

*Minha Terra* (My Homeland), verses by Luiz Peixoto, music by Hekel Tavares

PART II

*Linda provinciana* (Beautiful Country Girl), Argentinian song

*Margarida Punzo* (Red Daisy), Uruguayan song, first hearing

*Princesita* (Little Princess), Spanish song

*El decolote* (A Bird), popular Mexican song, first hearing

*Despierta, Vidalina* (Wake Up, Vidalina), popular Mexican song

*Huayco*, popular Peruvian song, first hearing

PART III

Sounds of Carillons, solo by João Pernambuco

Song, verses by Alphonsus Guimarães, music by M. Tupinambá

Song, verses by Ademar Tavares, music by M. Tupinambá

*Toada pra você* (Song for You), verses by M. Andrade, music by L. Fernandez

*Matutando* (Thinkin'), verses by Olegário Mariano, music by Jaime Ovalle

The Brazilian part of the program included very active authors of that period, such as Hekel Tavares, Marcelo Tupinambá and Luiz Peixoto, who were involved in the creation of works that brought to the urban environment a reference of regional Brazil. Olga also introduced João Pernambuco who had established himself in Rio de Janeiro as a true representative of the northeastern country, creating a work based on regional rhythms such as *cocos*, *cateretês* and *emboladas*. The repertoire was carefully chosen, and, from

the beginning, it revealed the artist's commitment to Brazilian art, as stated by the magazine *O Violão*: "Why should we despise what is ours, our songs so plangent, so varied, so unknown yet... for the very ordinary pieces of such old operas, for the 'romanzas' that express nothing of our soul".<sup>6</sup>

While still active in radio programs, 1929 brought something new to Olga's career: the beginning of artistic tours, which would cover not only Brazilian states but an extensive international agenda. On April 13, aboard the Itanagé steamboat, she left for Salvador, where she stayed for two and a half months, teaching guitar lessons while she was there to young ladies from local society. She also declared to have heard guitarists who mastered the instrument with rare ease, such as Maria Angélica Pedreira (former student of Oswaldo Soares) and Heddy Cajueiro. It is important to point out that Heddy Cajueiro became a fundamental figure for the development of the guitar in Bahia, being responsible for introducing the instrument into the Federal University's seminars and, also, for training many personalities of the musical scene of that state. In late 1929, Heddy Cajueiro performed a recital in Rio de Janeiro, presenting a program in which she demonstrated mastery of the repertoire of concert pieces, consisting of transcripts such as Haydn's *Andante*, Schubert's *Musical Moment*, Chopin's *Nocturne no. 2* and original pieces such as *Capricho Árabe* (Arabic Caprice), *Minuet and Prelude no. 5* by Tárrega, *Choros no. 1* by Villa-Lobos, and the arrangement of *Brejeiro* by Ernesto Nazareth, among other works. This was probably the second hearing of Villa-Lobos' *Choros no. 1*, whose debut was made by the Spanish guitarist Regino Sáinz de la Maza during his visit to Rio de Janeiro in that same year.<sup>7</sup>

In December 1929, Olga made her first recordings: the popular *A mosca na moça* (The Fly on the Girl), an *embolada* whose lyrics, a genuine jawbreaker, describe the animal and insect epic that occurred to interrupt the girl's courtship, and *Sá querida*, by her student Celeste Leal Borges, which despite being recorded as a samba has an accompaniment with rhythmic milonga characteristics.<sup>8</sup> In these first records, Olga did not do the accompaniments, but had guitarists Rogério Guimarães and Patrício Teixeira participate to

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<sup>6</sup> *O Violão*, year 1, no. 7, July 1929.

<sup>7</sup> *O Violão*, year 1, no. 10, November-December, 1929.

<sup>8</sup> *A mosca na moça*, nº 3065 [Odeon 10514], and *Sá querida*, no. 3106 [Odeon 10514].

perform the harmony. At that time, Olga's performances consisted of radio programs, musical performances in private homes, charity events and large shows promoted for the celebration of important dates such as the press day, a party for which several artists were in charge of the music. In September of that same year, Olga married the poet and translator Gaspar Luis Coelho, establishing a union that lasted approximately fourteen years, which was lived with companionship, and a friendship that endured throughout her life.<sup>9</sup>

### I. RADIO AND POLITICS IN THE EARLY 1930S

The early 1930s was a troubled period in Brazilian political life, with a revolution bringing Getúlio Vargas to power, backed by the military. One of the measures set by the government was the establishment of new ways to control public opinion, through the creation of a body that had a wide scope of action, ranging from the country's official propaganda, broadcasting, and cinematographic censorship, to artistic manifestations and sports. On July 10, 1934, decree no. 24651 was published, whose object was the creation of the Departamento de Propaganda e Difusão Cultural (DPDC), linked to the Ministry of Justice, taking on functions that were previously related to the Ministry of Education. Its first general director was Francisco Antonio Rodrigues de Salles Filho, who was discharged on request in May 1935, and replaced by Lourival Fontes. The new director summoned the radio speakers to a meeting held at the Palácio das Festas, with the aim of exposing DPDC's operational mechanism. He explained, above all, the new form he intended to give to the old "national program" that then began to be broadcast from 6.45 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. in long and short waves, under the name "A Hora do Brasil" (Brazil's Hour).<sup>10</sup> The official service in its new

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<sup>9</sup> They honeymooned in Paquetá. When the couple came back home, they were greeted by a polyphonic serenade, considering that at the time Olga had 48 guitar students! The family lived on Rua das Laranjeiras and her father gave them one of the houses he had built at the back of the main residence.

<sup>10</sup> These transmissions, besides their cultural and informative purpose, also had a recreational aspect, and were organized in such a way as to spark public interest. To this end, it was agreed that all stations would contribute to the artistic creation of the programs with the most



phase was inaugurated on Monday, July 22, offering an interesting program (table 13.2).

**Table 13.2:** Program of the first broadcast of “A Hora de Brasil”, July 22, 1935.

<p><i>From 6.45 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. in long waves</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Piano concert by professor Arnaldo Rebello</li> <li>2. Brazil Day</li> <li>3. Alberto Nepomuceno: <i>Nocturne</i></li> <li>4. News: the Brazilian Language</li> <li>5. Villa-Lobos: <i>Farrapos</i> (Rags)</li> <li>6. The Confederação Brasileira de Rádio (Brazilian Radio Confederation) by Dr. Agenor Miranda (president of CBR)</li> <li>7. Chopin: <i>waltz</i></li> <li>8. News</li> <li>9. Debussy: <i>La plus que lente</i></li> <li>10. Scientific chronicle by Roquete Pinto</li> <li>11. Miguez: <i>Allegro appassionato</i></li> </ol> <p><i>From 7.30 p.m. to 7.45 p.m. only in short waves</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explanatory note on the musical program to be broadcast</li> <li>2. Villa-Lobos: <i>String quartet</i></li> <li>3. News</li> <li>4. Villa-Lobos: <i>Saudade das selvas brasileiras</i> (Brazilian Jungle Nostalgia)</li> <li>5. Throughout Brazil</li> <li>6. Villa-Lobos: <i>Momo precoce</i> (Precocious Momus)</li> </ol>
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Integrated into the ideology that fed the DPDC’s actions were the programs that aimed to praise national unity, reflected in activities prepared especially for civic date celebrations such as the Independence of Brazil. For the latter, an event was organized for “A Hora do Brasil”: a series of patriotic talks to be broadcast daily (figure 13.2).<sup>11</sup> Regarding the initiative, Mr. Lourival Fontes declared: “It is not the DPDC’s function to reveal Brazil to foreign curiosity only. Its main purpose is to create civic pride, love for Bra-

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outstanding elements of their casts. Those present cheered the plans outlined by Mr. Lourival Fontes with the valuable assistance of Mrs. Ilka Labarte, head of the Department’s radio section. “Radio”, in *A Noite*, July 18, 1935, no. 8488: 3.

<sup>11</sup> Information on the use of radio as a political propaganda tool of the Vargas government can be further explored in the readings of Haussen (1997) and McCann (2004).

zilian things, veneration, respect, the cult of great figures and the facts of its tradition and past”.<sup>12</sup> Within these general lines, the DPDC prepared a series of programs disseminated throughout the country with the theme “National Unity and Brazilian Formation”, with talks given by Tristão de Athaide, Roquete Pinto, Oliveira Viana and by the Minister Otávio Tarquínio de Souza.



**Figure 13.2:** Olga Coelho’s participation in “A Hora do Brasil” in Buenos Aires. *Guión*, September 25, 1940.

<sup>12</sup> “Pela criação do orgulho cívico e do culto às grandes figuras nacionais”, in *A Noite*, September, 4, 1935, no. 8529: 2.

Music also assisted the government's ideology, either through the activities led by composer Heitor Villa-Lobos or by disseminating lyrics that were in tune with the new guidelines. In this context, the figure of Getúlio Vargas, who was sympathetic to the artistic environment, stands out. Mário Lago, one of the most important Brazilian actors whose presence on the cultural scene was always marked by a political position aligned with leftist thought, describes very accurately these relationships: "Getúlio had the artists' admiration for a simple reason. He was the author of the law that practically regulated the profession; [...]. Every December 31st there was a serenade in the Guanabara Palace Garden and the staff went willingly" (Hausen 1997: 33). It was in this context that Olga Pragner Coelho made her first steps towards an international career, an intense activity, which saw her appear on the most respected stages. Interestingly, although in statements Olga declared that Getúlio Vargas did not like her, it was in the name of his government and the cultural dissemination policies undertaken by it that the artist set out to show Brazilian folklore abroad, with the capital of Argentina as the first stop.<sup>13</sup>

In 1933, Argentinian President Agustín Justo visited Brazil, beginning a cooperation between both countries through agreements and treaties that encompassed economic, trade and cultural aspects. As pointed out by Raquel Paz dos Santos, the reforms developed in Itamaraty by the Vargas government opened a new direction in foreign policy, as disseminating "Brazilian things" on an international level was part of his nationalist project (Santos 2009: 358). Thus, repaying President Justo's visit, Getúlio Vargas left for Argentina in 1935 (also visiting Uruguay), with the mission of establishing a friendly relationship that would put to rest the image of rivalry that until then had marked the contact between the countries. Confirming the new level reached in international relations between Brazil and Argentina, *Diário de Notícias* published a very eloquent note: "During the opening of Calle Corrientes, Mr. Getúlio Vargas, when cutting the ribbon that gave access to the traffic on the formidable

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<sup>13</sup> Vargas' discontentment is due, according to Olga, to the fact that she was invited to teach guitar lessons to Jandira, the president's daughter and that she refused to teach at Palácio do Catete, demanding that the student come to her home. Additionally, there was the close bond that united her to Otávio Mangabeira, Getúlio's political enemy.

avenue, was targeted by the Argentine mayor with the following words: The heart of Buenos Aires grows bigger to receive the Brazilian people".<sup>14</sup>

In the history of cultural relations between Brazil and Argentina, artistic exchange was encouraged, with the circulation of writers, visual artists, actors and musicians. It was quite common at the time to spread news about radio artists who were performing in Argentina during the 1930s. This was probably the context that inspired—in the bibliography of many works dedicated to Brazilian popular music—the reference to the entourage that accompanied President Vargas on this trip, which included artists such as Carmen Miranda and Bando da Lua. In the documents examined in Itamaraty's archives, which records the movement and the protocols established by Brazilian diplomacy for the event, no evidence was found, nor any mention of such an artistic entourage. The documents reveal that there was an artist hired by the Brazilian government to perform recitals during President Vargas' visit to Argentina: pianist Guiomar Novaes.

Several newspapers at the time wrote about Olga Prager Coelho's performance in Argentina, a singer "whom the government decided to appoint as representative of Brazil in the International Folklore Congress".<sup>15</sup> The Official Advertising Department was responsible for sending news to the Brazilian papers regarding Argentinian events: "Olga Prager Coelho is currently in Buenos Aires, carrying out an impressive work to divulge our folklore. In this mission, she has performed for several Buenos Aires radio stations and in many official programs of the Sociedade Brasileira de Rádio Difusão, broadcast throughout America, during the visit of President Getúlio Vargas to the Platine region".<sup>16</sup> In that season, Olga performed three recitals: one in La Plata, Argentina, and two in Montevideo, Uruguay. In her second concert in Buenos Aires, she performed at the gala recital offered by the Brazilian Embassy to the nations that contributed to the pacification of the Chaco,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "O presidente do Brasil na capital Argentina", in *Diário de Notícias*, May 25, 1935, no. 2588: 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Correio da Manhã*, April 29, 1936, no. 12716: 2.

<sup>16</sup> "Olga Prager Coelho, Embaixatriz do nosso folk-lore no Prata", in *Gazeta de Notícias*, July 10, 1935, no. 161: 10.

<sup>17</sup> Fought between Paraguay and Bolivia in the 1930s, the Chaco War counted on the Brazilian government's diplomatic participation to solve the conflict.



**Figure 13.3:** Olga Coelho, *Sintonía*, year VIII, no. 379, October 2, 1940, cover photo.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Gazeta de Notícias*, September 15, 1935, no. 219: 17.

in the presence of all representatives of the South American countries and the highest authorities of the Argentinian government.

Another triumph was Olga's performance at the party where Mr. Sebastião Sampaio paid tribute to the members of the Pan American Congress. Her stay in Buenos Aires was widely advertised, with articles in the main local magazines and a cover photo on the magazine *Sintonia* (figure 13.3). Back in Brazil, she commented on her recent success: "I prefer to see the Argentinians' applause as an undeniable proof of the great friendship that bonds them to us. By acclaiming me, they honored Brazil. As for myself, I tried hard not to devalue the artistic culture of our country in Buenos Aires".<sup>19</sup>

Her speech was clearly in tune with the ideals of Americanism and the valuing of Brazilian cultural roots, the same postulates that guided the cultural policy of the Vargas government. On September 13, Olga Prager Coelho performed a recital at "A Hora do Brasil", in thanks for the comments made by the Brazilian press during her performance at the Platine region. September was an extraordinary month, in fact, for her career. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, Radio Tupy, the *air Chief*, was inaugurated.<sup>20</sup> The focus of 1936 was the strengthening of relations between Olga and the parts of the Vargas government responsible for cultural dissemination. During this period, the National Propaganda Department sealed agreements with the Ente Italiano per la Audizioni Radiofoniche to establish a monthly exchange of musical programs between Brazil and Italy. On March 2, the first broadcast of a special program of Italian music, organized by that entity, took place, at the usual time of "A Hora do Brasil" (figure 13.4). In return, the National Propaganda Department broadcast a program that was officially received and retransmitted throughout Italy, thus bringing the advertising guidelines of Brazilian music into effect. The organization was entrusted to the Federal District's Education and Culture Secretariat, and the program consisted of two symphonic poems — *Imbapara* by Lorenzo Fernandez and *Uirapuru* by

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<sup>19</sup> "Victoriada em Buenos Aires", in *Diário da noite*, September 9, 1935, no. 2411: 5.

<sup>20</sup> Closing the year, Olga performed at the casino of the Copacabana Palace Hotel (December 3, 1935), in an evening dedicated to Argentina and Uruguay. The program featured regional pieces not only from both those countries, but also from Germany, Cuba, France, Mexico, Spain and Brazil.

Villa-Lobos. The conductor was Villa-Lobos, superintendent of Music and Artistic Education. In March 1936 a request from several countries to the Departamento de Propaganda e Difusão Cultural for the broadcasting of special programs was announced. The DPDC for “A Hora do Brasil” tried to answer these requests “that greatly move us”. Therefore, on the 25<sup>th</sup>, a program was broadcast to Berlin, and relayed to all of Europe, consisting solely of Brazilian folklore music. The singers Olga Prager Coelho and Jorge Fernandes were appointed to fulfill the artistic task, with the accompaniment of Olga, Lentine (guitar), Ney Orestes (guitar), Carolina Cardoso de Meneses (piano), all exclusive Radio Tupy artists.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 13.4:** “A Hora do Brasil”, broadcasted to Berlin.  
*A Noite*, March 26, 1936, no. 8702: 11.

<sup>21</sup> “Intercâmbio musical brasileiro-alemão”, in *Gazeta de Notícias*, March 24, 1936, no. 69: 8.

The great news for Olga's artistic career was published in the capital's main newspapers and published in the May 8 official *Gazette*, April 27 decree, stating that: "the singer Olga Prager Coelho was appointed for a mission of the Department of Propaganda and Cultural Diffusion —at no cost to the National Treasury— to promote, in the various European countries that she is to visit, the dissemination of Brazilian folklore".<sup>22</sup> Her appointment was reported by the daily newspaper *Diário Carioca*: "The Brazilian government has chosen Mrs. Olga Prager Coelho to represent Brazil at the International Folklore Congress to be held in Berlin. Olga Prager has definitely been a great ambassador for national music on the continent".<sup>23</sup> In the several statements she made, Olga liked to comment on this fact, emphasizing that she had always undertaken the trip "without any burden to the national treasury". Actually, it was an operation that counted on the efforts of the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, José Carlos de Macedo Soares, who granted Olga and Gaspar air tickets for the trip and Otávio Mangabeira, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Washington Luís government (removed from office in October 1930), and elected in 1934 as a federal congressman by Bahia, who obtained from the members of congress an allowance of 10 *contos de réis* (Brazilian currency at that period) to pay for the couple's expenses.<sup>24</sup>

Before she left for the European season, Olga played on programs that were broadcast by "A Hora do Brasil" abroad and had time to go back to Buenos Aires to perform new concerts and appear on programs on the Belgrano, Porteño, El Mitre and Splendid radio stations.<sup>25</sup> Back in Rio de Janeiro, Olga resumed her activities presenting a recital broadcast by PRG-3, Radio Tupi, dedicated to the press. Ending the Rio season, Olga and Gaspar offered journalists a farewell cocktail and on August 5 they left for Germany aboard the Graf Zeppelin, a feat that would constitute a great adventure: "with no sense of danger [...] when I entered, on top everything was a screen

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<sup>22</sup> *Diário Oficial*, May 8, 1936, no. 9733.

<sup>23</sup> "A cantora Olga Prager Coelho vai à Europa", in *Diário Carioca*, April 29, 1936, no. 2872: 9.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview. Rio de Janeiro, January 27, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> For more information, see Haussen (1997).



over a steel frame, the room was so small; two bunk beds and a small passage. There was no bathroom, just a toilet and a basin” (Olga in personal statement). This would be one of the last departures of the great airship that at that time maintained an intense schedule of regular trips to Brazil, accounting for approximately 12 round trips in the year 1936 alone”.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. OLGA COELHO AND THE EUROPEAN SEASON

Olga left for Berlin on a mission for the Department of Propaganda and Cultural Diffusion, as Brazil’s official representative at the International Folklore Congress, henceforth known as the “Ambassador of Brazilian folklore”. Despite everything that had been publicly disclosed regarding the trip being related to her participation in the international Congress, the artist herself—in an article published in *Cinearte* magazine—tried to explain the event:

It is not exactly a folklore congress, but an artistic event organized by the German government, at the end of the Olympics. It is at this event that I will perform with Brazilian music. Berlin will, therefore, be my first stop. I will perform at a radio station and it is likely that afterwards I will tour several German cities. Five months of artistic tour will follow in Vienna, Budapest, Rome, Paris, Lisbon and other European centers; in each one of these I will be giving performances sponsored by Brazilian embassies or consulates.<sup>27</sup>

When examining the substantial official activity report of the 11<sup>th</sup> Berlin Olympic Games (1936), we found no mention to Olga’s name, and it has not been possible so far to establish the circumstances surrounding her participation. In addition to a rich musical agenda dedicated mainly to the performance of the orchestral repertoire and the promotion of a composi-

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<sup>26</sup> From its first flight on September 28, 1928, to December 7, 1936, the airship crossed the Atlantic 134 times, the North Atlantic seven times, and the Pacific Ocean once, the latter on the occasion of its famous voyage around of the world, which lasted from August 15 to September 4, 1929. See *Correio Paulistano*, January 4, 1938, no. 25097: 13.

<sup>27</sup> “A Embaixatriz do folk-lore brasileiro”, in *Cinearte*, September 1, 1936, no. 446: 24.

tion contest that took place during the event, the organization took care of promoting daily artistic entertainment in order to keep athletes in the Olympic Village. The main room of the Hindenburg House —the place where the performances took place— housed approximately a thousand people and consisted of a small stage, a platform for the orchestra and a complete apparatus for the projection of films. To supervise artistic activities, Erich Schilling from the German Theater, in Berlin, was appointed. The programs were divided into two parts, the first musical and the second dedicated to film projection, and at the beginning of each presentation scenes were shown from the competitions held the previous day, which naturally stirred the audience. As the public was made up of representatives from about fifty different countries, the program, especially in its musical aspect, tried to reflect this ethnic diversity. Famous German artists, and also foreign ones, participated in the events, including Marta Linz, Irene de Noiret, Jan Kiepura, Georges Boulanger, the Japanese tenor Fujiwara, and the Greek singer Moulalas, just to name a few. We can presume that Olga performed in this space due to the varied nature proposed by the program. As she repeatedly said, at a certain point during the Olympic ritual, she sat in a box next to Hitler's, from whom she had a terrible impression, in contrast to the sympathy she felt for the dictator Mussolini whom she would visit a few months later.<sup>28</sup>

During her visit to Germany, we know that she participated in social activities, one of which was offered by the Brazilian government and reported by the newspaper *Diário da Noite* (September 9, 1936) in which she appears in a photo next to Jan Kiepura and Martha Egghert. She also went on radio programs, the success of which opened to her the doors of the Bechstein Hall, the most famous in Berlin, for a performance that was attended by elite German society and the entire South American diplomatic corps. The event was promoted by the Brazilian ambassador, Muniz de Aragão, and the Italian ambassador, the ministers of Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, the commercial attaché in Guatemala, as well as representatives from neighboring countries were all present. The concert received laudatory reviews from leading German newspapers, including the *Berliner Tagblatt*, “extraordinary guitar virtuoso”; *Charlotten-*

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<sup>28</sup> For more information, see Richter (1937).

*burg Zeitung*, “She rendered her country a beautiful service”; *8 Uhr-Abendblatt National Zeitung*, “a magical and exotic enchantment”, and, finally, from the *Deutsch Allgemeine Zeitung*, which stated in the morning edition of November 20:

With charming ease, the recitalist explained and sang melodious songs superbly, songs which retain the sensation of native themes and, also, of the time of slavery. The sweetly melancholic motives were interpreted by her as persuasively as the luminous and naive grace of some joyful songs. Her eminent gifts as an interpreter led the audience to demand an encore of almost all the songs on the program. Only after many extras and a song from Brazil, whose refrain was sung in chorus by the South Americans present, did the emotional night die slowly away in the late hour.<sup>29</sup>

The German agenda also included participating in radio programs broadcast to Brazil as part of the agreement signed between the German Ministry of Press and Propaganda and the Brazilian Propaganda Department. She also took part in the special studio program to commemorate Radio Tupi’s first anniversary, celebrated on September 15 with twelve nonstop hours of programming, from midday to midnight.<sup>30</sup> In December 1936, Olga sailed to Italy for an extensive tour, where she performed in Rome, Bologna and Florence. It was on this trip that the famous visit to Mussolini took place, the content of which was published on March 30, 1937, in *O Jornal*, in an article entitled “My Conversation with Mussolini”.<sup>31</sup>

In the following months, she continued her work promoting Brazilian music in Europe. In March in Vienna, at the Legação do Brasil, she delighted minister Souza Leão’s guests with an exquisite performance of some pieces of Brazilian music. She returned to the Bechstein Hall in Berlin, and then to Hungary where she performed at the Music Academy. On June 1, the Brazilian ambassador in Brussels, Pereira e Souza, hosted at the embassy’s park a magnificent garden party attended by his Majesty King

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<sup>29</sup> All the performances and critics were mentioned in “Olga Prager Coelho em Berlin”, reproduced in *Diário de Notícias*, December, 23, 1936, no. 3072: 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Diário da Noite*, September 8, 1936, no. 2721: 3.

<sup>31</sup> “My Conversation with Mussolini”, in *O Jornal*, March 30, 1937, no. 5456: 8.

Leopold III, the court and refined Belgian society, as well as the diplomatic corps accredited in Brussels. The event was reported in an article published by the newspaper *A Noite*, under the title “The Party Offered to King Leopold III of Belgium - Regional Music in a very Charming and Picturesque Environment”.<sup>32</sup>

Naturally, it will not be possible in this context to map and document Olga Prager Coelho’s brilliant international career. She traveled to Europe between 1937 and 1939, was in Paris as a guest at the July 14 celebrations, performing alongside artists such as Marlene Dietrich, Marta Eggerth and Maurice Chevalier. In London she presented herself to Queen Mary and became the first South American to take part in a music television program. In 1939 she performed in Portugal, Australia, New Zealand, and in 1940 and 1941 she went to Cuba and South Africa.

Olga’s repertoire, which was increasingly international, featured a selection of folkloric themes, songs from the oral tradition that she picked up and interpreted in a unique way. It is important to highlight the presence of composers of great significance in the universe of concert music, such as Chopin and Tedesco, a trend that would be consolidated in later programs. No less interesting was the presence of the contemporary repertoire that reflected her fine perception demonstrated by the inclusion of works by authors such as Lorenzo Fernandez, Mignone and Villa-Lobos and the extremely popular Hekel Tavares, a prestigious representative of the so-called “popular”. This involvement in and extremely personal way of choosing her repertoire was fundamental to the artist’s career, making her distinct due to the skills she had acquired, despite the stylistic diversity of her repertoire. As regards the choice of her themes, she explained:

First of all, my taste for simple things, born from the heart, with no subterfuge [...] My innate curiosity, my craving to know different natures, also led me to dedicate myself to foreign folklore. So, I tried to improve my sensitivity, even feeling Spanish in a *jota*; Russian, in a Cossack song; Portuguese, in a *fado*; Argentinian, in a *vidalita*; Cuban in a *rumba*, to then miss my *Brazilianness* and,

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<sup>32</sup> “Na embaixada do Brasil, a festa oferecida ao Rei Leopoldo II da Bélgica –música regional num ambiente de encanto e pitoresco”, in *A Noite*, June 10, 1937, no. 9094: 3.

without having to put on another mask, I can, with all my heart, just be myself, Brazilian.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, in the 1940s, Olga performed a number of times in the United States, where she met Andrés Segovia, the greatest guitarist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They fell in love and lived together in New York for twenty years.<sup>34</sup> Olga carried on living in the city for another ten years. With Segovia, Olga hung out with the world art elite, being close to the most important performers and composers of the 20th century, some of whom dedicated works to her. Her American debut took place in New York's Town Hall, on February 9, 1943. Her baptism of fire happened, however, a few years later, when she sang, on the same stage, Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras no. 5*. A piece originally written for voice and cellos, it was transcribed for voice and guitar by the composer, especially for Olga. In the audience were Andrés Segovia, Villa-Lobos and the *New York Times*' critic, Olin Downes, who declared: "Mme. Coelho, a musician and an artist, always confers style upon whatever she interprets, and the listener leaves the hall having been enriched in his experience of music that reflects the spirit, customs and environments of many lands. She is the most finished and eloquent interpreter of folk music that this reviewer has encountered".<sup>35</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The examining of Olga Coelho's career offers an analysis of different underlying aspects of her performance: her repertoire choice, her political role of interpreter as a representative of the Brazilian government, and the probable social implications of her trajectory analyzed from the perspective of gender studies, the latter being an aspect not covered by the scope of this article. The practice of folksong highlights an important cultural moment in a number of countries. In the Brazilian case, it was a particular context

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<sup>33</sup> "Como me tornei artista", in *Diário da Noite*, February 6, 1936, no. 2538: 5.

<sup>34</sup> Olga and Segovia had two children, a son and a daughter, raised and adopted by Gaspar Coelho.

<sup>35</sup> *The New York Times*, February 16, 1953, no. 201: 18.

that strongly influenced modernism and which would embrace the union of two tendencies: on the one hand, the resumption of a nationalist attitude reflected by the repertoire selection and, on the other, the demonstration of cosmopolitanism symbolized by the performance of young and independent women in Rio de Janeiro's cultural scene. The second aftermath surfaces in the beginning of the 1930s, when Olga's artistic career evolves during a troubled period of Brazilian politics, a moment in which a revolution put Getúlio Vargas into power, supported by the armed forces.

Olga revealed to the world Brazil's and Latin America's numerous voices (figure 13.5). She performed in the main halls of the European and American elite. It is important to point out that in 1942 she sang in the White House, invited by Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote down in her diary: "Madame Olga Prager Coelho, of Brazil, gave us a program of songs, sung to her guitar, which she plays remarkably. Many of you have heard her over the radio but watching her adds enormously to the pleasure of her performance" (Roosevelt 1942). Her art was known for its fastidious repertoire selection and, also, for the expertise with which she mastered voice and guitar in instrumental arrangements of great virtuosity. Despite standing for twenty years beside and under Andrés Segovia's shadow, she managed to build a priceless musical legacy, unfortunately unknown to the public in general and recognized and respected only by experts. In her long trajectory from the National Music Institute to the salons of the world, Olga Prager Coelho left a mark with her intelligence, her lively spirit and, above all, her unique artistic skill.



**Figure 13.5:** Olga Coelho, Andrés Segovia, Arminda e Heitor Villa-Lobos.  
Author's personal archive.

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