

# Musical Imagination and Reading<sup>1</sup>

## The Role of Sight-Reading in the Constitution of Brazilian Musical Genres

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### Abstract

We focus on professional Brazilian music of the instrumental genre and address the crucial role of sight-reading in its development. We argue that in addition to the standard concept of sight-reading — related to the strict deciphering of signs on the pentagram — other reading praxis founded, over the last two centuries, what came to be recognized as Brazilian music. In this sense, we highlight that the notational format internationally known as lead sheet (the notational standard used in the context in question) not only enabled the availability of essential musical elements for the singularization of work and authorship but also led to the consolidation of the collection of images musicals that constituted the genre in question. In this way, the interaction of imagined simulations of generic patterns—the action of embodied memory — with reading the lead sheet gave rise to works and defined a repertoire. Considering assumptions of embodied cognition of music, stylistic-musical foundations, and the analysis of recordings and transcriptions, we speculate attributing a central role to sight-reading in the constitution of the stylistic field addressed — primarily represented by Choro. It is a musical production originated by and in performance, encompassing phrasal and harmonic improvisation, modes of articulation, and sonority.

**Keywords:** Brazilian music, sight-reading, music performance, embodied cognition

### Imaginação musical e leitura: o papel da leitura à primeira vista na constituição dos gêneros musicais brasileiros

#### Resumo

Focalizamos a música brasileira profissional de gênero instrumental e abordamos o papel crucial da leitura à primeira vista para o seu desenvolvimento. Argumentamos que, para além do conceito comum de leitura à primeira vista — relacionado à estrita decifração de sinais sobre o pentagrama —, outras práticas de leitura fundaram, ao longo dos dois últimos séculos, o que se passou a reconhecer como música brasileira. Neste sentido, destacamos que o formato notacional internacionalmente conhecido como lead sheet (padrão notacional empregado no contexto em questão) possibilitou não só a disponibilização de elementos musicais essenciais para a singularização de obra e autoria, como também suscitou a consolidação da coleção de imagens musicais que constituíram o gênero em questão. Desse modo, a interação das simulações imaginadas de padrões genéricos — a ação da memória incorporada — com a leitura da lead sheet originou obras e definiu um repertório. Considerando pressupostos da cognição musical incorporada, fundamentos estilístico-musicais e a análise de gravações e transcrições, especulamos atribuir papel central à leitura à primeira vista para a constituição do campo estilístico abordado — especialmente representada pelo choro. Trata-se de uma produção musical essencialmente originada pela e na performance, abrangendo improvisação frásica e harmônica, modos de articulação e sonoridade.

**Palavras-chave:** música brasileira, leitura à primeira vista, performance musical, cognição incorporada

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## Introduction

As Bailes and Bishop (2012) highlighted, it has been widely demonstrated that a past musical experience — particularly a piece of music or an excerpt of musical work already heard — can be retrieved by memory and imaginatively re-experienced with remarkable precision. We begin the discussion of the partial results of the study that we have been developing regarding the musical praxis that gave rise to the musical stylistic field recognized as "Brazilian music," drawing attention to two human abilities in music cognition. If, on the one hand, we can imagine the music we are currently listening to or have heard in the past, we are also able to imagine new musical patterns. As for the latter, those stylistically related — that is, that present some similarity bias — with already experienced patterns are substantially more common. This ability is recognized as one of the most compelling signs of musical creativity. Bailes and Bishop (2012) claim that little attention has been given to the conscious processes involved in the imagination of music. In this sense, we agree with the authors that it is essential not only to focus on the conscious processes of music cognition that we know as the production of musical images (the "musical imagery") but also to investigate the relationship between these processes and "musical imagination," here understood as the creative mental practice that is at the heart of the generation of musical events and pieces of music.

For the development of this argument, we assume that "imagination" is the creative faculty of going beyond perceptual experience, producing mental images of what is not currently presented to us. Therefore, the relationship between the production of mental images (imagery, imaging), as an imaginative simulation of what we experience as an act, and musical imagination (imagining), as a human capacity to idealize musical actions not yet carried out as actual gestures, constitutes the origin of musical creative processes.

The practice of memorizing highly recurrent musical patterns in a given stylistic field and evoking them in the act of improvisatory performance is widely cited in the literature about the musical genres that constitute repertoires of what we plausibly recognize as "performative works" — as is the case with the practice of Choro or Jazz. We must emphasize, however, that musical imagination is not only crucial for the generation of works linked to "improvisational" music genres but also indispensable to any other musical creative process. If the use of musical imagery is recurrently approached by the pedagogy of "performative genres" (based on improvisatory acts in public performance), less studied is the relationship between the cognitive process of producing mental images as replicative mental simulations of already experienced musical patterns — a creative action of memory — and

the creative process of imagining "new," as yet unexperienced, events that will result in performative works.

The hypothesis investigated here is that objectifying the relationship between these two instances of creative memory production will enable a deeper understanding of (1) the creative functions of musical imagery, that is, the cognitive processes that underlie musical genres, as well as (2) the imaginative praxis that consolidates authorial repertoires and musical styles. For that, the present study focuses on the role of acts of reading the musical text — a text that may be present or virtualized in the performer's scriptural imagination — as a primordial condition for creating works and consolidating the Brazilian music genres covered here. We intend to argue that such acts provoke the musical imagination mediated by the performer's competence in evoking and recreating highly *embodied* musical images, which will trigger the continuous updating of the genre they target.

## Sight-Reading

The term "sight-reading" in professional Brazilian music refers to creating music in the performative act directly provoked by deciphering a known musical text in the performance itself (Pierce et al., 2021). When deciphering the graphic signage, experienced sight-readers generate mechanisms of anticipation, intuition, and deduction, thus identifying familiar patterns that will fill the formal gaps in the music "text" to create a piece of music through improvisation.

Although the lead sheet notational format is usually described as a limited or incomplete representation of music composition, through extensive training, expert musicians are able, in the act of reading, to access and connect musical patterns — *musical mental schemes* (Nogueira, 2020) — and their expressive contents, regulated by cognitive devices for activating contents in long-term memory. In a synchronous and highly speedy way, a concatenation of musical events is imagined with remarkable support from schematic patterns of gestural meaning. Such schemes are memorized by accompanying highly repetitive bodily actions (Hayward & Gromko, 2009) and consolidated as schematic musical patterns in memory. For learners to acquire mastery of traits and patterns characteristic of a specific genre, in addition to the systematic experience of listening to performances/recordings by skilled improvisers and deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson & Harwell, 2019) of stylistic patterns by imitation, the role of sight-reading is essential. Why? Above all, it objectively provokes the exercise of activating memories of those patterns.

It is believed that this competence is acquired through the quality of experience accumulated with activities that involve sight-reading

and the size of the repertoire of stylistic patterns (Ericsson & Harwell, 2019). However, repertoire size does not necessarily mean an improvement in sight-reading skills if there is no involvement in challenging tasks during rapid repertoire acquisition and adaptation to the specific needs of the task. According to Lehmann and Ericsson (1996), individual differences in sight-reading ability among individuals and sight-reading specialization feats of eminent musicians do not indicate an innate musical talent. They are, instead, the result of long-term engagement in relevant activities related to protected self-imposed domains and challenges. In other words, they are tasks that develop "prerequisite" skills, such as the ability to imagine and organize previously experienced music, facilitate subsequent mental imagery, or the ability to make informed guesses or create "new" likely sequences (Lehmann & Ericsson, 1996).

Recent studies (Gromko, 2004; Kopiez & Lee, 2008; Hambrick & Meinz, 2011; Ericsson, 2014; Macnamara et al., 2014) support the hypothesis that there are consistently significant correlations between reading comprehension and general cognitive abilities, such as working memory capacity. Furthermore, they demonstrate that it is not the total number of hours of practice that matters but a specific type of practice that is the most effective predictor of sight-reading performance. Ericsson (2014) suggests that only by focusing on the enhancement of specific mental adaptations and mechanisms can we identify the precise training activities that are most effective. The primary approach appears to be simulated situations, which require performers to receive feedback and the opportunity to make repeated corrections and adjustments. By conducting an analysis and comprehending the factors that influenced their decision to opt for an inefficient body movement, individuals can enhance their proficiency in sight-reading. Thus, when sight readers make corrections and adjustments to their methods of evoking and producing musical images, these changes are not restricted to the piece in question but must extend to other similar pieces of music, potentially creating a mental image. This finding indicates how well-developed these performers' mental images are (Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

The ability to cognitively process lead sheet information — converting the signals into continuous, coherent mental images of motor actions to be performed as fluently as possible — requires the performer to constantly adapt to an ever-changing environment concerning the demands of musical completion. The perceptual and cognitive abilities of the performer-reader are connected to deliberate and involuntary body movements. Skilled sight-reading performers tend to look further from the point where they are playing to prepare themselves for rapid adaptations of their psychomotor actions to the situations that

present themselves in the collective performance. To achieve these competencies, your perceptual and cognitive abilities are connected to deliberate and involuntary body movements. The agility of perceptual acts in front of the score is essential for improving the skills of predicting actions more precisely and quickly around what is being stylized (Arthur et al., 2020). At the same time, selecting the most efficient and ergonomically viable fingering for the instrumental realization of the idealized events is also crucial for the success of the improvisation.

An analysis of this complex set of sensory, motor, and affective actions in improvised performance can provide a better diagnosis of "errors" that can be made in sight-reading. When the production of novelty exceeds the limit of stylistic recognition, could the incorrect choice to recover a particular stylistic pattern be alleged as the cause of deviations identifiable by critical listeners? We believe that such conformity errors occur during the act of reading — the stage of activation of mental schemas — or during the constructive action of the musical event imagined in the act of reading — the stage of performative execution of the creative updating of schemas (Thompson et al., 2004).

A look at these more specific aspects of the construction processes of the performance of "scriptural-improvisational" music makes it possible, for example, to investigate comparisons between the actions intended by the performer and the events they produced. This study can potentially reveal the boundaries between the imagery of the practiced style and the performer's ability to create new solutions imaginatively. Thus, through deliberate practice of sight-reading, perception changes adaptively, allowing the retrieval of relevant mental structures such as melodic contours and rhythmic cells, phrasal and harmonic patterns, modes of articulation, and sonorities from memory, ultimately musical imagery that explains the most identifying aspects of the style. To investigate the experience of constructing the improvised stylistic performance, the threshold between what was idealized by the performer and the actual performance — a crucial moment of identifying the tension between the limit of the style and the creative acts of the performer — we employed a protocol observation based on what Ericsson (2006) called simultaneous protocol analysis. We are seeking to objectify the skills that make explicit the implicit creative actions revealed by each performer in their improvisational production.



## Choro images

Among musicians and researchers of the choro genre, improvisation, and rhythmic-melodic variation are expressive actions considered some of its most essential characteristics, consistently appreciated in circles and concert halls (Valente, 2014; Diniz, 2013; Cazes, 2010; Sá, 1999; Livingston, 1998; Garcia, 1997; Moura, 1995; Vasconcelos, 1977; Tinhorão, 1975). In Choro, the practice of rhythmic-melodic variation appears spontaneously, free from regulation by technical-compositional principles. Therefore, they occur in two ways: 1) improvised, generally depending on the moment of the performance, in random sections, and may, for example, appear as a response to a rhythmic or melodic stimulus suggested / played by a co-participant of the performance; 2) previously established, usually based on very striking melodic motifs in some choros, such as, for example, in *Noites Cariocas* (Jacob do Bandolim), where the rhythmic structure applied to the melodic motifs of section A is recurrent, stimulating memorized and adopted variations as standard in that work.

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In both cases, variations can only be verified in the rhythmic structure when preserving the original melody only changes the rhythmic pattern through accents, rubatos, anticipations, or accelerations. The variations are concentrated on small motifs in the original text, returning to them immediately afterward. Therefore, at least in the case of Choro and probably in the improvisational practice of related genres, the boundary between improvisation and rhythmic or melodic variation can be dubious and subject to questioning from case to case.

Parallel to the context of "*rodas*"<sup>2</sup> and shows, in more reserved environments such as classrooms, recording studios, or homes, sight-reading linked to memorizing recurring musical patterns in the genre plays an essential role in developing and maintaining your characteristics. Two basic musical images of Choro induce the cognitive process of instantaneous adoption of patterns to be applied to the current performance: a characteristic way (with the application of specific sound articulations) of performing the syncopation represented in Figure 1 — emerging from Brazilian musical hybridism — and the European polka sectional scheme, in rondo form with five ABACA sections.

Figure 1:  
Syncopation as the Choro primary rhythmic image



<sup>2</sup> Expression in Portuguese is similar to the meaning of "jam session." In the *roda de choro*, musicians come together without prior rehearsal to play the genre's repertoire, with melodic variations, improvisation, and extended forms. The *roda de choro* generally occurs with a diverse audience in different locations, such as private family properties, bars, and the open air on the streets.

The specific performance of that syncopated rhythmic pattern, called by Andrade (1965) "characteristic syncope," — a term that is imprecise but consecrated by use — can be considered an approximate symbolic representation of what occurs in the performative metric practice of Choro, presenting itself, nonetheless, with very particular rhythmic and articulatory nuances. The adoption of specific rhythmic patterns and their application during sight-reading of Choro has a direct relationship with the process of hybridism, defined in terms of symbiosis, mixture, crossing, junction, fusion, syncretism, miscegenation, crossover, influence, tendency or friction of musicalities (Motta, 2018; Piedade, 2011; Oliveira, 1964, apud Piedade, 2013). During the development of Brazilian music, especially in the second half of the 19th century, the primary rhythmic cell of lundu-dança, represented here by the graphic pattern in Figure 1, was absorbed by instrumentalists and intensely applied in their performances, whatever the genre covered. In this paper, we will not address the acquisition of resources from other musical sources that participate in forming the Choro musician, whose elements are included in the processes of generic hybridization. Take, as an example, the known formula "habanera rhythm" (Figure 2) — at least as it was presented in sheet music to Brazilian musicians at the time—and we have the emergence of new patterns that came to characterize the lundu-canção (Figure 3), mentioned by Gérard Béhague (as cited by Ferreira, 2016).

**Figure 2:**  
Habanera rhythmic pattern.

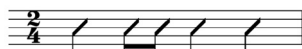


**Figure 3:**  
Representation of the rhythmic conduction pattern of the lundu-canção.

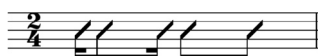


Several hybrid forms emerged in Rio de Janeiro during that period. Polka (Figure 4) would have arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1844, soon becoming an "epidemic... polka was in fashion" (Macedo as cited by Andrade, 1989, p. 405). Pixinguinha (1897–1973) reports in an interview at the Museu da Imagem e do Som (Museum of Image and Sound) of Rio de Janeiro in 1968 that "*Carinhoso* was a slow polka. At that time, everything was polka, whatever the tempo" (MIS-RJ, 1968). Thus, the generic polka-lundu rhythmic conduction pattern emerges (Figure 5).

**Figure 4:**  
Polka rhythmic pattern.



**Figure 5:**  
Pattern that established polka-lundu.



## Case studies

A look at the more specific aspects of the construction processes of the performance of "written-improvisational" music makes it possible, for example, to investigate comparisons between actions intended by the performer and the events they produced. Through sight-reading limited to a particular genre, perception changes adaptively, allowing the recovery of relevant mental structures of melodic contours and rhythmic cells, phrasal and harmonic patterns, modes of articulation, and sonorities from memory. We are referring to musical imagery that explains the most identifying aspects of the style. To investigate the experience of constructing an improvised stylistic performance, the threshold between what was idealized by the performer and the performance performed, we need to objectify the skills that make explicit the implicit creative actions revealed by each performer in their improvisational production.

Considering these assumptions, case studies carried out by the first author for the research entitled *Receita de Choro ao molho de bando-lim: Uma reflexão acerca do Choro e sua forma de criação* (Sá, 1999) demonstrated that both the sight-reading of a lead sheet as the "reading by ear" are capable of not only revealing musical traits of original work and the musical universe of its author but also bringing to light the spirit of the "missing link" in the transition between genres. The case studies were based on the complete score of the polka Flora for mandolin and piano by the Italian mandolinist Giuseppe Bellenghi (1847–1902), composed at the end of the 19th century (located in the Museu da Imagem e do Som, Archive Division of the National Library of Rio de Janeiro).

**Figure 6:**  
Original melodic text of the polka *Flora* (section A).





The case studies were based on analyzing two musical performances by expert Brazilian mandolinists. In the first study, the score of the polka *Flora* (Figure 6) was presented to a mandolinist fluent in sight-reading. This performer did a quick rhythmic-harmonic analysis of the text, three preliminary reading experiments, and then performed his definitive performance. The phonographic recording of this performance — transcribed in Figure 7 — revealed a departure from the European-style polka style, given the rhythmic variations applied and the insertion of embellishments and new improvised melodic contours. It was found, for example, that this performer-reader systematically resorted to adopting the rhythmic cell of *lundu-dança* (Figure 1), so characteristic of the "polca-lundu" hybridism, today indiscriminately referred to as *Choro*.

Figure 7:

Polka *Flora* performed by the first mandolinist based on sight-reading (section A).



To investigate (1) the path of hybridization of European polka in its Brazilian update and (2) to what extent sight-reading of the written text of the music and "playing by ear" are cognitively similar, a second study was proposed. Considering *Flora's* lack of sound recordings at the time of the research, an Italian mandolinist from the classical academic world—the closest to the stylistic context of 19th-century Italian polkas—was asked to record it. The recording was made in Italy by the mandolinist mentioned above and an Italian pianist accompanist. The recording was then presented to another Brazilian mandolinist so that he could effect a new performance, this time reproducing "by ear," according to his "listening/learning/assimilation," the Italian mandolinist's performance recorded "in the European way." The transcription of his performance can be seen in the transcription in Figure 8.

The rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment of the two case studies—the performance of the two Brazilian mandolinists — was performed on the classical guitar by experienced choro guitarists. Both were asked to perform the simple accompaniment of the polka, being responsible for following the melody and the interpretation performed by the respective mandolinist according to the protocol of the traditional *rodas de choro*.

Figure 8:

Polka *Flora*, played by the second mandolinist, based on "reading by ear" (section A).



The same type of "reading" was observed in the two Brazilian performances, even though they used different "scriptural matrices:" in written and sonic text. The second Brazilian performer, initiated and "trained in Choro" without any practice in writing or reading music, listened to the Italian mandolinist recording, memorized the recording's sonic text based on his collection of mental images of Choro, and then effected his performance of *Flora*. The result of this "reading by ear" did not present any surprises from the point of view of the distance between the "polca-lundu" style and the European way. The performer inserted different rhythmic variations, embellishments, and improvised melodic contours, equally linked to the "polca-lundu" hybridism.

## Final considerations

Choro musicians, even those less familiar with historical issues that permeate the relationships between Polka and Choro, tend to associate these two genres immediately, as ratified by the case studies carried out and the results presented. Playing in a more "polked" way or "to polka" a particular musical section is more or less recurrent in Choro circles. Another possibility is to play a given choro in a more "maxixed" way, with rhythm and accents typical of Maxixe, a genre close to Brazilian Tango, both included in the Choro universe. In this sense, the studies could have presented different results around the "umbrella" Choro genre.

For reasons of format, we do not present the case studies in their entirety here, which would encourage a more extensive spectrum of analyses and reflections. However, we believe that the references exposed here are sufficient to spark discussion around the role of the cognitive devices involved in sight-reading as regulators of the development of stylistic hybridization that resulted in the founding matrices of the stylistic domain recognized as "music Brazilian." Furthermore, the second hypothesis that is transparent in the results discussed here is that "reading by ear" uses the same memory imagery patterns activated when reading the written text of the song—particularly experienced by performers when reading lead sheets. The

striking conversion of pairs of eighth notes through the basic musical image of the "syncopation gesture" stood out (Figure 1). This procedure adopted in the genre's *modus operandi*, something somewhat atavistic, almost a consecrated rule by a performative practice of more than 150 years, directly refers to the hybridization referred to here and points to the sedimentation of characteristic patterns.

Among other aspects, the design of the case studies adopted in the experiments demonstrated that (1) the relationship between musical expertise and specialized reading practices offers broad possibilities for investigation, particularly in the domain of style, (2) "reading by ear" constitutes an essential exercise in consolidating image patterns and acquiring imaginative competence, and (3) it is plausible to consider its application to other musical genres and performance pedagogy dedicated to the acquisition of musical images of traditional genres.

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