



CHICAGO ARTS AND CULTURE, CURATED

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CLASSICAL

The Brazilian Assad Family Entertains with Flourish and Flair

BY LOUIS HARRIS ON APRIL 19, 2016 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))

The guitar duo of Sergio and Odair Assad were joined by composer, pianist, and vocalist Clarice Assad, who is also Sergio's daughter, for an enchanting performance at the University of Chicago's Mandel Hall on Sunday, April 17, 2016. The Assads' music, in both performance and composition, is heavily influenced by the land of their birth. Entitled *Memories from Rio*, where Clarice was born, the program was a homecoming of sorts, highlighting Latin American or other composers with links to Brazil's pleasure capital. The pieces, several of which were transcriptions of works written for other instruments, provided an excellent opportunity for the Assads to show off their tremendous range of talent.

Beginning with music by the Spanish composer Isaac



Odair, Clarice, and Sergio (with Sazouki) Assad NYU Skirball
Center, NY
April 15, 2010

Ibanez and Argentinian Astor Piazzola, the Assad brothers demonstrated what 50 years of playing together can accomplish. Whether they're grabbing chords high up the fretboard while mixing in plucked harmonics, as in Ibanez's *Evocacion*, or picking through rapid passages with uniform touch and harmony, as in Piazzola's *Bandoneon*, their ensemble playing was flawless. Brazilian composer Baden Powell's delicate *Tiempo Feliz* showed a warm and circumspect side of the Assad brothers.

Clarice Assad joined her father and uncle for several pieces requiring scat, vocalizations, and straight-up singing. A transcription of Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos's

Melodia Sentimental showed the range of her light, but deep voice, while her father's *Cidade* allowed her to jazz it up with Salsa rhythms and scat vocals.

Up next was an arrangement of Rio songwriter and composer Antonio Jobim's *Insensatez*, a piece that borrowed the chord structure from Chopin's *Prelude* no. 4 in e-minor, originally written for the piano. Sergio Assad blended the two into a seamless arrangement that had Odair Assad soloing Chopin's plaintive melody, while Sergio backed him up and Clarice sang and vocalized.

A medley of Jobim's music, including his most famous song, *The Girl From Ipanema*, was part of the opening of the second half of the concert, where Clarice displayed virtuosity on the piano and dexterity in her singing. She overlaid trilling, tonguing, and other vocalizations to the upbeat piano transcription of Brazilian guitarist Milton Nascimento's *Cravo e Canela*, which she ended with rhythmic claps on her torso. A transcription of Nascimento's *Ponta de Areia* showed her as a nuanced balladeer.

As delightful as the concert had been, I especially enjoyed the Assad compositions at the end. The full trio took the stage for Clarice's *The Last Song*, a wispy, sentimental tune filled with charming, unexpected harmonies. It allowed Clarice's piano to interplay seamlessly with her uncle's guitar picking.

Three pieces from Clarice and Sergio's suite *Back to Our Roots* provided a spectacular finish, as well as a vehicle for Sergio to play a sazouky, a Greek and Turkish instrument. These pieces are a tribute to the history of people emigrating from Lebanon and Syria and settling in Brazil around the turn of the 20th century—an especially poignant programming choice given today's Syrian refugee crisis. *Leaving* described the family's voyage from France. It was filled with racing syncopated rhythms and Brazilian harmonies, as well as tight ensemble playing. *Nostalgia* depicted the immigrants facing uncertainties in the new world. It provided solo and improvisational

opportunities for the three players. *Hope* showed the immigrants integrating into their new society. Its melody was characterized by the high-charged thumping of single notes, with tunes formed from slight variations. The overall effect of the three pieces was exhilarating, making me wish they had played the fourth and final part the suite. In light of today's terrible events transpiring in the eastern Mediterranean, one can only wonder if the Assads deliberately omitted a piece called *Happiness*.

An encore, duly welcomed by the audience, was a return to Jobim. Clarice sang *Louisa*, while the brothers played flashy accompaniment.

The Sergio, Odair, and Clarice Assad concert was the latest installment of the UChicago Presents chamber music series featuring classical and jazz in Hyde Park. Up next: the Pacifica Quartet plays string quartets by Mozart and Shostakovich, as well as Beethoven's monumental and difficult string quartet no. 14 in c-sharp minor, Op. 131, arguably the finest piece of music ever written (Alas, I cannot be there to enjoy it), Sunday, April 24, 3:00 pm, at Logan Center; Dion Parson and the 21st Century Band offers jazz influenced by the US Virgin Islands and other Caribbean sounds, Friday, April 29, 7:30 pm, at Logan Center. For more information, check out <https://chicagopresents.uchicago.edu> (<https://chicagopresents.uchicago.edu>).

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