

“...In the immortal forms of beauty”: Frédéric Chopin seen through the eyes of the father of Brazilian neurological semiology

“...nas imortais formas da beleza”: Frédéric Chopin visto pelos olhos do pai da semiologia neurológica brasileira

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ABSTRACT

Aloysio de Castro (1881–1959) is now remembered as one of Brazil’s greatest physicians and is considered the father of Brazilian neurological semiology. However, his interests went far beyond the realm of Medicine, and he became one of the most illustrious intellectuals of his time. In 1927, he gave a speech at the São Paulo Society of Artistic Culture on Frédéric Chopin and embarked on a journey across the composer’s life and times, discussing the medical issues involving his death, as well as his lovers, his compositions, and the spiritual aspects of musical interpretation. Thus, Castro reinforced the bonds of music and Medicine and provided lessons on Musicology that may very well be as suited to a hospital as they are to a concert hall.

Keywords: Aloysio de Castro; History; Neurology; Music; Frédéric Chopin.

RESUMO

Aloysio de Castro (1881–1959) é hoje lembrado como um dos maiores médicos do Brasil, bem como o pai da semiologia neurológica brasileira. Entretanto, seus interesses iam muito além dos domínios da Medicina, e ele se tornou um dos mais ilustres intelectuais de sua era. Em 1927, Castro deu uma palestra na Sociedade de Cultura Artística de São Paulo sobre Frédéric Chopin, e embarcou em uma jornada pela vida e época do compositor, discutindo o aspecto médico de sua morte, bem como suas amantes, composições e aspectos espirituais da interpretação musical. Assim, Castro reforçou os laços entre música e Medicina e ensinou lições de Musicologia que podem muito bem ser tão aplicadas à Medicina quanto a uma sala de concertos.

Palavras-chave: Aloysio de Castro; História; Neurologia; Música; Frédéric Chopin.

INTRODUCTION




Few individuals hold a higher position in the pantheon of Brazilian physicians than Aloysio de Castro (1881–1959) (Figure 1), considered the father of our neurological semiology¹. Son of Francisco de Castro (1857–1901), a professor and director of the Rio de Janeiro School of Medicine, young Aloysio studied with his father and graduated first in his class; his dissertation denominated “Of gait disorders and their clinical value” awarded him a period of studies in

Paris. Beginning at the Hôpital Bicêtre, under the auspices of Pierre Marie, he visited the many institutions that would define the golden age of Neurology: Hospice de la Salpêtrière, Lariboisière, Hôtel-Dieu, and Necker, among others. On his return to the homeland, he soon launched a spectacular career that culminated with a professorship at his *alma mater* and the 58th chair at the Brazilian Academy of Medicine². However, his career went far beyond the conventional limits of Medicine, as he embraced life as an intellectual: poet, composer, and music critic. He eventually assumed the fifth

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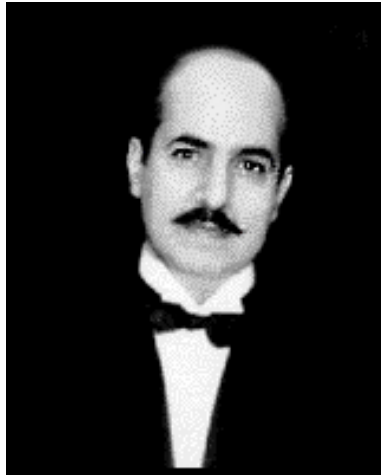
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Source: Brazilian Academy of Letters.

Figure 1. Aloysio de Castro.

chair of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, after the deceased Oswaldo Cruz, and was thus immortalized in 1919³.

OF ASCLEPIUS AND EUTERPE

In 1927, the celebrated São Paulo Society of Artistic Culture invited Castro for a lecture at its theater on a musical subject. In his speech “The Sentimental Expression in the Music of Chopin,” he attempted to reconcile the arts of Music and Medicine through an analysis of the music of the famed Polish composer, Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849), preceding a recital of Antonietta Rudge on the same evening. The lecture was subsequently published by F. Briguiet & Cia in the same year⁴ (Figure 2).

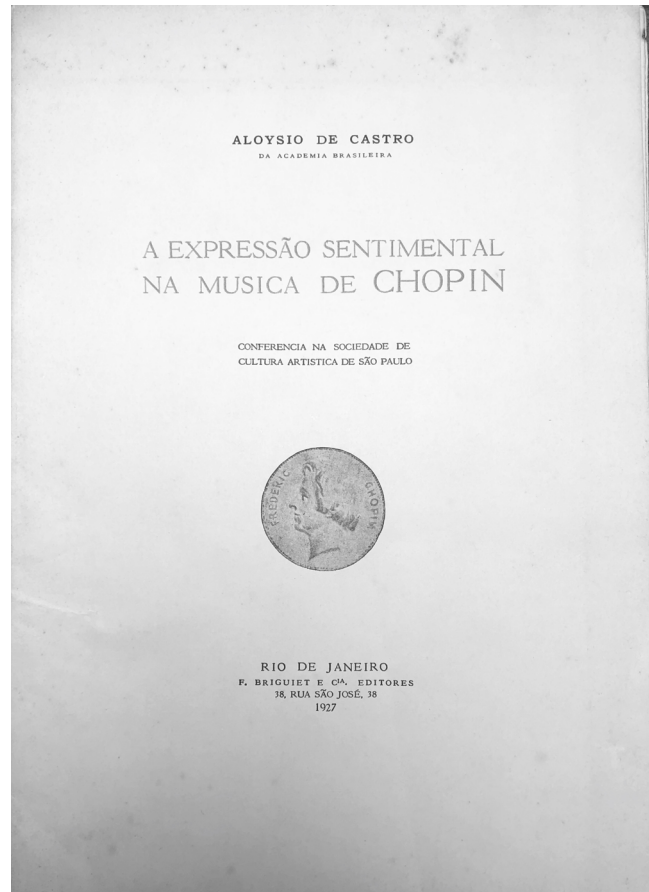
He started his speech with the lyrical prose that earned him the chair at the Brazilian Academy of Letters, acknowledging the unusual sight of a physician speaking of music (the translation is ours):

“If convention demands, when speaking in public, that one justifies the theme chosen in the exordium, I shall not flee from this practice, in my case an immediate obligation, so that none shall be appalled that today a physician who lives between the four walls of his science speaks about a hero of music.”

He goes on, in a classic rhetorical maneuver, to mention the muses in an entirely original fashion, thus bridging the subject with Medicine itself:

“...none shall count impossible the things of art and science, and notable cases confirm the perfect alliance between Asclepius and Euterpe.”

Further referencing the Hellenic roots of both arts, he cites Hippocrates, “who applied the notion of musical harmony to the processes of bodily development,” as well as composers who were also physicians, such as Alexander Borodin and Hyppolite Duprat. With dry wit, he mentions an



Source: from the author's private collection.

Figure 2. Aloysio de Castro's lecture on interpretation and Chopin.

orchestra comprised entirely of medical doctors in Vienna, and wonders whether they also play in the funeral services of their patients.

Recognizing his own bias in lecturing on a composer as a health professional, he adds, “...little versed in music, I shall not make myself a judge of things I barely know; do not expect, thus, a musical comment on Chopin's oeuvre, to which I lack merit, but a brief psychological and literary appreciation.”

ON CHOPIN

Castro then proceeds to comment on Chopin's physique (“In all his portraits left to us remain the trace of sweet and morose beauty;” “His are hands worthy of poems”), his numerous and incendiary love affairs, even to the point of defending George Sand's honor on the subject (“In Chopin's music, there is always a woman. In fact, everything in his work breathes love and love;” “Of her [Marie Wodzinska, his former fiancée] love for Chopin no one knows what is left, but for the painful separation, we have the waltz in F minor, op. 69, n. 1”), and, obviously, on the nature of Chopin's final ailment (“...he had the confirmatory signs of laryngeal

tuberculosis;” “...when the non-deferrable and decisive hour came, and Chopin was sent to immortal heights”). Though different diagnoses have been proposed over the years, such as cystic fibrosis^{5,6}, recent research has corroborated the initial diagnosis of tuberculosis, thus granting accuracy to Castro’s remarks⁷.

On the musical interpretation of the Polish master’s music, he declares:

“True music has an expression of sincerity greater than words, and if with words one may lie, with music no lie can be told.”

He argues, “...in musical style is where the Man truly is; no disguises, it is the soul that shows itself.” Defending the individuality of each pianist playing and how two performances shall never be alike — a musical spin on Heraclitus’ river —, he notes, “Interpretation is, therefore, its own act of creation.”

Castro’s most elevated propositions are as follow:

“Chopin demands spiritual conditions that not all may have, and that do not rely on patience and study alone.” He chides pure technical prowess without the inherent spiritual involvement with the music, and concludes: “Many love; how many know how to love? Because love is a supreme gift for a few elected ones. Many can play the piano; very few feel and can make others feel the true Chopin.”

The poignant conclusion, a panegyric on the composer, ends giving glory “...to him who, eternal and superior to the times, pours on us the treasures of his inspiration and consoles us with his music, making our lives noble with dreams and lifting us in love, in the immortal forms of beauty.”

CONCLUSION

From Bedrich Smetana, who incorporated the sounds of his neurological disease into a composition for string quartet⁸, to Oliver Sacks’ insightful writings on amusia from a medical perspective⁹, few relationships are more fruitful than that of Music and Medicine. In his lecture, Aloysio de Castro further reinforced the bond, providing us not only with the typical analysis of the artist’s death but also an intense appraisal of his life and the spiritual aspects of the performance of Chopin’s music. By offering medical and musical insight from an outsider’s perspective and vividly describing the inspirations and consolations of Chopin’s music, Aloysio proves that the active involvement of physicians in art is beneficial to both parties, enriching even more the annals of music in Brazil, as well as adding yet another laurel to the memory of one of the fathers of Brazilian Neurology.

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