

A Dozen Choro Tributes

Louis Arques, clarinet

www.boukas.com/dialogos-duo

www.boukas.com/dialogos-mannes-residency

dialogosduo@boukas.com

A Choro Duo Residency with Diálogos Duo

Richard Boukas, guitar-composer

About CHORO

Choro is Brazil's popular virtuoso instrumental music, a tradition that spans one and a half centuries. It is a multi-genre body of repertoire whose roots lie in European classical, Impressionist and Afro-Brazilian influences. Its brilliant composers, musicians and vast repertoire offers a unique opportunity to all players, whether their primary training is classical, jazz or other national/ethnic traditions.

Choros are often based in 19th century European popular dances such as the *polca*, *valsa*, *schottische* among others. The most traditional compositional form consists of **three primary thematic sections**, constructed in a modified rondo form: **(AA BB A CC A)**.

Choro ensemble instrumentation varies widely, depending on the availability of players and specific demands of the repertoire. Most traditionally, an ensemble is known in Brazil as the "**regional**"- referring to the compact groups of musicians that would serve as the house band for touring artists on live radio programs and concerts.

The *regional* usually consists of one or two **primary melodic instruments** (flute or clarinet, mandolin), **cavaquinho** (steel-string ukulele, also called **cavaco**), **violão** (six-string guitar), **violão sete cordas** (seven-string guitar) and **pandeiro** (tambourine).

The primary function of the *violão sete cordas* is for **bass lines**- the more elaborate of those known as **baixarias**. The **six-string** and **cavaquinho** fill out the **chordal accompaniment**, and the six-string can play **parallel single lines** in thirds **with the seven-string**.

Although **linear improvisation** (as in Jazz) is not a predominant aspect of Choro, there is a keen sense of **creative license in the phrasing a melody- endless rhythmic variations, articulations and embellishments**. Just as a jazz player does not play a melody literally as notated in a fake book nor a classical player plays Bach mechanically, the Choro melodist must personalize their interpretations, *not* phrase the same thematic section identically.

The very same thing can be said of the **accompaniment instruments**. The cavaquinho and six-string guitarist does not learn a two-bar rhythmic pattern and repeat it without variation. Nor does the seven-string guitar play the same bass lines for a given harmonic progression.

There is a range of vocabulary for each *regional* instrument assimilated over the course of years by ear- mainly from classic recordings, live performances, and in today's digital age, videos and streaming audio. It is each musician's responsibility to draw upon their creative vocabulary to keep the music infectiously spontaneous, vibrantly interactive and full of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic surprises.

about “A Dozen Choro Tributes”

I composed this work at the end of summer 2018 in **ten days**. To start, I made a list of the Choro legends I wanted to honor, and got working immediately.

Thankfully, the inspiration from these masters made the composing almost effortless- there was a wonderful feeling of them looking over my shoulder, advising on which choices to make at each important compositional juncture. It was understood that the goal was to *channel the composer's essence* while still enjoying my own compositional leanings.

So, in ten days, the suite sketches were complete- at least *creatively* speaking. What followed was fifteen months of meticulous **guitar revisions**.

The more that Louis and I rehearsed, the more accompaniment passages appeared that were very awkward, and in some cases, *unplayable!* If there was any hope for us performing and recording this work successfully, and sharing it with players around the world for decades to come, I had to get these accompaniments **RIGHT**. They had to be written as if the guitarist was spontaneously making choices by ear and instincts honed by decades of experience.

Duo Instrumental Roles

A *regional* may have two thematic instruments to share the melodic material either switching by thematic sections or playing an entire piece. When a Choro ensemble is reduced to just **one melodic soloist and one accompanist**, the demands on each musician are far more considerable.

The Clarinet

In a **Duo** setting, the clarinet is responsible for the majority of thematic material, playing almost continuously. Occasionally it may be relieved by a guitar introduction or playing a thematic statement for both textural contrast and giving the clarinet a well-deserved rest.

This creates physical challenges with breathing and maintaining energy. More importantly, it requires the clarinet to achieve contrasting timbres which mimic other solo woodwind and string instruments (flute, saxophone, mandolin). This is achieved by a keen attention to **tone, dynamics and articulation**.

The broader creative aspect of **melodic interpretation** (variations and embellishments) is fundamental to Choro performance practice. It is also the absolute requisite in meeting the high demands of the astute Choro listener- even in a small, informal bar or coffee shop.

It is essential that the melodic player be aware of a piece's overall form (ex. AABBACCA), phrase structure and underlying harmonic progressions. A key aspect of Choro harmony is localized *surprises* (ex. *bl Neapolitan sixth*) and abrupt modulations to both diatonic and even more distant key centers. For the melodist, this presents rapidly changing pitch collections on the instrument which can result in difficult enharmonic alternatives.

The highly syncopated rhythms of Choro melodies originate in Afro-Brazilian percussion. Internalizing these rhythms and "grooves" is essential to achieving the unique "swing" of Choro and "locking in" with the accompaniment instrument(s). At the same time, there needs to be a rhythmic suppleness and elasticity, never sounding mechanical.

It is recommended for clarinetists to **listen to authentic recordings** and play **basic percussion** with them (and a metronome) to become more fluent with Choro's rhythmic vocabulary as a linear instrument. Play your clarinet as if it were a *percussion instrument*.

The Guitar

In **Duo Choro playing** (as in the case of **Diálogos Duo**- clarinet and guitar), the guitar must render a **consolidation of all chordal, rhythmic and bass line functions**- essentially, merging the six-string guitar, cavaquinho and seven string guitar's basslines. I wanted guitarists to feel the incredible responsibility and excitement of creating accompaniment textures *alone*- a **complete rhythm section**, with impeccable sense of *tempo* and *groove*.

This presents substantial technical and stylistic challenges, whether the guitarist is reading a **totally notated accompaniment** or a basic a **lead sheet with melody and chord symbols**.

Variations in Accompaniment

As previously mentioned, the traditional form of Choro compositions is (AA BB A CC A)

In most of the pieces, the return to the **A section** via a *dal segno* (**D.S.**) is used. In other pieces, I decided to write out/encode accompaniment **variations of the A section** (into both the clarinet and guitar parts), to simulate **what happens spontaneously** when Choro musicians jam on hundreds of pieces they have committed to memory.

In the latter case, this decision to notate alternative melodic and accompaniment variations was as much a compositional imperative as a *stylistic/performance practice* requirement.

In *A Dozen Choro Tributes*, I wanted all players to experience first-hand what needs to happen when performing Choro.

From highly syncopated chordal attacks and arpeggios, transitioning in and out of furious *baixarias* and other counterpoints with the clarinet, these pieces offer more than a century of compositional/stylistic evolution in Choro's primary genres, as demonstrated by the master players and composers.

It is our hope that as you become familiar with these pieces and prepare your parts for performance, you will assimilate the heart of Choro melodic and accompanimental vocabulary, and actively seek out historical repertoire to play with your colleagues.

That is what this Diálogos Duo Residency is all about: sharing music and performing it to the highest level possible. Welcome to this journey with us and see you at the **DAL SEGNO!**

Louis Arques and Richard Boukas

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Other Residency Documents are available on the **DUO RESIDENCY PAGE:**

www.boukas.com/dialogos-mannes-residency

- Orientation
- Schedule of Events / Duo and Repertoire Assignments
- Notated Handouts of Excerpts from the pieces