

[Mehmari & Holanda: Brazilian Duo's Seismic Utterance](#)



Written by Bruce Gilman

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André Mehmari has a special gift of touch, coaxing from the piano both an emotion recollected in tranquility and the rash impact of experience. Hamilton de Holanda is simply the most gifted 10-string bandolim player of his generation, the soul of sensitive drive. This is evidenced on their latest creation, *Contínua Amizade* (released in the U. S. as *Continuous Friendship*).

Cached behind the title of this CD is a duo that plays with richness and precision, bringing outstanding technique and distinctive musical personality to an intense, yet intimate program.

There is confidence about the music-making on this disc that signals something special. The duo's ease of execution, relaxed rhythmic application, and ability to construct coherent solos - eschewing the impulse to overplay - appears unbeatable. Well-produced and generously filled out with classics, recast to the point where they are virtually reinvented, as well as four original compositions, *Contínua Amizade* glows with scintillating style, capturing the mystery and the urgency of each composition.

The opening track, Pixinguinha's waltz, "Rosa," is ornamented and varied in active musical dialog, Holanda coloring the melody, while Mehmari, alternating power and delicacy, carries the music through its reflective plaintiveness. The tune thrives on exploiting the contrasts of accompaniment, solo, and counterpoint, channeling the great composer's music through modern sensibilities without compromising its integrity one whit.

A quirky, unexpected approach is taken to Nelson Cavaquinho's "Notícia." Alternating lyricism with tightly intertwining parts of harmonic complexity, an air of tension pervades the tune. The nervous Monk-like atmosphere (sustained by its melody passing from one instrument to another and by a glancing, oblique quality to theme statements) is like the taking of a watch apart to see what makes it work.

What's most appealing about Mehmari's "Choro da Contínua Amizade" is its syncopated personality. Holanda, vigorously showing off all the musical empathy he has acquired, never strikes a brittle note, even while attending to salient counterpoint; and although Mehmari's clear, extended harmonic voicing is a consistent attribute of his performance, so is his flexibility. Unfussily virtuosic as always, he plays fervent runs, yet still manages the underlying rhythmic thrust.

The musicians are no less dazzling in the openly endearing ballad "Acontece" by Cartola, where they display an almost mystical ability for drawing even more out of the tune than the composer put into it originally. And if Guinga's "Di Menor" explodes with great stamina and an expansive technique that draws on a near-orchestral spectrum of sonorities, such open bravura is balanced in "Choro Negro" by Paulinho da Viola, where the musicians' insights and instincts are finely balanced and translucent, a spontaneous eloquence brimming over with real affection for the music.

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Another high point on this disc, which opens up a twilight world, is the balladic dialogue on Holanda's "O Sonho." The clear recording balance allows us to hear all the nuances of its lyricism, its textures, and its quiet subtleties of color. This is the very stuff of a waking dream. And if Holanda's "O Sonho" illustrates the unusual emotional range of the duo, his "Enchendo o Latão" demonstrates its infectious jauntiness. There is a sense of the decadent about the tune, but decadence, we all know, can be quite fun. Composed for a friend who favors the expression "encher o latão" (to drink a lot), it is a feisty, tight performance full of humor and inspired twists.

"Vivo Entre Valsas" is, as André Mehmari alludes to in his title, a fast (vivo) section cradled between two lyrical waltzes, in typically nostalgic valsa brasileira fashion. Says Mehmari, "The idea was to create contrasting sections within a unified composition." Composed during a burst of nostalgia for his native land during his stay in Boston, this piano and bandolim duet combines a poetic inwardness of strength with sparkling and fresh wit, its spacious, autumnal, reflective melody augmented by whirling measures of infinite brio.

"Baião Malandro," Egberto Gismonti's technical tour de force, attests to the duo's extraordinary versatility and digital dexterity. Control and projection of rhythm are impeccable. Here the sense of magnetism and lyrical purity, the wide tonal contrasts, and the compositional depth packs an impressive punch that repays repeated listening. Dip anywhere into the tune and you can hear the separate melodic lines not only given individual character, shape, and direction, but also combined with ease and authority.

Beautifully played with expressive fervor and unfailing finesse, the "Love Theme" from director Giuseppe Tornatore's Academy Award winning film *Cinema Paradiso* effortlessly encompasses the narrative mood, bringing out the heartfelt emotion without exaggerating it. Here is another irreplaceable document of the duo's unforced interpretation penetrating to the very core with intuitive poetry and emotional candor.

Recorded at Estúdio Monteverdi (Mehmari's home studio), *Contínua Amizade* sparks with unified and fully realized tracks. There is a happy absence of long, aimless jams where solos are taken because there is no other way to fill up the recording. There are also stellar alternative takes of "Choro Negro," "Notícia," and "Choro da Contínua Amizade," offering added awareness into the duo's creative process.

Here is a program lovingly interpreted by Holanda, who has made available new techniques and provided ground-rules to promote another generation of bandolim players, who sails into a tune without a hint of a pause and invests it with the maximum respectable quota of passion; and by Mehmari, whose style is by turns witty and romantic, whose invention and intuitive grasp of the most complex harmonies and genuine sensitivity make it impossible for him to be precisely duplicated.

The sense of this music being in the hearts, minds, and collective unconscious of Holanda and Mehmari adds particular charisma to a CD radiant with the exuberant performances of two close friends' collaborative efforts. Together André Mehmari and Hamilton de Holanda perceive and highlight facets of each other's music across a program that is complete and integrated - a vivid, no-holds-barred performance - their verve and aplomb providing an exemplar in the art of musical conversation.

Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of Brazzil magazine, an online international publication based in Los Angeles, for more than a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the Georgetown Journal.