



John Chahar

MIMO, BRAZIL

Clive Davis explores the cobbled streets and churches of Olinda and discovers the delightful variety of Brazil's MIMO festival

As if by magic, faded but still imposing baroque churches begin to throb with music and light. In the colonial quarter of Olinda, once the capital of Pernambuco and now a UNESCO heritage site, some of South America's oldest churches are the atmospheric backdrop for concerts spanning all categories. World music mixes with classical symphonies, pop blends with jazz. Now absorbed into the sprawling metropolis that is Recife, Olinda may be famous for its annual carnival – a much less commercial operation than its big brothers in Rio and Salvador – but MIMO (Mostra Internacional de Música em Olinda or International Music Showcase of Olinda) is where past and present meet on equal terms.

In this still young nation, all eyes are fixed on the horizon. People live in the present, the elite preoccupied with GDP figures and the country's status as a regional power, the less well-off simply trying to keep their heads above water. History, in these circumstances,

can appear something of a luxury. MIMO, launched a decade ago, was originally conceived as a way of celebrating the city's heritage and championing north-eastern culture in a country that is still dominated by those twin giants, São Paulo and Rio.

The philosophy is boldly all-embracing. "We try to offer a sip of every taste," says the effusive artistic director André Oliveira. "We never put a label on the music. We're not a blues festival, we're not a jazz festival. We want to have Beethoven at an orchestral concert where we also have pieces based on traditional Brazilian melodies. And we have films about music at the heart of things too."

By day some of the churches can look a little forlorn and neglected. The moist Atlantic air and decades of neglect have taken their toll. By night, with a little help from the lighting engineers, and with music lovers assembling for the concerts – all of them free – the buildings come to life. By day there are educational workshops too. As you stroll

around the cobbled streets, the sound of a class or a youth rehearsal is never too far away.

Last autumn's programme found the mandolin virtuoso Hamilton de Holanda exploring *choro*, *frevo* and other traditional rhythms with the pixie-ish Italian pianist Stefano Bollani while the grandmaster of MPB, Gilberto Gil, held court in the much more crowded main square in a late-night collaboration with the young musicians of the Orquestra de Sopros da Pro Arte. Even in his early 70s, Gil remains a consummate showman. It was nearly three in the morning before the crowds finally dispersed and we staggered home to our beds. But not for long. I was woken early the next morning by an impromptu *bloco* [street band] passing my guesthouse, drums and trumpets blaring.

Gil had popped up earlier in the week in *Tropicália*, Marcelo Machado's absorbing documentary about that extraordinary flowering of counterculture music-making and art of the 1960s. An audience of all ages



Brian Figueras



The historic city of Olinda boasts a multitude of squares and churches that resonate with the sound of music during the four-day festival in September



queued patiently for al fresco seats in the courtyard of the Igreja da Sé. On-screen, eloquent as ever, Gil's old friend Caetano Veloso explained how their hostility to the country's military junta landed them in exile in Swinging London. Watching footage of their let-it-all-hang-out appearance at the Isle of Wight Festival while dodging a sudden but short-lived squall off the Atlantic was surreal.

For world music fans who are wary of 'high culture', MIMO's eclectic approach might seem intimidating at first. But one of the joys of the event is the way it constantly springs surprises. If you wanted a fix of less demanding pop or dance music, it was always possible to wander down the hill to the main stage in the centre to catch the likes of Nouvelle Vague – decibels trumped creativity there at times, it has to be said. The more intriguing options were to be found in the churches and chapels clustering on the hill overlooking the sea and the distant, shimmering skyscrapers of Recife. Convinced I never wanted to hear yet another version of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, I wasn't sure I was going to enjoy the slimmed-down arrangement performed by the French accordionist Richard Galliano and the string players of the Quinteto da Paraíba. In the end, I was transfixed by the informality and spontaneity of the playing.

Nearby at the hauntingly beautiful Convento de São Francisco, there were echoes of vintage Afro-bossa as the saxophonist Carlos Malta paid homage to the songs of Vinicius de Moraes. There was, thankfully, no sign of the diplomat-cum-poet's most famous but most over-played creation, 'The Girl From Ipanema': Malta was revisiting the much more muscular collaborations with the guitarist Baden Powell. Even though his flourishes were anything but easy listening, there was not an empty pew in sight. And scores of people unable to get a seat listened outside, unfazed by a brief tropical downpour. They had their reward when Malta unexpectedly strolled down the aisle, stepped out of the main doors and continued soloing in front of them without missing a beat.

Since 2012 MIMO has spread its wings beyond Pernambuco itself, with segments

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also being held in two other 'heritage cities' – Ouro Preto in Minas Gerais and Paraty in Rio de Janeiro state. Each event has its own distinctive headliners. In a country so huge that major artists often do not venture far beyond São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, MIMO's founder and general director Lu Araújo hopes to bring more listeners into the fold. She and Oliveira are on a mission, you sense, to remind the culture brokers in faraway Rio, that the *cidade maravilhosa*, is no longer the centre of the universe.

The Ouro Preto leg will take place late in the summer (August 29-31) with Olinda (September 4-7) and Paraty (October 10-12) to follow, and Tiradentes bringing up the rear (October 17-19). As ever there will be workshops, film screenings, talks and exhibitions too; this year the cultural outreach programme will be extended with auxiliary events throughout the year. An app and web radio project will be available too.

For all the big names sure to attend this year, it is the buildings that are at the centre of it all. Other festivals have grander venues and bigger budgets. To wander the streets of Olinda, though, is to discover how bricks and mortar can create music of their own. ♦

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