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## Report. The friendly duel of pianists Raúl da Costa and Vasco Dantas at the Sintra Festival

By Bernardo Crastes, June 23, 2023



We had already said a few days ago, that one of the most fascinating events of the Sintra Festival was the duel of pianists between the virtuosos Raúl da Costa and Vasco Dantas, two of the most acclaimed names in Portuguese contemporary classical music. The festival is proud of its eclecticism, the variety of alignment and its effort to recontextualize music and performance, which aims to bring audiences

and artists closer together by changing the way they interact. He already did it earlier this week with a concert walk, and now he has done it again with a format stolen from the 19th century: the piano duels.

It was this historical context that was presented to us by the musicologist and composer Edward Ayres d'Abreu. The also director of the National Museum of Music talked about the history of duels, from the times of 1300 to the last century. Whether blood duels, whether these harmless musical duels, there is a human fascination for this format in which two people face each other. Of course, in tonight's program that we are telling you, the bar was not as high as it was before, because in addition to the two musicians being long-time friends, we knew that a "defeat" would not take away the merit of any of the artists.

This is exactly what Martim Sousa Tavares, artistic director of the Sintra Festival, implied in his opening speech of the brilliant night that provided to the lucky ones who were present in the Noble Hall of the Seteais Palace. Despite the luxury that characterizes the rooms of the palace and the bourgeois atmosphere inherent in a concert of that musical style, the show had a lightness and unpretentiousness emanated by the two protagonists of the night. Over four rounds, the two alternated in front of the keys, choosing very different works to demonstrate their skills.

A coin was thrown into the air and it was decided that it would be Raúl da Costa who would open the hosts. To this end, he chose Robert Schumann's "Toccata", recognized as an incredibly difficult piece and a proof of virtuosity and stamina for those who propose to play it. Played in a cheerful and dynamic way, it was an impressive show of talent at the piano. To counter the fieriness of this work, Vasco Dantas chose the transcription of Franz Liszt (acolyte of the piano duels) of the end of Wagner's opera, "Tristan and Isolde". His dreamlike, theatrical and frankly emotional version drew strong applause from the audience and one of the first "bravo!" of the night.

For the second round, Raúl also attacked the emotion more, choosing the beautiful "Ballad N.º4" by Frédéric Chopin, which still also requires a lot of technical dexterity. However, Vasco came out again with his rendition of three of "The Firebird", ballet by Igor Stravinsky, in the transcription of Guido Agosti. Although they probably did not spend more than ten minutes in their performance, the play went through very different moments. Occasionally, it sounded dissonant, in others it almost looked like a progressive rock opera played on the piano, moments interspersed with quieter passages.

For the third segment of the night, the pianists turned to the music made in Portuguese. Raúl da Costa chose the "3 Scenas Portuguesas" by José Vianna da Motta, a work already performed on disc by the rival. Throughout the three movements - "Cantiga d'Amor", "Chula" and "Valsa Caprichosa" - the piano seemed to sing, exuding a lightness characteristic of Portuguese popular music. It was an airy and beautiful moment. Vasco Dantas chose a sequence of fados for his third interpretation of the night - "Fado Corrido" by Alexandre Rey Colaço, "Fado" by Eduardo Burnay and his own versions of "A Folia" and the classic "Gaivota".

At that time, we began to become more and more invested in the duel, knowing that the duration of the clapping after each interpretation will determine the winner. In addition to being involved in music and each pianist surprising us more with each round, we still have the enthusiasm of being able to actively contribute to the end result.

But before we still had one last round for the last talent test. Raúl made us the "Diabolical Suggestion" by Sergei Prokofiev, a short work that looks like an authentic descent into hell, touched with care and in a deliciously macabre way. On the other hand, Vasco was more classic and interpreted more delicately one of Vladimir Horowitz's Variations from Bizet's opera "Carmen".

In the end, either of the two would have been a fair winner, but the difference of only 13 seconds in the applause gave the victory to Vasco Dantas, but in the end who really came out to win was the public.

Not least because, as the two pianists had already promised us in [the interview](#) they granted us a few weeks ago, there was room for some more "fireworks". On four hands, the two interpreted the suite "Peer Gynt", by Edvard Grieg, which includes the unavoidable works "Morning Mood" and "In the Hall of the Mountain King", and also the "Hungarian Dance N.o 5", by Johannes Brahms.

The Sintra Festival will continue [its program](#) until next June 25, with many more unusual moments of music, scattered throughout the municipality of Sintra.

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