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The charismatic Gilberto Gil at the Barbican

Helen Wallace enjoys an evening in the company of a luminous musician

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Submitted by: [Helen Wallace](#)

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Brazil is on the rise. This year it officially overtook the UK as the world's sixth largest economy. Soon, we're told, our graduates will be heading to Rio to find work, not the other way round. But while Argentina has created a highly sophisticated music scene which has produced a stream of Western classical stars (Daniel Barenboim, Martha Argerich, Nelson Goerner) with Piazzolla's tangos and Osvaldo Golijov's Latin American fusion, our perception of Brazilian music is limited to Carnival Samba, *The Girl from Ipanema* – and Villa-Lobos. Where has its music journeyed since that particular pioneer set out to combine street music with Bach and Debussy?

One luminous figure who represents the best of Brazil's potent musical fusion is the legendary singer-guitarist-composer Gilberto Gil. Now 70, he drew an adoring crowd to his concert with the [London Symphony Orchestra](#) on 4 July. A rare musical hero of our time, he has not only enriched the course of his nation's music, but been imprisoned, exiled and returned to fight for environmental causes and to take up the role of Minister of Culture (2003-8).

The moment he sat down and sang, one was aware of being in the presence of a complete musician: the voice is still sonorous and warm with a vast range from bass to brilliant falsetto; the smile is beatific, the microphone technique breath-taking and each note dropped into the darkness with seductive intimacy. You could see François Xavier-Roth, the orchestra's stylish conductor, basking in the melting perfection of his soloist like a cat in the sun. Gil was accompanied by his son guitarist Bem Gil, violinist Nicolas Krassik, percussionist Gustavo di Dalva and distinguished cellist and arranger Jaques Morelenbaum, who had written the orchestral parts. Singing a mixture of songs by himself, other Brazilian greats, such as Luis Gonzaga and Dorival Caymmi, and Jimi Hendrix, (who he knew) he alternated between lush orchestral arrangements (sometimes too overwhelming from the stalls) to his own band, to singing with the cellist alone or, in the mesmerising *Não tenho medo da morte*, accompanied only by the tapping of his guitar and a single string.

Morelenbaum created contrasting palettes of sonority for each number, a tall order when so much of this music has a raw, secret quality that can be lost when magnified. The LSO double basses and winds seemed to be having a whale of a time negotiating the bewildering rolling *bossa nova* rhythms, though the strings didn't exactly enter into the spirit of this, or the first half, which paired Villa-Lobos's *Dança frenética* and *Chôros No. 10* with Milhaud's mischievous dances *Saudades do Brasil*. Villa-Lobos's *Dança* is one of his earliest, and crudest, pieces, while Milhaud's arch-polytonal sketches needed more flair and brilliance, despite the efforts of a balletic Roth. There's nothing like the baleful stare of a section violinist receiving applause to put a dampner on the festivities, and Gil's charismatic team only highlighted their end-of-term pallor. So three cheers to the LSO chorus for their zestful contribution of *Chôros No. 10*, one of Villa-Lobos's most unusual pieces, in which he uses the chorus entirely instrumentally in fast and furious rhythmic patten and contrapuntal lines. Brass and wind provided the tropical bird calls and monkey chatter with aplomb, but Gilberto Gil's own bizarre bird-like descants are the ones that will remain in my mind.

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